RELIGIOUS LITERACY IN A NORTHWEST GEORGIA SCHOOL DISTRICT

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Since September 11, 2001, religion has been implicated in national and international issues to the extent that a fully-informed American citizenry must consider religious literacy to be an integral part of public education. Through analysis of anonymous questionnaires and voluntary interview participants, *Religious Literacy in a Northwest Georgia School District* investigates a single Georgia public school system and examines attitudes, perceptions, and educational practices of high school teachers with respect to religious literacy and how existing state standards address religious literacy. There were 189 educators in the system, who were anonymously surveyed by means of a 2-page questionnaire with seven Likert-scaled items and seven completion items. In addition to the surveys, one administrator and three teachers from each of the system’s three high schools volunteered for a series of three face-to-face interviews each. The Likert-scaled items on the 189 questionnaires were quantitatively analyzed using response percentages. Qualitative analysis consisted of coding and identifying emergent themes in the completion items on the questionnaire as well as from the twelve face-to-face interview transcripts.

This dissertation argues that public high school teachers cannot ignore the effects of religion in their academic subjects and that a basic understanding of the rudimentary tenets of Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, and Judaism—the five major world religions—is necessary for a complete public education. This dissertation illuminates not only the need for dispassionate, religiously literate educators who can equip their students with this prescient,
timely, and from all prognostications, crucial element of a culturally literate society, but also the need for teacher training to give educators the knowledge and the confidence to help produce religiously-literate students. Religious literacy is a relatively new educational issue that begs for additional research, and with that research, perhaps further strides can be made toward an international community united by dialogue rather than splintered by misinformation and fear.
DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my friend and colleague of over three decades, Dr. James David Doubet. Without his encouragement and support, not only would I never have become an educator, I also would never have set off on this ongoing journey of higher education.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Without the encouragement and guidance of Doctors James Tucker, John Freeman, Ingrid Jones, and Valerie Rutledge, this dissertation simply would not exist. Their belief in me sustained me many an hour. The patience of my Dissertation Chair, Dr. James Tucker, borders on the divine. He has backed my ideas and me for years, and I shall be forever in his debt.

In 2007, when I sent an email to author Stephen Prothero asking his permission to replicate the spirit of one of the religious literacy questionnaires he uses with his college freshmen, he not only answered me within hours, he gave his kind permission and generous support to my endeavors.
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The standard-bearer of cultural literacy, E. D. Hirsch, Jr. (1988) has never wavered from the mantra he published more than 20 years ago in *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know*: “To be culturally literate is to possess the basic information needed to thrive in the modern world. The breadth of that information is great, extending over the major domains of human activity from sports to science” (p. xiii). Stephen Prothero (2007), chair of the religion department at Boston University and author of *Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs To Know—And Doesn’t*, is a follower of Hirsch’s ideas. Prothero insists that religious literacy in the 21st century is crucial:

Today, when religion is implicated in virtually every issue of national and international import (not least the nomination of Supreme Court justices), U.S. citizens need to know something about religion too. In an era in which the public square is, rightly or wrongly, awash in religious reasons, can one really participate fully in public life without knowing something about Christianity and the world’s religions? (p. 10)

Though Georgia has some broad educational standards regarding major world religions in the state curriculum for world history, which all Georgia public high school students have to pass in order to graduate (AskDOE, 2013), it remains the job of educators “to teach [the] student population the essential skills needed to become literate readers, literate writers, and independent thinkers” (Hubbard, Hatfield, & Santucci, 1997, p. vii). The teachers of literature, history, languages, mathematics, science, and art cannot ignore the effects of religion, and to fully understand these connections, students need a working understanding of the tenets of the five major world religions: Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, Judaism, and Hinduism.
In this study, the researcher surveyed a sample of North Georgia public high school teachers and administrators in order to explore opinions and perceptions regarding whether or not a need for educational augmentation in world religions is necessary to best serve the students. The researcher also explored opinions and perceptions regarding how well North Georgia high school teachers are versed in the historical perspectives of world religions, including those perspectives outlined by the Georgia state standards.

Background of the Problem

The predominant Protestant population of North Georgia has afforded little student exposure to classmates or teachers of widely diverse religious experiences, though we in the United States—particularly after the events of September 11, 2001—are keenly aware of the diverse mélange of religions that makes up our nation. Diana L. Eck (2001) insists, “the challenge of relations between and among people of different religious and cultural traditions, both here in the United States and around the world, is moving to the top of the agenda” (p. xiii).

E. D. Hirsch, Jr. (1988) pioneered the idea that the level of cultural literacy required by literate Americans has steadily risen since the 1950s and that our ability to participate in regional, national, and international discourse is predicated on our ability to understand the lingua franca of a literate society. Hirsch insisted that this patois is made up of specific information. Drawing on Hirsch’s thesis, Prothero (2007) expanded that idea to include specific religious information. Prothero posits that,

Today religious illiteracy is at least as pervasive as cultural illiteracy, and certainly more dangerous. Religious illiteracy is more dangerous because religion is the most volatile constituent of culture, because religion has been, in addition to one of the greatest forces for good in world history, one of the greatest forces for evil. (p. 4)

After years of trying to remain neutral about religion and perhaps avoid offense and controversy in American public schools, educators are beginning to reap the harvest of religious
illiteracy. Events in history and allusions in literature are lost on many of today’s students.

Warren A. Nord and Charles C. Haynes (1998) admit that there are *educational* reasons for taking religion seriously. A good *liberal* education should expose students to the major ways humanity has developed for making sense of the world—and some of those ways of understanding the world are religious. An exclusively secular education is an illiberal education . . . By conveying a limited (secular) range of views that students must, in effect, accept on authority for want of any understanding of the alternatives, we place them at a deep disadvantage in thinking critically about where the truth might lie. (pp. 8-9)

Statement of the Problem

By examining a sample of North Georgia public high school educators, the researcher attempted to determine whether their perceived levels of religious literacy pose problems when trying to disseminate information in their classrooms that relies on previous knowledge of the five major world religions (*e.g.* religious allusions) and what, if any, effect this had on the participants’ ability to fulfill the existing state standards.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to assess the attitudes and perceptions of a sample of educators from a North Georgia public school system regarding their knowledge of the five major world religions: Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, and Judaism. Teachers and administrators from the system’s high schools were surveyed and interviewed to determine, record, and assess their attitudes, in light of Georgia public school standards and their implementation and efficacy.
Conceptual Framework

From exclusivists who fervently believe their religion is the only true one, which should therefore be taught as such, to strict separatists who carry the torch for absolute separation of church and state, regardless of the importance of religion in the lives of a majority of this country, the continuum of people who weigh-in on issues surrounding religion in public schools is as diverse as the student bodies represented. Some inclusivists favor their own religions but concede that others may hold truth as well, and some pluralists insist that all religions are true when evaluated within the context of the cultures from which they sprang. B. A. Robinson (2004) concedes that “pluralism” itself has shades of meaning ranging from tolerance to ecumenism to diversity, and that some theologians favor the term “particularism” over “exclusivism.” Generally speaking, he outlines that when speaking of major world religions, “The liberal/progressive wing accepts pluralism, the conservative wing teaches inclusivism, the very conservative wing believes in exclusivism, and the fundamentalist wing teaches extreme particularism” (p. 1).

In *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, William James (1902, 2004) provided a definition of *religion* that served the purposes of this study: “Religion . . . shall mean for us the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine” (p. 39). The sample area of North Georgia is statistically “Christian” as described by Diana L. Eck (2001):

The language of “Christian America” has been voluminously invoked in the public square. However, I sense in some of the most strident Christian communities little awareness of this new religious America, the one Christians now share with Muslims, Buddhists, and Zoroastrians. They display a confident, unselfconscious assumption that basically means Christianity, with traditional space made for the Jews. But make no mistake: in the past thirty years as Christianity has become more publicly vocal, something else of enormous importance has happened. The United States has become the most religiously diverse nation on earth. (p. 4)
Significance of the Study

While Georgia now has standards for those public schools who wish to implement elective courses that offer the study of the Christian Bible as literature, and while there are world history standards in place which address the historical impact of several world religions, this is the first such study in the targeted school district to examine whether or not the curriculum and/or the teachers explore enough information to produce students who can be deemed religiously literate. The data from administrators and teachers could provide a broader view of any real or perceived needs in this area.

Research Questions

The core research questions of this study were:

a. How did teachers and administrators in the Northwest Georgia school district being studied develop their attitudes regarding their own religious literacy?

b. How do they address religious literacy in their own teaching practices?

c. Do they adequately cover the existing state standards as those standards apply to religious literacy?

General Method

By means of a two-page questionnaire, teachers and administrators from the three high schools in the district provided anonymous quantitative data for this study, and 12 volunteers—one administrator and three teachers from each of the district’s three high schools—participated in a series of interviews and provided qualitative data for this study.
Limitations

Since this study was limited to a sample of high school administrators and high school teachers from the same county who were willing to participate, the findings may not be generalized for other public schools, systems, students, or educators in Georgia, the South, or the United States at large.

Delimitations

This study was delimited to three high schools in one northwest Georgia county public school system, and no other Georgia county school systems were involved.

Assumptions

The participants answered honestly and to the best of their abilities. The questions themselves were not intentionally leading or misleading.

Definition of Terms

Allah: The word is derived from the Arabic, “the God.” Though Arabic-speaking Jews and Christians sometimes use the same term, Muslims consider it the name of the One God—the true God—because it is the name used in the Qur’an (Archer, 2014, p. 133).

Atheism: According to McDowell & Brown (2009), atheism “technically . . . is not a religion, but simply a statement of nonbelief in a divine entity of any kind” (p. 5). In the Atheist Manifesto, Michael Onfray (2011) insists that atheism “rejects the existence of God as a fiction devised by men desperate to keep on living in spite of the inevitability of death” (p. 15), and that “God, manufactured by mortals in their own quintessential image, exists only to make daily life bearable despite the path that every one of us treads to extinction” (p. 13).

The Bhagavad Gita: Describing the Hindu text, Morgan (2001) explains that “The Gita, as it is familiarly known, is actually Book 6 of the huge epic, the Mahabharata . . . 100,000 verses long, all in Sanskrit” (p. 53). “The Gita . . . dates from about 100 B.C.E., although the original source was probably written several hundred years earlier. The setting is a battle between the Pandavas and their cousins the Kauravas” (p. 54).

Buddhism: Siddhartha Guatama, later known as the “Awakened One” (the Buddha), founded this religion in northern India sometime between the sixth and fourth centuries BCE. Following the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path, Buddhists seek to eliminate desire and ignorance and, therefore, end suffering (Prothero, 2007, p. 165).


Cultural Literacy: No one can define this term better than the man who essentially coined it, E. D. Hirsch, Jr. (1988): “To be culturally literate is to possess the basic information needed to thrive in the modern world. The breadth of that information is great, extending over the major domains of human activity from sports to science” (p. xiii).

Eightfold Path: In Buddhism, this culmination of the Four Noble Truths is divided into three parts: wisdom (right view, right intention), morality (right speech, right conduct, right
livelihood), and concentration (right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration) (Prothero, 2007, p. 152).

Four Noble Truths: Delivered by the Buddha in his first sermon, these constitute the core of Buddhism: The first truth (the Existence of Suffering) states that human life is characterized by suffering; the second truth (the Origin of Suffering) states that suffering is the result of clinging to impermanent things; the third truth (the Cessation of Suffering) teaches the cause and effect of suffering can be reversed to gain liberation from suffering; and the fourth truth (the Path to the Cessation of Suffering) reveals the Eightfold Path as the way to complete freedom from suffering (also known as nirvana) (Prothero, 2007, p. 151).

Fundamentalism: Generally speaking, fundamentalism constitutes “the struggle against modernism by religious groups who claim the continued relevancy of earlier time periods for models of truth and value and reject what they perceive as forms of secularism” (J. Z. Smith, Ed, 1995, p. 369).

Hasidism: McDermott (2011) describes Hasidism as an “Orthodox piestic movement in Judaism emphasizing the ‘rebbe’ or mystical leader” (p. 134).

Hinduism: Approximately 80 percent of India’s one billion people follow this polytheistic and diverse religion. Though scriptures such as the Vedas, the Upanishads, and the Bhagavad Gita are sacred to many, there is no recognition of a founder or standard scripture shared by all. Many American Hindus are monotheists who believe that the many Hindu deities are manifestations of one Absolute Reality (Prothero, 2007, pp. 186-187).

Islam: Monotheistic Muslims revere the same God of Christians and Jews and recognize many biblical figures important to all three religions, including Abraham, Moses, and Noah. Though Jesus is considered a prophet to Muslims, they do not recognize his deity. The Islamic
creed asserts, “There is no deity except Allah and Muhammad is his messenger” (Hubbard et al., 1997, p. 86).

Judaism: Originating with Abraham c. 1800 B.C.E., Moses ushered in Judaism as a belief system c. 1250 B.C.E. With the first five books of the Old Testament Bible—the Torah—and the belief in a Promised Land, Judaism stresses observance of the Torah and an ethical life over creeds. Jews share the same belief in a monotheistic God with Muslims and Christians (Hubbard et al., 1997, p. 97).

Methodism: Noll (2002) quotes John Wesley, “A Methodist is one who has ‘the love of God shed abroad in his heart by the Holy Ghost given unto him’ [Romans 5:5]; one who ‘loves the Lord his God with all his heart, and with all his mind, and with all his strength’ [Luke 10:27 and parallels]. God is the joy of his heart, and the desire of his soul” (p. 332). He also references John Fletcher’s stress on most of the central affirmations in the Wesleyans’ Creed: “The total fall of man in Adam . . . Christ as the only way to Salvation; holiness of heart and life; full sanctification; general redemption . . . Christ as the savior of all men . . . and the moral agency of man . . . upon the principles of . . . natural and revealed religion” (p. 334).

Monotheism: This is the belief in one solitary God. Of the five major world religions, Christianity, Islam, and Judaism are monotheistic (McDowell & Brown, 2009, p. 5).

Mormonism (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints): Mormons base their beliefs in the message of Jesus Christ and founder Joseph Smith’s post-biblical, “latter-day” revelation of 1820 which he published in 1830 as The Book of Mormon (J. Z. Smith, Ed, 1995, p. 652). Richard and Joan Ostling (2007) describe the Mormon church as “hierarchial, centralized, authoritarian, and almost uniquely secretive” (p. XVII). From it’s genesis in New York state in 1830 with six members to 1844 when founder Joseph Smith was assassinated, leaving over
26,000 faithful, the Mormon church’s uniquely American brand is now America’s richest church relative to size (p. XVII).

Muhammad: Born in Arabia, foundational prophet of Islam Muhammad (570-632 C. E.) was selected by God (Allah) at age 40 to establish true religion. Muhammad preached openly, spreading the oneness of Allah in the face of idolatry (Shouler, 2010, p. 130).

Pluralism: In explaining pluralism, McGuckin (2011) stated “In the domain of modern inter-faith dialogue some Western Christian theorists have adopted a syncretic pluralist approach based around the premise that all religions are the same and that they all are equally valid paths to the same God” (emphasis mine) (p. 427).

Polytheism: According to McDowell & Brown (2009), a “belief in an often unspecified number of gods, demigods, and/or other deities” (p. 4).

Presbyterians: According to J. Z. Smith (1995), “Presbyterians affirmed the sovereignty of God, the Lordship of Jesus Christ, the authority of scripture, justification by grace through faith, the priesthood of all believers, and the efficacy of only two sacraments, baptism and the Lord’s Supper” (p. 857).

Prodigal Son: It is both the title of a parable attributed to Jesus in Luke 15:11-32 and a description of the parable’s younger son’s profligate lifestyle (Brand, Draper, & England, 2003, p. 1331).

Protestantism: Known by two enduring themes—justification by faith and the Protestant Principle—this broad division of Christianity holds that “human beings are justified—that is, restored to right relationship with the ground of their being and with their associates—by faith” (H. Smith, 1991, p. 357) and that “stated philosophically, [the Protestant Principle] warns against absolutizing the relative [and] stated theologically, it warns against idolatry” (H. Smith, 1991, p. 359).
Puritans: Though they didn’t agree in all matters and were not organized, these radical Protestants during Queen Elizabeth’s reign were dubbed “Puritans” because they wished to return to biblical religion and purify the Church of England in the process. Notably, they opposed traditional worship elements such as communion on an altar, the cross, and priestly garments. Their conception of a sober life rejected ostentation and luxury and was guided by the Holy Scriptures (Gonzalez, 2010, p. 194).

Qur’an: The holy book of Islam, the Qur’an (Koran) is the Arabic revelation from Allah of his kalam (speech) or Word. Though the same message has been expressed by earlier prophets such as Moses and Jesus, Muslims believe the original message has been corrupted and the only faultless Word of God is in the Arabic Qur’an (Bowker, 2006, p. 182).

Religious Literacy: According to Prothero (2007), religious literacy “. . . refers to the ability to understand and use in one’s day-to-day life the basic building blocks of religious traditions—their key terms, symbols, doctrines, practices, sayings, characters, metaphors, and narratives” (pp. 11-12).

Seven Sacraments of the Roman Catholic Church: These “mark different stages of the Christian life. Partaking in the sacraments shows membership of the church; being part of the Church is, Catholics believe, necessary for salvation” (Desai, 2013, p. 343). They are Baptism, Confirmation, Eucharist (Communion), Holy Orders, Matrimony, Penance, and Extreme Unction (p. 343).

Taoism: Following the teachings of Lao Tsu, Taoists believe in living in harmony with nature and living simply. They believe all things in creation are one, and that the Supreme Being does not intervene in human affairs (McDowell & Brown, 2009, pp. 134-135).

Zen Buddhism: Huston Smith (1994) insists that Zen Buddhists “are completely serious, though they are seldom solemn” (p. 88), and that “we cannot hope to capture their perspective
 completely, it being of Zen’s essence that it cannot be impounded in words” (p. 88). He further explains that practitioners are “validated by their masters, and granted permission to teach, only when their masters see them as having attained the insight-experience that flashed wordlessly from Buddha” (p. 88).

Zoroastrianism: According to Bowker (2001), “the early Persians revered gods of nature, fertility, and the heavens. Sometime around 1200 B.C.E., Zoraster founded a religion that taught ethical dualism: the choice was between Righteousness and the Lie. This was no unqualified monotheism, but one in which uncreated good and evil spirits battled against each other” (p. 157).

Organization of the Study

The foreword is intended to show that cultural literacy in America includes religious literacy, as well. Chapter I introduces the problem of educators’ limited religious literacy and its implications for fulfilling the standards in North Georgia public high schools.

Chapter II contains a review of the literature, exploring not only the need for religious literacy in America, but also the relative dearth of such knowledge based on policy, practice, and perceived attitudes.

Chapter III describes the methods of quantitative and qualitative study, using anonymous questionnaires and interviews of educators and administrators in a North Georgia public school system.

Chapter IV summarizes the assembled data from the anonymous questionnaires and the individual interviews.

Chapter V is the conclusion to the study, including implications and recommendations for educators and for further research.
INTRODUCTION

Jeff Passe and Laura Willox (2009) put it succinctly: “Americans are confused about the role of religion in schools” (p. 102). E. D. Hirsch (1988) complained that “cafeteria-style education, combined with the unwillingness of our schools to place demands on students, has resulted in a steady diminishment of commonly shared information between generations” (pp. 20-21). Implicit in Hirsch’s observation is religious knowledge as a part of that shared information; this is evidenced by his claim that “because our country started out with a powerful commitment to religious toleration, we developed habits of cultural tolerance to go with it” (p. 95). Following in the steps of his academic and philosophical mentor Hirsch, Stephen Prothero (2007) asserted in Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs To Know—And Doesn’t that [Hirsch’s] argument concerning the academic study of religion in secondary and higher education is threefold: first, that teaching about religion is an essential task for our educational institutions; second, that the primary purpose of such teaching should be civic; and third, that this civic purpose should be to produce citizens who know enough about Christianity and the world’s religions to participate meaningfully—on both the left and the right—in religiously inflected public debates. High school and college graduates who have not taken a single course about religion cannot be said to be truly educated. (p. 17)

An Incomplete Education

From its inception, America has been steeped in religion. The word Puritan has morphed from the proper noun for English separatists longing, as taken from the New Testament book of Matthew, to build in the New World their own “city that is set on an hill” (The Holy Bible, Authorized King James Version, 1979, p. 3) to an adjective that often carries with it a whiff of
the pejorative. Historian Sarah Vowell (2008) makes an important distinction, however: “The United States is often called a Puritan nation. Well, here is one way in which it emphatically is not: Puritan lives were overwhelmingly, fanatically literary. Their single-minded obsession with one book, the Bible, made words the center of their lives—not land, not money, not power, not fun” (p. 13). And while 21st century America decidedly does not scoff at land, power, and fun, the Bible remains irrevocably tied to cultural literacy. “The Bible is quoted, referenced, and alluded to by thousands of great writers, orators, composers, and artists in tens of thousands of their classic cultural works. The vast majority of English authors over the centuries have presumed that their readers were biblically literate” (Beal, 2009, p. xv). In public high school English classes across America, biblical references abound in works ranging from Beowulf, the oldest extant piece of English writing currently known, to modern fantasy novels by Neil Gaiman, and as researchers Jeff Passe and Lara Willox (2009) intone,

Without [knowledge of] religion, how can a student possibly understand such topics as the Crusades; religious persecution; the formation of India and Pakistan; and the election of John F. Kennedy, America’s first Catholic president—not to mention more recent events and controversies, such as 9/11; the Israeli-Palestinian dispute; the edicts of Pope Benedict; and the positions of the Christian right on abortion, gay rights, and stem cell research? (p. 102)

Rob Bell (2011), contemporary Christian preacher, teacher, and author, believes that in order to read between the lines, as it were, we have to actually read the lines themselves. Only then can we become a part of the dialog that has—however haltingly—continued for millennia:

The ancient sages said the words of the sacred text were black letters on a white page—there’s all that white space, waiting to be filled with our responses and discussions and debates and opinions and longings and desires and wisdom and insights. We read the words, and then enter into the discussion that has been going on for thousands of years across cultures and continents. (p. x)
The Problem

American public schools have largely skirted the issue of world religions—including Christianity—for fear of violating church and state issues. When the issue of religious clubs and organizations in public schools arises, Nathan L. Essex (2005) notes that administrators have been advised that “their actions should be guided by a sense of fundamental fairness and respect for the First Amendment rights of others” (p. 27). He also advises that communication and representation is key:

Administrators should ensure that criteria, rules, and regulations governing student clubs be carefully drawn and communicated to all students. Ideally, student representatives should be involved in the policy development process. All efforts should be made to provide equal protection for all groups, regardless of philosophical ideology. The only way this can be achieved is through a strong conviction and a commitment to fairness for all students irrespective of differences that might exist regarding their religions or moral beliefs. (p. 29)

Ironically, early American churches were bastions of education until the late 1800s when “public” schools began (Passe & Willox, p. 103). Twenty-first century America, while still professing to be overwhelmingly “Christian,” has witnessed demographic changes that cannot be denied. Harvard professor Diana Eck (2001) senses

in some of the most strident Christian communities little awareness of this new religious America, the one Christians now share with Muslims, Buddhists, and Zoroastrians. They display a confident, unselfconscious assumption that religion basically means Christianity, with traditional space made for the Jews. But make no mistake: in the past thirty years, as Christianity has become more publicly vocal, something else of enormous importance has happened. The United States has become the most religiously diverse nation on earth. (p. 4)

In the past 50 years, Robert D. Putnam and David E. Campbell (2010) have seen more division in America than diversity: “Perhaps the most noticeable shift [regarding what has changed in American religion over the past half century] is how Americans have become polarized along religious lines. Americans are increasingly concentrated at opposite ends of the
religious spectrum—the highly religious at one pole, and the avowedly secular at the other” (p. 3).

In public schools, ignoring the issue of religion has, some believe, contributed to an incomplete education. E. D. Hirsch, Jr. (1988) was not excluding religion when he insisted that “any educational movement that avoids coming to terms with the specific contents of literate education or evades the responsibility of conveying them to all citizens is committing a fundamental error” (p. 133). Stephen Prothero (2010), himself an ardent admirer of Hirsch’s groundbreaking work in cultural literacy, has no doubts about the subject being here to stay:

Until recently, most sociologists were sure that religion was fading away, that as countries industrialized and modernized, they would become more secular. And religion is receding today in many Western European countries. But more than one out of every ten Americans believe in God, and, with the notable exception of Western Europe, the rest of the world is furiously religious. (p. 7)

Even those who fear what they view is the pervasive power of religion believe that knowledge is powerful:

Our world is fast succumbing to the activities of men and women who would stake the future of our species on beliefs that should not survive an elementary education. That so many of us are still dying on account of ancient myths is as bewildering as it is horrible, and our own attachment to these myths, whether moderate or extreme, has kept us silent in the face of developments that could ultimately destroy us. Indeed, religion is as much a living spring of violence today as it was at any time in the past. (Prothero, 2010, pp. 25-26)

That the more fundamentalist sects have resisted change has not been lost on those who are forward-looking:

Once the sacred texts of a religion have been finalized, a religion must live within the framework set by its canon. The fixed texts of Christianity and Islam have made both religions hard to update, and this in turn has led to clashes with modernity. In the long run, it would seem that both religions need to adapt to new knowledge or be undermined by it. (Wade, 2009)

Karen Armstrong (2000), writing before the cataclysmic events of September 11, 2001, spoke of schisms in first world countries that have become exacerbated in the intervening years:
Frequently, modern society has become divided into “two nations”: secularists and religious living in the same country cannot speak one another’s language or see things from the same point of view. What seems sacred and positive in one camp appears demonic and deranged in the other. (p. 367)

In America, Stephen Prothero (2003) warned about “objectivity [as] a casualty on both sides of the Christian America debate” (p. 9) where

The Christian nation camp overlooks the vitality of non-Christian religions in the United States, while the multireligious camp turns a blind eye to the public power exercised by the Christian majority. Both sides fail to see how extensively insiders and outsiders are improvising on one another—how Buddhists, Hindus, and Muslims are adopting Christian norms and organizational forms, and how Methodists, Baptists, and Presbyterians are taking up, however stealthily, the beliefs and practices of Asian religions. (pp. 5-6)

After the Fire

Since September 11, 2001, the world in general and the United States in particular have learned more about Islam than the average citizen had ever known before. The legitimacy of what we have learned may be questionable, but never before in the history of our nation has religious dialogue been at such a fevered pitch. Charles Kimball (2002) reminds us that such dialogue has a long and bifurcated past:

Religion is arguably the most powerful and pervasive force on earth. Throughout history religious ideas and commitments have inspired individuals and communities of faith to transcend narrow self-interest in pursuit of higher values and truths . . . At the same time, history clearly shows that religion has often been linked directly to the worst examples of human behavior. (p. 1)

No longer is religion confined to the home, insists Prothero (2010): “It matters socially, economically, politically, and militarily” (p. 7). Students are learning a great deal, it seems, but their only teachers are often biased parents, churches who fail to acknowledge other views, insensitive movies and television shows, or peers who are as equally in the dark about not only the fundamentals of major world religions, but also the existential questions that puzzle us all:
Why are we here? What makes life worth living? Is there life after death? Harvey Cox (2009) wrote,

It is true that we are all responding to the same mystery, the one that confronts us all not just as mortal beings, but as beings aware of our mortality. Still, we sense and cope with the mystery in quite disparate ways. The various world religions constitute complex codifications of these responses, and they differ from each other in significant respects. (p. 38)

But Prothero (2010) posits that “there are all sorts of reasons to try to become more religiously literate. One is civic. It is impossible to make sense of town or nation or world without reckoning with religion’s extraordinary influence, for good and for ill” (p. 23). He also admits that religious literacy is the ticket into the international debate hall, where we can “stand alongside with Jesus and the Buddha, Muhammad and Moses, Confucius and Laozi . . . to look out at a whole universe of questions with curiosity and awe . . . to meander, as all good conversations do, from topic to topic, question to question.” (p. 24)

Public Schools

What is the public school’s role in all of this? Compulsory school attendance is mandated in all fifty states, and estimates put ninety percent of our nation’s children in public rather than private schools (Rosenblith & Bailey, 2007, p. 93). Public schools teach the very subjects for which at least a modicum of religious literacy is required to decipher the thousands of years of art, history, and literature that civilization has contributed to the human story, and our very dialogue with the global community might depend upon a working language of cultural and religious literacy. Richard P. Manatt (1995) is convinced that “schools have bent over backwards for so long in their efforts not to offend anyone about anything that there is nothing left in the curriculum even vaguely resembling religious or ethical content” (p. 123).
Others fear that the passing of The Greatest Generation has seen the rise of a new generation with far less promise—a generation Mark Bauerlein (2008) calls “The Dumbest Generation.” Bauerlein firmly believes “The Dumbest Generation cares little for history books, civic principles, foreign affairs, comparative religions, and serious media and art,” (p. 234) and that “democracy thrives on a knowledgeable citizenry, not just an elite team of thinkers and theorists, and the broader knowledge extends among the populace, the more intellectuals it will train” (pp. 231-232). Still others are certain that the complexities of the Digital Age have engendered a generation far more savvy than they often get credit for. In his book *Everything Bad is Good for You: How Today’s Popular Culture Is Actually Making Us Smarter*, Steven Johnson (2006) offers hope for Bauerlein’s “Dumbest Generation”:

The cultural race to the bottom is a myth; we do not live in a fallen state of cheap pleasures that pale beside the intellectual riches of yesterday. And we are not innate slackers, drawn inexorably to the least offensive and least complicated entertainment available. All around us the world of mass entertainment grows more demanding and sophisticated, and our brains happily gravitate to that newfound complexity. And by gravitating, they make the effect more pronounced. Dumbing down is not the natural state of popular culture over time—quite the opposite. The great unsung story of our culture today is how many welcome trends are going up. (pp. 198-199)

Religious Concerns

Religious leaders, as well, are coming forward with their concerns. Worried that Islam is now cornering the market on extremist religious fundamentalism, Harvard Divinity School’s Harvey Cox (2009) tempers his surprisingly upbeat and hopeful *The Future of Faith* with these sobering words:

Does it ever trouble fundamentalists that their attitude toward the Bible, a relatively recent one in the history of Christianity, is exactly the same as that of most Muslims who believe the Qur’an was dictated word for word to Muhammad by Allah? I doubt it. But with Muslims and Buddhists and Hindus now down the street and around the corner in America, instead of across the ocean, the challenge, even for ordinary people, of understanding neighbors’ sacred texts is bound to become more pressing. I sometimes wonder if those who would like to get prayer and scripture reading back into public-
school classrooms (which might, under certain conditions, be a good idea) would allow
the scripture to be read from the Hindu Bhagavad Gita or the prayer to be the Muslim
Shahada in classes in which there are students from those traditions, as there are in many
American cities. The religious pluralism of our country today means that there are many
different scriptures in play. (pp. 166-167)

Few would debate the importance of the Christian Bible as part of a complete education
in Western civilization. As quoted in The Top Ten: Writers Pick Their Favorite Books (Zane,
2007), Andrew Hudgins said, “True or not true, ‘the greatest story ever told,’ in the majesty of its
telling and the power of its message, has taught an entire culture how to think about love,
suffering, and transcendence and it has fundamentally colored the language by which we talk
about everything” (p. 79). John Buehrens (2010) bluntly states that “one cannot possibly
understand our heritage of art, music, or literature, much less our public rhetoric and politics,
without understanding the Bible” (p. 78).

The South

As surely as stereotypes abound among less-enlightened Americans regarding adherents
to world religions other than Christianity, even in our own country, Christians in the American
South are assumed to be largely fundamental and evangelical by Christians from the north
(Rosenblith & Bailey, 2007, p. 100). If that were true of southern public school educators who
identify themselves as Christian, would they see a pressing need for their students to know the
Eightfold Path of Buddhism or understand the duties of an imam? Would those same educators,
if they saw value in widespread religious literacy, be able to provide such an education or be
willing to be trained to do so? Would they agree with Gershom Gorenberg (2000) that regional
myopia could distort perceptions to the point of misperception?

A parable from the Jewish mystical tradition known as Hasidism [teaches]: A man was
once walking through a forest at night and came to a house. Looking through the
window, he saw people flinging their arms and legs about in grotesque motions. How
awful, he thought, they’re having seizures, they must all have a terrible illness, or perhaps
they’re mad. But the man outside the window didn’t hear the singing inside, and didn’t know the people were dancing. If you don’t hear the music of faith, says the story, you’ll see the dance as disease. To take the point further, if you don’t pay attention to the particular song being sung, you may notice only “seizures”—and not which dance you’re seeing out of the many possible. (p. 236)

Do these educators—and by extension, their students—realize that the major monotheistic religions did not come to us fully formed, as they are perceived today? Robert Wright (2009) insisted that

[Jesus’s] agenda probably didn’t include transethnic outreach or its moral corollary, a brotherly love that knows no national bounds. That doctrine entered Christianity in the decades after his death—a reflection not of his true teachings, but of the cosmopolitan, multiethnic milieu of the Roman Empire. His teachings were then reshaped accordingly, and the resulting distortion became the gospel . . . Muslims think of Muhammad as a man who carried two revolutionary messages: he told Arab polytheists that there was only one god, Allah, and he explained to Christians and Jews that their God and Allah were the same god. But the chances are that when Muhammad arrived on the scene Allah was already known to be the God of Christians and Jews, a fact that helps explain why so much Christian and Jewish belief and ritual survive in Islam. And as for the question of whether Allah was the only god—here Muhammad was equivocal. (pp. 432-433)

Mining the depths of research databases such as Dissertation Abstracts, Education Full Text, ERIC, Google Scholar, and the Religion and Philosophy Collection, among others, yielded peripheral data regarding Catholic education, Christian high schools, Bible curricula, and historical perspectives on religious literacy in early America. Only one recent study surfaced that bore parallels to this study, and it was focused on preservice elementary and secondary social studies teachers. Though Marks, Binkley, and Daly (2014) did not interview their subjects in depth about their attitudes toward personal religious literacy, they did distribute questionnaires among social studies preservice teachers at three small universities. They, too, included survey questions that relied on the spirit—if not at times the letter—of Prothero’s own religious literacy quiz (2007, p. 235). Their research question “What do preservice teachers . . . actually know about religion and the First Amendment?” (Marks et al., 2014, p. 248) yielded a simple answer: not much.
There has been little research conducted about career educators’ attitudes toward religious studies in public schools in the cataclysmic wake of 9/11, particularly in the historically conservative and religiously fundamental Christian American South. The dearth of data regarding the very concerns of this study has been noted by the Harvard Divinity School, but there is hope in sight:

Even though religion is embedded in K-12 humanities and social science curriculum standards—as well as in the Common Core Standards adopted in more than 44 states—there is no comprehensive information about how religion is taught in schools. Similarly, there is no comprehensive information about how teachers are trained for the special challenges and opportunities related to teaching about religion in light of First Amendment guidelines in a multireligious society. To address these challenges, the Religious Literacy Project of Harvard Divinity School has embarked upon a substantial research initiative to collect data, map, and analyze how religion is taught in American K-12 schools. A parallel project will collect data, map, and analyze how teacher education programs address content related to religion and religious diversity within schools and communities. The RLP site will be launched February of 2015 with a collection of helpful information and tools. ("Religious Literacy Project," pp. 3-4)

By gathering information from quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews with educators, this study explored these timely issues.
CHAPTER III
METHODOLOGY

Process

The process of this study involved distributing two-page questionnaires to the faculties of all the public high schools in a single north Georgia school system as well as interviewing volunteer educators from the same system. The faculties completed the two-page questionnaires anonymously, and the volunteers were given pseudonyms in this study. The purpose of both the questionnaires and the individual interviews was to explore opinions and perceptions regarding their background experiences and knowledge of Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, and Judaism—the five major world religions—and the implications concerning Georgia state standards.

By means of the two-page questionnaire, teachers and administrators from the three high schools in the district provided anonymous quantitative data for this study. Likert Items 1-5 on the survey questionnaire (see Appendix A) asked the participants to assess the value—or helpfulness—of religious literacy, first to their students’ understanding of core subjects and then specifically to their students’ understandings of language arts, math, science, and social studies. While research question a. (“How did teachers and administrators in the Northwest Georgia school district being studied develop their attitudes regarding their own literacy?”) was addressed more directly in the individual interviews, the degree to which the survey participants thought that religious literacy was helpful to their students could illuminate whether or not the participants were concerned over their own perceived levels of religious literacy. Items 1-5
provided a window into their attitude regarding their own religious literacy by revealing the importance—or lack thereof—they placed on religious literacy as it related to high school core subjects.

Likert Item 6 asked the participants to assess their own religious literacy, and their answers provided part of the data used to address research question b. (“How do [the participants] address religious literacy in their own teaching practices?”). Likert Item 7 asked the participants to assess the Georgia Standards’ efficacy regarding religious literacy, and their answers helped illuminate research question a. (“How did [the participants] in the Northwest Georgia school district being studied develop their attitudes regarding their own religious literacy?”). These connections are explored further in Chapter IV.

The fill-in-the-blank Items 8-13 on the questionnaire were designed to gauge the participants’ knowledge of the rudiments of Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, Buddhism, and Christianity (both Protestant and Catholic). A personal knowledge base of the five major world religions—a personal level of religious literacy—is at the very heart of research questions b. and c. (“Do they adequately cover the existing state standards as those standards apply to religious literacy?”), and Items 8-13, when compared and contrasted with Item 6, could be revealing. Item 14 (“In what ways, if any, do you integrate aspects from any or all of the five major world religions into your teaching?”), the open-ended question that closed the survey questionnaire, was a rewrite of research question b.

The questions in the three scheduled interviews (see Appendix B) were designed to address all three of the research questions in depth. In the days after each interview, the participants were given a written, verbatim interview transcription to review before proceeding to the next interview. In Interview One, the interview subjects were asked to provide biographical information and career information in order to present a clear picture of themselves.
as individuals who grew up and decided to teach. They were asked specifically to recount what, during their childhoods and teaching careers, they felt had created their attitudes toward the five major world religions and religious literacy. Interview One ended reflectively, giving the interview subjects a chance to add to what they had already said.

In Interview Two, the questions delved into the interview subjects’ own teaching practices regarding religious literacy and their assessment of existing state standards regarding religious literacy. They were asked about the value of religious literacy at the high school level as well as how they addressed religious literacy with regard to existing state standards. Again, the interview ended with the opportunity to reflect, amend, and clarify.

Interview Three was completely reflective. After reviewing transcripts from Interviews One and Two, the interview subjects were asked about connections between their life experiences and their attitudes toward their own religious literacy, and they reflected on how their attitudes would play out among their superiors, peers, and students. Once again, they were given the opportunity to made any amendments or clarifications.

Participants

After obtaining the proper permission from the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga’s Institutional Review Board and the school system to be studied, the researcher distributed survey questionnaires to the entire staffs of the three high schools in the system. The researcher solicited potential interview subjects from the three high schools: one administrator and one teacher each from the language arts, science, and social studies departments, respectively. The four volunteers from each school comprised his brace of 12 interview subjects. The participants were given pseudonymys in order to protect their identities.
Scope of the Study

Questionnaires were distributed at separate whole faculty meetings at the respective three high schools in the North Georgia county being studied. A total of 189 teachers and administrators responded. The individual interviews were limited to 12 adult volunteers from among the teachers and administrators employed in the three high schools in the North Georgia county being studied, and each of the twelve participants was interviewed three times.

Data gathered from the survey questionnaires distributed to the entire staffs of the three high schools were analyzed quantitatively by compiling the responses to the seven Likert-scaled items and applying percentage analyses. Patterns and outliers emerged in the process of comparing and contrasting these data. The responses to the three open-ended questionnaire items were compiled verbatim and analyzed thematically. The transcripts of the interviews with the 12 volunteer subjects were analyzed qualitatively by transcribing the interviews verbatim and carefully examining the transcripts for emergent themes and notable outliers from among the participants.

Researcher Positionality

In qualitative research, Mertens (1998) noted that not only is the researcher “the instrument for data collection” (p. 175), but also that

Considerable interest has been focused on who the researcher is and what values, assumptions, beliefs, or biases he or she brings to the study. In general, qualitative research texts recognize the importance of researchers’ reflecting on their own values, assumptions, beliefs, and biases and monitoring those as they progress through the study (perhaps through journaling or peer debriefing) to determine their impact on the study’s data and interpretations. (p. 175)

To aid in the understanding of his own biases regarding religious literacy, the researcher participated in a bracketing interview using the same open-ended questions the researcher used in his study’s qualitative interviews. Pollio, Graves, and Arfken (2006) recommend a bracketing
interview to “help an investigator become aware of presuppositions” (p. 255). The researcher was interviewed about the subject of this study, not only to identify any presuppositions he may have held, but also, as Pollio, Graves, and Arfken suggest, to allow him “to have experience with what it is like to be interviewed” (p. 255).

The bracketing interview was digitally recorded and reviewed, allowing the researcher to explore his own biases. The researcher realized his affinity with a majority of the participants: He is a product of local public schools in the tri-state area. He was born and has lived the majority of his life within a 10-mile radius of the county he studied. He was raised regularly attending a suburban conservative Protestant church. There were differences, as well: The researcher matriculated in a much larger public school system than the one he studied, and his schools had more racial and economic diversity. Though teaching was always the researcher’s stated career choice growing up, he worked in the private sector first and did not begin teaching until his mid-thirties. The researcher’s strongest identified bias is against intolerance within his own religion. Personally, the researcher recognized this as a sensitive area.

For more than 20 years the researcher has been teaching in the same North Georgia system he studied. His area of expertise—English literature—deals with allusions from many of the world religions. The researcher is cognizant of the fact that his worldview could color his perceptions. In preparing the interview questions and conducting the interviews, the researcher did not want his worldview to interfere with the interview participants’ communication of their opinions and perceptions. The researcher’s goal was the professional treatment of all participants and the unbiased recording of their responses. Participants who agreed to be interviewed were informed that they could withdraw their participation in the study at any time—no questions asked. They were given the interview questions beforehand in each case, and they also had the opportunity to review each transcript, should they desire to make any changes
in their responses. By digitally recording their interviews and transcribing them in their entirety verbatim, their recorded responses remained true to the spirit of their answers. The researcher strove to fashion his comments and any follow-up questions to facilitate clarity and promote deeper, more detailed answers without leading the participants.

Procedures

This study could not be neatly classified as completely an explanatory design or a triangulation design, though the researcher would argue that he largely followed the explanatory design. Thirteen of the 14 survey items were quantitative, and the final item was an open-ended question: “In what ways, if any, do you integrate aspects from any or all of the five major world religions into your teaching?” McMillan and Schumacher (2006) wrote that in the explanatory design “qualitative data are used to elucidate, elaborate on or explain quantitative findings” (p. 405). The individual interviews were not concurrent with the distribution of the surveys and were conducted in the weeks following. Arguably, the one qualitative item on the survey—Item 14—was given concurrently with the quantitative items, but, if the respondents completed the items sequentially, this item was somewhat phased into the data collection. Certainly the extensive individual interviews were phased in.

Echoing M. L. Patten’s (2005, p. 143) guidelines regarding “purposive sampling,” the researcher solicited interview volunteers who were likely to have information relevant to his study. This is sometimes described as seeking individuals who will be “rich sources of information.” In other words, qualitative researchers make subjective judgments regarding the individuals to select based on the likelihood that they would be able to provide the needed information. From M. Q. Patton’s (2002) 16 methods of purposeful sampling, the researcher’s method hewed closest to intensity sampling where he “[sought] a sample of sufficient intensity to
elucidate the phenomenon of interest” from “information-rich cases that [manifested] the phenomenon of interest intensely (but not extremely)” (p. 234), recognizing that his strategy had “to fit the purpose of the study, the resources available, the questions being asked, and the constraints they faced” (p. 242).

After obtaining approval from the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga and the school board of the North Georgia county he studied, the researcher asked each school’s principal to distribute two-page questionnaires to their respective teachers and administrators to be completed anonymously during a regularly scheduled school-wide faculty meeting. The researcher was not present in the rooms where the survey processes took place. He gave each principal the surveys in an unsealed envelope, and when the survey process was completed, the principals collected the surveys and returned the surveys to the researcher in the same envelope, sealed. They were careful to return any unused surveys as well. It was only after the researcher had spent the following two weeks compiling the data from the surveys, that he distributed to random potential interview volunteers a request to participate in the qualitative component of his study. The study’s introduction and participation request form explained who the researcher was and the purpose of his study. The form requested names, gender, and preferred methods of contact, and the participants were assured of these safeguards: Positive responders were given an informed consent form to sign. Negative responses were not penalized. Participants were guaranteed full confidentiality. Participants could have withdrawn from the study at any time.

This study was framed by three research questions: a) How did teachers and administrators in the Northwest Georgia School district being studied develop their attitudes regarding their own religious literacy? b) How do they address religious literacy in their own teaching practices? c) Do they adequately cover the existing state standards as they apply to religious literacy?
Research volunteers who signed an Informed Consent Form were interviewed following the phenomenological interviewing design (PID) as outlined by Irving Seidman (1998) in *Interviewing as Qualitative Research*. PID utilized deep, pointed open-ended questions over the course of three separate interviews. The focus of these interviews was to investigate the participants’ attitudes regarding perceived student needs (if any) in religious literacy, whether or not those needs (if any) were sufficiently addressed in the existing Georgia standards, and how teachers disseminated this information. While specific questions were used with each participant, Flick’s (2009) suggestions to “refrain as far as possible from making early evaluations” and to “perform a non-directive style of conversation” (p. 151) were employed.

The three-interview process as outlined by Seidman (1998, pp. 11-12) was structured in the following ways: Interview One established the interviewee’s focused life history, that is, those experiences or events which may have impacted his or her attitudes toward their own perceived level of religious literacy. Interview One lasted approximately 1 to 1.5 hours and was limited to the time before the participants began working in public education.

The purpose of Interview Two was “to concentrate on concrete details of the participants’ present experience in the topic area of the study” (Seidman, 1998, p. 12). Interview Two lasted approximately 1 to 1.5 hours and was limited to the time the participants worked as educators. In keeping with respecting the busy schedules of the participants, Interviews Two and Three were done consecutively (Seidman, 1998, p. 15).

Interview Three (1 to 1.5 hours) was reflective in nature, and the participants were asked to reflect on the meanings of their past (before working as educators) and their present (as educators) experiences with issues, concerns, and events regarding religious literacy. “Making sense, or making meaning, requires that participants look at how the factors in their lives interacted to bring them to their present situation” and “addresses the intellectual and emotional
connections between the participant’s work and life” (Seidman, 1998, p. 12). A number of areas addressed were included: Did the participants recognize their life experiences as formative in the creation of their attitudes toward religious literacy? Were there connections among their current attitudes in regard to religious literacy and their past or present experiences that may have affected their attitudes? Prior to teaching, the participants’ experiences regarding religious literacy formed a focused life history, and the results of those experiences and interactions could have possibly affected the attitudes of the participants. Likewise, the participants’ experiences as educators might have come to bear. Pre-teaching events possibly affected current events in their lives, and the interactions between the two could be key to their existing attitudes regarding religious literacy. The purpose of Interview Three was to plumb the participants’ understandings of events that may have affected their current attitudes.

Analysis

The interviews were digitally recorded, and the interviews were transcribed. Following Spradley’s (1979) “Verbatim Principle” (p. 73), the researcher strove to

*make a verbatim record of what people* [said]. This obvious principle of getting things down word for word is frequently violated. Whether recording things people say in natural contexts or in more formal ethnographic interviews, the investigator’s tendency to translate continues to operate. (p. 73)

A verbatim record guards against inadvertent or semiconscious summarization and prevents the loss of potentially valuable clues.

The transcriber signed a pledge of confidentiality and the audio files and transcriptions are secured at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga Graduate Center. Analysis began after the first set of interviews was completed. Seidman (1998) admitted that “once the interviews commence, the researcher cannot help but work with the material as it comes in” (p. 98). The researcher allowed the participants and transcripts to speak and did not interpret them
in a preconceived manner. The interviews were examined inductively not deductively; that is, the researcher did not address material with a set of hypotheses to test, as with a theory developed within another context (Seidman, 1998, pp. 99-100). Seidman (1998) stresses that “what is required in responding to interview text is no different from what is required in responding to other texts—a close reading plus good judgment” (p. 100). In categorizing, the researcher marked passages that were interesting and tentatively labeled them. These labels were loosely applied and fluid so that they could be changed as needed.

Labeling, grouping, and marking areas of interest are how the researcher began to interpret the data. This analytic work started the interpretation process as he sought for “connective threads” (Seidman, 1998, p. 110) among the thematically organized events from the participants’ experiences. This helped the researcher “understand the details of people’s experiences from their point of view” (Seidman, 1998, p. 112).

Validity is paramount, and the researcher strove to keep each participant’s comments in context. He followed a scripted, open-ended interview process, and he asked the same questions in the same way for each participant. This facilitated consistency and gave the interviewees freedom of expression. Also, consistency was fostered by spreading out the interviews (Seidman, 1998, pp. 14-15). Multiple participants also bolstered the reliability of the study (Seidman, 1998, p. 17).

Multiple evaluators strengthened validity as the researcher, his University of Tennessee at Chattanooga professors trained in qualitative research, and the participants themselves examined the data. Mertens (1998) insisted on member checking:

Member checks [are] the most important criteria in establishing credibility. The researcher must verify with the respondent groups the constructions that are developing as a result of data collected and analyzed. Member checks can be formal and informal. (p. 182)
The researcher met with each interviewee after the first interview in order to review the interview transcription. Any changes they requested were made. This process was repeated after the second and third interviews, and participants who wished to make additional changes were invited to do so as well.

Jonassen (1991) insists that “each of us constructs our own reality through interpreting perceptual experiences of the external world” (p. 10). How the participants felt about their own levels of religious literacy and whether or not these levels posed a problem trying to disseminate information contingent on previous knowledge (e.g. religious allusions) were of particular note. Similarly, the participants’ attitudes regarding the state standards and the possible need for additional instruction in the major world religions at the high school level also spoke directly to the researcher’s research questions.

At each step of the data-gathering process, the researcher strove to hew close to the distinctive features of qualitative research as outlined by Flick (2009): the appropriateness of qualitative methods, the diversity and perspectives of the researcher’s participants, the researcher’s own reflections, and the variety of approaches qualitative research affords.
CHAPTER IV
DATA PRESENTATION

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to assess the attitudes and perceptions of a sample of educators from a North Georgia public school system regarding religious literacy and its implications for the teaching of Georgia Standards. This study was framed by three research questions: a) How did teachers and administrators in the Northwest Georgia School district being studied develop their attitudes regarding their own religious literacy? b) How do they address religious literacy in their own teaching practices? c) Do they adequately cover the existing state standards as they apply to religious literacy? The design of this study as discussed in Chapter III was qualitative. By means of a two-page questionnaire consisting of seven Likert-scaled items and seven short answer items, teachers and administrators from the three high schools in the district provided anonymous quantitative data for this study. Twelve volunteers—one administrator and three teachers from each of the district’s three high schools—participated in a series of interviews to provide qualitative data for this study. These data provided a more in-depth and personal view of the participants’ attitudes and perceptions regarding not only their own religious literacy, but also their attitudes and perceptions regarding applying that religious literacy to their teaching of the existing state standards. Seidman’s (1998, pp. 11-12) three-interview process was shortened to two sessions per volunteer due to participant time constraints. Interviews Two and Three were conducted at one sitting and were scheduled at a different time from Interview One. The volunteer participants included eight females and four males. This
chapter contains school profiles, participant profiles, questionnaire items, interview questions, themes that emerged, and summary of the data.

Interview Participant Profiles

Participating Schools

For the purposes of data presentation, the three schools whose faculties were asked to fill-out research surveys have been arbitrarily named “High School #1,” “High School #2,” and “High School #3.” The number of survey responses was 77, 55, and 57, respectively, for a total of 189 surveys returned.

High School #1 employs one principal, three assistant principals, and 92 teachers who serve 1,336 students. High School #2 employs one principal, three assistant principals, and 79 teachers who serve 1,371 students. High School #3 employs one principal, three assistant principals, and 125 teachers who serve 900 students.

Individual Participants

Information for the following individual participant profiles came from Interview One. The participants were given pseudonyms in order to protect their identities. Denzin (1989) championed what he identified as “thick description,” and while striving to ensure the anonymity of those involved, his model informs the synopses that follow:

[Thick description] goes beyond mere fact and surface appearances. It presents detail, context, emotion, and the webs of social relationships that join persons to one another. Thick description evokes emotionality and self-feelings. It inserts history into experience. It establishes the significance of an experience, or the sequence of events, for the person or persons in question. In thick description, the voices, feelings, actions, and meanings of interacting individuals are heard. (p. 83)

Angie, 34, is a white female. She was born in the same Georgia county featured in this study, and until age twelve her father and stay-at-home mom were her primary caregivers. Her
parents divorced, and when her mother remarried, Angie lived with her mother and stepfather. She was educated in the county’s public school system and earned her B.S. in education from a Georgia state university. Angie has a total of eleven years teaching experience. She began her teaching career in California, where she taught social studies to seventh and eighth grade inner city public school students. “I taught for two and a half years at a [California middle school] . . . that was in a very ethnically diverse population in that it was about half Latino, half Black, and in there were a couple of Asian kids, too. And it was definitely an inner-city school, and at that school I taught social studies to seventh and eighth grade students,” Angie said. Angie and her husband moved back south to Tennessee where she served as a public high school teacher and Gifted Coordinator. She did this for six months before moving back to the Georgia county in which she was raised where she worked in a public middle school for three years in a variety of capacities: social studies special education (SE) inclusion teacher, science SE inclusion teacher, gifted social studies teacher, and, eventually, Gifted Department Chair. She currently teaches high school social studies. Angie was an enthusiastic, if relaxed, interviewee, and she had no trouble answering the interview questions with candor, humor, and erudition. While she occasionally sought validation (“Does that [answer] make sense?”) she was clearly comfortable with her answers.

Bonnie, 47, is a white female. She was born and raised in a small town on the Tennessee-Georgia border, approximately 10 miles from the same county featured in this study. Bonnie lived with both biological parents and was educated in the public school system. She completed her undergraduate studies at a state college in Tennessee. Bonnie admitted, “I’ve always lived in the South . . . My caregivers were my mom and dad. I was either at school or at home with my parents—I never had, like, babysitters, or whatever—you know, I was either at school or at home. I didn’t live on campus or anything.” Bonnie has taught 26 years in the
county featured in this study. She currently teaches science. Bonnie was noticeably passionate, focused, and opinionated during her interviews. Though relaxed, she exhibited a no-nonsense, all-business approach to the questions. She kept eye contact and did not have to cogitate on the questions at length before answering firmly and resolutely. Bonnie was friendly and thoroughly prepared.

Carolyn, 57, is a white female. She was born and raised by both biological parents in the same Georgia county featured in this study. She was educated in the public school system, and after working two decades in the private sector as an accountant, Carolyn attended a nearby state college in Tennessee where she earned an undergraduate degree in education with a concentration in social studies. “I didn’t start teaching until I was 42 years old, so I had a whole life . . .,” enthused Carolyn. “My caregivers were my parents. I lived in a very traditional household. I was the youngest of four kids, so my mother stayed home. She never worked after the kids started coming along, and so my mother and father were my caregivers.” Currently Carolyn teaches social studies. Carolyn proved to be an easygoing, self-deprecating interviewee with a lot to say. Anything but strident in her manner, beneath her somewhat demure delivery was a committed, passionate, and resolute woman.

Debi, 62, is a white female. She was born and raised by her biological parents in the same Georgia county featured in this study. She is a product of the public school system and received her undergraduate education degree from a nearby Tennessee state college. Debi grew up in North Georgia and said, “I lived in the same house the entire time I grew up, with both parents and a younger sister. I was educated in [public] schools in North Georgia, and my mom worked when I was young. My parents came from a lower middle class background, both very hard workers, and tried to give us pretty much everything we needed and some of the things we wanted.” Debi started her career teaching public middle school remedial reading. “I went in for
an interview and came to find out there had been already either three or four teachers that year, and they’d all left because it was just, you know, the job of teaching remedial reading to people who were already in the eighth grade and couldn’t read a lick was just kind of a daunting task.”

Debi taught English for 27 years and is now an assistant principal. Debi showed an infectious and outsized personality and proved to be a lively and loquacious interviewee. In a series of sometimes-hilarious anecdotes, she traced her upbringing and education in the light of her family’s extensive involvement in their local church. Passionate, frank, and generous with her time and information, Debi was a delight to interview.

Emily, 36, is a white female. She was raised by her father, a Baptist minister, and her mother, with whom she lived until she enrolled in college. Though born in Tennessee, her father’s job had the family living in a number of states, including West Virginia, Texas, and Florida. Emily received her undergraduate degree at a private Baptist college in Tennessee and her master’s degree at a Tennessee state college. Emily called hers, “the, I guess, quintessential American Family . . . my caregivers were my parents who were, you know, they both parented me . . . there was no divorce in my background . . . I always said I wouldn’t be a teacher . . . I went to school to study music but ended up being an educator.” Emily has taught English for 18 years in seven different schools. Though raised in a very religiously observant family, Emily spoke with obvious fondness about her upbringing. And although her upbringing and work experiences were steeped in traditional Christianity, Emily’s anecdotes and outlook were remarkably inclusive, tolerant, and open-minded. Though somewhat discursive, Emily responded willingly and warmly to the interview questions.

Frank, 31, is a white male. He grew up in central Georgia and was a product of the public school system. He graduated from the same high school at which his mother taught for 32 years, and he received his undergraduate degree at a private Tennessee Baptist college where he
enjoyed a football scholarship. He was raised by both biological parents and is an only child. “I grew up with a mother and a father,” Frank said. “My dad worked—still works—for [a major aeronautical corporation] in charge of external security, internal security, counterterrorism . . . He was in the Army before that. My mother was a lifelong educator. She’s retired. She taught for roughly 32 years . . .” Frank has taught seven years at one of the high schools in the county featured in this study. “I’ve only worked at one place,” he related. “I started out primarily as a freshman government teacher, then all of a sudden—because I am broad field social science—they threw an econ[omics] class at me, and I had pretty good results with the [state] EOCTs [End of Course Tests] . . . [I] co-taught environment, and we had really good results with them as well, and then all of a sudden it got changed into AP Economics, and I got certified in that, so I teach AP Economics, I teach psychology, and I teach one class of freshman government.” Frank’s wife is an educator as well, and she teaches English in a nearby Georgia county. Frank was a genial interviewee and was one of the most talkative participants, peppering his answers with numerous anecdotes. His love of teaching and coaching was abundantly clear, and he took great pride outlining not only what he felt was an exceptional undergraduate college experience, but also his own personal accomplishments since then, both in the classroom and on the playing field.

Gene, 41, is a white male. He was not only raised by both his biological parents and educated in the public schools of the county featured in this study, his only career jobs have been in the same county. Gene received his undergraduate degree at a Georgia state college and his two graduate degrees at an Alabama state school and a Tennessee private school, respectively. Gene has been an assistant principal for nine years, but before that he taught social studies and coached boys’ basketball. Gene’s father is an ordained Methodist minister, and Gene grew up in what he described as a close-knit, loving, and religiously observant family. Though genial and
cooperative during the interviews, of all the participants, Gene seemed to be the most insecure in
his answers, opting to write-out his answers to the questions in Interviews Two and Three
beforehand and read them aloud in response. He seemed very concerned whether or not his
answers were “alright.”

Hank, 45, is a white male. He was raised an only child by both biological parents and
was publically educated in the same county featured in this study. He received his undergraduate
degree from a Tennessee state school. Hank has taught English for twelve years, and before that
he worked in the private sector. “Basically, I grew up in [a] community in [the same county
featured in this study]. A very small town atmosphere. A mother and father, a grandmother, and
an uncle and aunt who were very pivotal in my upbringing, and I had some very good friends
who kind of helped nurture me as I hopefully nurtured them along, and was educated in the same
community,” he revealed. Hank was a very willing participant and answered all of the questions
thoroughly, often taking philosophical “side roads” which, for the most part, elucidated his
responses. Hank is not only fond of teaching and coaching, he is very proud of his career
accomplishments.

Inez, 41, is a white female. She was born in a small town on the Tennessee-Georgia line
but was raised by her biological parents in the same Georgia county featured in this study where
she was educated in the public school system. She earned her undergraduate degree in education
at a Tennessee state college and her graduate degree at a Georgia state college. “I lived pretty
much in this area for my whole life. My primary caregivers were my mother and my father, and
my father died . . . when I was eighteen years old,” Inez confided. She has worked in two
schools during her career: “My first year I taught at [a high school] in [an] inner-city [Tennessee
city], and it was an eye-opening experience for me. Very much outside my comfort zone . . .”
Inez now teaches high school English: “I’ve been there 16 years, and I have worked as an English teacher in grades 9-12.” Though Inez was open, friendly, and completely willing to participate in this study, she worried over the fact that her own personal religious experiences and knowledge were limited to Christianity in general and the Southern Baptist denomination in particular. She claimed to be “a very sheltered individual” regarding other religions, Islam in particular, but she placed great stock in, since 9/11, finding information on her own and wonders “how many students have that initiative” rather than “just taking at face value what they’re hearing without ever questioning it.”

Joan, 50, is a white female. She was raised by her biological parents in the same Georgia county featured in this study and is a product of the county’s public school system. Her public school experience, grades 1-12, was all in the county featured in this study. Joan received her undergraduate degree from a nearby Tennessee state college and her master’s from a private religious college in Tennessee. “I have never been anywhere but [my] high school, from the time I graduated from high school to the time I became employed as an educator. I taught [business courses] for seven years. I was assistant principal [over] Career Technology for eight years . . . and now I’m in my third year as principal,” Joan explained.

Kevin, 41, is a white male. He was born and raised in the Georgia county featured in this study where he was also educated in the public school system. Kevin was raised by his biological parents who remained married until he was in his early twenties. His undergraduate and graduate work in education and social studies took place at three Georgia state colleges. “I spent pretty much my entire life in [the county featured in this study]. I was raised by both parents,” Kevin said. “I’ve got 15 years in education, high school grade level, all of it, and I spent my entire career at the same school . . . I’ve taught world geography, world history, political science, U.S. history, and economics most recently.” He has also coached girls’ soccer,
golf, and wrestling. Not only was it clear from the interviews Kevin loved teaching history, it was clear that he had little use for religious intolerance.

Linda, mid-30s, is a white female. She was raised in a military household by both biological parents and was “stationed all around the country [and] in Europe.” Linda’s father retired from the military and managed automobile dealerships in Ohio. It was in Ohio she graduated from a public high school. She “opened a restaurant” and “went to work for the government” before finally earning a master’s in education and beginning her teaching career. “My father was in the military, the Army . . . and we had vast experiences in different places with different cultures with different people,” Linda explained. “I turned down all sorts of scholarships . . . because I missed traveling . . . All along I had done volunteer tutoring . . . I’d worked with adults and small children in education, and I just said, ‘You know, that’s really what I want to do,’ and so I went back to school, got my master’s in education, and here we are today.” Linda worked for two years at a rural Tennessee public high school and has taught social studies at her current public high school—in the county featured in this study—for eight years.

Linda was a lively, pleasant, and talkative interview participant, and her love of history was matched only by her gratefulness for having lived in so many places where she was exposed to diverse viewpoints, both religious and political. Clearly that cosmopolitan world view influences her teaching, and she welcomes the challenge of teaching in an area that she feels is characterized by a “very narrow perspective and not an all-encompassing one” when it comes to religious literacy.
School Questionnaire and Individual Interview Questions

Anonymous questionnaires were distributed at scheduled faculty meetings at each of the three schools featured in this study (See Appendix A). The school principals allowed time for their faculties to complete the questionnaires before they collected the completed—and any blank and unused—questionnaires and returned them to me the same day in a sealed envelope. All individual participants were familiar with the interview questions before each of the three formal interviews (See Appendix B). Additionally, they received the Interview One Questions before signing the Informed Consent Form (See Appendix C).

Survey Responses

Table 4.1 presents as percentages the 189 county participants’ responses to the survey questionnaire’s seven Likert-scaled items:

1. An understanding of the basic tenets of the five major world religions (Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, and Judaism) would be helpful to students in understanding the core subjects taught at my high school.

2. An understanding of the basic tenets of the five major world religions would be helpful to students in the study of language arts at my high school.

3. An understanding of the basic tenets of the five major world religions would be helpful to students in the study of math at my high school.

4. An understanding of the basic tenets of the five major world religions would be helpful to students in the study of science at my high school.

5. An understanding of the basic tenets of the five major world religions would be helpful to students in the study of social studies at my high school.

6. I have an understanding of the basic tenets of the five major world religions.
7. The Georgia Standards for public high schools sufficiently address the basic tenets of the five major world religions in my subject area.

Responses from Participants

Table 4.1 Percentage of Responses from the 189 County Participants

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<th>Item</th>
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<th>NO</th>
<th>SWA</th>
<th>SA</th>
<th>NR</th>
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</table>

*Note.* SD = Strongly Disagree; SWD = Somewhat Disagree; NO = No Opinion; SWA = Somewhat Agree; SA = Strongly Agree; NR = No Response.

Likert item 1 stated, “An understanding of the basic tenets of the five major world religions (Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, and Judaism) would be helpful to students in understanding the core subjects taught at my high school.” Almost 67% of the participants agreed that religious literacy would be valuable to the study of the high school core curriculum (48.68% “Somewhat Agreed,” and 17.99% “Strongly Agreed”).
Likert item 2 stated, “An understanding of the basic tenets of the five major world religions would be helpful to students in the study of language arts at my high school.” Again, 67% of the participants agreed (50.79% “Somewhat Agreed,” and 16.40% “Strongly Agreed”).

Likert item 3 stated, “An understanding of the basic tenets of the five major world religions would be helpful to students in the study of math at my high school.” Almost 51% of the participants disagreed with item 3 (20.11% “Strongly Disagreed,” and 30.69% “Somewhat Disagreed”) and a substantial 32% of the participants indicated that they had “No Opinion” on the matter.

Likert item 4 stated, “An understanding of the basic tenets of the five major world religions would be helpful to students in the study of science at my high school.” The participants were split on item 4 with 37% disagreeing (13.76% “Strongly Disagreed,” and 23.28% “Somewhat Disagreed”) and 42% agreeing (33.86% “Somewhat Agreed,” and 8.47% “Strongly Agreed”). A not insubstantial 20% of the participants indicated that they had “No Opinion.”

Likert item 5 stated, “An understanding of the basic tenets of the five major world religions would be helpful to students in the study of social studies at my high school.” In the largest showing on the survey, 87% of the participants agreed that an understanding of the five major world religions would benefit social studies students (39.68% “Somewhat Agreed,” and 47.62% “Strongly Agreed”). Disagreeing participants amounted to the smallest showing in the survey with 7.40%.

The data suggest that a majority of the 189 participants agreed that religious literacy as evidenced by an understanding of the basic tenets of Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, Buddhism, and Christianity would benefit public high school students in the core subjects of language arts, math, science, and social studies as a whole, but when asked about individual core subjects, it was
language arts and social studies that were the real focus of the participants’ agreement. By their responses to Likert items 1-5, participants were split on the value of religious literacy to science students and did not see its value to math students. As a general concept, the participants’ attitudes toward religious literacy in the classroom were positive, but when they examined the value of religious literacy subject-by-subject, this initial assessment did not hold up for them across the board. The degree to which the participants deemed religious literacy to be helpful to students could bear on the development of their personal attitudes regarding their own perceived levels of religious literacy as explored in research question a. (“How did teachers and administrators in the Northwest Georgia school district being studied develop their attitudes regarding their own religious literacy?”).

Likert item 6 stated, “I have an understanding of the basic tenets of the five major world religions.” While 26% of the participants did not agree that they had a basic understanding of world religions (7.41% “Strongly Disagreed,” and 18.52 “Somewhat Disagreed”), almost 62% indicated that they understood the basic tenets of Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, Buddhism, and Christianity (51.85% “Somewhat Agreed,” and 10.58% “Strongly Agreed”). How the participants address religious literacy in their own teaching practices (research question b.) could depend upon their understanding of the five major world religions and their comfort level with imparting this information.

Likert item 7 stated, “The Georgia Standards for public high schools sufficiently address the basic tenets of the five major world religion in my subject area.” By their responses, only 16% of the participants agreed with item 7 (13.23% “Somewhat Agreed,” and 3.18% “Strongly Agreed), and almost 39% disagreed (19.58% “Strongly Disagreed,” and 19.05% “Somewhat Disagreed”). From among all of the Likert items, item 7 yielded the largest number of “No Opinion” responses (39%) and items left blank (6% “No Response”). The degree to which the
Participants felt the state standards addressed religious literacy in their subject areas could illuminate their attitudes regarding their own religious literacy (research question a.): Does perceived insufficiency in the state standards lead to teacher augmentation of the standards or disregard of the standards altogether based on the teacher’s confidence in his or her own religious literacy?

The first fill-in-the-blank questionnaire item asked participants to name one sacred text of Hinduism. The 189 participants were split almost evenly into two camps: One hundred one of the participants (53.44%) wrote no response at all, and 88 (46.56%) wrote responses. Of those 88 who recorded responses, 38 participants (20.10%) correctly identified a sacred text of Hinduism (24 named the Vedas, 10 named the Gagaved Gita, and four named the Kama Sutra). 33 participants (17.46%) admitted that they did not know (or some iteration thereof: “don’t know, don’t care”; “n/a”; “no clue”; “no idea”; “I don’t have any understanding”; “can’t”), and 17 (9%) offered incorrect answers, ranging from texts from other religions (“cabala,” “Talmud,” and “Koran”) to nonsensical words and phrases (“The Hin-dos and Hin-don’ts of Hindu,” “Hadista,” “Saskirit,” and “Kishnu”). With over half of the respondents coming up at a loss and another quarter of the educators failing to answer correctly, this item represented a substantial dearth of knowledge regarding a basic tenet of Hinduism.

The second fill-in-the-blank questionnaire item asked participants to name Islam’s holy book. Of the 189 participants, 153 individuals (80.95%) correctly identified the Koran (though there were ten incorrect spellings of the title: “Corin,” “Karan,” “Keran,” “Quar’an,” “Quara’n,” “Quaran,” “Quoran,” “Q’uran,” “Qu’ran,” and “Quran”). Twenty-six participants (13.76%) wrote nothing. Eight participants (4.23%) indicated that they did not know (or some iteration thereof: “idk”; “?”; “no clue”; “don’t know, don’t care”), and two participants (1.06%) recorded the incorrect answer “Torah.” A clear majority of the respondents were able to name Islam’s
holy book with most of them (76%) using the correctly spelled and widely accepted names “Koran,” “Quran,” or “Qur’an.”

The data suggest that more of the participants were knowledgeable about Islam than were familiar with Hinduism. Approximately 86% of the participants responded when asked to name Islam’s holy book, but approximately 47% of them attempted to name a sacred text of Hinduism. Of the 86% of the participants who attempted to name Islam’s holy book, approximately 81% correctly named the Koran. Only approximately 3% of the participants who attempted to name a sacred text of Hinduism did so correctly.

The third fill-in-the-blank questionnaire item asked participants to name the first five books of the Hebrew Bible (also commonly known as the Pentateuch). Of the 189 participants, 100 individuals (52.91%) correctly identified all five of the first five books of the Hebrew Bible: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. Sixteen individuals (8.47%) correctly identified four books. Eleven individuals (5.82%) correctly identified three books. One individual (0.53%) correctly identified two books. Three individuals (1.59%) correctly identified one book. Two individuals (1.06%) could not identify any of the books. Nine individuals (4.76%) wrote “I don’t know” or some iteration thereof “?”; “n.a”; “no idea”; “can’t”).

The data suggest that over half of the participants could correctly name the first five books of the Hebrew Bible with an additional approximately 16% who could name some of them. Approximately a quarter of the participants did not respond, suggesting that—coupled with the 6% who admitted that they did not know any of the books or incorrectly responded—approximately 31% of the participants did not know the first five books of the Hebrew Bible.

The fourth fill-in-the-blank questionnaire item asked participants to name Buddhism’s Four Noble Truths: Life is suffering, suffering has an origin, suffering can be overcome (nirvana), and the path to overcoming suffering is the Noble Eightfold Path. Of the 189
participants, four individuals (2.12%) correctly identified the Four Noble Truths. Two individuals (1.06%) correctly identified three Truths. Two individuals (1.06%) correctly identified two Truths. One individual (0.53%) correctly identified one Truth. 20 individuals (10.58%) incorrectly identified all four Truths. Thirty-four individuals (17.99%) wrote “I don’t know” or some iteration thereof (“idk”; “don’t know”; “?”; “n/a”; “-----”; no idea”; “no clue”; “don’t know, don’t care”; “I can’t”; “have no clue—need to study but keep not doing it”). The incorrect answers ranged from the ostensibly feasible (“discipline,” “self-knowledge,” “Man is basically good,” “right living,” “right thinking,” “right beliefs”) to random words and phrases (“The check is in the mail,” “Always rub the fat man’s belly,” “Chinese food is filling for fifteen minutes”). One individual (0.53%) recorded a response that defied categorization: “How about the pillars of the Islam faith? I would bet you don’t get one survey who knows about Buddha!” One hundred twenty-five participants (66.14%) left the item blank.

The data suggest that approximately 5% of the participants could correctly name at least one of Buddhism’s Four Noble Truths. Approximately 29% of the participants either admitted they did not know any of the Noble Truths or incorrectly identified them all. The majority of participants—approximately 66%—left the item blank. Combined with those who were incorrect and those who admitted no knowledge, the data suggest that approximately 95% did not know Buddhism’s Four Noble Truths. This item proved to be the most challenging to the participants.

The fifth fill-in-the-blank questionnaire item asked participants to list the four Gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Of the 189 participants, 158 individuals (83.60%) were able to name all four of the Gospels. Two individuals (1.06%) correctly identified three of the Gospels. Two individuals (1.06%) correctly identified two of the Gospels. One individual (0.53%) wrote “n/a.” Twenty-six participants (13.76%) left the item blank. The data suggest that
approximately 86% of the participants could name at least two of the first four books of the
Christian New Testament and approximately 14% left the item blank. The number of
participants who were able to correctly identify all four of the Gospels was slightly greater than
the number of participants who correctly identified the Koran as Islam’s holy book.

The sixth fill-in-the-blank questionnaire item asked participants to list as many of the
seven sacraments of Catholicism as they could: Baptism; Eucharist/Mass/Holy Communion;
Reconciliation/Confession/Penance; Confirmation; Marriage; Holy Orders; and Anointing of the
Sick/Last Rites. Six individuals (3.18%) correctly listed all seven sacraments. Seven individuals
(3.70%) listed six sacraments. Fifteen individuals (7.94%) listed five sacraments. Three
individuals (1.59%) listed four sacraments. Seventeen individuals (9.00%) listed three
sacraments. Sixteen individuals (8.47%) listed two sacraments. Seven individuals listed
(3.70%) listed one sacrament. Three individuals (1.59%) listed no correct answers. Twenty-one
individuals (11.11%) wrote “I don’t know” or some iteration thereof (“idk”; “?”; “-----”; “n/a”;
“What?”; “I’m Baptist”; “no clue”; “don’t know, don’t care”). Ninety-four individuals (49.74%)
left the item blank. Ostensibly plausible—but incorrect—responses included “birth,” “blood,”
“body,” “bread,” “catechism,” “church attendance,” “death,” “spirit,” and “12 yr
old rededication.” Random responses were “communism,” “confunktion,” “confusion,” and
“cheese.” One participant posed a question: “Why not ask about the sacraments of Christian
faith? (that includes Catholicism but that’s like asking a question about Shiites [sic] and not
Islam!!).” The data suggest that approximately 37% of the participants could name at least one
of the seven sacraments of Catholicism. Approximately 13% did not know or wrote incorrect
answers, and the data indicate that approximately half of the 189 participants left the item blank.
A clear majority of the participants did not correctly identify any of the seven sacraments of
Catholicism.
The seventh fill-in-the-blank questionnaire item asked participants to list the ways, if any, that they integrated aspects from the five major world religions into their teaching.

Social Studies

Ten individuals (5.29%) indicated that they integrated aspects of the five major world religions into their social studies classes:

“As a Social Studies teacher if doing World History. I would do each of them and use them in comparison. In other classes I will use them only in reference.”

“Historical & social context”

“I teach S.S. so we teach these to pieces! Not much time to spend on them and the standards don’t ask us to go into depth—No books of the bible.”

WH [world history]—Brochures, magazines, graphic organizers AM [American history]—Christianity (Great Awakening)”

“I teach world history on GPS.”

“I use them all in the teaching of World History, do a unit on world religions, and utilize them in U.S. & World History units as appropriate.”

“Refer to religion as history—rights we as Americans have that other cultures have not had.”

“At the beginning standards, I cover the basics of Catholicism & Protestant Christianity so that my students have a better Understanding of exploration & colonization so that they can then have a good background knowledge moving forward.”

“Could discuss how it has affected the power structure in the world throughout history and even in the Bible.”
“I teach W[orld] History so I cover the basic aspects of the religions, (but not Buddhism).”

Language Arts

Ten individuals (5.29%) indicated that they integrated them into their language arts classes:

“In British Lit Catholicism is integrated in every aspect of the history and literature.”

“I don’t—unless it is in the literature assignment.”

“As it applies to American, British, World Literature. The standards are vague enough to include religious motifs/symbols as needed to advance the meaning of the text.”

“As religious symbols, imagery, motifs, or allusions occur in literary texts, we discuss connections to self, society, history, world & comparative religions.”

“Some of the literature we study addresses several of the major religions.”

“background info, for literature”

“Literature frequently alludes to religion. Literature texts contain pieces from several religious texts—Integrated w/standards”

“Literature study necessitates the discussion of Religion and Religious documents”

“ Literary selections literary allusions”

“We make literary references and allusions to works from some of the major religions”

Science

Six individuals (3.17%) indicated that they integrated them into their science classes:

“I stay away from religious teaching—I teach science”

“When discussing evolution vs creation”
“by avoiding discussion on evolution.” [smiley face drawing]

“I teach science so I don’t really integrate any of these. We might discuss how science changed the beliefs of some because of advancements in technology, etc. (world flat, geocentrism, etc).”

“In the ways I treat my students. Subtle relating of the creation to our understanding of science.”

“Science reference to respect of the religions viewpoint but nothing else.”

Math

Three individuals (1.59%) indicated that they integrated them into their math classes:

“discuss the[m] very little (math.) I do use of Π in the building of Solomon’s Temple mentioned in the Old Testament.”

“Islamic geometric patterns”

“I teach math, so I don’t cover Religion.”

Non-Academic Classes

Fifteen individuals (7.94%) indicated that they integrated them into their non-academic classes. Eight individuals (4.23%) indicated that they integrated aspects from the five major world religions into their teaching of acceptance, kindness, and/or tolerance:

“Acceptance for others views, and understanding. Understanding Culture and a respect. A deeper understanding of their own convictions & beliefs.”

“Be good to kids.”

“Do unto others as you would have others do to you???”

Humanitarianism”
“teaching tolerance & diversity during parts of curriculum”

“To me it’s about being open & accepting to other ways of thinking & being respectful.”

“—try to teach tolerance among different cultures.”

“To try to encourage understanding of other cultures.”

Two individuals (1.06%) used the space to write about their own personal Christian beliefs:

“Christian principles”

“Because I am a born-again Christian, I endeavor to reflect Christ and live out/practice
Christian principles in my life. Such is undoubtedly reflected in teaching.”

Six individuals (3.18%) indicated that they used few, if any, aspects from any or all of the
five major world religions in their teaching:

“To meet standards only”

“Little, if any.”

“Rarely, if ever.”

“ Barely, only mentioning religion and culture as it applies to availability and acceptance
of food throughout the world. I teach Culinary, religion does not impact food choice and food
tradition.”

“Not much. I’m atheist”

“Outside of basic ideas of right/wrong I don’t”

One participant (0.5%) alluded to physical education:

“Meditation, Yoga”

Two participants (1%) alluded to foreign languages:

“Read some of Martin Luther in original German”
“Rosary explanation Saints Days/Birthday comparison All Soul’s Day Importance of Catholicism in Hispanic celebrations”

One participant (0.5%) alluded to art or drafting:

“Only when religious buildings demonstrate important architecture.”

Two participants (1%) mentioned business courses:

“Biblical Scriptures involving money and possessions addressed in curriculum on money management.”

“I teach business, so there is not really any religious aspects”

One participant (0.5%) mentioned music:

“Study of catholic mass in music history Role of music in renaissance history”

The remaining eight participants (4.5%) wrote comments that couldn’t be definitely tied to any specific courses of study:

“allusions (identification & understanding)”

“Survival of the fittest”

“to add perspective into Cultural issues”

“Well, I teach all of them. I do comparison charts on Hinduism & Buddhism. Read text from Holy books. Do a comparison of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam! Students don’t like it.”

“While teaching, I teach students diff. religions treat people differently.”

“I primarily have to reference Catholicism in my subject matter in order to explain some older traditions. Everything else relates to Protestant faiths or no religious link at all.”

“It is in my standards.”

“By the way I live! It’s interesting that someone who opposes the Christian faith is so concerned about teaching ‘religion’?”

55
Forty individuals (21.16%) wrote “I don’t” or some iteration thereof (“n/a”; “none”; “don’t”; “-----”; “no opinion”; “I do not”; “not at all”; “I do not integrate them into my teaching”; “I would love to, but I need to learn more first”; “I don’t b/c I am told not to”; “I do not integrate any religious aspects into my teaching”; “no, but I could”; “I regret to say that I do not use anything from the major world religions in my classroom”; “I teach what the standards tell me to teach which doesn’t include some of the questions above”) to indicate that they didn’t use any of the five major world religions in their teaching. Eighty-nine individuals (47.09%) left the item blank.

The data suggest that approximately 15% of the participants integrated aspects of the five major world religions into their teaching of core academic subjects, and approximately 8% integrated them into their non-academic subjects. Approximately 4% of the participants integrated aspects of the five major world religions into their teaching of acceptance, kindness, and/or tolerance. Approximately 24% admitted to integrating few to none of the aspects of the five major world religions into their teaching, and approximately 1% used the space to comment about their own personal religious beliefs. Approximately 47% of the 189 participants left the item blank.

Although 68 percent of the participants did not indicate that they integrated any of the five major world religions into their own teaching, 22 percent of the participants felt that they referenced one or more of the five major world religions in their coursework. The fact that so many participants indicated by their questionnaire responses that they saw value in students having a modicum of religious literacy in order to excel in a majority of the core subjects contrasts sharply with the majority of silent voices regarding personal integration of any of the five major world religions into their own teaching. Prothero (2010) advocates a more realistic view of tolerance on what he calls “this furiously religious planet” (p. 4): “... both [religious]
tolerance and respect are empty virtues until we actually know something about whomever it is we are supposed to be tolerating or respecting” (p. 5). Recognizing the value and need for religious literacy might only be half of the battle.

Presentation of Interview Themes

Interview One

The participants’ responses to the questions in the first interview concerned pre-teaching biographical information, possible pre-teaching religious influences, education career information, and career influences with regard to personal attitudes toward religious literacy. These questions were designed to illuminate research question a. (“How did teachers and administrators in the Northwest Georgia school district being studied develop their attitudes regarding their own religious literacy?”).

Question One

Please recount biographical information starting with your childhood up to the time you started working as an educator. For example, where did you grow up? Who were your caregivers? Where were you educated?

Four themes emerged out of Question One: a) individuals who were raised in the county featured in this study, b) individuals who were publically educated in the county featured in this study, c) individuals who were raised by both biological parents, and d) individuals who attended regional state colleges and universities.

Eight of the twelve participants (67%) were not only raised in the county featured in this study, but they were also educated in the same county’s public school system. Ten of the twelve
participants (83%) were raised by both biological parents, while one experienced her parents’
divorce and another’s father died when she was in high school. Ten of the twelve participants
(83%) earned undergraduate degrees from regional state colleges or universities. Malinowski
(1992) understood that group cohesion was generational:

Order and civilization can be maintained only by strict adhesion to the lore and
knowledge received from previous generations. Any laxity in this weakens the cohesion
of the group and imperils its cultural outfit to the point of threatening its very existence.
(p. 39)

The first research question of this study might be influenced by the strength of the familial and
community ties and possible allegiances to the very community in which the participants serve as
educators.

**Question Two**

During the time described in Question One, what issues or events were involved in the
creation of your attitudes toward the five major world religions: Buddhism, Christianity, Islam,
Judaism, and Hinduism? For example, were there media reports, individuals, friends, family
acquaintances, and/or religious groups who had input into the formation of your attitude?

Two themes emerged out of Question Two: a) individuals who identified their pre-
teaching homes as actively practicing Christian homes and b) individuals who were exposed to
any of the five major world religions other than their own during their pre-teaching years. Eight
of the twelve participants (67%) self-identified as active practicing Christians during their
childhoods up until the time they began teaching. Of the 12 participants, seven identified
themselves as Baptists, two as Methodists, two did not specify a denomination, and one claimed
no church identification.
Angie remembered a childhood of religious training that lacked diversity: “I was raised in a very strict Christian home, and that was really the only religion that I knew anything about: Christianity.”

Although Debi recounted similar circumstances, nostalgia infused her words: “I grew up in a family where we attended the same church the entire time I grew up, and I did not have a lot of awareness of other religions. I didn’t really have even an awareness so much of other denominations . . . I grew up in that church, I went to the same church my entire childhood—and even into young adulthood . . . There were people there who cared about us as children and as young people, and we did a lot of extra things together, and I guess you’d say, really, my whole life revolved around my family and my church because a lot of the friends I had went to the same church, and, frankly, that church was pretty instrumental in a lot of things that happened in that particular county at the time.”

Wade (2009) insisted, “Religion, above all, embodies the moral rules that members of a community observe toward one another. It thus sustains the quality of the social fabric” (p. 2). The participants’ monocultural bent in regard to early religious influences could very well speak to their attitudes about religious literacy in their classrooms.

When asked about exposure to and possible influences of the five major world religions (Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism) during their childhoods up until they began teaching, seven participants (58%) claimed some exposure to Buddhism, seven to Islam, six (50%) to Judaism, and seven to Hinduism. Additionally, two participants (17%) singled out Catholicism from Protestantism.

Bonnie and Hank spoke of pre-teaching courses in world religions that gave them the fundamental concepts of Buddhism, Islam, and Hinduism:
“I don’t think, until I was in the upper school grades, that I even realized there were other religions in the world . . . and then in college I took a class—Religions of the World—and learned about the other religions, and I really didn’t have too much of an opinion, either—I mean, it was interesting to learn about the other religions,” Bonnie admitted.

“Fortunately, I had a good teacher when I was in high school who had us study religions and different denominations. In fact, I did a report on the Mormons, but she did talk to us about Buddhism, Hinduism, and, really, looking back, it was a very good thing for me,” Hank said.

While the majority of the participants’ early childhood experiences offered little religious diversity, their growth to young adulthood saw their horizons expanding. These expansions, according to the participants, were inculcated in the upper grades of high school and in the undergraduate post-secondary classes they took at colleges and universities.

**Question Three**

Tell me about your career as an educator? How many years of experience do you have? Within how many schools have you worked? What were your job assignments?

Two themes emerged from Question Three: a) a majority of the participants have between 10-20 years of educational experience, and b) a majority of the participants have spent their entire educational careers in the same county featured in this study.

Nine of the 12 participants (75%) have been working in education between 10-20 years, and eight of the 12 participants (67%) have spent their entire educational careers in the same county featured in this study.

Both Joan’s and Kevin’s interviews echo the experiences of over half of the interview participants:
Joan, who has taught and is currently a principal, said, “Of course, I have never been anywhere but [one high school in the county featured in this study], from the time I graduated from high school to the time I became employed as an educator.”

Kevin, too, has spent his career at one school in the county featured in this study: “I’ve got 15 years of experience in education . . . high school grade level, all of it, and I’ve spent my entire career at the same school.”

Such a preponderance of “home-grown” educators might raise the question as to whether or not such educators are able—or willing—to open the minds of their students, or to replicate the community’s mores. Bruner (1996) wrote that “. . . however much the individual may seem to operate on his or her own in carrying out the quest for meanings, nobody can do it unaided by the culture’s symbolic systems. It is culture that provides the tools for organizing and understanding our worlds in communicable ways” (p. 3). Indeed, how can these teachers inculcate the rich variations of religious literacy when they themselves were nurtured in a veritable religious monoculture?

**Question Four**

During the time described in Question Three, what issues or events were involved in the creation of your attitude toward religious literacy? For example, were there media reports that affected you? Were there individuals related to your position as a teacher or administrator who affected your thoughts? Did you receive input from a religious organization concerning religious literacy in schools? As an educator, what is your understanding of the term “religious literacy”? A strong theme that emerged from Question Four centered around the participants’ understanding of the term “religious literacy.” Ten of the 12 interviewees (83%) agreed that religious literacy entailed an understanding of the basics of the five major world religions.
Bonnie’s and Emily’s responses were not untypical:

“. . . My understanding of religious literacy is basically understanding and perhaps having some knowledge of the fact that there are different religions out in the world, you know, not just what I am, which is Christian,” Bonnie said.

“To me, the meaning of religious literacy is that students are presented with a range of ideas from different religions and cultures, that they are literate in those belief systems and can apply them to things that they read and can interpret the world around them with what they know of those religions,” Emily said.

Seven of the ten participants who agreed that the term “religious literacy” meant a knowledge of the basics of the five major world religions added that, for them, religious literacy also included their own view of understanding others—their students, in particular:

“I think it helps you understand them better as a person if you know what they believe and why they believe it,” said Carolyn.

“. . . Religious literacy is that the children, our students, are exposed to a decent understanding of what [the five major world religions] really teach, what they really mean. And I think, too, reflecting in the instruction of the educator that we are open-minded enough to realize that we are teaching Buddhists, Hindu, Muslim, and atheist, and agnostic, and Christian, Baptist, Mormon,” said Hank.

As a theme, Islam emerged from Question Four in two ways: a) September 11, 2001, and b) Islamic activity worldwide since 9/11.

Emily’s response sounded a chord that resonated through the participants’ recollections:

“But, going back to the beginning of it, things that created my attitude toward religious literacy? I would say I began . . . my interest was more piqued after 9/11 . . . I thought, you know, we need to understand each other, or we’re going to lose a handle on civilization.”
Kevin’s anecdote was particularly personal and visceral:

“Of course, one of the biggest events in my time that would involve religion would be 9/11. I think it had a negative impact on the Muslim community from the Christians’ perspective even though a Christian person would not be accountable for David Koresh . . . I was fortunate to spend probably two years as a teacher driving a Muslim to school every day. This was the time of the 9/11 terrorist attack[s], and I remember having discussions with this guy. This was a former refugee who fled his homeland to avoid execution. He even witnessed his own father being shot. Turned out later he had survived that incident, but here we get a 16-year-old kid going to a public school in the United States in Georgia who basically is denying who he is because of the fear of persecution he might receive if his classmates found out that he was a Muslim. I have even heard his own coaches—ordained ministers—make a comment about, you know, how all Muslims want to do is kill Christians, and I’m here thinking, your field goal kicker is a Muslim.”

Kimball (2002) believes that the “same [major religious traditions] that have nurtured millions of people have also inspired adherents to rediscover, redefine in contemporary terms, and deepen these truths amid changing circumstances over the centuries,” and that “all the resources needed for reform can be found at the heart of the major religious traditions” (p. 188). If this is true, the inclusion of religious literacy in public high school curricula and educators addressing religious literacy in classrooms might both be viewed as desirable.

Question Five

We are now finished with the interview. Is there anything you would like to say about this session?
When asked Question Five, four of the 12 participants were satisfied with their answers to Questions One through Four, but a theme emerged from six of the eight interviewees who decided to say more: Debi and Joan felt that thinking about religious literacy in their own personal lives is something that begs reflection:

“I think that going through the process of looking at these questions and going back to my childhood and thinking about it has been helpful to pull all this together because right now, at this age . . . I’m 59 years old, and I’m still searching. I’m glad I am because I think if you’re just really cut-and-dried, you know, ‘This is it; this is the way it is,’ then I think that’s scary,” Debi said.

“This is very deep thinking, and it makes you put things in perspective because when you’re a child growing up, you are formed . . . your opinions are basically formed by your parents. When you become a parent, you’re trying to form opinions for your own kids. When you become an educator, you realized that all that was a phase in your life, and as an educator you don’t need to be forming opinions for other people,” Joan said.

Putnam & Campbell’s (2010) research indicated, “Although differences in levels of religious diversity by religious tradition are interesting and important . . . Most Americans are intimately acquainted with people of other faiths” (p. 526). Though not to be confused with being intimately acquainted with the theology and practices of people of other faiths, could these statistics be a bellwether of change on a national scale? Where does that place the need for religious literacy in public high schools all across the United States?

Interview Two

The participants’ responses to the questions in Interview Two concerned personal classroom experiences regarding religious literacy, whether or not students needed to be
religiously literate, the existing state educational standards in the light of religious literacy, and personal classroom experiences regarding those standards and religious literacy. The interview participants’ responses provided data that helped to answer research questions b. (“How do [the participants] address religious literacy in their own teaching practices?”) and c. (“Do [the participants] adequately cover the existing state standards as those standards apply to religious literacy?”).

Question One

What has been your experience with religious literacy in your classroom?

A tripartite theme emerged from Question One as seven of the 12 participants (58%) found a discernable lack of religious literacy from their students, from themselves, and/or from the curriculum.

“Over the years I’m finding that fewer students are knowledgeable about any religion, including Christianity,” Carolyn said. “I noticed the last year I taught world history that I was having to teach even more about Christianity than I had in the past, so it seems to me that fewer students are knowledgeable about any religion, and some of the things they think they know are really not true.”

“Limited,” Inez admitted. “Without a background in the different religions, I am often so uncomfortable with my own knowledge that I am confined to the few selections that are in our textbooks . . . I often inadvertently shy away from—or gloss over—texts from different religious backgrounds because I feel completely unqualified to field questions or give any credible significance to these texts. . . . I also fumbled through a few selections featured in our textbooks from the Koran and the Panchatantra and covered some Zen parables and Taoist anecdotes. However, I did not cover them to the extent and certainly not with as much depth.”
Prothero (2007) admits that families, religious congregations, and even the media could do a much better job teaching and explaining specific groups’ doctrines to America’s children (p. 126), but he states, “Still, it must be admitted that the dominant venues for education in the United States today are schools, colleges, and universities. So we should concentrate our religious literacy efforts here” (p. 127). He recognizes what several of the interview subjects feared:

So, plainly the place to start is public education. And here the situation is grim. Religion is rarely taught in public schools—a Department of Education survey from the 1980s found that only 640 out of the nation’s 15,000 high schools offered a stand-alone course in religious studies—and when students bring this subject up it typically makes teachers very nervous. (p. 127)

If, indeed, religious literacy at the high school level is desirable—necessary—and if family units, churches, and media outlets have dropped the ball on this one, could the school system be the place where such perceived deficits can be addressed?

**Question Two**

In his book *Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs To Know—And Doesn’t*, Boston University religion department chair Stephen Prothero (2007) wrote, “Today when religion is implicated in virtually every issue of national and international import, U.S. citizens need to know something about religion too. In an era in which the public square is, rightly or wrongly, awash in religious reasons, can one really participate fully in public life without knowing something about Christianity and the world’s religions?” [p. 10] Can you respond to this quotation in the light of your experiences as an educator?

The theme of religious literacy as a necessity became clear when nine of the twelve participants (75%) agreed with Prothero’s suggestion that U.S. citizens needed to know something about the world’s religions in order to “participate fully in public life”: 
“. . . We can’t fully participate in public life without knowing what Christianity is, what the world religions are—what they say, what they mean to us, and how they figure into our lives and our own belief systems,” Debi said.

“. . . It’s a detriment to our country and our society and to [U.S. citizens] as a whole because we do need to have . . . be cognizant of the values of religion, culture . . . every society to be informed and to be able to get along, to be able to understand why people do the things that they do,” Linda said.

Not all of the participants completely agreed with Prothero, however:

“I don’t know if I would say that people cannot fully participate in public life without full knowledge of the world’s religions, but I do believe that it is certainly more difficult now and may lack the understanding, tolerance, and richness that it might have with at least a basic knowledge,” countered Inez.

Gene cautioned, “. . . Once again, you have to be very careful what you discuss in your classroom because, like I said, lack of knowledge or not even wanting to know about someone’s religion—and I don’t want to maybe use ‘fear’—but just not wanting to know: ‘This is what we believe in, and everything else is not true’—as an educated person, you have to be very careful where you go with that.”

Three other emerging themes surfaced from Question Two: a) unrest in the Middle East, b) politics in general, and c) social media and the Internet:

“I mean, you can’t talk about the Middle East today and anything that’s going on in the news with our foreign policy—or domestic policy—without knowing that these religions are there, but also how they developed and evolved and different border skirmishes and control throughout early 3,000 BCE, I mean, it goes all the way from there to now, all of these modern
events that are going on in the Middle East are tied back to this and religion and the development of religion there and the claim to lands based on religious origin, you know,” Angie stressed.

“... There’s a lot of political debate about [religious literacy]. Wars are fought over it. So, if we don’t have a basic understanding of each other, I think there’s going to be even more problems along the way. If we can’t have a basic understanding of world religions, we’re never going to understand why,” Emily said.

“... The word ‘fully’ does add a new dimension to the question. Because of technology, our world is much smaller than it used to be. Travel is much easier and communication is readily available, and the Internet has changed our lives in so many ways. We are exposed to so much more now, including people of different religions backgrounds. Even our politics and headlines are affected and evolving,” Inez added.

Pinker (2011), for one, believes that when compared over the course of world history, violence based in religion is actually in decline in the 21st century and that the same global public square Prothero posits is one of the reasons: “A global campus increases not only the complexity of ideas but their quality. In hermetic isolation, all kinds of bizarre and toxic ideas can fester. Sunlight is the best disinfectant, and exposing a bad idea to the critical glue of other minds provides at least a chance that it will wither and die” (p. 178). Could it be that the perceived problems addressing religious literacy in the classroom might pale in comparison to what might result as the result of doing what is necessary to make everyone concerned—educators, students, and the community alike—comfortable with religious literacy joining the other “3 R’s” (“reading, [w]riting, and [a]rithmetic”)?
Question Three

What are your reactions to the existing standards regarding religious literacy in Georgia public high schools?

Three themes emerged from Question Three: a) the standards are there, but difficulties hinder their implementation, b) the standards are not deep or specific enough, and c) there are few or no standards to speak of.

“... We do have standards set forth by the state... It says, ‘A deep understanding of the world’s religions’—which is what I understand religious literacy to be—is still something that a community would question if you went very in-depth,” Gene cautioned.

“I think that the new Common Core Standards are vague enough to open the door for more religious literacy,” Inez said, “but we still have a long way to go. Unfortunately, most teachers are so afraid of violating any separation of church and state or having the news show up that they stay away from religious texts to avoid any trouble. Many are also concerned about parents calling and complaining if texts from other religions are presented. In our litigious society, some of those fears are warranted. In other cases, we just aren’t given the necessary background to be able to adequately understand and incorporate texts from religious backgrounds other than our own and feel unequipped to present them correctly.”

“. . . Standards are in the world history curriculum, but it’s basically just scratching the surface of the religion,” Carolyn said, “and you don’t get to follow the religion through history and see what actually happens as a result of their beliefs.”

“Well, I guess the best word would be that they’re very weak,” Kevin said. “The standards are . . . they’re very broad. It’s not extensive nor intensive. You’re covering five of the world’s religions in just a matter of a couple of paragraphs for each one, so, I mean, that’s very inadequate in my opinion.”
“There’s not many [standards],” laughed Hank. “Very few, *per se* . . . didn’t totally shock me, but the standards out there are not bad, but it’s just the fact that I don’t think anyone’s doing it. At least I know in our system it’s not happening, and I think that . . . you read the whole standards . . . I mean, the ones I read were basically more of a teaching of the New Testament and Old Testament as literature and from an historical standpoint.”

“What standards?” Linda exclaimed. “We’re two state superintendents away from ‘evolution doesn’t exist’? . . . It’s something that is truly not addressed in our standards, other than just very specifically in certain social studies classes—in U.S. History—but only in context of the Puritans, the Great Awakening.”

As the interview participants represented a range of disciplines within the county studied, so did the reactions to this particular question. Social studies and language arts teachers had the most to say about existing standards and religious literacy, though few felt Georgia left clear or deep clues as to how to weave religious literacy into the state’s public academic high school curricula. With Georgia transitioning from state standards to the national Common Core model, some felt the non-specificity of texts could leave room to include religious literacy. Will teachers recognize a need and take the challenge?

*Question Four*

If you were on a committee charged with reviewing the existing Georgia standards addressing religious literacy, what would be your response regarding their efficacy?

Three themes emerged from Question Four: a) the benefit of a world religion class, b) the need for more explicit or detailed standards, and c) religious literacy may be too controversial or problematic to pursue.
“Well, I think I would welcome the opportunity to actually teach a world religion class at the high school level in social studies,” Carolyn said. “. . . I don’t know that we could really change the Georgia Standards addressing religious literacy unless they sanctioned a class where we could actually teach religions of the world through the social studies department, which would be actually pretty neat. I think it’s pretty eye-opening when you study them, just even from an historical standpoint.”

“. . . If I could ask the people that wrote these standards, I would ask, give me a list of all of the stuff for each of these religions that you want me to teach,” Angie said, “but I would want that for everything, but I think that these could be more effective if it was more detailed . . . I would just want a more specific list with more specific information.”

“If I was on a committee, I do think the standards should be rigorous. They should be meaningful. They should align with the Common Core Curriculum,” Gene admitted. “. . . But I still believe that most teachers would have to defend Christianity in pointing out what was wrong with other religions. You may run into a situation like that. Or if you started to talk about the Koran and say why the Koran is good, or this . . . or try to defend it, I think the teacher would start having to try to defend themselves.”

Inez, too, was concerned: “What happens to these well-intentioned lessons if someone that is not equipped to teach these texts teachers them incorrectly, incompletely, or with bias? With no real specifics on religions of the world noted in the standards, the efficacy of these standards is probably inadequate . . . but that might be the goal of the people that created them. The standards are vague enough for a teacher to use these outside texts, but not detailed enough that the state can be blamed for it. The teacher is ultimately held accountable for the decisions on the texts, not the state.”
The interview subjects upheld the value of religious literacy and rigorous standards requiring religious literacy, but fears remained regarding teacher training, efficacy, and community reaction. Perhaps with a complete education for the public school students of Georgia at stake, efforts at training pre-service teachers properly, augmenting veteran teachers’ knowledge, closely examining the state’s role in all of this, and building bridges within the communities could bring the issues surrounding religious literacy in the schools to the fore.

Question Five

As an educator in a multicultural community, how do you address religious literacy in your school with regard to existing standards?

In answering Question Five, the participants’ responses were so wide-ranging that no clear themes-by-majority emerged, though three ideas stood out: a) addressing religious literacy from a purely historical standpoint, b) capitalizing on the similarities among the three monotheistic world religions of Christianity, Islam, and Judaism, and c) exercising caution to avoid controversy.

“I think that you have to teach religion from a historical standpoint only,” Carolyn insisted.

“. . . If you look at it from the traditional monotheistic viewpoint,” Frank said, “we’re more closely related than you think, so understanding others sometimes helps you understand yourself, and I think that’s important to keep in mind in discussing religious literacy in high school.”

Kevin said, “Well, I do teach the standards, and I think what we get caught up with a lot of times is how these religions are different. What I like to do is point out how they’re connected and how they’re . . . you know, there’s a common thread between all religions, and I feel like if a
student can see the similarities, then that might do more good than focusing on the differences, because we’re a lot more alike than different, people in general.”

“Well, as an administrator,” Gene cautioned, “we do live in a multicultural community, somewhat . . . So, as an educator, you would be, I think, you would be . . . you would be on guard at all times, and I say that because, you know, you would not want to offend anyone in your school that had a different religious belief.”

Inez, too, had concerns: “This is a very dangerous area for educators, administrators, and county office personnel. I think many are simply more afraid of backlash and repercussions that come with anything dealing with religion, more than they fear the possibility of exposure to different texts.”

The dichotomy between the subjects’ stated beliefs that teaching religious literacy in their public high schools would, indeed, be a good thing, and the motifs of professional ignorance regarding literacy in religions other than their own—coupled with the fear of community backlash—might point to an impasse. Or crossroads. Prothero (2007) is clear:

[The] costs of perpetuating religious ignorance are too high in a world in which faith moves, if not mountains, than at least elections and armies. It does nothing for the Secular Left to remain ignorant of the Religious Right (or vice versa). And it puts America at risk to remain ignorant as a society of the beliefs and practices of Buddhists in Sri Lanka, Hindus in Kashmir, and Muslims in Iran. In debates about life and death and war and peace, the stakes are too high to defer to politicians and pundits. (p. 145)

**Question Six**

We are now finished with the interview. Is there anything you would like to say about this session?

Six of the participants (50%) had more to say about Interview Two, and the predominate theme was how the interview experience had caused four of the six respondents to reflect on issues regarding religious literacy that they might not otherwise would have.
“[Interview Two questions] were very thought-provoking,” Frank said. “[They] definitely made me reflect personally, culturally, globally, historically, philosophically, which I think’s really cool because I enjoy that stuff.”

“I’ve not really thought about it in these terms before, but I definitely can see why this is an important subject, because everything we do in our dealings with people could be directly related to what we know about other religions. And I think the more educated we are, the better people we are. I definitely would like to say that,” said Kevin.

“. . . I wish people would know a little more [about the five major world religions] before they open their mouth and post things on Facebook,” Carolyn lamented.

The open-ended, reflective nature of the final Interview Two question found those who chose to elaborate further on the issues waxing positive about the importance of religious literacy in a public high school educational setting.

Interview Three

The final interview was the most reflective of the three, and the participants explored not only the connections between their life experiences and their current attitudes toward religious literacy, but also how their students and peers might respond to those attitudes.
Question One

Interview Three involves reflection. After reviewing your comments from previous interviews, how do you understand the connections between your life experiences and your attitude toward religious literacy?

For eight of the twelve participants (67%), their formative years impacted their attitudes toward religious literacy.

“. . . I have to applaud my parents for protecting me, for sheltering me from a lot of what was going on,” laughed Carolyn. “They did a great job, but I think it made me an ignorant person, so I was very naïve. It made me want to know more about things.”

“I pretty much drank the Kool-Aid my parents served for me in our local church” Debi said, “and I don’t regret that at all. I don’t regret that foundation that I have to build on . . . I tended to have my conservative streak early, and from the time, I guess, maybe, as a young adult, I’ve tended to evolve into a more open-minded, more accepting person, and a more curious person about what other people believe and why they believe it.”

The second theme that emerged from Question One was that four of the participants (33%) wanted religious literacy to be part of their students’ preparation.

“I just always hope that when [my students] do leave here, they’re not looked down upon because they’re backwards and stupid, and I think, for me, [our] mission statement . . . —“We prepare kids for life”—like, I kind of latch on to that, and that’s part of life that I want them to be prepared for, partly because I don’t feel like I was prepared for it,” Angie said.

Hank worried, “. . . We are sending a number of students to college and university every year who are very naïve and are very ignorant on what’s out there as far as religion goes, and I think that’s a bad thing. I think we are not preparing kids, and they get off to college and they get professors who have different beliefs, professors with different religions . . . I think it’s a
culture shock to them and some of them feel like they’re going to Hell or something because they’re learning these different things . . . I think we are depriving our children, and it’s almost, to me, it’s just as bad as not teaching the basics of the Constitution.”

Though only two participants in each case agreed (17%), two smaller themes emerged from Question One: a) living elsewhere affected attitudes toward religious literacy, and b) fear affected attitudes toward religious literacy.

“[After moving to California] I think a lot of people kind of made assumptions about me as a Southern female white person,” Angie said, “that I was racist, that I was backward in my thinking, that I didn’t know a lot of stuff, and I didn’t! It was kind of an education for me. And if anything, I want [my students] to know that they can’t make assumptions about people based on anything about them. You just have to get to know every single human being. And that’s part of preparing them for life. And understanding religion is part of preparing them for that.”

“As an educator, curiosity and necessity have caused me to seek information beyond my own experiences and have perhaps given me a broader, albeit limited, understanding and hopefully a greater tolerance for things that are different,” Inez said. “That being said, I certainly would not say that I am providing well-rounded and adequate religious literacy to my students. Even with that slight intellectual curiosity, I don’t feel that I am qualified in any way to present these varied religious texts and provide any meaningful understanding to students.”

A number of the participants credited their own religious upbringings for inculcating in them healthy senses of curiosity and personal rebelliousness. Ironically, their own admittedly myopic early experiences to which they credit their present-day openness and intellectual curiosity are often overshadowed by feelings of fear of reprisal and inadequacy to effectively teach religions other than their own.
Question Two

How would your attitudes toward religious literacy affect your personal/professional relationships with your students and your professional peers?

Two themes emerged from Question Two: a) a number of participants claimed they eschewed discussing personal views on religion and politics with coworkers and students, and b) a number of participants felt their coworkers and students might be surprised to know their attitudes toward religious literacy.

“I don’t talk about religion with people that I work with,” Angie said.

Carolyn said, “...My peers here...most of them realize that I march to the beat of a different drum in a sense that my thinking is somewhat more liberal than maybe others in my department, but we don’t really talk about it a lot, and I try not to press my views on other people...we don’t discuss religion, really, at a professional level. I’m not really sure we should, and I’m not going to press any of my beliefs on any of my students.”

“You know, with my teaching peers,” Frank said, “I feel like a lot of them don’t know me anyway, so I don’t know how much the relationship would actually change. Might scare more of them off. Maybe they’d leave me alone (laughs)... Might surprise some at the county level.”

Linda said, “People who are single-minded, I stay away from them. The people I can have a conversation with do know my feelings, and, at times, it has been surprising to some of them what I had to say because they might have just assumed a different perspective. So that’s always an interesting thing for me when I see a little bit of ‘Oh!’—on their face—‘I wasn’t expecting that!’ So, I think a lot of my peers already know. As far as my students? I don’t tell students what my faith is. I don’t tell students what my politics is because it’s not my place to try to influence their belief systems in any way.”
For most of the participants, the subject of religion and personal beliefs either does not come up or is not brought up among peers or students. Propriety, more so than controversy, carried the day with these educators. A number of the participants equated their “attitudes toward religious literacy” (as stated in Question Two) with revealing their own faith or belief system to students or peers. Are some of the participants concerned that “knowledge of” will be mistaken as “interest in” or “adherence to”?

Question Three

We are now finished with the interview. Is there anything you would like to say about this session?

While four of the 12 participants (33%) chose not to add anything at the end of Interview Three, two themes emerged from those who wanted to add to their interviews: a) the interview process was beneficial, and b) there is a need for religious literacy.

“I think it’s been . . . it’s been . . . beneficial to me . . . There [have] been very few opportunities in my life to really sit back and think everything in aggregate and how they’ve added up to make me me, so to speak. And I think people need to have that opportunity. I think it’s therapeutic,” Frank said.

“[Religious literacy] is something that makes you think. I’ve become a lot more open-minded to it simply because I do have so much diversity here [at school]. We’ve got a lot of the Hindu . . . we’ve got a lot of the Muslim . . . a lot of diversity,” Joan said.

“I think people would be more open-minded about different religions if they just knew what that religion was about,” mused Gene. “I know that sounds so common, but if you just knew that person that lived beside you and you knew what they were about, I think people would be more apt to be a little bit more open, or, let me say, understanding.”
There was a positive and hopeful tone in the participants’ final answers that mitigated the vein of fear and trepidation shot through many of their previous responses. Even Kevin’s visceral parting comment—sobering and bracing as it was—concluded with a statement that few—if any—of the participants would challenge:

“One of the things that really left an impression on me as an educator was following 9/11,” repeated Kevin, “that was the time where I was taking a Muslim student to school who played soccer—he was on the football team. He was running through signs with Bible verses on them. He was afraid that the secret would get out that he was a Muslim, so he would tell his peers that he was Christian. Something that just really made me feel sick is that one of his coaches tells me—just out of the blue—that all Muslims want to do is kill Christians, and I’m thinking, this particular player is a Muslim; he’s out to kill you? This is an educator. You know, this is who’s teaching our children. And that left a really big impression on me, for sure, and the need for more tolerance in America, and you’re only going to get more tolerance through education.”

Summary and Discussion of Data

Anonymous Questionnaire

The purpose of the anonymous questionnaire was to provide a backdrop against which to examine the 12 participants who agreed to be interviewed three times each for a total of 36 interviews. The process featured seven Likert-scaled items; six fill-in-the-blank items regarding basic tenets and facts of Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, Buddhism, and Christianity; and a single open-ended question regarding personal integration of religious literacy into teaching.
The first six Likert-scaled items provided a general glimpse into the county teachers’ and administrators’ feelings regarding the perceived value of an understanding of the basic tenets of the five major world religions within the curriculum of the core public high school subjects: language arts, math, science, and social studies. The seventh item sought to discover how well they thought the Georgia Standards addressed these tenets. In the six fill-in-the-blank items that followed, participants were asked to rate their own perceived personal understanding of the basic tenets of the five major world religions. The final fill-in-the-blank questionnaire item asked respondents to elaborate on how they integrated aspects from any or all of the five major world religions into their teaching.

While the survey participants did not agree that each of the four core subject areas—language arts, math, science, and social studies—would benefit from religious literacy, the majority (67%) agreed with the general statement that religious literacy would benefit high school students overall in their studies (Likert Item 1). The participants’ answers to Likert Items 2-5 gauged the importance of religious literacy to the four core subjects and ranked them by importance: social studies (87%), language arts (67%), science (42%), and math (15%). Here, the general positive trend favoring religious literacy with respect to the core subjects skewed in favor of social studies and language arts. A majority (62%) of the survey participants felt positive about the levels of their own religious literacy (Likert Item 6). Very few (16%) felt that the existing state standards sufficiently addressed religious literacy in their individual subject areas (Likert Item 7). These data, based in the participants’ attitudes and opinions regarding religious literacy and the state standards, broach research questions a. and b. This provided a macro view that was later refined in the individual interviews.

Survey Items 8-13 were fill-in-the-blanks items asking the participants to provide rudimentary information about Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, Buddhism, and Christianity. These
data were intended to further elucidate the participants’ attitudes toward their own religious literacy (research question a.); prepared teachers are confident teachers, and these data could be indicators of the participants’ attitudes regarding their own abilities to teach religious literacy in their subject areas.

Only 20% of the survey participants could name a sacred Hindu text (Item 8), compared to 80% who correctly named Islam’s holy book (Item 9). While only half of the participants named all of the first five books of the Hebrew Bible (Item 10), only 1% could not name a single book. Item 11 elicited the smallest correct response: only 2% of the participants could name all four of Buddhism’s Four Noble Truths. More than 75% could name none, leaving Item 11 either blank or recording incorrect answers. When asked to list the four Gospels (Item 12), more than 83% of the participants were successful, and 14% left Item 12 blank. Item 13 asked the participants to name the seven sacraments of Catholicism. With the second smallest fill-in-the-blanks response, 3% of the participants were able to name all seven sacraments, and a sizable 60% gave incorrect responses or left Item 13 blank.

The final survey item (Item 14) directly addressed research question c. The participants were asked to explain the ways—if any—that they integrated religious literacy into their teaching. Approximately 15% of the participants outlined ways in which they used religious literacy in a core academic class, but 47% left Item 13 blank. Approximately 21% went so far as to say that they did not integrate any aspects of the five major world religions into their teaching.

Interview Transcriptions

The interviews provided a more elaborate view of the participants’ feelings and perceptions regarding their own levels of religious literacy and how extensively and successfully they applied their religious literacy to teaching the existing standards. The analysis of the
Interview transcriptions suggested several themes. Four volunteers from each of the three schools studied participated in three interviews each resulting in three interviews per participant for a total of 12 interview transcripts. Generally, a theme was noted if four or more participants raised related issues, though in a handful of cases, as few as two participants might warrant a particular mention if the responses were striking enough.

Question One of the first interview revealed that not only was a clear majority of the 12 volunteer teachers and administrators raised and publically educated in the North Georgia county featured in this study—some at the very same schools where they currently teach—but also nearly all of them earned undergraduate degrees from state colleges or universities in the tri-state area of Georgia-Tennessee-Alabama. As well, almost all were raised in two-parent homes by biological parents. Question Two of the first interview revealed that not only did a majority of the participants identify their childhood homes as actively Christian from the time they were children until they began teaching, but the majority also identified themselves as Baptists. Over half of the participants claimed some exposure to Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, and Islam during the same time period, and two of the participants specifically recounted experiences with Catholicism as well. Question Three of the first interview revealed that not only had nine of the 12 participants taught in public schools for 10-20 years, but also eight of the 12 participants had spent their entire teaching careers in the same North Georgia county featured in this study. Question Four of the first interview revealed a strong consensus among the participants that the term “religious literacy” entailed a basic knowledge of Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, and Judaism. As a theme, Islam emerged from Question Four regarding the attacks on September 11, 2001, and worldwide Islamic activity since that day to the present. Question Five in the first interview invited the participants to elucidate on or to add to their responses in the
first four questions, and three-quarters of the participants admitted that they had rarely, if ever, reflected on religious literacy in their own lives.

The emergent themes from Interview One laid the groundwork for how the participants may have developed their own attitudes toward religious literacy. With similar upbringings and educational experiences, the participants claimed understanding of the term “religious literacy,” yet they admitted that they rarely reflected on religious literacy in their own lives.

Question One in the second interview revealed a majority of the participants agreeing that there was a discernable lack of religious literacy from their students, from themselves, and/or from the standard curriculum. Question Two in the second interview presented a quotation from Stephen Prothero (2007) in which the author suggested that in order to “participate fully in public life,” U.S. citizens needed to know something about the world’s religions. The majority of participants agreed with Prothero. Concerns included the continuing unrest in the Middle East, the prominence of religious issues in American politics, and the dichotomy between the “Information Age” of the Internet and the persistent lack of information that individuals display regarding religions. Question Three of the second interview divided the participants with many believing that with regard to religious literacy the existing Georgia State Standards were either too shallow or lacked specificity, or their effective implementation might reap difficulty from the community regarding misperceptions of the church-state issue. The remaining participants insisted that there were few or no standards involving religious literacy to begin with. Question Four of the second interview revealed that while many of the participants recognized the benefits of a world religions class at the high school level—some even going so far as to remarking that they would enjoy teaching such a class themselves—others were reticent to deal with the community controversies that they felt such a class would engender. Question Five of the second interview did not yield strong-by-numbers themes, but three patterns emerged: teaching
standards dealing with religious literacy from a dispassionate, historical perspective; stressing common threads among world religions, particularly among the monotheistic ones of Middle Eastern origin; and exercising caution to avoid community controversy. When given the opportunity in Question Six, the final question in the second interview, fewer participants than in the first interview felt the need to expand on or add to their responses to the first five questions in Interview Two. The ones who did noted that Interview Two provided an opportunity to personally reflect on issues otherwise unexplored.

The emergent themes from Interview Two paired the participants’ agreement on two dichotomous phenomena: They perceived their students to be lacking in religious literacy, yet they agreed with Prothero (2007) that religious literacy was a key requirement to participation in the public life of America. With the participants doubting the depth and specificity of existing state standards—and some doubting the existence of such standards at all—their endorsements of teaching world religions to high school students were undercut by a noticeable fear of possible community backlash.

Question One of the third and final interview revealed that for a majority of the participants, their formative years were among the life experiences that had most affected their own attitudes toward religious literacy. A couple of the educators held that having the opportunity to live somewhere other than the area in which they now teach impacted their attitudes toward religious literacy significantly. Question Two of the third interview revealed that while the participants were divided on their perceptions of how coworkers and students might respond to their personal attitudes toward religious literacy—some felt their peers and students would be surprised; others didn’t—the majority agreed that they did not discuss politics and religion with their students or fellow educators. As in Interview One, three quarters of the teachers and administrators interviewed decided to expand on or add to their responses to
Questions One and Two: They agreed that not only were the interviews personally beneficial, but also that there is a real need for religious literacy in their own lives and in their own schools.

The emergent themes from Interview Three told of educators who recognized the importance of their upbringings in developing their attitudes toward religious literacy. But for all of their discussion about the broad-based need for religious literacy, discussion of their own personal attitudes regarding religious literacy with fellow teachers or students was not a priority.

The scope of answers to both the survey questionnaires and the individual interview questions reveals a community of educators that may not be as monocultural as some of their demographics might suggest to the casual observer. One might have expected perceived deficiencies in the knowledge base of the minority religions within the community, but the issues of perceived value of and need for a stronger knowledge of the five major world religions—among educators and their students alike—emerged.
CHAPTER V
CONCLUSION

Overview of Study

The purpose of this study has been to assess the attitudes and perceptions of a sample of North Georgia public high school educators regarding their background experiences and knowledge of the five major world religions: Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, and Judaism. How did the participants develop their attitudes regarding their own religious literacy? How do the participants address religious literacy in their own teaching practices? Do the participants adequately cover the existing state standards (AskDOE, 2013) as those standards apply to religious literacy? These three core questions frame this study. Following the call that religious literacy in the 21st century is crucial, and that U.S. citizens need to have a working knowledge of the five major world religions (Prothero, 2007), educators striving to produce literate readers, literate writers, and independent thinkers (Hubbard et al., 1997) need to be cognizant of not only their students’ levels of religious literacy, but also of their own.

While educators struggle with whether or not broaching religion in the classroom is necessary, to the rest of the world it is becoming obvious—sometimes painfully so—that we ignore religious literacy to our peril. If E.D. Hirsch, Jr. (1988) was correct when he insisted that every American should “possess the basic information needed to thrive in the modern world” (p. xiii), then Stephen Prothero (2007) rightly wondered “. . . can one really participate fully in public life without knowing something about Christianity and the world’s religions?” (p. 10). High school teachers of literature, history, languages, mathematics, science, and art cannot
ignore the connections among religions and their subjects. At the very least, a working
to teach [the] student population the essential skills needed to become literate readers, literate writers, and independent thinkers” (Hubbard et al., 1997, p. vii).

North Georgia is largely Protestant, and the communities there demographically cannot offer public high school students and educators widely diverse religious experiences. Diana L. Eck (2001) reports that “the challenge of relations between and among people of different religious and cultural experiences . . . here in the United States . . . is moving to the top of the agenda” (p. xiii), and what students do not learn at home about the major world religions is left to the realms of the entertainment industry, social media, self-study, and education. The connections among the core public high school subjects in Georgia—language arts, math, science, and social studies—and the basic tenets of Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, and Judaism are not equal. The lines from Shakespeare’s allusions to the Bible and the internecine Middle Eastern Wars and the development of the systemized study of algebra and the continuing dialogue over evolution are, alternately, strong and tenuous, blurred and clear.

Since September 11, 2001, the subject of world religions—Islam in particular—has been in our nation’s collective consciousness. Ignorance and information have clashed like waves on a rocky shore in the turbulent tide of the near-ubiquitous worlds of the Internet and her most vocal child, social media. Is religion, as Prothero (2007) insists, “the most volatile constituent of culture” and “in addition to one of the greatest forces for good in world history, one of the greatest forces for evil” (p. 4)?

I attempted to determine if the perceived levels of religious literacy in a North Georgia county posed problems for teachers. I anonymously surveyed the public high school teachers in a north Georgia county, and 189 educators agreed to anonymously answer survey items on my
two-page questionnaire (see Appendix A). The seven Likert-scaled items in the first half of the survey questionnaire (Items 1-7) asked basically three things: Would religious literacy be helpful to public high school students in their core academic classes? Did the participants feel religiously literate themselves? Did the Georgia state standards sufficiently address religious literacy within the core curriculum? Six fill-in-the-blank items that constituted the second half of the survey questionnaire (Items 8-13) explored the participants’ baseline knowledge of the rudiments of the five major world religions. The final open-ended response item (Item 14) invited participants to share how religious literacy was integrated into their teaching.

In Items 1-5, the survey participants gauged their perceived value of religious literacy in the educational process. This speaks directly to their attitudes regarding not just religious literacy as something integral to education, but to their own levels of religious literacy and, therefore, their competency to teach these concepts. By breaking down the survey into items specific to the core high school subjects, it gave individual respondents the opportunity to contribute strongly based on their individual knowledge and experience levels. It is unlikely that the participants were intimately acquainted with any state standards outside of their field(s) of expertise, and the “No Opinion” option gave them latitude to use the stronger choices for those subjects and standards with which they were acquainted.

Whether or not a participant felt he or she was religiously literate could directly affect his or her attitude toward religious literacy, both personally and professionally. By asking the participants to assess the degree to which the Georgia state standards for high schools address religious literacy, I sought to illuminate not only how the participants integrated religious literacy into their classrooms, but also whether or not their attitudes toward their own religious literacy could be affected by their perceived efficacy of the state standards as guidelines.
From the survey questionnaire I gained insight into the educators’ attitudes regarding their own religious literacy, how they utilized that religious literacy in their own teaching, and whether or not they felt they covered existing state standards regarding religious literacy. The data from the anonymous surveys suggest that the participants felt that an understanding of the basic tenets of the five major world religions would be most helpful to students enrolled in high school social studies and language arts classes, respectively, with math and science trailing at third and fourth. This stands in contrast to the participants’ indication in Likert item 1 that an understanding of the basic tenets of the five major world religions would be helpful to students in understanding all four core subjects combined. While the general concept of the value of religious literacy with respect to core academic classes was greeted positively by a majority of the participants, when the same question was applied to the individual subjects, it became clear that the participants felt that the study of language arts and social studies would benefit most from religious literacy. On the surface, the participants broadly and generally agreed that a knowledge of the rudiments of the five major world religions would be helpful to high school students in their studies, but when pressed, core subject by core subject, their rankings became clear: Social studies and language arts would benefit most from the inclusion of religious literacy.

The data suggest that, together, the survey participants leaned toward somewhat agreeing that they had a personal understanding of the basic tenets of the five major world religions, but their answers to Items 8-13 did not support this general self-assessment. Their knowledge of the rudiments of Christianity and Judaism as revealed by their answers to survey Items 10 and 12 was substantial. Their answers to Item 13—“List as many of the seven sacraments of Catholicism as you can”—yielded very few correct answers, but these data are in keeping with demographics of the participants as explored later in the individual interviews. After
approximately 80% of the survey participants were able to correctly name Islam’s holy book in Item 9, the correct fill-in-the-blank answers fell precipitously when asked to name a single sacred text of Hinduism (Item 8) and to name the Four Noble Truths of Buddhism (Item 11). The data from the survey questionnaire suggest that the participants did, in fact, have a rudimentary grasp of Protestant Christianity (including the Hebrew Bible) and Islam, but were lacking in the basics of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Catholicism.

The majority of the survey participants either disagreed that Georgia public high school standards sufficiently addressed the basic tenets of the five major world religions (Likert Item 7), chose No Opinion, or did not to respond at all. Could this have contributed to the dearth of positive answers to the final, open-ended survey questionnaire item (Item 14)? From the 189 survey participants, 47% wrote nothing when asked how they integrated aspects from any or all of the five major world religions into their teaching. 29% of the participants claimed to have integrated aspects from one or more of the five major world religions into their teaching. The remaining 24% either claimed that they used few, or stated that they did not use any, of the major world religions in their teaching. These data suggest that less than a third of those surveyed felt that they integrated religious literacy into their curriculum.

How did the participants develop their attitudes regarding their own religious literacy? Part of the answer is linked to how they felt about the value of religious literacy at the high school level within the core subject areas. How do they address religious literacy in their own teaching? Less than a third of the participants admitted to doing so. Do they adequately cover the existing state standards as those standards apply to religious literacy? The final Likert item found almost half of the participants mute on the subject. While the survey questionnaire provided a broad snapshot of the educators’ perceptions, attitudes, and practices regarding religious literacy, the individual interviews dug deeper to provide a clearer view.
At each of the three high schools in the system I studied I found one administrator and three classroom teachers who were willing to participate in three separate interviews (see Appendix B). From among those who responded, I chose the widest possible spread of core subjects represented. Each individual was interviewed three times. During the first interview I gathered information, and I probed into the possible issues and events that informed each interviewee’s attitude toward the five major world religions during their formative years and during their years as an educator. In the second interview I investigated the participants’ experiences with religious literacy in their classrooms with particular regard to any Georgia state standards that may have come into play. The participants personally assessed their state curricula and how those standards were fleshed-out in their own classrooms. While both Interview One and Interview Two called for reflection at the end of each session, the entire theme of reflection guided Interview Three. Participants theorized about how their personal attitudes toward religious literacy might affect their students and coworkers.

I found that a majority of the participants were raised by both parents and publically educated in the same county I studied, and most of those participants matriculated in colleges and universities in the tri-state area of Alabama, Georgia, and Tennessee. Almost all of the participants were raised in Protestant Christian homes, and most recalled exposure to religions other than their own. The majority had taught for 10-20 years in the same county studied. The participants understood the term “religious literacy” and related it to having a basic knowledge of the five major world religions, but three-quarters of them rarely reflected on religious literacy in their own lives. Most interviewees admitted to a lack of religious literacy, not only among their students and the state standard curriculum, but in themselves as well. In the wake of 9/11, Islam was a major topic of conversation during the interviews, though the participants lamented a dearth of basic knowledge of the other five major world religions.
A majority of the interviewees perceived a lack of religious literacy in their students, in themselves, and in the curriculum. Three quarters of the participants agreed with Prothero’s (2007) assertion that participation in public life as a U. S. citizen is proportional to individual religious literacy (p. 10). They were divided regarding the state standards: some found them either flaccid and ineffectual or nonexistent, and others cited potential community difficulty as a deterrent to exploring the five major world religions in their classrooms to any depth. Proposed additions to the state curriculum included the benefit of a high school class in world religions and state standards that were more detailed and explicit regarding religious literacy. When asked how they addressed religious literacy in the classroom, the answers were almost as varied as the number of participants, yet a few salient points surfaced: teaching religions strictly from a historical standpoint—including stressing the similarities among the Abrahamic religions of Christianity, Islam, and Judaism—and proceeding with caution to avoid offense, backlash, or community repercussions. Most of the interviewees credited their upbringings for having helped formed their own attitudes toward religious literacy, and although the majority agreed that they were reticent to discuss religion with their students or peers, a third of them wanted religious literacy to be included in their students’ educations. For a minority of the participants, a thread of insecurity over their ability to teach religious literacy noticeably ran. Overall, the majority of the participants found the three interviews beneficial, and they agreed that the need for religious literacy exists.

Ironically, although the majority of the interview subjects were educated locally and have built their teaching careers locally, their responses were far less exclusive than their educational and occupational demographics might portent. The fact that a religious monoculture can produce educators with religiously multicultural visions speaks to the potential of familial support, healthy curiosity, and an inclusive education.
Salient Themes

From the anonymous questionnaires, four themes were prominent: 1. The survey participants initially thought religious literacy would be helpful in all of the core academic high school subjects, but it was actually social studies and language arts that received the most attention. 2. The survey participants indicated that they understood the rudiments of the five major world religions, but their answers found the majority severely lacking in the basics of Buddhism, Catholicism, and Hinduism. 3. Less than a third of the participants felt that they integrated religious literacy into their own teaching. 4. Almost half of those surveyed were silent about the effectiveness of state standards regarding religious literacy in the curriculum.

From the individual interviews, five themes were prominent: 1. Although the majority of the participants grew up, were educated, and ended up working in the same county that was featured in this study, their multicultural visions were open-minded and broad. 2. The participants ultimately deemed themselves, their students, and the curriculum lacking where religious literacy was concerned. 3. The majority found the existing state standards either ineffectual in promoting religious literacy or found the effort too potentially controversial to pursue. 4. The participants largely agreed that they found the interviews personally helpful. 5. The participants saw a need for religious literacy at the high school level.

Implications and Recommendations for Educators

In this study, the questionnaire and the interview processes to which the faculties and administrators and the volunteer interview subjects were exposed respectively have implications for educators. Teachers cannot ignore the presence of religion in their academic subjects. Hardly a daily local, national, or international newscast is without a story based in religion, whether about religious conflicts among nations, organizations, groups, or individuals. Students
face a regular fusillade of information that requires a modicum of understanding of the basic
tenets of the five major world religions in order to decipher. If the majority of religious
information learned in students’ homes is based on the family units’ own personal religious
choices (or non-choices), where are these students going to get this basic-yet-crucial
information?

The survey questionnaire participants saw a need for religious literacy in high school core
subjects, particularly in social studies and language arts. These two subjects deal with the
historical records that define cultures as well as the oral and written output generated by those
cultures. The participants recognized the roles religions have made in the development of
cultures as well as the roles religions play in the contributions those cultures had—and often
continue to have—in human history. They did not see the same strong religious influences in
science and math, though, again, they generally felt religious literacy was beneficial to all of the
core high school subjects.

This tendency to generally answer a broad question positively and to refine their answers
under closer examination was echoed when a majority of the survey participants agreed that they
understood the basic tenets of the five major world religions themselves, yet their answers to the
survey items examining the individual religions told a different tale. Participants understood the
tenets of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, but their understandings of Hinduism and Buddhism
were noticeably lacking.

At first blush, the participants’ attitudes toward their own religious literacy as well as
their perceived value of religious literacy in high school were positive. Only when they
examined each core subject and each of the five major world religions was the prophet Daniel’s
writing on the wall made clear, as it were, and things were found wanting in some areas (The
Holy Bible, Authorized King James Version, 1979, p. 517). When commenting on the efficacy of
the state standards regarding religious literacy, the survey participants’ negative responses and tacit refusals to answer were in line with similar answers and non-answers regarding their own coverage of religious literacy in their own classrooms. The survey participants generally saw the importance of religious literacy to a high school education, and they even fancied themselves somewhat religiously literate. How can the gaps revealed by closer examination be closed?

Where the survey questionnaire provided a broad and faceless picture of the educators featured in this study, the individual interviews with the twelve volunteers provided a richer, more-detailed view. Interview One revealed that a strong majority of the subjects were raised, educated, and employed in the same county that is featured in this study, yet for over 50 percent of the participants, this did not prevent their exposure to religions other than their own before they began their teaching careers. Most of them understood the term religious literacy, and they credited the events of 9/11 as a factor. Over half indicated that reflection on religious literacy was personally important. What looks like a narrowly defined background produced educators with some sense of religious literacy and a recognition of its importance.

In Interview Two, the participants came to grips with the degree to which they themselves and their students were religiously literate and the degree to which the state standards fostered religious literacy through the mandated curricula. According to the interviewees, all concerned parties were lacking, and, according to the interviewees, these deficits needed to be addressed if their students were to be fully educated. The participants were caught between their fears of community controversy that might result if they taught religious literacy and their own feelings of inadequacy to teach religious literacy. This was coupled with a strong sense of little or no guidance from the state by means of clear and effective standards addressing religious literacy. Though some participants worried about the possibility of community controversy,
others saw the benefit of more explicit state standards mandating religious literacy; the benefit of a world religion class at the high school level was bandied about.

In the third and final interviews, the participants confirmed that their formative years were integral in shaping their personal attitudes regarding religious literacy. They continued to insist upon the value of religious literacy, both in the lives of their students and in their own personal lives. Interviewees admitted to remaining quiet on the subjects of religion and politics among their students and peers, and a number of them felt that their students and peers would be surprised to learn their views on the subjects.

Prothero (2007) believes that the lack of religious literacy in America is not only as pervasive as the lack of cultural literacy, but that it is also more dangerous than being culturally illiterate. Prothero characterized religion as today’s “most volatile constituent of culture” (p. 4). With Eck (2001) calling the U. S. “the most religiously diverse nation in the world” (p. 4) and Prothero (2010) claiming that “with the notable exception of Western Europe, the rest of the world is furiously religious” (p. 7), it isn’t surprising that Prothero (2007) concludes that “high school . . . graduates who have not taken a single course about religion cannot be said to be truly educated” (p. 17).

European and Western art and literature are steeped in Christianity and the 1611 King James Version of the Bible. High school social studies curricula—from world history to current events—cannot avoid, as Passe & Wilcox (2009) enumerate, the Crusades; religious persecution; the formation of India and Pakistan; the election of John F. Kennedy, our nation’s first Catholic president; the edicts of the Pope; and America’s Christian right’s stands on abortion, gay rights, and scientific research (p. 102). And it isn’t just within Christianity where religious literacy is crucial. Cox (2009) reminds us that “the religious pluralism of our country today means that there are many different scriptures in play” (p. 167).
Few would argue with White (2009): “Teachers are the main determinant of the quality of education a student receives. They make daily choices, both conscious and unconscious, in regards to how to structure academic and social relationships in the classroom” (p. 858), but she also concludes that though “teachers are given guidelines for instructional content and effective teaching practices . . . very little is known about how teachers navigate these pedagogical boundaries based on their own religious observance” (p. 859).

Teachers need to understand any connections that may exist between their pre-service religious experiences and their ability to inculcate religious literacy, not only in their own lives, but also in the lives of their students. Professionalism is stressed in undergraduate teacher training, and it is a tacit obligation of all public school teachers. White (2009) believes that an understanding of the influences of an educator’s prior experiences cannot be ignored:

Individuals enter a profession with prior experiences that influence current notions of self. In order to develop a professional identity one must draw on this existing substantive identity. Therefore, the personal and professional notions of self shift and interact together to form the teacher’s professional identity. In understanding a teacher’s professional identity, it is important to explore how both personal and professional experiences interact and relate to each other. (p. 861)

Logically, prior religious beliefs and experiences factor into the mix: “. . . religion may be a component of a teacher’s professional identity, if it is an aspect of a teacher’s personal experience. Thus, it becomes important to understand to what degree teachers enter the classroom with religion as a part of their personal experience” (White, 2009, p. 861).

The training of undergraduate education majors should include coursework that addresses religious literacy; this could bolster any deficits—real or imagined—pre-service teachers might encounter in the face of preparing to teach in the most religiously diverse nation in the world. Existing teachers and administrators in our public schools would benefit from similar staff development as they strive not only to cover core state standards that reference
religious literacy, but also as they equip graduates with the tools to enter the national and international debate over this most current of issues.

How many high school teachers and administrators recognize the need for students to have rudimentary knowledge of the basics of the five major world religions? How many of them see a lacuna in their own personal level of religious literacy? How many are frustrated with what they feel are flaccid or non-existent standards to guide them? How many take the path of least resistance to avoid potential conflict with parents and other members of their communities? And what of the students who leave their tutelage to go on to college or enter the work force with little or no way to navigate Eck’s (2001) most religiously diverse nation in the world? These questions came out of my research and beg for further study.

Implications and Recommendations for Further Research

My study only scratches the surface of issues that are, in some cases, alarmingly present in America. Further research into the need for and efficacy of undergraduate training in religious literacy would go far to start fully equipping students for a dynamic and forceful national and world climate. Research into the levels of preexistent training that current educators have received regarding religious literacy could address these issues from the other end of the employment spectrum. Also, research into educators’ attitudes and perceptions regarding their own knowledge of the basic tenets of Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, and Judaism could yield a wealth of information in an area that is only now reaching a tipping point.

My research offers a view of what is going on regarding religious literacy in the public high schools of one Georgia county which is geographically rural, yet the county is also a bedroom community of a Southern city whose suburbs extend into the penumbra of the county I studied. Many of the educators I surveyed and interviewed have lived through a number of
changes in the area, and those changes continue to alter not only the faces they see in their hallways and classrooms, but those changes also affect the community’s attitudes and perspectives toward religion and its place in their lives and the lives of their families and friends.

Are other school systems in Georgia experiencing the same struggles, questions, and successes surrounding religious literacy in public schools indicated by those educators I surveyed and interviewed? How do rural, suburban, and urban school systems compare regarding religious literacy? Indeed, to what extent is my study representative of the rest of Georgia, of the United States, of the world?

It is clear to me that religion and religious perception are going to conspicuously share the world stage in the 21st century. Many of the international conflicts that refuse to die are squarely centered in the practices, beliefs, and perceptions of religion. American political debate is rife with religious discussions and disagreements, and I cannot help but feel that one positive step toward rational dialogue among groups who feel they differ so widely on diverse issues would be for the general population to develop a working understanding of the basic tenets of the five major world religions. From a secular standpoint, this understanding would not only open a world of knowledge from an historical and literary standpoint, it would also equip citizens of every stripe to read, understand, speak, and debate in a knowledgeable fashion: a fashion that has the facts before emotion.

There will always be educators who care, and often that care comes from a moral system based in religious teachings. The relatively few Georgia educators I interviewed were not defiant or recalcitrant regarding religious literacy. Their hesitancy was largely based in feelings of inadequacy regarding religious knowledge, not in their tacit refusal to see things from another’s perspective. This is where training of veteran teachers and those in colleges and
universities preparing to teach one day could benefit their students, many of whom are religiously ignorant from a secular standpoint.

Is it too much to imagine colleges and universities that require of their education majors at least one course in major world religions? In the county I studied, one of the high school graduation requirements outside of core academic subjects was a semester of computer keyboarding skills. The idea is that all students will have the basic ability to use computers efficiently. Computers are so integral in all of our daily lives that this particular county school system deems it necessary that every single student has exposure to the basic tenets of using a computer. What if pre-service teachers were required to pass a college or university course in the basic tenets of the five major world religions? Taught from a strictly secular and academic standpoint, I believe that such a requirement would fill the noticeable information gap that my research revealed in one Georgia county, a gap that might be indicative of similar gaps all over the state and the nation.

Veteran teachers would need staff development, yes, and the curriculum would have to be fair and accurate. We have precedent: veteran teachers over the past several years have been given extensive training in computer and Internet skills. While not always without a learning curve, veteran teachers who knew little or nothing a decade ago about the complexities of technology that continue to change the faces of classrooms all over the United States are now using technology comfortably and efficiently on a daily basis in their classrooms.

Knowles (1992) implored that, “Research on teacher identities, their interests, and biographies is urgently needed because we have little knowledge of how teachers’ early experiences affect their careers and strategies” (p. 102), and White (2009) insists, “We need to know more about how teachers’ own religious positioning impacts their learning to teach and pedagogical enactment in the classroom” (p. 864). These gaps could be addressed with further
research into the levels of pre-teaching training in religious literacy as well as further research into the need for staff development in religious literacy for veteran teachers and educators. Such research would need to include assessment of any state standards that address religious literacy in specific subject areas.

What I envisage for all public educators is a basic, non-sectarian knowledge of the basic tenets of the five major world religions. This would equip them to understand literary allusions and influences as well as historical events—including the present day history that is being written daily before our very eyes—that are so steeped in the national and international role of religion in the lives of a majority of Earth’s inhabitants. If our goal is a better tomorrow—and what educator would argue with that?—would we not come closer to that ideal through understanding the different belief systems that motivate our fellow travelers on this earthly plane?
REFERENCES


APPENDIX A

QUESTIONNAIRE
The purpose of this study is to assess the attitudes and perceptions of a sample of educators from a North Georgia public school system regarding students’ knowledge of the five major world religions: Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, and Judaism. Teachers and administrators from the system’s high schools will be surveyed and interviewed to determine, record, and assess their attitudes in light of Georgia public school standards and their implementation and efficacy. **Completion of this survey will be considered consent to participate in the study.**

**INSTRUCTIONS:** Please rate how strongly you agree or disagree with statements 1-7 by placing a check mark in the appropriate box and answer to the best of your ability and without the aid of reference materials questions 8-13 in the spaces provided.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>Somewhat Disagree</th>
<th>No Opinion</th>
<th>Somewhat Agree</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. An understanding of the basic tenets of the five major world religions (Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, and Judaism) would be helpful to students in understanding the core subjects taught at my high school.</td>
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<td>2. An understanding of the basic tenets of the five major world religions would be helpful to students in the study of language arts at my high school.</td>
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<td>3. An understanding of the basic tenets of the five major world religions would be helpful to students in the study of math at my high school.</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. An understanding of the basic tenets of the five major world religions would be helpful to students in the study of science at my high school.</td>
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<tr>
<td>5. An understanding of the basic tenets of the five major world religions would be helpful to students in the study of social studies at my high school.</td>
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<tr>
<td>6. I have an understanding of the basic tenets of the five major world religions.</td>
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<tr>
<td>7. The Georgia Standards for public high schools sufficiently address the basic tenets of the five major world religions in my subject area.</td>
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<tr>
<td>8. Name one sacred text of Hinduism.</td>
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<tr>
<td>9. What is the name of Islam’s holy book?</td>
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</table>

107
10. What are the first five books of the Hebrew Bible? ____________________________
    ____________________________                   ____________________________
    ____________________________                   ____________________________

11. Name Buddhism’s Four Noble Truths.

    ______________________________________________________________
    ______________________________________________________________
    ______________________________________________________________
    ______________________________________________________________

12. List the four Gospels.

    ______________________________________________________________
    ______________________________________________________________

13. List as many of the seven sacraments of Catholicism as you can.

    ______________________________________________________________
    ______________________________________________________________
    ______________________________________________________________

14. In what ways, if any, do you integrate aspects from any or all of the five major world
religions into your teaching?
Interview One

Question One

Please recount biographical information starting with your childhood up to the time you started working as an educator. For example, where did you grow up? Who were your caregivers? Where were you educated?

Question Two

During the time described in Question One, what issues or events were involved in the creation of your attitudes toward the five major world religions: Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, Judaism, and Hinduism? For example, were there media reports, individuals, friends, family acquaintances, and/or religious groups who had input into the formation of your attitude?

Question Three

Tell me about your career as an educator? How many years of experience do you have? Within how many schools have you worked? What were your job assignments?

Question Four

During the time described in Question Three, what issues or events were involved in the creation of your attitude toward religious literacy? For example, were there media reports that affected you? Were there individuals related to your position as a teacher or administrator who affected your thoughts? Did you receive input from a religious organization concerning religious literacy in schools? As an educator, what is your understanding of the term “religious literacy”? 

Question Five

We are now finished with the interview. Is there anything you would like to say about this session?
Interview Two

Question One

What has been your experience with religious literacy in your classroom?

Question Two

In his book *Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs To Know—And Doesn’t*, Boston University religion department chair Stephen Prothero (2007) wrote, “Today, when religion is implicated in virtually every issue of national and international import, U.S. citizens need to know something about religion too. In an era in which the public square is, rightly or wrongly, awash in religious reasons, can one really participate fully in public life without knowing something about Christianity and the world’s religions?” Can you respond to this quotation in the light of your experiences as an educator?

Question Three

What are your reactions to the existing standards regarding religious literacy in Georgia public high schools?

Question Four

If you were on a committee charged with reviewing the existing Georgia standards addressing religious literacy, what would be your response regarding their efficacy?

Question Five

As an educator in a multicultural community, how do you address religious literacy in your school with regard to existing standards?

Question Six

We are now finished with the interview. Is there anything you would like to say about this session?
Interview Three

Question One

Interview Three involves reflection. After reviewing your comments from previous interviews, how do you understand the connections between your life experiences and your attitude toward religious literacy?

Question Two

How would your attitudes toward religious literacy affect your personal/professional relationships with your students and your professional peers?

Question Three

We are now finished with the interview. Is there anything you would like to say about this session?
APPENDIX C
INFORMED CONSENT
Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study is to assess the attitudes and perceptions of a sample of educators from a North Georgia public school system regarding students’ knowledge of the five major world religions: Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, and Judaism. As a participant in this study, you are a volunteer and will assist me in seeking information to determine, record, and assess educator attitudes in light of Georgia public school standards and their implementation and efficacy.

Interviews

This study will involve three audio recorded interviews which will last approximately 1 ½--2 hours and take place at a mutually agreed upon place. You will receive a copy of the interview questions before the interview for your contemplation.

The first interview will entail the questions noted below. The second interview will include your review of the transcribed interview and reflection, in addition to the questions also noted below. At this time, you may make changes on the transcriptions you wish and feel free to add additional information.

You will have the opportunity at the end of each interview to ask any questions or add any additional comments. It is your prerogative to review your audio recordings upon request at a mutually agreed upon time and place.

Benefits of Participation

Among the potential personal benefits you may receive as a participant in this study are: a) a better understanding of your attitudes toward religious literacy, b) personal growth concerning issues of religious literacy, and c) considerations for how to deal with religious literacy in the schools.

Potential Risks

Your participation in this study entails no unusual risks or discomforts, perhaps no more than the discomfort that might be felt by some people talking in educational settings about religion. If you do become uncomfortable during the interviews, you may terminate your participation at any time.

Confidentiality

You and your affiliations will be referred to by pseudonyms, thus ensuring your confidentiality. Your names and the names of your school(s) will not be used. There will be no consequences to your enrollment in classes or employment status at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga or otherwise as a result of your participation in this study. Confidentiality is assured by not allowing your identities to be revealed. Every precaution will be made to insure confidentiality of records and identifying information.

The audio recordings will be professionally transcribed by a transcriber who will sign a Confidentiality Statement. Again, your names and affiliations will not be revealed. The interview recordings and transcripts will be secured at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga. The files will be destroyed following the successful defense of the dissertation.

I have read the above statements and agree to participate in this research. In addition, I am aware that:

1. My name, affiliations, transcripts, and audio recordings will remain confidential. The recordings will be erased after the dissertation has been successfully defended.
2. I am entitled at any time to make further inquiries regarding the procedures of this study.
3. Participation is voluntary, and I may withdraw my consent and discontinue my participation at any time for any reason without any penalty.

Signature ______________________________________________

Print Name ______________________________________________

Date ____________________________________________________

Doctoral Student/Principal Investigator
Mr. Wayne Ingle
1276 Phils Drive
Chattanooga, TN  37421
Phone: (423) 991-4035
Email: Wayne-Ingle@utc.edu

Advisor
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Email: Jim-Tucker@utc.edu

If you have any questions about your rights as a subject/participant in this research, or if you feel you have been placed at risk, you can contact Bart Weathingon, Chair of the Human Subjects Committee, Institutional Review Board at 423-425-4289 or Lindsay Pardue, Director of the Human Subjects Committee at 423-425-4443. Additional contact information is available at www.utc.edu/irb
APPENDIX D

TRANSCRIBER’S PLEDGE OF CONFIDENTIALITY
As the transcribing typist of this research project, I understand that I will be hearing tapes of confidential interviews. The information on these tapes has been revealed by research participants who participated in this project on good faith that their interviews would remain strictly confidential. I understand that I have a responsibility to honor this confidentiality agreement. I hereby agree not to share any information on these tapes with anyone except the primary researcher of this project.

Any violation of this agreement would constitute a serious breach of ethical standards, and I pledge not to do so.

Transcribing typist ___________________________________________
Printed Name _______________________________________________
Date ______________________________________________________

**Doctoral Student/Principal Investigator**
Mr. Wayne Ingle
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APPENDIX E

REQUEST FOR PARTICIPANTS
My name is Wayne Ingle, and I am a doctoral student at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga. I am a high school teacher with 22 years of experience, and I have an interest in religious literacy. For my dissertation I am exploring the attitudes of North Georgia public high school educators regarding students’ knowledge of the five major world religions: Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, and Judaism.

After the events of September 11, 2001, I became even more keenly aware of the diverse religions that make up our nation, and the words of Boston University’s Religion Department Chair, Dr. Stephen Prothero (2007), have remained with me:

Today’s religious illiteracy is at least as pervasive as cultural illiteracy, and certainly more dangerous. Religious illiteracy is more dangerous because religion is the most volatile constituent of culture, because religion has been, in addition to one of the greatest forces for good in world history, one of the greatest forces for evil (Religious literacy: What every American needs to know—and doesn’t. New York: HarperOne).

In order to participate in regional, national, and international discourse, religious literacy may be part of that conversation. The study of history, science, and literature at a high school level exposes students to a number of references and allusions drawn from the world’s major religions, and I am interested in whether or not religious literacy is an issue that concerns us as public school educators.

I desire to interview you regarding your attitude toward religious literacy, and if you would agree to be part of my study, please complete and return this form and I will be in touch with you with more information.

Your help would be greatly appreciated, and your confidentiality is guaranteed.
NAME__________________________________________________________________
ADDRESS_______________________________________________________________
CITY, STATE, ZIP________________________________________________________
PHONE NUMBER________________________________________________________
_____TEACHER
_____ADMINISTRATOR

Doctoral Student/Principal Investigator
Mr. Wayne Ingle
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APPENDIX F

PERMISSION FROM APPLICABLE AUTHORITIES
March 1, 2012

Mr. Wayne Ingle
1276 Phils Drive
Chattanooga, TN 37421

Dear Mr. Ingle:

Based on my review of your research proposal, the system grants you permission to conduct the study entitled “Religious Literacy in a Northwest Georgia School District” within the Catoosa County Public Schools organization, specifically Heritage High School, Lakeview-Ft. Oglethorpe High School, and Ringgold High School. This permission is granted on the basis that the school principals will establish procedures to ensure that the privacy of students and staff is maintained. As Georgia educators, we are also all required to follow the standards established in the Georgia Professional Standards Commission Code of Ethics. We reserve the right to withdraw from the study at any time if our circumstances change.

I understand that the data collected will remain entirely confidential and may not be provided to anyone outside of the research team without permission of the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga Institutional Review Board (IRB).

Sincerely,

Dr. Kim Nichols
Assistant Superintendent
Catoosa County Public Schools

Cc: Ronnie Bradford, Principal, Heritage High School
    Terri Vandiver, Principal, Lakeview-Ft. Oglethorpe High School
    Sharon Vaughn, Principal, Ringgold High School
APPENDIX G

IRB APPROVAL LETTER
MEMORANDUM

TO: Wayne Ingle
    Dr. James A. Tucker

FROM: Lindsay Pardue, Director of Research Integrity
      Dr. Bart Weathington, IRB Committee Chair

DATE: April 23, 2012

SUBJECT: IRB # 12-100: Religious Literacy in a Northwest Georgia School District

The Institutional Review Board has reviewed and approved your application and assigned you the IRB number listed above. You must include the following approval statement on research materials seen by participants and used in research reports:

The Institutional Review Board of the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga (FWA00004149) has approved this research project #12-100.

Please remember that you must complete a Certification for Changes, Annual Review, or Project Termination/Completion Form when the project is completed or provide an annual report if the project takes over one year to complete. The IRB Committee will make every effort to remind you prior to your anniversary date; however, it is your responsibility to ensure that this additional step is satisfied.

Please remember to contact the IRB Committee immediately and submit a new project proposal for review if significant changes occur in your research design or in any instruments used in conducting the study. You should also contact the IRB Committee immediately if you encounter any adverse effects during your project that pose a risk to your subjects.

For any additional information, please consult our web page http://www.utc.edu/irb or email instrv@utc.edu

Best wishes for a successful research project.
E. Wayne Ingle was born in Chattanooga, Tennessee, to Herman Franklin and Marie Margaret Ingle. He was their seventh and final child. After attending Westview Elementary and both Tyner Junior and Tyner Senior High Schools in Chattanooga, he entered the work force for a decade. He did not pursue undergraduate and graduate degrees until a decade later when he enrolled in the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga where he earned a B.A. in Education with a concentration in English and an M.A. in English with a concentration in literature. Wayne was accepted into the first doctoral cohort at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga for an EdD in Learning and Leadership. He is currently employed by the Catoosa County Board of Education where he serves as the head of the English department at Heritage High School in Ringgold, Georgia. He has taught English for 26 years.