

**Colloquium Presentation C2.7, Saturday, November 2, 2014 at 1:45 PM**

**Title: Can religious literacy deter religious bullying?**

**Colloquium presenter: Wing Yu Alice Chan, PhD Student, McGill University**

**Main concepts/issues:**

This emerging research explores the connections between religious literacy and religious bullying within public school settings in Modesto, California and Montreal, Canada. As the only two mandatory religious literacy programs within North America, I hope to find teaching practices and student, teacher, principal, and parental perspectives on the role of religious literacy within public schools in both contexts. In doing so, I aim to better understand religious bullying in relation to religious literacy and share existing practices with teachers struggling to teach religious literacy. This presentation will introduce my literature review thus far and issues of religious bullying and the state of religious literacy in Modesto and Montreal, as well as discuss the role of dialogue in religious literacy programs (Jackson, 1997; Moore, 2007; Haynes, 2011; Wessler, 2011).

Today, reports on religious bullying trickle into our mass media and research (Hamblim, 2013; Joshi, 2007; Kabf, 1998; Lipsett, 2008; *Sikh Coalition*, 2014). Although religious bullying is often misunderstood, bullying organizations, such as Canada's PreVNet and America's stopbullying.gov, and my doctoral research are uncovering more details about this type of bullying. Like other forms of bullying, religious bullying causes emotional, mental, or physical harm to another individual(s). Specifically, it occurs when individual(s) are physically, psychologically, or verbally degraded intentionally by other individual(s) in-person and/or online based on the bully's own (non-)religious convictions or the (non-)religious convictions of those being degraded (Kirman, 2004; PreVNet; stopbullying.gov). Elaborating on existing conceptions, I argue that religious bullying is not only a one-time occurrence but can be a repeated offence as well.

Moore (2007) conceptualizes religious literacy as the ability to understand basic religious beliefs and practices, their complexities and diversities within and across religions, and the ability to discern and analyze religions' influence across the intersections of political, social, and cultural life historically and today. Her work cautions pluralistic societies against instilling religious illiteracy through the failure to include religion in the curriculum and as a violation to constitutional laws. In accord with her precautionary comments, my experience as a corporate employee in a Forbes 500 company, as a classroom teacher, and as a teacher researcher raises questions about the possibility of a cycle of (il)literacy among adults and students today. Having witnessed a degree of religious (il)literacy among adults, and a recent report by the Pew Research Group's Religion and Public Life Project on increasing rates of global religious hostility, my presentation will also consider the role of religious literacy programs in deterring this potential cycle. Concluding thoughts in the presentation will focus on the role of dialogue and current approaches and strategies for discourse from Jackson, Moore, Haynes, and Wessler.

**Methodology for addressing the topic:**

Using narrative analysis methodology, my research will span four years with five overlapping phases. Surveys and interviews will be my main methods of data collection. For

quantitative data, I will use a demographic survey to identify trends or patterns and comparative demographic data such as age, ethnicity, religion, etc. For qualitative data, I will use multiple-case study methodology to conduct three one-on-one interviews with 16 key participants – 3 students, 1 teacher, 1 principal and 3 parents from each context. Interviews will be: at the beginning and end of the school term, and a year later to see if their outlook on others and society may differ as a result of the religious literacy programs. In the third interview, responses and observed best practices from Montreal participants will be shared with Modesto participants and vice versa to encourage reflexivity of participants. Each phase will begin with observation in Montreal for the first half of the school year, followed by Modesto in the second half of the school year. I will focus only on the urban public school setting of Modesto, California and Montreal, Quebec due to their increasingly multi-ethnic and multi-religious populations. In Phase 1, I plan to find best practices and statistics on documented bullying cases from literary review. I am currently completing Phase 1. In Phase 2, 3, and 4, I will survey and interview students, teachers, principals, and parents, respectively. In Phase 5, my primary focus is research dissemination.

**Data Collection and Analysis:** Demographic surveys will include multiple choice and open-ended questions. Semi-structured interviews will follow with my 16 key participants. Verbatim interview transcription and thematic analysis will follow each survey and interview, where data will be analyzed based on the theoretical frameworks of the study and additional themes from participant response. In-class descriptive and reflective field notes will be used to identify additional teaching practices.

### **Sources grounding the presentation:**

My Masters research on Greater Toronto Area (GTA) public school systems revealed that public school boards, provincial, federal, and international policies and legislation support the importance of informal religious discussion. All parties agree that the inability to understand and respect differences can foster student bullying (such as name calling and alienation), possible self-destruction, and potential destruction of others in violent or radical ways. However, Lester (2013) posits that when teachers create an inclusive space for students to discuss religious diversity in the classroom, they offer varying perspectives that guide students toward conflict resolution for their future. Perhaps religious literacy can contribute to this inclusive space. My research will build on Lester's (2013) research in Modesto's World Religions Course and bring a new approach to the study of Montreal's Ethics and Religious Culture program. Current reports by the Pew Research Group, studies and teaching strategies from Diane Moore, Robert Jackson, Charles Haynes, and Stephen Wessler will be leveraged. The Tony Blair Faith Foundation's Face to Faith program and California's 3 Rs Project on religious liberty will also be referenced.

### **The status of the research at the time of the proposal:**

This presentation will present emerging research. Hence, all alternative approaches to the research will be welcomed during the post-presentation discussion.

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