



NEEDS IMPROVEMENT: HOW PUBLIC SCHOOLS TEACH ABOUT RELIGION

Andrew P.W. Bennett
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Executive Summary

This paper represents an initial exploration of the way in which religion and belief are addressed in primary- and secondary-school curricula in four Canadian provinces: British Columbia, Manitoba, Ontario, and Nova Scotia. These provinces represent a diversity of size, geography, and religious and ethnic makeup and are indicative of the growing pluralism of twenty-first-century Canada. In undertaking this study, we were particularly concerned to find out how Canadian students in public schools are informed about religion, religious beliefs, and practices—key components of this deepening pluralism. Are students in public schools receiving the necessary formation that will support their participation in a society that is becoming increasingly diverse in religious expression? Instructing the next generations not *in* a religion but *about* religion should be a key element of Canadian education.

The public schools in these four provinces take varied approaches to engaging religious topics. We find Ontario to be the stand-out example of a more expansive engagement with religion, both in terms of exploring the various religious traditions' history as well as how they are lived out in the lives of Canadians today. The curricula of the other three provinces tend to present religion primarily from a distanced, historical, or sociological perspective. In some instances, we find that these curricula present some religions or spiritualities in consistently favourable or unfavourable ways, despite the officially secular, non-sectarian nature of public education. Other religions appear absent from the curricula, despite the particular province, and Canada as a whole, having significant communities that represent these faiths. We argue that these deficiencies do not serve Canadian pluralism well.

The paper concludes with recommendations for provincial ministries of education, teachers, faith leaders, and faculties of education at Canadian universities. We urge the provincial ministries of education to undertake their own formal research in order to review and revise the curricula where necessary.



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Introduction

One of the principal goals of education is to equip each new generation with the skills needed to engage the world, especially the public life of the country they live in. Canada is a pluralistic society, shaped by a myriad of ethnicities, regional cultures, histories, and faith communities. Legal scholars Rosalie Jukier and José Woehrling describe Canada as “a bilingual, multicultural federation operating within a pluralistic society.”¹ In 2011, 20.9 percent of Canada’s population was foreign-born, significantly higher than both the United States, at 13 percent, and the United Kingdom, at 11.7 percent. This level is expected to increase to between 24.5 and 30 percent by 2036. The countries of origin of new Canadians is also shifting. Within fifteen years approximately 57 percent of immigrants will come from Asia, principally China, India, and the Philippines, and 15 to 18 percent from Europe—a reversal of immigrant origins in the space of fifty years.² Canadians’ ability to navigate and thrive within this pluralism requires attitudes of openness and respect. This posture does not come naturally; it is a process that is fostered through education.

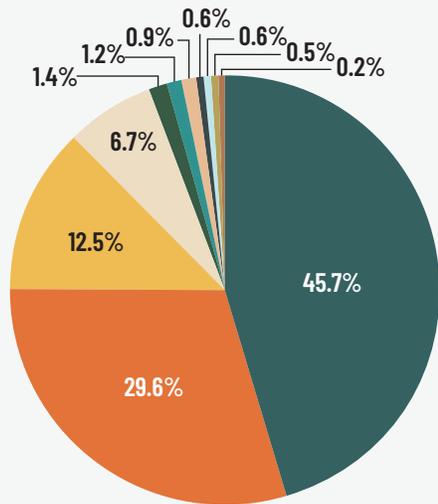
An important component of Canadian pluralism is religion, and the religious face of Canada has grown increasingly diverse over the past quarter century. The older, more established faith communities in Canada have either remained stable or grown slightly in the cases of the Catholic and Jewish communities, or declined in the case of the mainline Protestant denominations. Other Protestant groups have experienced positive growth. In the midst of these experiences of both growth and decline, Christians, at least nominally, still remain collectively the largest faith group in the country. Yet the landscape of religion in Canada is steadily changing. Between 1991 and 2011, the Canadian Muslim population more than quadrupled, the Sikh and Hindu population both more than tripled, and the Buddhist population more than doubled. Indeed, the Muslim population in 2011 (1,053,945 adherents) was marginally larger than the combined population of Lutherans, Presbyterians, and Reformed Protestants (1,053,400 adherents combined).³ Given population projections that take into account the continuing growth in immigration from Asia,

1 R. Jukier and J. Woehrling, “Religion and the Secular State in Canada,” in *Religion and the Secular State: National Reports*, eds. J. Martinez-Torrón and W.C. Durham (Provo: International Center for Law and Religious Studies, 2010), 183, https://www.mcgill.ca/law/files/law/jukier_2010_religion_and_the_secular_state.pdf.

2 Statistics Canada, “Immigration and Diversity: Population Projections for Canada and its Regions, 2011 to 2036,” <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/91-551-x/91-551-x2017001-eng.htm>.

3 Statistics Canada, “Religion, Immigrant Status and Period of Immigration, Age Groups and Sex for the Population in Private Households of Canada, Provinces, Territories, Census Metropolitan Areas and Census Agglomerations—2011 National Household Survey, Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 99-010-X2011032,” <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/en/catalogue/99-010-X2011032>; Statistics Canada, “Population by Religion, Showing Age Groups—1991 Census of Population, Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 1006401,” <https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/English/census91/data/tables/Rp-eng.cfm?LANG=E&APATH=3&DETAIL=1&DIM=0&FL=A&FREE=1&GC=0&GID=0&GK=0&GRP=1&PID=120&PRID=0&PTYPE=4&S=0&SHOWALL=No&SUB=0&Temporal=1991&THEME=114&VID=0&VNAMEF=&VNAMEF=>.

FIGURE 1: Canadian Religious Landscape, 1991

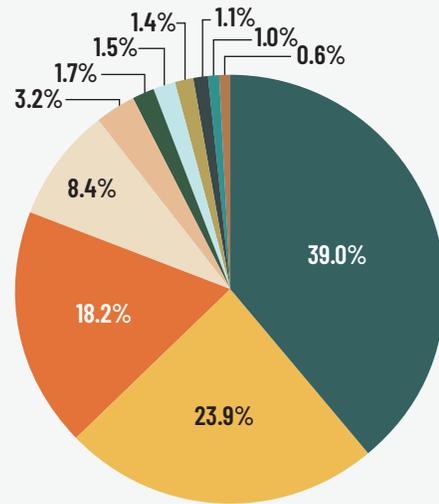


- Catholic¹
- Mainline Protestant²
- No religious affiliation³
- Other Christian³
- Christian Orthodox
- Jewish
- Muslim
- Buddhist
- Hindu
- Sikh
- Other religions⁴

- 1 Includes Roman Catholic, Ukrainian Catholic, Other Catholic.
- 2 Includes Anglican, Baptist, Lutheran, Mennonite, Pentecostal, Presbyterian, Reformed, United.
- 3 Due to changes in how Statistics Canada counts religious affiliation, this category includes Other Protestants and Salvation Army, but also Jehovah's Witnesses and Latter-day Saints (Mormons).
- 4 Includes Para-religious groups, Other Eastern non-Christian, Other, n.e.c.

Source: Statistics Canada, 1991 Census, R9101—Population by Religion, <https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/English/census91/data/tables/Rp-eng.cfm?LANG=E&APATH=3&DETAIL=1&DIM=0&FL=A&FREE=1&GC=0&GID=0&GK=0&GRP=1&PID=66&PRID=0&PTYPE=4&S=0&SHOWALL=No&SUB=0&Temporal=1991&THEME=114&VID=0&VNAMEE=8&VNAMEF=>

FIGURE 2: Canadian Religious Landscape, 2011



- Catholic¹
- No religious affiliation²
- Mainline Protestant³
- Other Christian⁴
- Christian Orthodox
- Hindu
- Sikh
- Buddhist
- Jewish
- Other religions⁵

- 1 Includes Roman Catholic, Assyrian Chaldean Catholic, Greek Catholic n.o.s., Maronite, Melkite, Ukrainian Catholic, Catholic n.i.e.
- 2 Includes agnostic, atheist, humanist, no religion, no religious affiliation, n.i.e.
- 3 Includes Anglican, Baptist, Lutheran, Mennonite, Pentecostal, Presbyterian, Reformed, United.
- 4 Due to changes in how Statistics Canada counts religious affiliation, this category includes a wide array of Protestants, but also Jehovah's Witnesses and Latter-day Saints (Mormons).
- 5 Includes Traditional (Aboriginal) Spirituality, Baha'i, Eckankar, Gnostic, Jain, New Age, New Thought-Unity-Religious Science, Pagan, Pantheist, Rastafarian, Satanist, Scientologist, Shinto, Spiritualist, Taoist, Unitarian, Zoroastrian, Other religions, n.i.e.

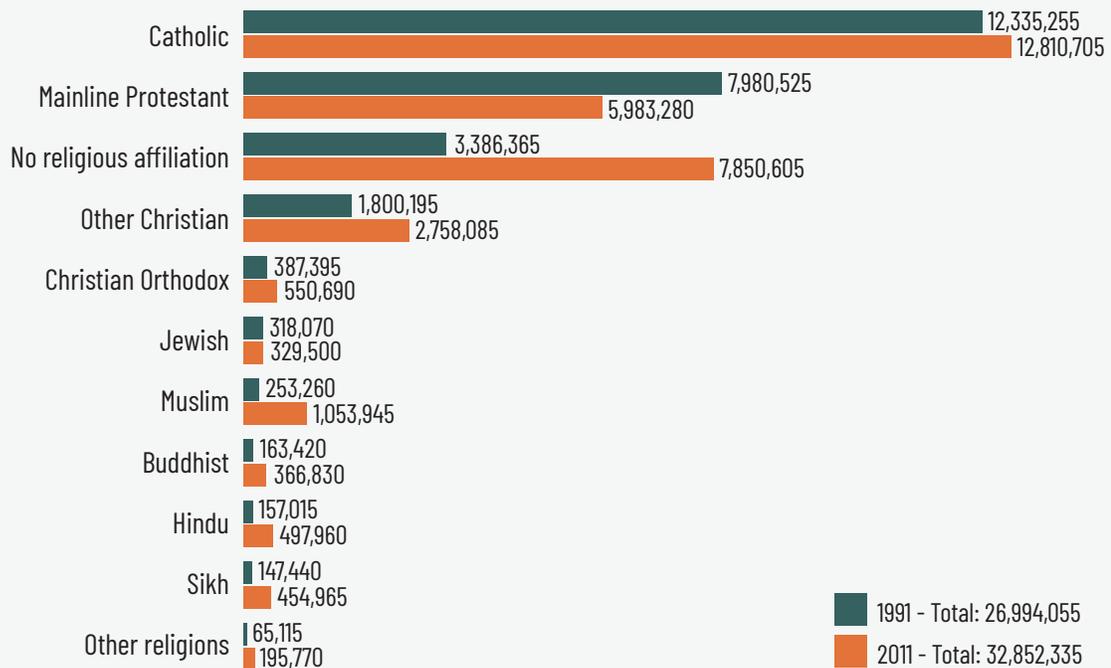
Source: Statistics Canada, 2011 National Household Survey, Table 99-020-X2011032, <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/en/catalogue/99-010-X2011032>.

Statistics Canada forecasts that in fifteen years Catholics will remain the largest religious group, with between 29 and 33 percent of the population, but that the non-Christian population, dominated by Muslims, Sikhs, and Hindus, will constitute between 13 and 16 percent of Canada's population by 2036 (compared with 9 percent in 2011).⁴

Religious faith shapes how we see the world and our community; it influences our political, social, and economic behaviour; and it guides how we relate to one another.

4 Statistics Canada, "Immigration and Diversity."

FIGURE 3: Canadian Religious Landscape, 1991 vs 2011¹



¹ Totals do not equal total population due to random rounding by Statistics Canada.

Sources: Statistics Canada, 1991 Census, R9101 - Population by Religion, <https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/English/census91/data/tables/Rp-eng.cfm?LANG=E&APATH=3&DETAIL=1&DIM=0&FI=A&FREE=1&GC=0&GID=0&GK=0&GRP=1&PID=66&PRID=0&PTYPE=4&S=0&SHOWALL=No&SUB=0&Temporal=1991&THEME=114&VID=0&VNAMEE=&VNAMEF=>; Statistics Canada, 2011 National Household Survey, Table 99-020-X2011032, <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/en/catalogue/99-010-X2011032>.

The Religion in Canada 150 poll conducted by the Angus Reid Institute in 2017 in partnership with Cardus’s Faith in Canada 150 revealed that roughly 21 percent of those surveyed were “religiously committed.” Among various attributes, those in that category all believed in God or a higher power, and a significant majority prayed to God, attended religious services, and talked about God with others once per month or more.⁵ Another 30 percent surveyed were “privately faithful.”⁶ Together that 51 percent represents 17.9 million Canadians.⁷ The Pew Forum’s Global Attitudes Survey of 2018 similarly found that 29 percent of Canadians said that religion was “very important in their lives”—a higher percentage than people living in the UK (21 percent) or France (12 percent).⁸

5 For more detail on how the spectrum of spirituality categories were defined, please see Angus Reid Institute, “A Spectrum of Spirituality: Canadians Keep the Faith to Varying Degrees, but Few Reject It Entirely,” April 13, 2017, https://angusreid.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/2017.04.12_Faith_Wave_1_Part_1.pdf.

6 Angus Reid Institute, “Spectrum of Spirituality,” 1.

7 Based on Statistics Canada, “2016 Census National Population of 35,151,728 Persons,” <https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2016/dp-pd/prof/details/page.cfm?Lang=E&Geo1=PR&Code1=01&Geo2=&Code2=&SearchText=Canada&SearchType=Begins&SearchPR=01&B1=All&TABID=1&type=0>.

8 M. Lipka, “5 Facts About Religion in Canada,” Pew Research Center, July 1, 2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/07/01/5-facts-about-religion-in-canada/>.

The growth of new immigrant communities is also challenging one of the prevailing assumptions of Canadians who have lived in this country for longer: the view that religion is a private matter. A significant proportion of immigrants come from countries such as India and the Philippines, in which religion and expressions of religious faith are part of the public sphere of life. And at the same time that religious diversity is increasing, Canada is experiencing a secularizing of the formerly dominant Christian populations. A growing number of Canadians claim no religion: 12.5 percent of the population in 1991, increasing to approximately 24 percent in 2011.

Will the increasing number of non-religious Canadians respect those who are religious, particularly if religion is expressed in a public manner? Will Canadians who adhere to one particular faith respect those who adhere to another? How are we ensuring that the deepening religious diversity leads not to division but toward greater social cohesion within our communities? Do we know one another, and are we able to appreciate and live alongside those who are different from us? What role does public education play in facilitating these goals?



Methodology

The degree to which students encounter and engage a diversity of ideas, cultures, and beliefs will help to determine how able they are to participate in and contribute to our common life in Canada. What are Canadian children learning about religion in our public schools and about their fellow students who manifest the richness of Canadian religious pluralism through their beliefs and practices?

To answer this question, we analyzed primary and secondary curricula of the public school systems in British Columbia, Manitoba, Ontario, and Nova Scotia. We selected these four provinces because they vary in population size, region, and degree of religious diversity. In the 2019–2020 academic year, these four provinces together had 2.94 million students enrolled in primary and secondary education, representing 59 percent of the total national enrollment of 4.92 million.⁹

We reviewed curricula from a variety of subjects, at both primary and secondary levels, in which one would expect to find references to religion. This included courses in social studies, history, geography, health and physical education, languages, law, science, and world issues. Keyword searches yielded data on the frequency and extent to which certain topics were addressed in the curricula. The keywords were grouped into three categories. The first category included high-level terms such as “religion,” “belief,” “faith,” and “spirituality.” The second category included keywords related to specific religious traditions such as “Christian(-ity),” “Judaism (Jewish),” “Islam (-ic, Muslim),” “Indigenous (Indigenous Spirituality, First Nations, Métis, Inuit),” “secular(-ism),” “atheist (Atheism),” and other (such as “Hinduism,” “Jainism,” “Buddhism,” “Latter-Day Saints”). The final category included key words linked to legal protections such as “freedom of religion,” “freedom of conscience,” and “Charter of Rights and Freedoms.” If a curricular document contained any of these terms, we recorded the document name and examined how the term was used, and we created a database of selected passages from these documents. In many cases, the same word or phrase appeared multiple times, often reflecting a general curricular goal being reaffirmed in each instance. For this reason, the number of times that a

9 Statista, “Enrollment in Public Elementary and Secondary Schools in Canada in 2019/20, by Province,” October 2021, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/449110/enrollment-in-public-elementary-and-secondary-schools-in-canada-by-province/>.

keyword appeared was not recorded, as it would not necessarily reflect unique or new curricular content. Instead, we examined the treatment of religion in these curricula from a qualitative rather than quantitative perspective.¹⁰ Our intent for this paper is not to employ a formal research protocol but to reflect on this material through a religious-freedom lens.

It is also important to note that it was beyond the scope of this study to assess how these curricula are interpreted and applied at the individual board, school, or classroom level. In many cases teachers are presented with a variety of topics through which they can explore a particular curricular goal. Subsequent research could shed light on how curricula are applied.

10 BC curricula reviewed: 20th Century World History 12, Asian Studies 12, ASL 8 and 12, Child Development and Caregiving 12, Comparative Cultures 12, Comparative World Religions 12, Composition 10 Through 12, Computer Programming 11, Contemporary Indigenous Studies 12, Core French 8 and 12, Creative Writing 10 Through 12, Digital Communications 11, Digital Media Development 12, Directing and Script Development 11 and 12, Drama 11 and 12, E-Commerce 12, Economic Theory 12, Economics 12, EFP + Literary Studies + New Media 11, EFP + Literary Studies + Spoken Language 11, EFP + Literary Studies + Writing 11, English First Peoples 12, English Language Arts 6 Through 9, English Studies 12, Entrepreneurship 12, Études littéraires et artistiques + expression orale 10 and 11, Études littéraires et artistiques + nouveaux médias 10 and 11, Études littéraires et artistiques + production écrite 10 and 11, Explorations in Social Studies 11, Fashion Industry 12, Film and Television 11 and 12, Food Studies 11 and 12, Français langue et culture 12, Français langue première 5, Français langue seconde immersion, Francophone History and Culture 11, Genocide Studies 12, German 8 and 12, Graphic Production 11 and 12, Housing and Living Environments 12, Interpersonal and Family Relationships 11, Italian 8 and 12, Italian Introductory 12, Japanese 8 and 12, Japanese Introductory 11, Korean 8 and 12, Korean Introductory 12, Literary Studies 10 and 12, Mandarin 8 and 12, Mandarin Introductory 11, Marketing and Promotion 11, Media Design 11 and 12, Musical Theatre 10 Through 12, New Media 10 Through 12, Philosophy 12, Physical and Health Education 6, Punjabi 8 and 12, Social Studies 2, 3, and 5 Through 10, Spanish 8 and 12, Spanish Introductory 11, Specialized Studies in Food 12, Spoken Language 10 Through 12, Textiles 11 and 12, Theatre Production 11, Tourism 11 and 12, Writing 10.

Manitoba curricula reviewed: Aboriginal Languages and Cultures K–12, Canadian Law Grade 12, Cinema as a Witness to Modern History Grade 12, Current Topics in First Nations, Métis and Inuit Studies 12, Dance K–4 and 9–12, Drama K–4 and 9–12, English Language Arts 6–8, Global Issues, Citizenship and Sustainability Grade 12, Hebrew Language Arts K–6, History of Canada Grade 11, Music K–4, 5–8, and 9–12, Physical and Health Education Senior 1 and 2, Physical Education/Health Education K–12 (K–S4), Social Studies K–8, Social Studies: Canada in the Contemporary World Grade 9, Social Studies: Geographic Issues of the 21st Century Senior 2, Visual Arts K–4, 5–8, and 9–12, Western Civilization Grade 12.

Ontario curricula reviewed: Kindergarten Program, Grades 1–8 Arts, Grades 1–8 Health and Physical Education, Grades 1–8 Native Languages, Grades 1–8 Science and Technology, Grades 1–6 Social Studies, Grades 7 and 8 History and Geography, Grades 9 and 10 Arts, Grades 11 and 12 Arts, Grades 9 and 10 Canadian and World Studies, Grades 11 and 12 Canadian and World Studies, Grades 9–12 First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Studies, Grades 9–12 Health and Physical Education, Grades 11 and 12 Interdisciplinary Studies, Grades 9 and 10 Native Languages, Grades 11 and 12 Native Languages, Grades 9 and 10 Science, Grades 9–12 Social Sciences and Humanities.

Nova Scotia curricula reviewed: Grade 6 Social Studies, Grade 7 Visual Arts, Grade 8 Healthy Living, Grade 7 and 8 Physical Education, Grade 8 Visual Arts, Grade 9 Citizenship, Grade 9 Healthy Living, Grade 9 Visual Arts, Grade 10 and 11 Drama, Grade 10 and 11 Visual Arts, Grade 12 Drama, Grade 12 Visual Arts, Grade 10 Plus English, Grade 11 Advanced English, Grade 12 Advanced English, Grade 12 Canadian Literature, Grade 12 English African Heritage, Grade 12 Canadian Families, Grade 11 and 12 Biology, Grade 10 History, Grade 11 Canadian History, Grade 12 Global History/Advanced Global History, Grade 12 Global Politics, Grade 12 Sociology.

Brief History of Public Education in Canada

Education is a provincial responsibility in Canada, and each province or territory has its own history of education that reflects the unique events, local circumstances, and other particularities of each jurisdiction. Accordingly, no two education systems are the same. Yet there are some overarching themes, particularly in relation to the origin and telos of public schools.

The earliest schools in what is now Canada were established and run by Christian denominations and religious orders. In distinction to these efforts, the “common school” movement arose in the nineteenth century: a uniform and universal system of compulsory, taxpayer-funded schools run and regulated by the government. While the common school was intentionally non-sectarian (not sponsored by or promoting one particular religious group), it still sought to inculcate Christian values and knowledge as part of its effort to form a socially cohesive citizenry. As the scholar Charles L. Glenn Jr. writes, “The primary goal of the common school crusade was to form the hearts of the next generation, [and] this goal was implicitly religious.”¹¹ Egerton Ryerson’s influential *Report on a System of Public Elementary Instruction for Upper Canada* spoke of the need for these schools to teach “the Holy Scriptures” and the “pervading principle” of “Christian Religion.”¹² In Nova Scotia, Premier Charles Tupper’s *Free School Act* introduced compulsory, common schools to the province in 1864,¹³ with non-sectarian “moral instruction on broadly but specifically Christian lines as the central aim of public education.”¹⁴ In 1870, Manitoba entered Confederation with dual Catholic and Protestant denominational systems, but its *Public School Act* of 1890 replaced denominational school funding with an Anglo-Protestant common school system.¹⁵ In British Columbia, the first superintendent of education was the Ryersonian-trained John Jessop, whose influence in the province’s *Public School Act* of 1872 helped ensure a Ryerson-style system there.¹⁶

This history provides important context for understanding references made to “religion” in the education legislation that is in force in each province today. Some provincial education statutes make no mention of religion. Others prohibit religious instruction, or state that religious instruction may be provided “should parents

11 C.L. Glenn, “The Common School as a Religious Institution,” in *The Myth of the Common School* (Oakland: Institute for Contemporary Studies, 2002 [orig. 1988]), 146.

12 E. Ryerson, *Report on a System of Public Elementary Instruction for Upper Canada* (Montreal: Lovell and Gibson, 1847), 22, 145.

13 R. Lanning, “Awakening a Demand for Schooling: Educational Inspection’s Impact on Rural Nova Scotia, 1855–74,” *Historical Studies in Education / Revue d’histoire de l’éducation* 12, nos. 1/2 (2000): 129–42.

14 A. Forrester, *The Teacher’s Textbook* (Halifax, 1867), 585–90, as cited in R.N. Bérard, “Moral Education in Nova Scotia, 1880–1920,” *Acadiensis* 14, no. 1 (1984): 49.

15 K.L. Robson, “A Historical Overview of Education in Canada,” in *Sociology of Education in Canada* (n.p.: Open Library Pressbooks, 2019), <https://ecampusontario.pressbooks.pub/robsonsoced/chapter/unknown-3/>.

16 Robson, “A Historical Overview of Education in Canada.”

request it.” It is important therefore to distinguish instruction *in* a religion (the type of instruction that continues today in independent religious schools—that is, instruction from a believing perspective, for the purpose of raising children up in the faith), from instruction *about* religion. There remains in public schools today the possibility of learning about religion just as students learn about and reflect on other aspects of our natural and social worlds.¹⁷

Findings

Navigating the Nomenclature

Our first observation concerns how particular terms tend to be used. When the terms “religion” or “religious” appear in the curricula, we found that they typically refer to one of the “world religions,” such as Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. In the Ontario curriculum, “religion” in this sense is generally presented in a favourable light. For example, the Grades 1–8 Health and Physical Education curriculum explicitly recognizes the role of parents and guardians as the primary educators of their children, including in the religious upbringing of their children, and the important role that religion plays in the family.¹⁸ By contrast, “religion” is typically presented in a neutral or unfavourable light in the curricula of BC and Manitoba, as for example in Manitoba’s grade 12 course Current Topics in First Nations, Métis and Inuit Studies, which will be described later in this paper. And in Nova Scotia, religion is largely treated in a neutral fashion in the provincial elementary and secondary curricula, reflected in such ways as “It is important that students discuss [and] understand the social and political structures such as family, church, education, as well as, the role of community/political leaders and their impact on change in community.”¹⁹

The negative association with the word “religion” matches the findings of an April 2017 poll conducted by Cardus and the Angus Reid Institute. Just 25 percent of Canadians indicate that “religion” had a positive meaning for them. Among those characterized as “religiously committed,” only 66 percent felt positive about the word “religion.”²⁰

17 Interestingly, section 264(1)(c) of the *Ontario Education Act* still states that one of the duties of a teacher is “to inculcate by precept and example respect for religion and the principles of Judaeo-Christian morality and the highest regard for truth, justice, loyalty, love of country, humanity, benevolence, sobriety, industry, frugality, purity, temperance and all other virtues.” Nova Scotia’s *Education Act*, 2018 section 42(1)(m) stipulates that it is the duty of every teacher to “maintain an attitude of concern for the dignity and welfare of each student and encourage in each student an attitude of concern for the dignity and welfare of others and a respect for religion, morality, truth, justice, love of country, humanity, equality, industry, temperance and all other virtues.”

18 Ontario Ministry of Education, “Grades 1-8 Health and Physical Education,” 14, <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/curriculum/elementary/2019-health-physical-education-grades-1to8.pdf>.

19 Nova Scotia Ministry of Education, “English 12: African Heritage,” 26, <https://curriculum.novascotia.ca/sites/default/files/documents/curriculum-files/English%2012%20African%20Heritage%20Guide%20%282012%29.pdf>.

20 Angus Reid Institute, “Spectrum of Spirituality,” 10, 12.

We also note that the terms “spirituality” or “spiritual” appear to be more privileged terms, in that they are found almost always in favourable contexts in the curricula and almost exclusively in reference to traditional Indigenous beliefs. We found that the term “religion” is almost never used in relation to Indigenous Canadians.

Where the term “belief” is found in these curricula, it is typically used in an unspecified or ambiguous way, referring to spiritual beliefs, opinions, or attitudes, depending on the particular context. For example, in British Columbia’s Graphic

Production 11 or Media Design 12 courses include the following goal: “Examine how cultural beliefs, values, and ethical positions affect the development and use of technologies.” Likewise, most language courses in BC at the secondary level, such as Core French 12, Korean 12, or Punjabi 12, affirm that “sharing our feelings, opinions, and beliefs in a new language contributes to our identity.”²¹ In these courses, “beliefs,” which could conceivably include religious beliefs, are grouped with feelings and opinions.

“Faith” is a term almost completely absent from the curricula of these four provinces.

These observations about terminology lead us to conclude that the curricula draw primarily on one way of approaching the study of religion—namely, a social-scientific, arm’s-length study of the beliefs, rituals, and other practices of human beings throughout history that have coalesced today into the “world religions” or

“organized religion.” We suggest, however, that this way of studying religion can be complemented by another, equally valuable way to introduce young people to this aspect of human life, which we address in the next section of our paper, below.

Speaking of Religion . . .

Religion is presented in these curricula primarily as a social phenomenon, to be approached by the detached observer. This approach has been informed by such thinkers as Émile Durkheim, Karl Marx, and Michel Foucault, who have shaped the discipline known as religious studies or comparative religion. Religious studies takes its bearings from anthropology and sociology, rather than from philosophy or theology. Durkheim, for example, viewed religion as a social reality that influences a community. In his seminal work on the philosophy of religion, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, God or whatever is society’s sacred object “is nothing but the collective forces of the group transfigured.”²²

Our review suggests that young Canadians in these provinces have only rare opportunities in these curricula to consider religion as something bound up with the transcendent, the pursuit of truth, and integral to human life.

21 BC Ministry of Education, “Applied Design, Skills and Technologies,” <https://curriculum.gov.bc.ca/curriculum/adst>; BC Ministry of Education, “Languages,” <https://curriculum.gov.bc.ca/curriculum/languages/courses>.

22 P. Carls, “Émile Durkheim (1858–1917),” Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, <https://iep.utm.edu/durkheim/>.

From this detached perspective, students do not come into contact with the truth claims of the various religions. If studied from a more philosophical or humanistic angle, however, the study of religion can become a means of developing students' abilities to make their own informed judgments about these truth claims and about the fundamental questions of human life that religions address: Who am I? Is there a God? Does my life have a meaning? Our review suggests that young Canadians in these provinces have only rare opportunities in these curricula to consider religion as something bound up with the transcendent, the pursuit of truth, and integral to human life. Studying religion in this way would greatly assist these young people in understanding how they and their classmates, and the wider society they will enter as adults, draw on religious faith to understand the world, their own place in the world, and their answers (even if provisional) about the ultimate purpose and meaning of their lives. It would be strange to teach philosophy in our schools from an informational perspective only, without also including the rich learning that can result from examining and discussing together the questions that the particular philosophy under consideration evokes. Religion can be approached in the same manner. Public-school teachers are skilled professionals who can encourage learning and discussion in an open and respectful environment where each student's thoughts and questions can be shared and considered.

Let's examine more closely how the social-science approach to religion manifests in the curricula. In BC, students in grade 7 Social Studies engage the "origins, core beliefs, narratives, practices, and influences of religions, including at least one indigenous to the Americas."²³ In 20th Century World History, students in grade 12 explore religious conflicts as a topic within the course.²⁴ Comparative Religions 12, as its name indicates, take a social-scientific approach, engaging students in topics such as the following:

Core beliefs, practices, and ethics of world religions, including spirituality in First Peoples culture;

Comparing beliefs provides insights and understanding of diverse global cultures and peoples;

What was the role of the Roman Empire in the early growth of Christianity in the 1st century?, and,

In what ways did Christianity influence the Roman Empire?²⁵

23 BC Ministry of Education, "Social Studies 7–The Ancient World to the 7th Century," <https://curriculum.gov.bc.ca/curriculum/social-studies/7/core>.

24 BC Ministry of Education, "20th Century World History 12," <https://curriculum.gov.bc.ca/curriculum/social-studies/12/20th-century-world-history>.

25 BC Ministry of Education, "Comparative Religions 12," <https://curriculum.gov.bc.ca/curriculum/social-studies/12/comparative-world-religions>.

In Manitoba, the grade 8 Social Studies course explores through a historical lens the development of world religions that emerged “in antiquity,” including Christianity, Confucianism, Judaism, Buddhism, and Hinduism.²⁶ The discussion of religion is more extensive in senior-level Social Studies courses, especially Canadian History, Global Issues, and the grade 12 course in Western civilization. This last course has the most extensive treatment of religion in the Manitoba curriculum as a whole. It examines such historical and cultural themes as the following:

The similarities and differences among Christianity, Judaism, and Islam;

The reasons why some religious groups were persecuted;

The contributions of the Judeo-Christian and Islamic belief systems to Western civilization;

The causes of conflict between the Christian Church and Islam.²⁷

In this course, religious topics are explicitly addressed only in the units of the course focusing on the pre-modern and Renaissance and Reformation eras. Religion does not appear as a topic in the units covering the “Age of Reason,” the nineteenth century, or the twentieth century.

Nova Scotia’s engagement with matters of religion is similarly limited. Religion appears for example in the grade 12 English course on African heritage, recognizing the role of Christian faith in black Nova Scotian history:

It is important that teachers provide historical and background information linked to African heritage [and] opportunities for students to focus on particular political, ideological and/or religious viewpoints and encourage students to compare and respond to various social problems. . . . It is important that students discuss [and] understand the social and political structure such as family, church, education, as well as, the role of community/political leaders and their impact on change in community.²⁸

Outside of some discussion of First Nations spirituality, there is little discussion throughout the curriculum of Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, or Sikhism, all of which are represented by communities in the province, with some of these communities having very deep roots there.

The Ontario curriculum stands alone among the four provincial curricula surveyed in having the most comprehensive approach to religion, engaging this topic from historical and sociological perspectives as well as how it is lived out in the lives of

26 Manitoba Ministry of Education, “Kindergarten to Grade 8 Social Studies: Manitoba Curriculum Framework of Outcomes,” 112, <https://www.edu.gov.mb.ca/k12/cur/socstud/framework/k-8framework.pdf>.

27 Manitoba Ministry of Education, “Senior 4: Western Civilization,” 1–3, <https://www.edu.gov.mb.ca/k12/cur/socstud/overviews/senior4-west.pdf>.

28 Nova Scotia Ministry of Education, “English 12: African Heritage,” 26.

students and their classmates. Several of the Ontario curricular documents provide guidance on how to approach students' and families' religious traditions. These statements evince a desire to know the whole person and recognize that religion may inform how particular students understand and engage the world, including how they will engage course material:

Parents are the primary educators of their children with respect to learning about values, appropriate behaviour, and ethnocultural, spiritual, and personal beliefs and traditions, and they are their children's first role models.²⁹

Some topics within the Healthy Living strand need to be approached with additional sensitivity, care, and awareness because of their personal nature and their connection to family values, religious beliefs, or other social or cultural norms.³⁰

The expectations in these courses provide numerous opportunities for students to break through stereotypes and to learn about various social, religious, and ethnocultural groups, including First Nations, Métis, and Inuit people, and how their beliefs, values, and traditions are reflected in the community.³¹

Topics and questions explored in Ontario's grades 9–12 Social Sciences and Humanities curriculum include the following:

In what ways has religion helped shape your identity? How might religion influence the adoption of gender roles or norms and related behaviour?³²

In what ways do religion and culture overlap? In what ways are they distinct from one another?³³

Describe ways in which families transmit their cultural and religious heritage to children (e.g., through storytelling, visual arts, festivals, religious and other rituals) as well as the ways in which families may be constrained in their ability to transmit their culture and religion.³⁴

Identify diverse religions and belief traditions that are found in Canada (e.g., Christianity, First Nation and Inuit ritual and spirituality,

29 Ontario Ministry of Education, "Grades 1–8 Health and Physical Education," 14.

30 Ontario Ministry of Education, "Grades 1–8 Health and Physical Education," 40.

31 Ontario Ministry of Education, "Grades 9 and 10 Canadian and World Studies," 49, <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/curriculum/secondary/canworld910curr2013.pdf>.

32 Ontario Ministry of Education, "Grades 9–12 Social Sciences and Humanities," 73, <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/curriculum/secondary/ssciences9to122013.pdf>.

33 Ontario Ministry of Education, "Grades 9–12 Social Sciences and Humanities," 95.

34 Ontario Ministry of Education, "Grades 9–12 Social Sciences and Humanities," 284.

Hinduism, Islam, Jainism, Judaism, secular humanism) . . . How does the study of world religions and belief traditions enhance our ability to understand and appreciate diversity? In what ways might the study of world religions reduce our tendency to negatively judge people who are different from ourselves?³⁵

Ontario's grade 11 and 12 Interdisciplinary Studies curriculum also stands alone among the secondary-level courses surveyed for this paper in examining religious belief and practice in depth and how these link to philosophy, politics, and culture. The course goals are worth quoting at length to show the thoughtful approach taken to understand religion from a variety of perspectives:

Students will use comparative and systematic approaches to investigate and research significant themes in and philosophical questions raised by world faiths. They will examine the development of the textual sources, recurring iconography, and artistic representations associated with these faiths; analyse the interplay of faith, culture, and art to comment on the human search for meaning; and apply their findings in the creation of art works that reflect religious themes.³⁶

This course explores the role that music plays in the aesthetic, cultural, social, religious, and political life of past and contemporary societies around the world.³⁷

This package of courses examines the relationship between religious and cultural expression in daily life. Students will compare a wide variety of scriptures and interpretations of scriptures as they examine such themes as social norms, the role of religious institutions and communities, and the use of traditional and contemporary technologies to communicate message and experience.³⁸

Ontario also stands out for the number of religious traditions mentioned in its curricula, including Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism, Indigenous spirituality, secular humanism, and Judaism. Indeed, the word “religion” or “religious” is mentioned on 362 occasions in the grades 9–12 Social Sciences and Humanities curriculum alone.³⁹

35 Ontario Ministry of Education, “Grades 9–12 Social Sciences and Humanities,” 359.

36 Ontario Ministry of Education, “Grades 11 and 12 Interdisciplinary Studies,” 11, <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/curriculum/secondary/interdisciplinary1112curr.pdf>.

37 Ontario Ministry of Education, “Grades 11 and 12 Interdisciplinary Studies,” 14.

38 Ontario Ministry of Education, “Grades 11 and 12 Interdisciplinary Studies,” 17.

39 Ontario Ministry of Education, “Grades 9–12 Social Sciences and Humanities.”



Indigenous Spirituality

A final theme concerns how Indigenous spirituality is considered in provincial curricula. There appears to be a clear preference for using the term “spirituality” to refer to the pre-Contact beliefs that continue to be practiced by some Indigenous people today. The BC Ministry of Education’s “Indigenous Knowledge and Perspectives in K–12 Curriculum” materials provide some representative examples of this usage. These materials are a resource for teachers “to easily access where Indigenous Knowledge and Perspectives intersect with the curriculum in every area of learning at every grade level.”⁴⁰ In the resource for K–12 Social Studies, we find for example,

Explorations in Social Studies 11: Indigenous peoples are reclaiming mental, emotional, physical, and spiritual well-being despite the continuing effects of colonialism (from Contemporary Indigenous Studies 12).⁴¹

Comparative World Religions 12: Characteristics of religion, mythology, and spirituality. What is the relationship between spirituality and worldviews for First Peoples in Canada? (sacred texts, traditions, and narratives Indigenous oral traditions).⁴²

First Nations spirituality is presented in an affirming manner as spiritual well-being, which is negatively affected by colonialism. How Indigenous spirituality includes or exists alongside other religious beliefs, particularly the Christian faith of many First Nations people in British Columbia, is not explored.

40 BC Ministry of Education, “Indigenous Knowledge and Perspectives in K–12 Curriculum,” <https://curriculum.gov.bc.ca/curriculum/Indigenous-education-resources/Indigenous-knowledge-and-perspectives-k-12-curriculum>.

41 BC Ministry of Education, “Explorations in Social Studies 11,” 2, https://www.curriculum.gov.bc.ca/sites/curriculum.gov.bc.ca/files/curriculum/social-studies/en_social-studies_11_explorations-in-social-studies_elab.pdf.

42 BC Ministry of Education, “Indigenous Knowledge and Perspectives: Social Studies K–12,” <https://curriculum.gov.bc.ca/sites/curriculum.gov.bc.ca/files/curriculum/indigenous-knowledge-and-perspectives/social-studies-K-12-indigenous-knowledge-and-perspectives.pdf>.

Manitoba's grade 11 History of Canada course contains considerable discussion of colonization and the historical experiences of Indigenous peoples in Canada. Religion and spirituality are juxtaposed here, as in the BC curriculum: "religion," specifically Christianity, is identified with what French settlers introduced, and "spirituality" is identified with what Indigenous Canadians practice. The following excerpts from the course curriculum express this:

The French brought their language, culture, religion, and government to Nouvelle France. . . . Some wanted to spread Christianity, some wanted to expand the power of their home country, and some saw possibilities in the fur trade.⁴³

The oral traditions of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit peoples teach the importance of maintaining a balance among the emotional, physical, mental, and spiritual aspects of life.⁴⁴

First Peoples were spiritually connected to all living things and to the natural world around them.⁴⁵

The curricula for grades 11 and 12 Aboriginal Languages and Culture explores "the role of traditional and contemporary spiritual beliefs and practices of Aboriginal cultures."⁴⁶ The grade 12 course Current Topics in First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Studies takes an implicitly unfavourable view of the interaction between Christianity, the religion of colonization, and Indigenous spirituality. A component of the curriculum is a role-playing game with the following goals: "to demonstrate the functions and effect of colonialism on an Indigenous people; to examine the means used by a colonial power to dismember a traditional society; and, to provide an experiential understanding of the historical breakdown of traditional cultures and how the effects of this breakdown affect native people today."⁴⁷ The course emphasizes the experience of Indigenous-settler relations as conflictual, with Christianity as a factor contributing to this negative relationship.⁴⁸

While these curricula associate Indigenous peoples with "spirituality" rather than with "religion," and with a faith other than Christianity, Statistics Canada informs us that as of 2011, 63.5 percent of Indigenous people in Canada self-identify their spirituality/religion as "Christian" and 4.5 percent as "Traditional (Aboriginal)

43 Manitoba Ministry of Education, "Grade 11 History of Canada: A Foundation for Implementation," III-17, https://www.edu.gov.mb.ca/k12/cur/socstud/history_gr11/document.pdf.

44 Manitoba Ministry of Education, "Grade 11 History of Canada," II-4.

45 Manitoba Ministry of Education, "Grade 11 History of Canada," III-11.

46 Manitoba Ministry of Education, "Kindergarten to Grade 12 Aboriginal Languages and Cultures: Manitoba Curriculum Framework of Outcomes," 69, https://www.edu.gov.mb.ca/k12/abedu/framework/k-12_ab_lang.pdf.

47 Manitoba Ministry of Education, "Grade 12 Current Topics in First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Studies: A Foundation for Implementation," 415, https://www.edu.gov.mb.ca/k12/abedu/foundation_gr12/full_doc.pdf.

48 Manitoba Ministry of Education, "Grade 12 Current Topics in First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Studies," 63.

Such realities cause us to question whether the curricula are conveying an adequate understanding of the faith lives of Canadians today and in the past, the possible ways in which terms such as “religion” and “spirituality” can be understood, and their relationship with particular ethnicities.

Spirituality.”⁴⁹ Many of these Christians integrate their Indigenous culture with their Christian faith in intentional ways.⁵⁰ Conversely, many non-Indigenous Canadians, whether Muslim, Jewish, Christian, or some other, consider “spirituality” to be an important aspect of their faith.

Such realities cause us to question whether the curricula are conveying an adequate understanding of the faith lives of Canadians today and in the past, the possible ways in which terms such as “religion” and “spirituality” can be understood, and their relationship with particular ethnicities. We fully affirm the importance of recognizing historical wrongs and discussing them openly. Yet we also point out that Manitoba’s

curriculum adopts a stance of implicit if not explicit approval toward Indigenous spirituality and disapproval toward Christianity. We suggest that this stance is inappropriate to a secular, public education curriculum.

We also wonder about the impact of this curriculum on the young Indigenous Manitobans who are Christians, and other young Manitobans who may be members of immigrant communities who have suffered in other countries because of their Christian faith. We also affirm the importance of historical exploration, but curricula that address the lives and experiences of Indigenous Manitobans today are also necessary. There appears to be a gap here in examining the full history and contemporary lived experience of Métis and First Nations people in Manitoba and how they understand and express their religious or spiritual beliefs now, no matter what the tradition is that they follow. Students in Manitoba need to learn *both* about traditional Indigenous spirituality *and* about such figures in Prairie history as Edward Ahenakew, to mention just one example.⁵¹ This may lead to a richer and more complete consideration of the religious lives of Manitobans in all their complexity, personal agency, and contributions to our society.

49 Statistics Canada, “NHS Aboriginal Population Profile, Canada, 2011: Religion,” <https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/nhs-enm/2011/dp-pd/aprof/index.cfm?Lang=E>.

50 As one example, the Indigenous Christian Fellowship in Regina uses smudging with prayer, and the Good Friday service is a “memorial wake for Jesus Christ,” using bannock and chokecherry juice. See <https://icfregina.ca/programs>. As another example, a group of Indigenous Christians in Canada have founded and operate a degree-granting seminary in order to “articulate and advance a culturally appropriate Christian faith in which Indigenous people could express both their commitment to Jesus Christ and their God-given indigeneity.” See <https://www.naiits.com/>.

51 See “Edward Ahenakew,” *Canadian Encyclopedia*, <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/edward-ahenakew>.

Recommendations

In our introduction we posed several questions to help frame our inquiry. We return now to three of them and offer some recommendations to ministries of education, teachers, faith leaders, and faculties of education.

How can we as Canadians help to ensure through public education that Canada's deepening religious diversity leads not to division but toward strengthening social cohesion? How can we ensure that our public schools support students in learning to respect and form relationships with those who hold different beliefs from them? How can we support curriculum development so that the role of religion in our society is taught in a balanced and informed manner?

- Present religion as part of the rich mosaic of Canadian life, in a spirit of hospitality toward one another's religious faith and practices. Guide students in how to engage in respectful conversations about religion and religious differences. Ontario's grades 9–10 Canadian and World Studies curriculum, for example, encourages students to consider the role of faith groups in their community and how they contribute to its diversity:

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. . . . What religious structures are in your community? What do they tell you about respect for diversity in the community?⁵²

- Emphasize the personhood of each student from a holistic point of view. Embrace each student as having his or her own unique perspective and family history across generational time as well as in the present.
- Consider the experiences that some students and their families may have had before immigrating to Canada, and how these may affect their religious beliefs today.
- Present the correlations between particular faith traditions and ethnicities as appropriate, but emphasize also the Canadian commitment to religious freedom as stated in the *Charter*, that each Canadian has the right to choose the faith that they wish to adhere to (and the right to choose not to adhere).
- Consider religion not only from historical and sociological angles but also from contemporary and more personal (philosophical, humanistic, etc.) angles.

52 Ontario Ministry of Education, "Grades 9 and 10 Canadian and World Studies," 157.

- Be alert to biases that may creep into the curriculum, explicitly or implicitly, that work against the goals of public education.
- Review and revise where necessary the teacher-training programs in universities and in ongoing professional development in order to equip teachers in the subject of religion and strengthen the commitments that we have listed in the above bullet points.
- During K–12 curricular design, consider consultation with faith leaders for their reflections and suggestions on the curriculum as drafted. Faith leaders may be able to provide helpful insights. Standing councils of faith leaders could be created, with membership proportional and nominated by faith communities themselves. These councils would propose objectives and evaluate annually whether objectives are being met. Ministries of education would report on how objectives are being met in the classroom as the curriculum is implemented. Final decisions would continue to rest with the ministry of education.
- Seek to build relationships at the school or district level with local faith communities. Invite faith leaders into the school to enrich the courses that consider religious beliefs and practice. The Ontario curriculum provides a model; teachers in this province are encouraged to reach out to faith groups in the local community to invite them into the schools to discuss their beliefs and practices.⁵³ Ontario is to be commended overall for its curricular emphasis on engaging with faith communities, so that the faiths can be encountered “in person” and not only in terms of the churches, gurdwaras, mosques, temples, and synagogues that students may observe on their way to and from school.

Religion is ultimately not something that is merely studied but something that is lived. As our country continues to diversify we must not lose our ability to communicate in a thoughtful and informed way with our neighbours about the things that matter to us most deeply, such as why we believe what we believe and how it leads us to act. Without the ability to speak about religion in the public square, due to a loss of a common vocabulary, we will grow increasingly distant from one another and misunderstand one another. Inherent to us as human beings is the quest for truth, for meaning, and for answers to the fundamental questions: Who am I? Who am I in relationship to you? Who am I in relationship to truth, to God, to what I believe and confess? If public education is truly about forming each generation so that they may play an active role in society and contribute in meaningful ways, it must reflect the fact that religion affects and shapes the lives of many Canadians. As we exit from the COVID-19 pandemic, young people are going to have questions about truth and meaning, and will need to develop skills that help them to build community. Actively engaging and recognizing religion’s role in this and drawing from faith communities’ deep wells of wisdom about the human condition will be indispensable.

53 Ontario Ministry of Education, “Grades 9–12 Social Sciences and Humanities,” 12.

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