Religious Literacy in the English as a Second Language University Classroom

Abstract: My proposed research will extend philosophical analysis and research on the aims of democratic citizenship and religious literacy by examining their application to English as a Second Language (ESL) contexts. ESL university classrooms are typically rich sites of both linguistic and religious diversity, and the legitimate role of ESL classrooms and teachers in promoting values of democratic citizenship is widely accepted. Despite this fact, the role of religious literacy as a framework for supporting this crucially important educational task has been seriously neglected in both professional and scholarly ESL communities. This project will provide a philosophical analysis of existing literature on religious literacy, centering on the idea that values of democratic citizenship – values that underpin efforts to teach us to treat one another as ‘civic equals’ – converge at the intersection of second language education and teaching for religious literacy. In short, I will argue that education for religious literacy represents an important and largely untapped resource for ESL education, especially in its role as a vehicle for promoting aims of democratic citizenship.

Keywords: Religious literacy, citizenship, higher education, second language education, teacher training

My doctoral research investigates the question, ‘What is the appropriate place of religious literacy (RL) as an educational aim in the Canadian English as a Second Language (ESL) university classroom?’ My answer is that religious literacy deserves a central role in ESL education. Ultimately, my goal is to explore the implications of this answer for both ESL classroom practice (curriculum, pedagogy, classroom ethos) and for ESL teacher education. The argument I develop centers on the idea that values of democratic citizenship – values that underpin efforts to teach us to treat one another as ‘civic equals’ – converge at the intersection of second language education and teaching for religious literacy. In short, education for religious literacy represents an important and largely untapped resource for ESL education, especially in its role as a vehicle for promoting aims of democratic citizenship.

Located at the intersection of language education and citizenship education, intensive ESL classrooms in Canadian universities are often the first points of sustained contact ESL students have with Canadian liberal-democratic values. As such, ESL teachers play an especially significant role in promoting the civic integration of immigrant students. ESL classrooms are typically rich sites of both linguistic and religious diversity, and the legitimate role of ESL classrooms and teachers in promoting values of democratic citizenship is widely accepted. Moreover, religious literacy has received positive attention among scholars as a broad curricular framework for promoting values of democratic citizenship. Despite this fact, the role of religious literacy as a framework for supporting ESL educators in their crucially important educational task of promoting civic integration has been neglected. There is a tendency for scholars to assume that, aside from the articulation of

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1 Osler and Starkey, 2005; Byram and Guilherme, 2000
2 Gutmann, 2009
3 Gutman 2014
4 Illiva, 2001; Nieto, 2010
5 Byram and Guilherme, 2000; Kramsch, 1993
broad but inevitably vague ‘cross-curricular’ aims and ‘competencies’, the explicit and systematic teaching of religious literacy should be confined to curricular ‘silos’ in civics classes, history education or moral education. In this light, the failure to consider the potentially vital role of religious literacy in supporting citizenship education through ESL teaching represents a serious omission and a missed opportunity. My doctoral research seeks to rectify this.

Context and Background

A variety of increasingly complex societal factors, including growing cultural and religious diversity, shifting boundaries between our public and private lives, as well as transnationalism, have led to a rise in public and scholarly discussion surrounding the intersection of religion and our public lives. As global societies become more religiously diverse, the tension between this diversity and our secular liberal-democratic states creates an urgent need for religious literacy in university classrooms, and, even more urgently, in ESL university programs.

While there are those who continue to argue fiercely for the privileging of all that is secular, it has become increasingly difficult to equate modernity with secularism. It is true that, for most of the second half of the last century, public discourse centered on how to mitigate the dominant Christian influence in Western societies, and secularism seemed the inevitable result of a modern democracy. However, as noted by Peter Beyer, recently our conversations have shifted to intensifying debates around “accommodation,” “dealing with diversity,” and the overlapping grey areas between religion and the public sphere. In Canada, religion came to the forefront of public discussion not only with the Quebec Bouchard-Taylor commission into religious accommodation, prompting vigorous academic debate and dialogue, but also with the recent public debate over the Partie Quebecois’ proposed Quebec Charter of 2013, which sought to limit the wearing of ‘conspicuous’ religious symbols by public sector employees.

Lori Beaman and Solange Lefebvre investigate the impact of religion in public institutions in depth and conclude that there is an urgent need for more scholarly inquiry into how education and religion impact each other (p. 316). North American institutions of higher learning have experienced a massive shift from their religious beginnings to the largely secular institutions we see today. However, another shift is occurring, and religion in higher education is “no longer invisible,” given its great importance to increasing numbers of our students. These facts have given importance to the term “religiously literate person,” defined by the American Academy of Religion as someone who possesses “a basic understanding of the history, central texts (where applicable), beliefs, practices and contemporary manifestations of several of the world’s religious traditions and religious expressions as they arose out of and continue to shape and be shaped by particular social, historical and cultural contexts.” Religious literacy then, is not a simple awareness that people are ‘different,’ but rather a nuanced understanding of the role religion may have in a person’s life.

Although there has been scholarship in the past decade highlighting the importance of addressing religious literacy among students, few studies have examined the religious literacy of teachers. There are a few examples of scholars who have broached this subject, but their work has been focused mainly on those instructors teaching in primary or secondary public school systems. One such study addressed the

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7 Morris, 2011; Boudreau, 2012
8 Beaman and Lefebvre, 2014; Bramadat and Koeing, 2009; Bramadat and Seljak, 2013; Casanova, 2006, 2008; McDonough, 2011
9 Berman, 2013
10 Jacobsen and Jacobsen, 2012
11 Beyer, 2013
12 Morris, 2011
13 Beaman and Lefebvre, 2014
14 Berman et al., 2013
15 Jacobsen and Jacobsen 2012
16 American Academy of Religion, 2010
17 Dalton and Crosby, 2001; Hill, 2009
18 Anderson, Mathys, and Cook, 2014; Subedi, 2006; White, 2010
implementation of Québec’s controversial Ethics and Religious Culture Program (ERC) in the public school system in 2007. Scholars analyzed the various impacts this program had on key players, namely, students, parents and teachers\textsuperscript{19}. The aforementioned studies focused on religious literacy among instructors who are responsible for teaching religious content in the public school systems; however, educational research has neglected to address two related but distinct research gaps.

First, research into the intersection of religion and religious literacy among instructors in post K-12 institutions and its pedagogical significance, is limited. While notable exceptions such as Jacobsen and Jacobsen’s work highlight the relevance of religion in higher education, scholarship investigating this religious literacy at this level has not been developed nearly as thoroughly as it has been for K-12 institutions. Second, there is almost no discussion of the religious literacy of those who teach content other than religion at the university level. Typically, religion is lumped in as one of multiple sites of diversity. In fact, in an informal review of ESL training program course calendars, even in courses clearly designed to address diversity in the classroom, religion is rarely listed as a category. This is unsettling. Intensive ESL classrooms in our universities hold a unique position that underscores the need for religiously literate teachers. As the milieu in which international students come to perfect their language skills before entering a university degree program, instructors of ESL programs are often the first point of sustained contact these students have with both the university and, in many cases, with Canadian culture and liberal democratic social values. In light of this, it is surprising that there is a complete gap in research into the religious literacy of ESL university instructors and the associated ethical and pedagogical implications of that literacy (or lack thereof).

**Potential Contribution**

My proposed research will advance research in citizenship education, ESL in higher education and ESL teacher preparation. First, I will extend philosophical analysis and research on the aims of democratic citizenship and religious literacy by examining their application to ESL contexts. Second, I will advance existing research in TESL scholarship by identifying specific practical implications of my philosophical analysis for determining ESL curricula, pedagogy and classroom/school ethos. Third, I will advance research in teacher education by demonstrating the need for preparing religiously literate ESL teachers in intensive ESL programs, and by outlining principles for developing an religious literacy-based component in TESL training programs.

**Research Questions**

The main objective of my research is to analyze the following question: What is the appropriate place of religious literacy (RL) as an educational aim in the Canadian English as a Second Language (ESL) university classroom?

The following ancillary questions must also be investigated:

- a) What is the philosophical basis for the claim that religious literacy should be included as an educational aim of education that promotes citizenship?
- b) Using standard, widely accepted criteria of religious literacy drawn from the work of Diane Moore, how religiously literate are university level ESL instructors?
- c) To what extent does an instructor’s level of religious literacy academically impact ESL students in higher education?
- d) What strategies do teachers use to either avoid or engage with manifestations of religious diversity (either in discussions, assignments or visible religious clothing/jewelry/symbols) in their classrooms?
- e) What obstacles prevent teachers from engaging in religious dialogues in the classroom?
- f) What supports would help teachers feel more at ease with religious diversity in their classrooms?

**Conceptual Framework**

**Religious Literacy**

\textsuperscript{19} Morris, 2011
The term religious literacy is currently gaining ground in different fields and regions\textsuperscript{20}, but it was Stephen Prothero who first introduced the term ‘religious literacy’ to the general public in his 2007 book *Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know–And Doesn’t*, sparking ensuing public discourse on the subject. His book is a passionate call to all Americans to educate themselves in the both the religion of the founders of the nation, Christianity, and also in the world’s religions, arguing that informed conversations about religion are impossible without these two components. Though the book received some negative attention, with critics pointing out the Christian bias\textsuperscript{21}, Prothero maintains that a stronger focus on Christianity is essential given its great historical importance in the West.

**Religious Literacy and Religious Diversity in Education**

In *Overcoming Religious Illiteracy*, Diane Moore takes Prothero’s work from theory into practice by investigating religious literacy in the American public education system. Drawing on Gutmann’s theory of democratic education, Moore argues that the purpose of a public education in a liberal-democratic society is to allow children to become active citizens, act as moral agents, and lead fulfilling lives\textsuperscript{22}. These aims underpin her argument for the promotion of religious literacy and as such deserve further comment. Educating for citizenship must include an education that is truly democratic and deliberative – that is to say, it must encourage genuine discussion, including – and perhaps especially – those discussions that are difficult\textsuperscript{23}. In our increasingly culturally and religiously diverse democratic societies, this goal of dialogue is urgent. For, as many have pointed out, being able to engage in discussions about religion requires not simply the will to do so, but also the ability\textsuperscript{24}. This is where educating for religious literacy comes in. We cannot discuss not only religion itself, but also many current and historical events without having at least a solid grounding in the basic tenets and practices of the world’s major traditions. Likewise, to promote genuine moral agency, a democratic education must not simply have good intentions; it must actively ensure that students’ deeply entrenched unconscious assumptions are revealed, reflected upon, and challenged. Moore’s cultural studies model insists that educators understand that all knowledge claims are situated\textsuperscript{25} And finally, religious literacy could be argued to be an essential part of enabling children to live a fulfilling life. To live a fulfilling life, political and educational philosophers argue that exposure to diversity is key\textsuperscript{26}. Without being exposed to various conceptions of the ‘good life,’ how can we know that the life we are living is truly good? However, while her study contributes to the discussion of how and why religion should be included in the public school system, she advocates teaching about religion, rather than investigating how one’s own religious literacy or illiteracy may impact students in general. This is in contrast to Robert Jackson’s conception of religious literacy\textsuperscript{27}. Jackson also calls for greater attention to teacher training for religious literacy, although he does not use the term. Rooted in the British cultural context, where there is a long history of religious education in public schools, Jackson distinguishes himself from Moore through his promotion of an interpretive approach to religious education, one in which the teacher and student are encouraged to engage in a process of critical self-reflection. Unlike Moore who is primarily interested in religion for its cultural and societal manifestations, Jackson emphasizes the individual/personal relationship to religion, along with its wider cultural contexts.

**Religious Literacy in Higher Education**

The year 2012 saw the release of one of the only books published to date on the subject of religion in higher education: *No Longer Invisible* by Jacobsen and Jacobsen. The premise of their book, that it is crucial for those

\textsuperscript{20} Dinham and Francis, 2015
\textsuperscript{21} Oppenheimer, 2007
\textsuperscript{22} Moore, 2007
\textsuperscript{23} Gutmann, 1999
\textsuperscript{24} Dinham and Francis, 2015
\textsuperscript{25} Moore, 2007
\textsuperscript{26} Brighouse, 2006
\textsuperscript{27} Jackson, 2004, 2012
working in higher education to develop a greater religious literacy considering the degree of religiosity that currently exists within the university milieu, greatly informs my own proposed project. The authors’ research into religion in higher education led them to coin the term “pluriformity” to describe the current diversity in such institutions. In so doing, they wish to highlight the “expansiveness” of religious options on today’s campuses. The authors point out that not only do we find representatives from all the major world religions in higher education, but we are also confronted with great diversity in terms of how religion itself is understood. They state that “the boundary line between what is and what is not religion has become thoroughly blurred. If secularity is like freshwater and religion is like saltwater, life in America is now thoroughly brackish”.

‘Brackish’ seems the perfect term to describe the Canadian context as well, given our societal commitment to multiculturalism. And despite the commonly held belief by the general public that our public realm is a firmly non-religious one, any even cursory glance at any media outlet will clearly show that religion is very much present in the public discourse. Finally, this study shines light on the dangers of religious illiteracy, and insist that leaving religious perspectives out of academic discussions cannot allow for a truly open dialogue. As teachers, if we fail to understand or acknowledge that religion is as important a framing factor as any other (such as values, class background, ethnicity, gender and so on), we may be missing crucial information that could allow us to better understand and help our students.

**Teachers’ Religious Literacy**

Recent years have also seen the furthering of discussion around teachers’ religious literacy or competency although it is limited to those teachers responsible for teaching religious content. Quebec’s ground-breaking, and controversial, Ethics and Religious Culture program (ERC) brought discussions around religion and education back to the forefront in both the public and academic realms. The religion teaching competency in a Quebec Ministry of Education, Leisure, and Sport (MELS) 2007 report describes ‘competency of religion’ as an area in which teachers either desire more support or feel ambivalent. This insight resonates strongly with my experiences as an instructor in higher education. Indeed, part of my motivation to investigate this topic stems from numerous conversations with my colleagues in which they express a great reluctance, or even resistance, to address any aspect of religion in the classroom as they don’t wish to “open a can of worms.” Many of these ESL teachers seem to be afraid of the kinds of difficult conversations and ensuing tensions that an overt acknowledgment of religion may introduce to their classrooms.

**Methodology and Framework**

My methodology will be both philosophical and qualitative. I will first undertake a philosophical analysis of contemporary research on religious literacy and democratic citizenship in educational contexts. This analysis will help me to identify and defend normative (including ethical and epistemic) arguments for incorporating religious literacy into TESL classrooms and teacher education programs. Accordingly, I will also clarify key concepts such as “religion,” “beliefs,” “citizenship,” and “religious literacy,” and related ethical and educational ‘values’. Competing interpretations of such terms necessitate a thoughtful and thorough examination that will provide a solid theoretical base for the study.

As indicated above, my research also requires an empirically grounded understanding of the extent to which religious literacy is currently incorporated (or, more likely, not incorporated) into TESL preparation programs at the university level. This will be achieved in subsequent chapters using a qualitative approach with the goal of shedding light on ESL university teachers’ views on and responses to religiosity in the classroom. The aim here is not to end up with quantifiable data which can serve as the basis for empirically-grounded proposals for change, as in a positivist approach, but rather “to study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them”29. Given that qualitative methods tend to be holistic, they are appropriate for this project, which ultimately seeks to investigate the many varied

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28 White, 2012; Morris, Bouchard, and De Silva, 2011
29 Denzin and Lincoln, 2005
ways in which religiosity is understood—that is, the highly contextualized manner in which teachers perceive religion in the classroom. Specially, in order to facilitate analysis of the fluid context of teacher values, fears and beliefs, I will use a case study approach. With its comprehensive “palette of methods”\(^\text{30}\) the flexibility of this method will allow me to use a wide variety of research procedures as the study unfolds.

In light of the fact that my dissertation will be grounded in an intensive philosophical analysis, considerations of time and space will impose practical limitations on the empirical dimension of the dissertation. To this end, I propose to develop a case study of teachers in intensive ESL university programs. This relatively small scale, focused approach will permit an understanding of the complexities of teachers’ religious literacy in the classroom without requiring a large-scale study. The flexibility of qualitative research will allow me to use mixed methods to acquire data collected over a period of six months to a year. The sample groups of 10-15 ESL teachers will be drawn from three Canadian English language universities. These instructors will be actively engaged in teaching ESL to international students in intensive ESL programs, and they must represent a range of career points and cultural backgrounds. Initially, anonymous quantitative surveys will be administered to determine teachers’ levels of religious literacy. Preliminary interviews with three teachers will determine key issues for instructors and shape questions for later interviews. I will conduct 30-minute video-recorded focus group interviews in groups of five to assess what teachers see as the main obstacles to religious literacy in the classroom. The last stage will use twenty-minute semi-structured individual interviews recorded by audio to gain deeper insight into these issues. Finally, TESL teacher education program documents will be compiled and analyzed to determine to what extent religious literacy is taught, either explicitly or implicitly. Insights from this analysis will be used to propose a training program to improve ESL instructors’ religious literacy using a normative case study approach. Given time limitations, it is hoped that the conclusions that are drawn from this study will lead to further studies, ideally resulting in implementing a training program to improve instructors’ knowledge of, and sensitivity to, their students’ religious backgrounds.

**Knowledge Mobilization**

My project has the end goal of generating awareness about the importance of religious literacy as an educational aim in ESL teacher training. Through disseminating my research via a series of publications in open access journals and conferences, I hope to generate sufficient interest among other educational researchers in the fields of religious studies, education, higher education and applied linguistics in order to deepen and broaden interdisciplinary academic discussion on issues related to religious literacy in education. Moreover, I aim to inform TESL curriculum designers and program administrators from education departments to impart changes to teacher education courses that will bring religious literacy a more central role in those courses designed to teach diversity. Ideally, this would come about in collaboration with religious studies departments in targeted universities. Finally, I hope to design and facilitate a series of in-service ESL teacher training workshops for promoting religious literacy among those educators.

**Conclusion**

In conducting this research, I aim to further the discussion about religious literacy in higher education, by focusing on instructor religious literacy in intensive ESL programs in a representative institution. Given the reluctance of most scholars outside Religious Studies to address religion as anything other than one point of diversity among many, I seek to demonstrate that religion is not simply a ‘can of worms’ to be avoided in the classroom at all costs. Religion matters. It matters to many of our students, and it should matter to their teachers, and to the institutions that train them.

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\(^\text{30}\) Stake, 1995
Bibliography


