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Islam in the Public School Classroom: The Teacher as Adult Learner

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Islam in the Public School Classroom:

The Teacher as Adult Learner

by

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A THESIS

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Abstract

This narrative research study explores the adult learning journey of teachers who teach about Islam in Alberta public schools. It tells stories of their experiences that are informed by personal convictions and sociocultural surroundings. The study focuses intentionally on how perceptions of Islam held by teachers change, if at all. It also directs attention to the impact of teaching and learning about Islam on teacher religious and nonreligious identities.

Four teacher participants, from different schools, were invited to share their stories and experiences teaching about Islam in the World Religions course. Narrative inquiry proved to be an invaluable guide in discovering and interpreting teacher learning journeys. Participants brought forth various understandings of Islam and diverse religious and nonreligious identities to the classroom space. Teaching about Islam resulted in strengthened religious and nonreligious convictions, and influenced in an important way, the nature of changes in perceptions of Islam teacher participants developed.

While the field of adult education is increasingly attending to the multidimensional ways that adults learn and change, the contribution of one's religious convictions in interreligious learning has not been extensively explored. As well, this study suggests that teachers and students actively engage with diverse religious and nonreligious outlooks and lived experiences in order to support deep learning. Thus, while it explores teacher experiences and changes, this dissertation also aims to articulate a way forward in curriculum and teacher development. As we increasingly encounter diverse and fellow human beings, this study highlights the great importance of learning about each other, from each other.

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Chapter 1: The research and researcher

This cannot be said enough: it is readers who make the book. The book unread is a story unlive (Okri, 1997, p. 42)

The purpose of this research study was to explore and interpret the adult learning journey of teachers who teach about Islam in Alberta public schools. Islam is formally taught in a Grade 12 World Religions course, which upon the discretion of Alberta schools boards, public schools can offer to students as an elective. In order to explore and interpret the adult learning journey of teachers who teach the course, I asked the following three research questions:

- What are the experiences of teachers who teach about Islam in Alberta public schools?
- How do perceptions and understandings of Islam held by teachers change, if at all, as a result of teaching about Islam?
- How do experiences of teachers who teach about Islam influence a teacher's narrative religious or nonreligious identity?

Premise

My study is premised on the collective need to acquire and demonstrate religious literacy. As we increasingly encounter diverse others, the need for religious literacy is pressing in order that we may live peacefully together and engage in meaningful ways. Religious literacy can be defined as a basic understanding of the world's religious traditions, the internal diversity of expressions and beliefs within each tradition and the role of religion in social, cultural and political life (D. L. Moore, 2007, 2008, 2010a). As adult learners, teachers who teach about Islam are contributing to their own and their students' religious literacy. An understanding of their learning journey, which I have

unraveled, storied and interpreted through this study, will inform efforts in nurturing religious literacy and realizing the valuable influence of doing so. While my research focuses on the adult learner, it is also mindful of the surroundings, the context (the environment, the circumstances) within which the learner is journeying. After all, “learning is a personal process-but a process that is shaped by the context of adult life and the society in which one lives” (Merriam, Caffarella, Baumgartner, 2007, p.1).

Context

In order to illuminate religious literacy as the impetus behind my study and to provide sufficient background on my research questions, I move now to features of the context that relate to learning about religion and Islam. The themes that I share my experiences and reflections under are: 1) conversations about religion; 2) safe conversations about religion; 3) intersections with religion in public space and 4) Islam in the news. After exploring the circumstances we find ourselves in, I will discuss the significance of my research, the research approach and my role as the researcher.

Conversations about religion. “On March 13, 2013 the world welcomed in a new Pope” (Nanji, 2014, p. 1). I remember watching the white smoke with intrigue as I caught a scene of the Vatican on the news. Masses of people, pilgrims they were called, had gathered, awaiting the news of their new religious leader. I was moved and inspired. Just over a year later, another major event occurred for the global Catholic community. Pope Francis declared the sainthood of 2 previous Popes. I am particularly attuned to news such as this, as I have been involved in a Muslim-Christian dialogue group initiated by the Roman Catholic diocese of Calgary. Even more important however, it was the immense sense of faith and hope of my Catholic brothers and sisters that caught my

attention. Being myself Muslim, one may wonder why I call Catholics my brothers and sisters. I have come to realize that we can no longer isolate ourselves from religious communities that differ from our own. Our identities are interconnected now, more than ever before and increased mobility and communication between peoples of the world are causing increasing encounters with diverse others. I was due to catch a theatrical performance at my children's school that afternoon. As I headed over I thought of my need to send warm wishes and prayers for blessings to my Catholic friends and colleagues. A perplexing thought however, followed this comforting one. Apart from a handful of individuals I knew the religious identity of, for the most part I had no idea of the religious affiliation or lack thereof, of those I would consider to be my more intimate associations. By the same token, I thought to myself, how much is really understood about my Muslim identity in our predominantly non-Muslim society?

The present, modern condition presents itself with a large selection of individualized meanings of religious identification (Esposito, 2011; Esposito, Fasching & Lewis, 2008; O'Toole, 2006; Moon, 2014b; C. Taylor, 2008). There are multiplicities of spiritual, religious and secularly oriented paths by which individuals seek meaning. According to Esposito et al. (2008) we have moved away from traditional societies in which the "majority of people share common religious stories and rituals" (p. 5). We have also moved beyond modern notions of society in which science has replaced religion as the most certain form of knowledge. Present conditions are characterized by a pluralism of worldviews in which religions and cultures intermingle to create diverse and particular beliefs and expressions.

One can turn to Canadian religious demographics, which Bramadat (2007, 2008)

stated are expected to see drastic changes, to obtain a sense of the increasingly multiple ways in which Canadians identify themselves religiously. A snapshot of changes between 1991 and 2001 demarcates the number of non-Christians, such as Muslims, Buddhists, Sikhs, and Hindus had more than doubled (Statistics Canada, 2003). It is estimated that by 2017, more than 10 percent of Canadians will be non-Christians (Bramadat, 2007). Beaman (2012a) suggested it is important to query: how are people religious? That is, “when Statistics Canada asks people to identify their religious affiliation we learn almost nothing about *how* people are religious or what they think religious behavior is” (p. 270). This is the case since numbers tell us nothing about the nature of beliefs and practices, or the nature of commitment to religion (Clarke, 2005). The increasing plurality, diversity of interpretation and contribution of culture cannot be appreciated through statistics. Bramadat (2009) attributed a lack of understanding of how people are religious to a sense that conversations about religion are considered to be too volatile to talk about in public space and are reserved for the private sphere (Bramadat, 2009). However, these conversations are important. They allow me to understand diverse meanings fellow human beings find in religion, including meanings Catholic Christians find in the Pope.

Safe conversations about religion. “Islam today exhibits a rich, and at times bewildering, array of interpretations” (Esposito, 2011, p. 250). Diverse interpretations are further shaped by the geographical and sociocultural contexts, within which Muslims live, work and learn. Thus my religious identity as Muslim binds me to other Muslims; however my cultural identity through which my religious beliefs become manifest is distinct from many other Muslims. On yet another snowy and cold weekend in April 2014, I took my daughter on a special mom-daughter weekend away to Kananaskis

Lodge. As we enjoyed reading by the fireplace in the main lobby, I looked up to see a Muslim family chatting about their day. The women were wearing hijab and seemed of Middle Eastern descent. They were speaking Arabic with one another. I reflected on my Southeast Asian Muslim identity. Although I shared a Muslim identity with the family I was stealing peeks at, I related more culturally, to Southeast Asian families in the pool and the rest of the lodge. This was based on geography, customs, language and regardless of our religious identity, be it Christian, Hindu, Sikh, agnostic, Muslim or otherwise. Yet with fellow Muslims, I share beliefs and understandings that I hold with deep reverence. My religious identity, I realized, cannot be delineated from my ethnic and cultural identity. Bramadat and Seljak (2013) provided the example of someone being able to determine the religious origins of their ethnic practices and the cultural or ethnic origins of religious practices. In reality, these cannot be easily distinguished. For me, religious expressions are privatized; I do not have overt and visible expressions of my Muslim identity. Cultural diversity, such as the one I reflected on through the above experience, adds another layer to the already existing diversity in interpretation found in the Muslim community. It raises the question: Who speaks for Islam? The response is, everyone. Since members of the Muslim community are so diverse, our multiple voices are characterized by relatively safe conversations with each other. After all, differences in interpretation extends right to the heart of the matter of religious belief, and differences in culture, which affects how we express ourselves, adds further complexity.

In response to the proposed Quebec Charter of Shared Values, Lakeview Hospital in Oshawa, Ontario published a recruitment ad in the McGill University newspaper in September 2013, which was also picked up by the Globe and Mail. The ad, depicting the

image of a female health care professional in hijab, hoped to lure potential employees who were concerned with the proposed Charter's ban on public servants wearing religious symbols and clothing. The ad read: "We don't care what is on your head." It went on to say: "We care what is in it." I was intrigued. What may seem like good intentions actually moves us away from conversations about religion. We *should* care what is on someone's head. Why do some Muslim women wear hijab and what meaning do they find in this expression? Religious literacy is based on understanding the social, cultural, political context that is part of, and influences religious belief and expression; however how can we aim for religious literacy if we are not having conversations that help us get to know one another? Have we privatized religion to the point that it has become sterile and safe in public spaces? And, if we don't come to know one another through daily, lived experiences of what it means to be religious and Muslim, how do we come to know one another? It seems for those conversations that do enter public space, there is a tendency "to frame the religious phenomena ...in terms of a binary essentialism in which all religions are essentially oriented toward love, peace, kindness and egalitarianism" (Bramadat, 2007, p. 121). This de-contextualized approach that uses neutral language may contribute to 'safe' conversations but does not contribute to understanding that in fact religions are constituted by people, and thus by their beliefs, interpretations, expressions, and assumptions (Bramadat, 2007; Bramadat & Seljak, 2013). In order to authentically come to know one another I realize, we need to see religious identity as layered by cultural identity and we need to be comfortable with discomfort, within our communities and between them.

Intersections with religion in public space. In September 2013, a York

University student taking an online course, sought permission to be excused from course group work because he did not want to work with women for religious reasons. When the student was granted his request, a tug-of-war between religious rights and women's rights became evident to Canadians. Professor Grayson of York University told the media:

York is a secular university. It's not a Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, or Moslem university. In our policy documents and (hopefully) in our classes we cling to the secular idea that all should be treated equally, independent of, for example, their religion or sex or race. Treating Mr. X equally would mean that, like other students, he is expected to interact with female students in his group (The Star, 2014).

Although conversations about religion outside of homes and places of worship are few and far between, religion is occupying a more prominent place in the public sphere in the form of debates on the need for, and limits of, religious freedom. The debates are emerging most especially in situations where certain religious practices risk impingement on the freedom of others. Moon (2014a) suggested the York University case demonstrated stresses between equality and freedom along with collective identity and individual belief. Furthermore, the complexity increases when there are intersecting issues of gender, equality and religious freedom (Beaman, 2011). Professor Grayson's comments as it relates to equality suggested that the student in question be treated the same as other students. However, instead of equality being sameness, Beaman (2011, 2012c, 2012d, 2013a) ushered her readers to consider substantive or deep equality, which renders itself different from one situation to another and involves employing creative and innovative solutions to managing religious diversity.

Prairie Christian Academy in Three Hills, Alberta provided another example of the sensitive intersection between religious conviction and equality. In April 2014, the publicly funded school's policy on teachers abstaining from homosexual relations created discomfort as it met up against discrimination, rights and freedoms as outlined in the Canadian and Alberta Charters. The school's position, based on Christ-centered education (Prairie Christian Academy, 2014) was seen as a problematic encounter between religious beliefs and provincial law. The result of this tension was a review on the part of the Alberta Ministry of Education of all agreements it has with school boards and alternative programs.

The two examples I provide above, demonstrate the complicated and dynamic incidence of religion in public space. It shows up in tension with other rights and freedoms and as something that needs to be managed rather than learned about.

Islam in the news. On a cold day in April 2013, my daughter who was in grade three came home from school and shared her day with me. She told me that a classmate mentioned that the person who caused the bombings at the Boston Marathon was Muslim. I peered at my daughter, wondering how she felt about being Muslim. "But, that is ok mom," my daughter proclaimed. "He doesn't know that Inji and I are Muslim." I reflected on her comment. Was she embarrassed? Did she want to hide her identity? Did she think that her classmate would not have mentioned this if he knew Alia is Muslim? Although my sense is we don't readily have conversations about our religious lives in public space, nor do we adequately engage in uncomfortable conversations about religion, there is an increased public consciousness about issues related to religion, and about Islam and Muslims in particular. I see this increased consciousness as a result of

perceived benign messaging in media and pop culture and also a result of actual events and circumstances. The depiction of Muslim men in our pop culture (for example in the movie Aladdin) as bearded, gruff men carrying swords is problematic (Sensoy, 2013). What may seem harmless is carrying forth subliminally strong messages of the nature of this segment of the population. As for actual events, “revival and resurgence of Islam in private and public life” is on the rise and Muslims are increasingly “visible in politics and international affairs” (Esposito et al. 2008, p. 250). When 9/11, the 7/7 London bombings, the Danish Cartoon controversy, circumstances around Sharia law, issues facing Muslim societies, the Boston marathon bombings, extremist threats in Syria, Iraq, parts of Africa and the cartoon catastrophe in Paris occur against a backdrop of already existing assumptions that have developed due to images of, and messages about Muslims, stereotypes and misperceptions are reinforced. There is an immense need to de-mystify Islam and the 1.2 billion people that practice this religion.

One need only turn to the news to see that Islam *does* occupy public space. However not in a way that enables one to discover the lived and diverse experiences of those around us that practice Islam, interpret it and whose daily life is shaped by it. If these conversations are not prevalent amongst Canadians in public space, how do we know what we know about Islam?

The need for religious literacy is evident based on the plurality and individuality of religious views and expressions that characterizes present times, the nature of conversations about religion in public space and the intensity of public consciousness about Islam and Muslims. Nurturing religious literacy through education as a means of increasing understanding, critical analysis and positive relationships compelled me to

pursue this study. Having completed the study, I am even more dedicated to, and compelled by the value of religious literacy. In addition, what I have uncovered and understood about tolerance in the data, and in the literature, has overwhelmingly influenced my future path. To be tolerant is seen as a positive aspect of one's demeanor. However, through this study I have come to appreciate the immense need to extend beyond tolerance. I share and discuss a more nuanced understanding of what it means to be tolerant and what it means to be tolerated towards the end of this dissertation. My research focuses on the public school teacher, an adult learner who is influenced and shaped by his or her sociocultural context, contributing to religious literacy and possibly being changed in the process. Understanding the adult learning journey of teachers can inform pre-service teacher preparation, professional development for teachers and curriculum development, thereby contributing to enhance religious literacy in complex and dynamic times.

Significance and Rationale

My study is significant and timely for three reasons. First, my study unveils the experiences and perceptions of teacher participants who encounter diversity in classrooms and through curriculum. This is relevant because we are increasingly encountering diversity, and a diversity that is more complex and multidimensional than in the past. The value and reasons my participants attribute to teaching about Islam in Calgary public schools uncovers elements of the sociocultural context within which they are teaching and the learning journey they have embarked on.

Second, curriculum re-design, which is well underway in Alberta, provides an opportune time to explore the present situation in teaching and learning about religion in

general and Islam in particular. In preparing Albertans to be engaged thinkers, ethical citizens with an entrepreneurial spirit, Alberta's education system will focus on acquiring competencies such that "the educated Albertan of 2030 should develop and demonstrate the attitudes, skills, knowledge, and values required for life-long learning" (Alberta Education, 2010, p.6-7). Although Steel (2012) questioned whether this new educational movement is truly transformational, the present situation poses an opportunity to be inspired by the world's diverse traditions. Religious literacy and its connection to real-life situations have the potential to contribute to relevant competency-based education. Alberta Education has identified the ability to demonstrate global and cultural understanding as a necessary competency held by an educated Albertan of 2030 (Alberta Education, 2010). Understanding the experiences of teachers who teach about religion can inform how best to nurture understanding of, and engagement with diverse ways of being and belonging, a competency students and teachers can benefit from.

Last but not least, my research findings contribute to the scholarly landscape of adult education and religion, which has traditionally and almost exclusively focused on Christianity. Many adult educational initiatives in Canadian history had "roots in religious impulses and directions" (English, 2012, p. 17). In particular, adult education as exemplified by the Antigonish movement in Nova Scotia and Frontier College in Ontario drew upon religious ideals from the Christian tradition in an effort to empower citizens and equip them with necessary labor and literacy skills. With an exclusive view to primarily one religious tradition, adult education heritage has not considered how diverse traditions have philosophized and practiced adult learning. An inclusive understanding of religiously inspired adult learning practices would increase breadth of knowledge of adult

learning and contribute to religious literacy. As Canadian society becomes increasingly diverse the contribution of various religious traditions to discourses in adult learning can promote greater understanding between peoples of diverse backgrounds. This includes studying how adults who live in what is essentially and culturally a Christian society (Beaman, 2006; Biles and Ibrahim, 2009; Bramadat & Seljak, 2013) acquire information, gain knowledge and change their perceptions and understandings about Islam. Adult religious education has focused on learning about religion that a particular adult learner espouses to (Foltz, 1986; McKenzie, 1986; English & Gillen, 2000; Elias, 2012) in order to find meaning through the “exploration of the richness of their religious heritage” (McKenzie, 1986, p. 11). Although this has encouraged critical reflection and “perspective transformation” (McKenzie, 1986, p. 12), casting the net more broadly and exploring diverse religious traditions beyond one’s own, as my research aims to do, will enrich and expand the field of adult education.

The rationale for this study is based on the premise of the pressing need for religious literacy. Its significance is substantiated by the need to understand how teachers as adult learners teach and learn about Islam. In addition, the opportune time of curriculum re-design in Alberta and the benefits of increased attention to scholarly contributions on religious diversity in the field of Canadian adult education make this study for me, a significant and timely one indeed.

Research Approach

In January 2014 I shared a moving story with an audience gathered to have a meal together. I had originally read the story about a chickadee on a cold winter day, narrated by Wagamese (2010) some time ago and have since shared it in writing and orally several

times. Upon finishing on this particular occasion, my husband leaned in and advised me that I tend to use the chickadee story a lot in my presentations. Now, for a public speaker who turns to storytelling as a means to share, to be told I overuse a story is concerning! I thought about it and realized something. I wasn't telling the story only for the receiver. My purpose wasn't exclusively for it to be heard by my listeners. I was telling the story because I found meaning in it and different, renewed meaning every time I told it. Narrative learning is learning by hearing and reading stories but also learning by telling and sharing stories. I want my research participants to tell their stories. Yes, for my benefit and all those that would hopefully read their stories, but also for themselves.

My research sought to uncover and interpret through a narrative inquiry approach, the adult learning journey that teachers who teach about Islam embark on. This involved firstly understanding the experiences teachers encounter. From this general understanding, my research sought to specifically inquire into whether there are changes in perceptions and understandings of Islam held by teachers. Lastly, in an effort to uncover the influence of a teacher's learning journey on his or her own religious or nonreligious identity, this research inquired into narrative religious identity. Once again, the three primary questions of my research study are:

- What are the experiences of teachers who teach about Islam in Alberta public schools?
- How do perceptions and understandings of Islam held by teachers change, if at all, as a result of teaching about Islam?
- How do experiences of teachers who teach about Islam influence a teacher's narrative religious or nonreligious identity?

Framed by a theoretical underpinning of transformational adult learning theory, this research regards the teacher as an adult learner who is experiencing, learning and possibly changing in the process of teaching about Islam in the public school classroom.

Drawing on Clandinin and Connelly's approach to narrative inquiry, teacher participants from four different Alberta high schools were asked to share and story their experiences and changes through individual and focus group interviews. My research captures, interprets and aims to understand their experiences through narrative, as ultimately narratives are how we make meaning of our experiences (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Clark, 2001, 2010; Clark & Rossiter, 2008; Rossiter & Clark, 2007; Merriam et al., 2007; Rossiter, 1999; Tennant, 2012).

The Researcher

My educational philosophy adopts a humanistic orientation in which learning is seen as a journey, ultimately leading one to reach their full potential. Reaching one's potential requires exposure to new ideas and knowledge, which includes exposure to diverse religious worldviews. However beyond mere exposure is genuine interest on the part of the learner to encounter the diverse other. For in coming to know the other, one comes to know one's self, one's assumptions and the origins and consequences of these assumptions. Transformational adult learning theory draws on humanistic adult learning philosophy. The theory sees the learner as an autonomous self, making choices, reflecting and acquiring new outlooks. Themes of religious and cultural diversity in my research resonate with a humanistic educational philosophy. Also, my study conceives the adult learner as being autonomous in that he or she can make choices. However, it also draws on an orientation of the self as conveyed by adult learning theorists and scholars that sees

the self as multiple and dynamic. In this orientation, the self can be considered as non-unitary and shaped in relation to culture, history and politics (Clark & Dirkx, 2000) along with being developed “in continuous relationship with others” (English & Gillen, 2000, p.529). The influence of the sociocultural context within which teacher participants are encountering an Islamic worldview through their teaching, is a key component of my study and of great value and significance to me as a researcher.

It would be remiss of me not to acknowledge that my outlook assumes that coming to know the religiously diverse other is a positive undertaking. In today’s climate of religiously inspired extremism how can we say every interpretation and expression is of equal value and therefore must be upheld? We cannot. However, it is worthwhile for these outlooks to be known and understood. This will enable us to behold situations in the multidimensional way that they exist, and be able to differentiate the value of religious literacy from that of an uncritical inclusiveness of all that is occurring in the name of Islam today.

Summary

Premised on religious literacy, my research study aims to understand the adult learning journey of teachers who teach about Islam in Alberta public school classrooms. This chapter has provided background on the impetus for my research, which is situated in the field of adult education and strongly influenced by the contextual landscape of religion in Canada. Understanding a learning journey requires me to move in time and space. I invite you, as the reader, to journey with me from the past to a potential future and from learner to context and back. My view of the adult learner through time, and in context weaves it’s way throughout my dissertation. Also intertwined in my writing are

quotes from Ben Okri's (1997) book, *A Way of Being Free*. In this book, Okri, a Nigerian poet, reminds me that life is a story through time that oscillates between the self and others. In encountering others, we come to know the self.

Chapter 2: The Literature across time and space

Perhaps we should strive for mythical resonances in our lives. Among many possible images, a human being can be seen as a tree: we should reach out for more light even as we reach deeper into reality for a more solid hold on the earth. We were not born with one eye, with only one thought in our heads, and with only one direction to travel. When we look out on the world with all its multiplicity of astonishing phenomena, do we see that only one philosophy can contain, explain, and absorb everything? I think not. The universe will always be greater than us (Okri, 1997, p. 19).

Since “learning is a personal process-but a process that is shaped by the context of adult life and the society in which one lives” (Merriam et al., 2007, p. 1), my research pays special attention to how Canada and the public school system addresses religious diversity and how this extends into a teacher’s learning experience. I commence this chapter with an exploration of the sociocultural context within which teachers as adult learners are learning and teaching about Islam. More specifically, I present the role and meaning of religion in Canadian society. The Canadian conception of religion influences my teacher participants’ understanding and appreciation of religion in Canada, has an impact on their learning experiences and the way in which they story their experiences. It also contributes to the development and articulation of their religious or non-religious identity. From here I turn to the adult learner and offer a literature review of transformational adult learning, narrative learning and narrative identity. It is my hope to reach out and reach deep (Okri, 1997).

Canadian Conception of Religion

Religion finds itself manifesting as different threads, which are woven together to form the fabric of how religion is conceived in Canada. At the onset and prior to exploring these threads one must ask: “What counts as religion? How do we define religion? Who decides what counts as religion?” (Beaman, 2012e, p.78-79).

Furthermore, is it seen as a social institution, organization or an individual perspective? (Beaman, 2012f). The range of possibilities in answering these questions will become evident as the different threads of how religion is conceived are explored in this literature review. One thread represents the nature of separation of church and state in Canada and Christianity as an integral part of our historically religious roots. My exploration of religion in Canada commences from this point, although I acknowledge there were understandings of religion held by indigenous First Nations prior to this. Another thread implies that although Canada as a nation has strong Christian roots, religious diversity and freedom is recognized and protected constitutionally. In addition is a thread that signifies the value of understanding religion in the ways Canadians live and experience it. This includes having conversations about religion in public space and adopting a certain orientation towards the term secular that still enables public expressions of religious belief. The threads converge and intersect with each other often in policy, practice and public space. How religion is framed and interpreted by policy and public space, broadly and in the school system in particular, informs the sociocultural context of my research. For the purpose of presenting a literature review, the threads will be discussed separately with an attempt to recognize toward the end of this discussion that in reality there is a dynamic and intersectional relationship between them.

Separation of church and state. In order to fully appreciate the constitutional recognition of religion in Canada and its implications it is first vital to uphold that Canada does not have a constitutional and legal separation of church and state. Prior to facing the challenge of creating a neutral state and multicultural nation, Canada was essentially a Christian society. At Canada's founding in 1867, Catholicism and

Protestantism were officially recognized in the Constitution Act (Beaman, 2012b) with Roman Catholics and Protestants constitutionally guaranteed educational rights (Schneiderman, 2008). According to Bramadat and Seljak (2013) the British North America Act of 1867 “gave power over education, healthcare and social services to provinces – which in most cases meant ceding control to the churches” (p. 97). This was especially true for Quebec in which Roman Catholicism was an inherent part of French Canadian identity (Seljak, 2008) resulting in the “embeddedness of Roman Catholicism in Canadian social structure” (Beaman, 2012a, p. 267). With time, and the forces of modernization, industrialization and urbanization after World War I (Bramadat & Seljak, 2013), the influence and regulating power of the Church decreased. Increased immigration commencing in the 1960s from non-European countries coupled with the introduction of multiculturalism in 1971 and the Charter of Rights and Freedoms in 1982 were responses to Christian privilege, and made room legally for religious diversity. However there has never been nor does there exist an official separation of church and state in Canada (Beaman, 2008, 2012e; Bramadat & Seljak, 2013; Seljak, 2008; Schneiderman, 2008). To illustrate the blurred relationship between religion and the state, Seljak (2008) referenced the 1982 Constitution Act, which required some provinces to fund Roman Catholic schools (Seljak, 2008). In addition, Farrow (2004) reminded us that God is referred to in constitutional law and in our anthem, and Beaman (2008, 2012a) and Ryder (2008) cited “The Supremacy of God”, which is stated in the preamble of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms. The resulting lack of a separation between church and state has prevented a neutral Canadian state (Schneiderman, 2008) with religious diversity “perhaps best represented by the idea of “accommodation”” (p. 67).

Christian culture. This far from exhaustive portrayal of the history of religion and the state in Canada demonstrates the movement from a Christian society to one that makes room for religious others. However essentially and culturally we continue to live in a Christian society (Beaman, 2006, 2012b, 2012e, 2012f, 2013b; Beyer, 2012; Biles & Ibrahim, 2009, Bramadat & Seljak, 2013; McAndrew, 2011; Seljak, 2012a). Seljak (2012b) proposed it is a society that is “more open to religious communities that have adapted themselves to liberal Protestant norms” (p. 10). “Canadian public culture is still marked by Christian values about what is allowable, reasonable, desirable or extreme (Seljak, 2012b, p. 10). As mentioned, Canadian history points directly to the prevalence of Christianity in dominating religious experience, shaping contemporary public life. Moon (2008) mentioned the example of Sunday closings of businesses and schools as benefiting a specific religious community and to this day, although now justified on non-religious grounds (Ryder, 2008), reflects the religious history of our nation. Beaman (2012b) concurred that “religious beliefs, religious organizations and religious practices are framed according to Christian standards” (p. 242) and that in fact Christianity “remains the constitutionally referenced baseline or ‘normal’ against which other religions or spiritual practices are referenced” (p. 243). In previous explorations of the topic, Beaman (2008, 2012a) went so far as claiming “that there exists a religious hegemony in Canada that is made up predominantly of mainstream Christianity” (2010, p. 279). Moon (2008a) justified an essentially Christian society since a large portion of the population adheres to Christianity, which according to Bramadat (2007) stands at 76.6% based on the 2001 Canadian census survey. Therefore the state cannot “avoid taking into account its practices when, for example, fixing public holidays” (Moon,

2008a, p. 4). Seljak (2008) noted that many Canadian institutions such as universities, hospitals and social service agencies are still marked by their Christian origins. Examples in Calgary include the Holy Cross Centre, Mount Royal University and the University of Calgary. The Holy Cross Hospital, established by the Sisters of Charity in the late 1800s closed in 1996 yet continues to uphold its name as a sign of its Christian roots (Covenant Care, 2013). Mount Royal University, a secular educational institution, demonstrates its Methodist origins through the descending dove on the crest of its coat of arms, which is symbolic of the Holy Spirit (Mount Royal University, 2013). The University of Calgary's motto, "I will lift up mine eyes," is adapted from a translation of Psalm 121:1 in recognition of the Scottish, Christian heritage of its founders. The motto is found on the University's Coat of Arms and inscribed atop a donor wall (University of Calgary, 2015).

Regardless of what challenges this poses to multiculturalism and state neutrality, Christianity is part of our history and contributes to our legacy as a religious nation. According to Ryder (2008) the recognition of religious adherence as a positive good that is "worthy of special respect and accommodation" (p. 93) is evident in our constitutional traditions such as public policy. This positions religion as an important dimension of life, worthy of protection, albeit characterized by a "textured and nuanced understanding of religion" (Beaman, 2012a, p. 266) in Canada.

Public policy and religion. Public policies as indicated by Bramadat (2008) "refer to official policies or laws created by city, municipal, provincial and federal governments...that are intended to encourage, prevent or regulate certain activities" (p. 122). The Government of Canada acknowledges and protects religious diversity and religious freedom through the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms,

Multiculturalism Act and Human Rights Act. The legal protection of religious freedom is an explicit affirmation of the value of religious diversity (Bramadat, 2009; Seljak, 2012b) and the desire to ensure state neutrality (Ryder, 2008; Bramadat & Seljak, 2013; Moon, 2014b). This is evident in the Multiculturalism Act, which reads:

AND WHEREAS the Government of Canada recognizes the diversity of Canadians as regards race, national or ethnic origin, color and religion as a fundamental characteristic of Canadian society and is committed to a policy of multiculturalism. (Government of Canada, 2013)

Inquiring into how religion is framed in Canadian laws and policies beyond its mere value, Bramadat (2008) concluded that religion is referred to with a “focus on the freedom of citizens to practice their religion without prejudice or interference” (p. 125). Similarly Ryan (2010) conveyed the Charter defines freedom of religion as a fundamental freedom while the Alberta Civil Liberties Research Centre (2004) reminded readers that fundamental freedom means freedom of religion and also means freedom from religion. In this way, religious diversity is seen as worthy of protection from discrimination and according to the Alberta Civil Liberties Research Centre (2004) is basically a protection of minority rights. Seljak (2012b) added that in addition to protection from discrimination provided by the Charter, is a curtailing of Christian privilege. Yet Habermas (2005) concluded that the “introduction of the freedom of religion was the appropriate political answer to the challenges of religious pluralism” (p. 12), however it does not guarantee equal religious freedoms.

Analogous to Canadian policies, Section 2a of the 2009 Alberta Human Rights, Citizenship and Multiculturalism Act states that no individual shall be discriminated

against because of their religious beliefs (Alberta Human Rights Commission, 2013). In addition to addressing discrimination and exposing persons to hatred or contempt because of their religious belief, the Act also encourages awareness and appreciation. However this awareness is directed to diversity that does not clearly point to religious diversity.

The Act reads:

WHEREAS it is recognized in Alberta as a fundamental principle and as a matter of public policy that all Albertans should share in an awareness and appreciation of the diverse racial and cultural composition of society and that the richness of life in Alberta is enhanced by sharing that diversity. (Alberta Human Rights Commission, 2013)

By framing religious freedom in more secular terms (Moon, 2008b, 2014b) and focusing on ethnic diversity, combating racism (Anctil, 2011; Biles & Ibrahim, 2009; Bramadat, 2008; Bramadat & Seljak, 2013; Seljak, 2012b) and upholding cultural practices (Rowe, 2009) the question of religion in Canadian multiculturalism policy has for the most part been ignored (Bramadat 2009; Bramadat and Seljak, 2013). Moon (2014a) concurred with the idea that religion does not necessarily fit within Canadian equality rights and anti-discrimination laws. Moon expanded by providing two reasons. First, adhering to religion can be viewed both as commitment on the part of an individual and the collective. Second, religious beliefs and practices are based on what is believed to be true or right, which can have implications in public. A report commissioned by the Department of Citizenship and Immigration Canada in 2010 identified that “the place of religious diversity within multiculturalism has not yet been adequately debated or explored” and that in fact “religion is now the most controversial domain of

multiculturalism” (Kymlicka, 2010, p. 18). In addition, the Multiculturalism Act and Charter address freedom of religion, but do not provide guidance on dealing with increasing religious diversity (Ancil, 2011). Although freedom to choose and freedom from discrimination as it relates to religion are addressed in Canadian policies, they do not address other dimensions of religion such as how religion is lived and experienced by Canadians. This encourages us to consider that “the multicultural character of Canada would be given meaningful interpretation in understanding the religious commitment” (Beaman, 2011, p.455) of fellow Canadians. Seljak (2008) contended that in reality it is belief there is a wall of separation between the state and religion, which may act as a barrier to achieving some of the goals of the Canadian Multiculturalism Act, as the perception of a clear separation prevents engaging with religion in policy. According to Bramadat and Seljak (2013), policies to manage Christian privilege and accommodate for religious diversity are ironically addressing the complexity of religious issues occurring today, inadequately.

Religion in private and public realm. In order to prevent the state from favoring one particular religion, and show equal respect to different religious traditions, was the understanding that religion needed to be excluded from public life and society needed to become secular (Bramadat, 2009; Moon, 2008a, 2014b; Seljak, 2012a, 2012b). Beyer (2012) cited the cessation of Christmas concerts as an example of the dilution of religious content and in particular of Christian features in public institutions. However more recently, the Supreme Court of Canada re-conceptualized the notion of secular. This occurred in what Benson (2007) and Farrow (2004) noted as the Chamberlain BC decision in which the court held that the secular sphere must not be deemed to exclude

religion. Instead it must allow for a spectrum of dispositions guided by religious conviction as well as those that are not. Farrow agreed with the Court's decision because "secular society is characterized above all by its resolute openness" (p. 140). That being said, within Canadian society, religious thinking and practice does not have great public significance (Farrow, 2004; Toulouse, 2014). Bramadat (2007, 2009) suggested that Canadian society is characterized by a sense that conversations about religion are considered to be too volatile to talk about in public space, and are reserved for the private sphere. The courts upholding the subjectivity of religious and nonreligious conviction brings forth further need to "reconcile the rather static notion of religion with the dynamic ways in which people live out or practice religion on a day to day basis" (Beaman, 2012a, p.40). Beaman (2012b) warned that ignoring religious belief and practice at the level of public space creates myths about the secular temperament of our society.

C. Taylor (2008) recommended a need to understand private and public in a manner that supports a positive rather than a subtraction story as it relates to religion and society. That is, by the term secular one cannot assume that a commitment to religiosity has waned. It is not that we are more secular due to the erosion of religious belief. Rather, from a positive viewpoint, there are a plethora of options and commitments today such as sacred, religious and spiritual varieties along with secular ones. Secularism in public space is in fact directed to the state and its institutions (Bouchard & Taylor, 2008; Woehrling, 2011), ensuring their neutrality with respect to religion. "In point of fact, religions already occupy this space and pursuant to the charters, religious groups and the faithful have the freedom to publicly display their beliefs" (Bouchard & Taylor, 2008, p.

43). This is in keeping with Habermas (2005) who reminded us that most religious citizens do not have a reason to artificially divide secular and religious in their minds. Religion provides meaning to the entirety of one's existence and therefore, how can we expect an individual to be divided into a secular being in public space and a religious one in private? In other words, how can we expect one's daily life in the public sphere be void of that which "touches something deep, meaningful and important in lives of many Canadians" (Clarke, 2005, p. 363)?

A post-secular society as proposed by Bramadat and Seljak (2013) would have principles in the Charter of Rights and Freedoms and in the Multiculturalism Act yet enable individuals to reside in public spaces in ways that are religiously open and meaningful to them. For religiously devout individuals this is important; secular orientations in law and practice, which are based on non-religious concerns, are in reality not neutral as they attempt to order community life according to non-religious values (Moon, 2008). This caused Moon (2014b) to ask: Is secularism neutral? Or, is it "based on a more negative view of religion" (p. 21)? Reimer (2008) proposed that perhaps religion has and will have little impact on a pluralistic and multicultural Canada. Why? Reimer rationalized with religious participation being considerably lower, religion is generally understood as a private matter. Also, religious Canadians are devoted inclusively to their religious ideals and to the Canadian ideal of "civility and pluralism" (Reimer, 2008, p. 106). On the other hand, Reimer considered the opposing view of religion having a critical effect on diversity since religion is of notable significance to many Canadians.

Where have our threads taken us thus far? The lack of a clear demarcation between church and state and a residually Christian society highlights the historical underpinnings and overall positive place of religion in Canada today. As religious diversity has and continues to increase, policies exist to uphold freedom of belief and protection from discrimination. However as we have seen, Canadian policy is struggling with how best to address religion. Although the refusal to address religion in a meaningful way is not based on any legal or constitutional restrictions (Seljak, 2008) our public spaces in which policies are practiced, are characterized by safe conversations, if any at all, about religion. Yet as we listen, see and read around us, there is an increased public consciousness of issues related to religion. There are challenges arising as increasing diversity, freedom of religion and secular/neutral public spaces intersect. Sikhs carrying kirpans, Hasidic Jews building sukkot and Muslim women wearing niqqab are some examples of how increasing religious diversity is posing challenges to the relationship between the state and religious individuals and groups (Benson, 2007; Bramadat & Seljak, 2013; Seljak, 2012b). According to Moon (2014a), these challenges, which are interestingly connected to Islam and Muslims, have moved religion to “the forefront of religious consciousness” (p. xii). Another tension is evident; increased public consciousness about issues related to religion and its expression (new public presence of religion) on one hand, with seemingly absent conversations about religion and it’s lived experience with our neighbors, colleagues and friends on the other. Beaman (2012c) proposed that the narratives about complex intersections of religious freedom, equality and secular spaces that we draw our understandings from, are negative. These are interesting times to say the least! As a secular state intersects with religious freedom and

increasing religious diversity, what is happening in terms of religion in the public school, a microcosm of broader public space?

Canadian Public Schools and Religion

Commencing in the 1960s, through to its widespread prevalence by the establishment of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms in 1982, removal of religion from non-religiously based Canadian public schools secured state neutrality and accommodated for religious diversity (Seljak, 2008, 2009, 2012a; Zwibel, 2012). This included the elimination of the recitation of the Lord 's Prayer (Seljak, 2012a; A. Taylor, 2001) and more recently the re-naming of holidays as Spring and Winter breaks (Gereluk, 2012). The removal of the Lord 's Prayer and other religious exercises (e.g. Bible reading) are due to the consistent ruling of Canadian courts that religious instruction in this format violates the freedom of conscience and religion of students and teachers (Benson, 2007) and that public schools need to adopt a secular tone (Alberta Civil Liberties Research Centre, 2004; McKay-Panos, 2005). Although public schools have attempted to remove religion in the interest of citizen rights and freedoms, Seljak (2012a) reminded us those values "such as personal integrity, honesty, and industriousness" (p. 315) which are inherently Protestant Christian have remained at the core of the culture in public school education. Providing another example of schooling's historically Christian identity, Gereluk (2012) described how school holidays continue to coincide with Christian holidays.

As my literature review journeys from the broader sociocultural context to the teacher as adult learner, this portion will move in from broader public space and address the public school system with a particular focus on the province of Alberta and its

associated legislation. In addition, an exploration of the rationale for teaching about religion and methods for doing so will be presented. This section will conclude with a study on teacher learning and Islam, which will serve as a transition into a literature review on adult learning that is relevant to my research.

Alberta public schools and religion. In Alberta, provincial legislature controls laws in relation to education, yet they must reside under the umbrella of the federal structure, specifically the Charter of Rights and Freedoms (Alberta Civil Liberties Research Centre, 2004; Donlevy, Chomos & Walker, 2008) along with the provincially developed Human Rights, Citizenship and Multiculturalism Act (Donley et al., 2008). This is readily apparent in two examples. First, the Alberta Teachers Association (ATA) Code of Professional Conduct claims that teachers must teach in a manner that respects dignity and rights of all persons regardless of their religious beliefs (Donlevy et al., 2008). Second, teaching about religion is permitted as long as it is not for the purposes of indoctrination and initiation (Alberta Civil Liberties Research Centre, 2004; Benson, 2007; Clarke, 2005; Seljak, 2012a; Zwibel, 2012). In this way freedom of religion and protection of minorities is upheld, as schools are not permitted to impose a religious view nor engage in devotional instruction.

The Alberta School Act deals with choice in two Sections of the Act. Section 21 enables a school board to offer alternative programs that emphasize a particular religion and philosophy (Donlevy et al., 2008), which is considered to be non-compulsory religious education with the option to opt-out (A. Taylor, 2001; Gereluk, 2013). Section 50 of this same Act allows school boards to provide education on religion through their public schools (Alberta Education, 2013). Based on a conversation I had with a

representative from Alberta Education, I have understood that under the prescribed Alberta Social Studies Program of Studies, education on religion is found in three secondary courses: World Religions, Religious Ethics and Religious Meanings (Susan Savage, personal communication, October 18, 2012). These comprise the Social Science program of studies and the Religious Studies curriculum (Alberta Education, 2015). The World Religions course is an elective course taught in grade 12. The course is based on a comparative study of the basic beliefs, practices, and developments of major religions around the world. The learning is supplemented with field trips to places of worship and sometimes guest speakers from various faith traditions. Other than the Social Science program of studies, which is meant to compliment the Social Studies program of studies, religion is not readily found in the Alberta curriculum, unless a teacher chooses to integrate it. It may surface in grade three when diversity is part of the curriculum and in grade eight when historical worldviews are examined. However if it is explored in grade eight it tends to surface as an exploration of historical Christianity in Europe, the Crusades and the Muslim response to the Crusades.

In Alberta, there are two publications for teachers that address teaching about religion. They are *Embrace the Spirit* and *One World in Dialogue*. *Embrace the Spirit* is a newsjournal publication of the Religious and Moral Education Council of the Alberta Teachers' Association (ATA) which aims to provide "professional development for teachers to help them nurture the moral, ethical and spiritual lives of students" (*Embrace the Spirit*, 2012, p. 4). The newsjournal focuses on religion from a Catholic Christian perspective. *One World in Dialogue* is a professional journal for social studies teachers published by the Social Studies Council of the Alberta Teachers' Association. To date,

there is only one article focusing on religion in public schools, which is written by myself, Nanji (2014).

Education about religion in Alberta public schools was met with complications in September 2010. At this time, Bill 44 became effective and Section 11.1 of the Alberta Human Rights Act was added to “provide transparency between schools and parents when controversial and sensitive issues are discussed” (Gereluk, 2011, p. 75). The Alberta Human Rights Act protects the equality of persons regardless of their religious beliefs. The amended Act requires teachers to provide notice to parents when religion is primarily and explicitly approached in subject matter (Alberta Human Rights Commission, 2013; Calgary Board of Education, 2010) so that parents can choose to opt their children out of this part of the curriculum. The opt-out clause has always existed as part of the Alberta School Act as it pertains to alternative programs; however, the onus has been on parents to notify teachers of their desire to opt out (Gereluk, 2013). With the introduction of Bill 44, the burden is now on teachers to inform parents. Failure to do so can result in a teacher being held personally responsible for a human rights violation before the Human Rights Commission. For teachers, the implications include practical challenges along with more philosophical ones. The burden of having to inform parents and the need to manage situations in which students are allowed to stay in class, but not participate are examples of more practically oriented challenges (Gereluk, 2011). Discussing his own experiences with teachers at Lord Beaverbrook School in Calgary, Wallace (2012) commented on philosophical challenges that the amendment has created. Teachers have had to change how they teach and the requirements of informing parents along with the repercussions of not doing so has instilled a sense of fear in them. As for

students, Bill 44 has the potential for preventing them from challenging the assumed beliefs of their families and this has ironically “pushed back rights of children” (Gereluk, 2011, p. 75) to learn about religions other than their own. In addition, Wallace questioned whether “students get a deep and rich education if they don’t get to discuss ideas different from their own” (p. 40). Theobald (2009) reflected on Bill 44 as a citizen, father and teacher. As a teacher, he felt that it allowed for considerable damage “to quality of classroom discourse and to the potential for real learning” (p. 2). It is evident that the amended Human Rights Act has serious implications for teaching about religion in public schools. There is a need to ultimately navigate the various educational interests of parents, the state and children (Clarke, 2005). An ongoing uncovering and analysis of experiences associated with its implementation will reveal its impact on why, what and how teachers teach about religion.

Why teach about religion? “Although there is a growing consensus regarding the need to teach about religion in public schools” (D. L. Moore, 2007, p. 6), there exists an ideological spectrum with those that dissent on one end and those that fully support it on the other (Greenawalt, 2005; D. L. Moore, 2007). On one extreme end is the confident articulation that “schools should ignore religion” (Greenawalt, 2005, p. 79) as this is the responsibility of the home and community; otherwise the neutrality of the state is diminished. A question arises however if abstaining from teaching about religion is a sign of neutrality or in fact one that imposes a secular worldview (Benson, 2007; Greenawalt, 2005). On the other end of the spectrum is the prospect of fully presenting worldviews and the need for public schools to include a major subject of human concern. According to Biles and Ibrahim (2009) the need for religious education takes on urgency in order “to

tackle the deep-seated fear of religion that has taken hold in Canadian public circles” (p. 169).

In an analysis of the value of teaching about religion in public schools, D. L. Moore (2007, 2010a, 2010b) highlighted three important reasons. First, religion is an important part of human experience. Simply for its important role in world events (Benson, 2007), religion should be recognized as an important part of the curriculum. Basinger (2011) claimed that whilst most students are aware of the multiplicity of religions, they “have very limited knowledge of such religions” (p. 281). A second reason posed by D. L. Moore (2007, 2010a, 2010b) and Asani (2011) is that teaching about religion encourages critical thinking and a questioning of assumptions held by learners. This includes the ability to discern the role of religion in world events and the contribution of economic, political, social and cultural forces. Clarke (2005) echoed this rationale when he cautioned teachers to refrain from demonstrating a bias, which would provide fertile ground for critical thinking on the part of students without fear of repercussions from their teacher, although others such as Gereluk (2012) resisted the notion or even the possibility of an entirely neutral teacher. D. L. Moore (2010b) advised that an appropriate posture for teachers to assume would be one in which coercion to accept or reject a particular religious tradition is avoided. At the same time, a teacher’s complete neutrality is not required as the “personal beliefs or practices of the teacher do not qualify or disqualify the teacher from teaching about religions” (D. L. Moore, 2010a, p. 19). Thirdly, teaching about religion in public schools increases knowledge without which misunderstanding results (D. L. Moore, 2007, 2010a, 2010b). Misunderstanding and misperceptions compromise genuine respect for others (Basinger, 2011; Benson,

2007; Clarke, 2005; D. L. Moore, 2007). For those who are weary, Clarke suggested that the Charter would protect against harmful manifestation of religion in public schools. Focusing on Islam specifically, J. R. Moore (2006) highlighted the importance of teaching about the religion in order to reduce the targeted discrimination against Muslims who can be the victims of assaults and harassment due to the actions of other Muslims. All this being said, the various benefits of teaching about religion are realized when an appropriate curriculum and pedagogical approach are developed and used.

How to teach about religion? Teaching about religion without coercing learners to believe and practice in certain ways is possible using textual, historical, experiential and cultural studies methods. Basinger (2011) felt it is important to provide factual information. Examples of ways in which information can be provided include distinguishing between various sects in a tradition, exploring scripture through a textual approach and examining religions using a historical lens. J. R. Moore (2006) indicated using the Quran to understand an Islamic worldview from the inside as it would allow “Muslims to articulate the essentials of their religion” (p. 142) through their text. These approaches however separate the various dimensions of religious life, which in reality are intertwined and dynamic (D. L. Moore, 2007, 2010a). Asani (2011) cautioned against a narrow, decontextualized reading of the Quran as a way in which to understand Islam as this undermines “the importance of relating expressions and interpretations of religion to a complex web of non-theological factors” (p. 11). One approach to providing factual information to learners is by highlighting shared values found in all religions. Basinger questioned whether teachers should convince students that all religions are equally valid as highlighting positive commonalities risks compromising critical analysis and a deeper

understanding of differences. It also reverts back to the tendency of engaging in ‘safe’ conversations around religion that don’t explore the issues that characterizes religion in public space today. An alternative approach would enable shared values to emerge however by no means as an exclusive approach to religious education.

In another route to teaching about religion in public schools, experiences are central to learning. Basinger (2011) explored generating empathy in students by having them experience a religion through symbols and practices. Notwithstanding the creative ways in which this can be imparted, this approach brings into question the notion of indoctrination and may also demean the experience of the actual adherents of a particular religion (Basinger, 2011). A phenomenological approach to teaching religion focuses on experiences, beliefs, symbols and practices found in a religious tradition. According to D. L. Moore (2007) though, this adopts a method that is ahistorical with traditions being presented as “timeless, uniform, and unchanging systems of belief” (p. 69) and separate from other aspects of human experience (D. L. Moore, 2010b). As an example, learning about the Five Pillars of Islam assumes all Muslims believe and practice this doctrine. In fact, religious traditions are not monolithic and there is a diversity of practices, many of which are a blend of ethical and cultural practices with religion. Assumptions that a group’s beliefs and practices are internally homogenous, and consistent across time, are likely inaccurate (Beaman, 2012e, Bramadat & Seljak, 2013). Thus, Asani (2011) proposed a devotional approach could privilege truth claims of specific interpretations and denominations. That being said, if students and teachers themselves express their beliefs in responsible and respectful ways, it would bring a lived and experienced dimension to the learning (J. R. Moore, 2006).

The ideal approach based on Diane Moore's efforts with the American Academy of Religious Studies and through her own research and teaching efforts in the area adopts a cultural studies approach (D. L. Moore, 2007, 2008, 2010a, 2010b). In this multidisciplinary approach that explores history, social studies, the arts and literature; religion is studied in the political, economic and cultural context within which it is practiced recognizing that religions are internally diverse, dynamic and embedded in culture. It provides an opportunity to be inclusive of internal diversity within religious traditions and local expressions that arise in specific contexts. A cultural studies lens uses an inquiry-based approach that is keenly aware of the power and voice of interpreters and inquirers. It enables the unraveling of dynamic, complex and contextually distinct aspects of religious belief and practice. Religion taught and learned in this way promotes religious literacy (D. L. Moore, 2007, 2008, 2010a). Supporting the views of D.L Moore, Asani (2011) strongly suggested a contextual approach to teaching about religion that concerns itself with persons who practice and interpret religion and whose situations influence and are influenced by it. To illustrate, Asani (2011) proposed an interdisciplinary framework that explores the relationship between religious beliefs, artistic expression and literary contributions about Muslim cultures. "Poems, short stories, novels, folk songs, rap, miniature paintings, calligraphies, films, architecture, and gardens can provide us glimpses into Muslim worldviews by representing understandings of Islam" (p. 25). To further illustrate, Gereluk, (2012) suggested that extremism and terrorism be addressed within a broader political and historical context so that factors and circumstances that may influence extremist activities can be understood. Gereluk further described how language and discourse in the public about 9/11 and 7/7 did not convey a

great deal about why this occurred and instead focused on emotions, need for justice and issues of freedom. She cautioned against teachers taking a position of neutrality and facilitation but rather placing the learning in a larger moral framework that is needed for civil society. Yet, how is this possible when teachers feel unprepared to teach since there is a “large void in teacher preparation to address the issues of terrorism and extremism” (Gereluk 2012, p. 93)?

Aown (2011) studied teacher learning about Islam by examining how and what an experienced non-Muslim teacher learned about Islam. The findings suggested that informal and self-directed learning through reading and interaction with a local Muslim community can be a means of learning about Islam. Aown claimed there is a great need to research the topic of teacher learning about the world’s religions, and in particular Islam. This is particularly relevant and required as religious diversity in public schools has increased, and teachers are inadequately prepared to teach about Islam.

The virtual absence of teaching religion in public schools has led to an intellectual gap and religious illiteracy (Bramadat, 2007; Bramadat & Biles, 2009; D.L Moore, 2007, 2008; Seljak, 2008, 2009; Sweet, 1997). According to D. L. Moore (2007, 2010b), few teachers have had the opportunity to learn about religion in a way that is appropriate for teaching in public schools and are now “teaching about religion in the context of deeply rooted and widespread religious illiteracy” (2007, p. 181).

Summary

The literature review thus far has journeyed through various relevant dimensions of the sociocultural context that teachers are living and learning in as they teach about Islam in Alberta public schools. This includes an eye to the history of religion in Canada

and how this history has shaped the present, modern conception of religion. By discussing federal and provincial policy on religion, conversations about religion in public space and the presence and non-presence of religion in public schools, it is evident that the ways in which religious diversity and freedom of religion is managed, is contributing to religious illiteracy. The rationale for teaching about religion stresses the value of curriculum and pedagogy that nurtures religious literacy. The chapter now turns to the adult learner who is situated in the context explored thus far. This second component of my literature review will commence with transformational adult learning, which frames my study. It will then move on to narrative learning and theorizing transformational learning as a narrative process albeit in its early stages in adult education scholarship. A discussion of narrative identity as presented in the literature will conclude the review.

Adult Learning

What does it mean to be an adult learner? Groen and Kawalilak (2014) reminded their readers that adult learning occurs at different times, in different ways and in different settings. My research study explores the experiences of my teacher participants who are adult learners. It goes on to explore changes in perceptions and understandings held by teachers of Islam and changes in religious and nonreligious identities. I commence with a review of the literature on my theoretical framework of transformational adult learning and follow with a presentation of the literature on narrative learning and narrative identity.

Transformational adult learning. Transformational adult learning is based on the understanding that when adults learn there is potential to experience change.

However, not all forms of learning lead to transformation. Transformational learning is associated with a “deep shift in perspective” (Cranton & Taylor, 2012, p. 3) and “substantial change” (Groen & Kawalilak, 2014, p. 153). Jack Mezirow first introduced the theory in 1978 (Mezirow, 1991; E. W. Taylor, 2008). Presently, there exists a myriad of views on transformational adult learning. E.W. Taylor (2008) classified the views as social-emancipatory, neuro-biological, cultural-spiritual, race-centric, planetary and individual transformation. The various conceptions of transformation differ in their view of what is transforming, be it the individual or social world, how transformation occurs, and the impetus and goals behind transformation. For example in the social-emancipatory view learners “are constantly reflecting and acting on the transformation of the world” (Taylor, 2008, p. 4) and in the neurobiological perspective “the brain structure actually changes in the learning process” (p.4). My study draws on transformational adult learning that is based on the individual learner, however a learner that is influenced by his or her sociocultural surroundings.

Transformational adult learning from the perspective of the individual has constructivist and humanist philosophical underpinnings (Taylor & Cranton, 2012). It assumes that adults construct meanings from their experiences and that they have the autonomy and ability to examine the perceptions they have of their experiences and revise them. This leads to greater understanding of themselves and their potential (Mezirow & Associates, 2000; Taylor & Cranton, 2012). A premise of the theory is that our perspectives, assumptions and beliefs are assimilated from our social and cultural world (Mezirow and Associates, 2000; Mezirow, 2012) and we have the ability to change them. In order for transformation to occur, adults need to be aware of their existing

assumptions. However beyond mere awareness, transformation occurs if there is critical examination of one's assumptions (Mezirow & Associates, 2000) described as that which "is taken for granted" (p.9). Thus key to transformational learning is a keen awareness and mindfulness such that perspectives are no longer uncritically assimilated but are critically engaged with, reflected on and ultimately changed.

What is being changed or transformed, and how? Mezirow coined the term 'frames of reference' to refer to perspectives, habits of mind and points of view that change (Mezirow, 2012; Mezirow & Associates, 2000). Frames of reference are assumptions and expectations and provide the contours by "which we choose what and how an experience is to be understood and appropriated" (Mezirow, 2012; Mezirow & Associates, 2000). Past interpretations create existing frames of reference that are comprised of habits of mind and resulting points of view. Habits of mind are "broad, generalized, orienting predispositions that act as a filter for interpreting the meaning of an experience" (Mezirow & Associates, 2000, p. 17). A point of view is how a habit of mind is expressed and comprises specific and immediate beliefs, attitudes and judgments (Mezirow, 2012; Mezirow & Associates, 2000; E. W. Taylor, 2009). Transformational adult learning is the process by which we change our frames of reference and make them more open to beliefs and opinions that are not constrained by an uncritical assimilation from past experience (Mezirow, 2009, 2012; Mezirow & Associates, 2000). This leads to frames of reference that are dependable, accurate, open to other views and more justified and true. According to Mezirow (2009, 2012) and Mezirow & Associates, (2000), learning occurs in four ways: Elaboration of existing frames of reference, learning new frames of reference, transforming points of view and transforming habits of mind.

Transformation can be sudden and dramatic, which Mezirow coined “epochal” or can occur incrementally through a series of progressive transformations (Mezirow, 2009; Mezirow & Associates, 2000; E. W. Taylor, 2008). According to Brookfield (2000) however, learning can only be transformational if it is epochal in that there is a major shift in one’s assumptions and a “fundamental questioning a reordering of how one thinks or acts” (p. 139). E.W. Taylor (2000) also suggested that transformation be understood as a significant event of a personal nature. Kegan (2000) on the other hand, conceived the idea of dramatic change as moving beyond informational learning to a change in the way one knows. Thus, according to Kegan transformation in its truest sense is probably occurring gradually, through several shifts and successive changes. In an effort to explore what it is that is actually transforming, Tisdell (2012) considered incremental change as equally contributing to transformational learning. Since a new view of an aspect of one’s life or oneself is also about change, transformational adult learning must also make room for change in thinking that is incremental rather than change in being that is solely epochal. Lange (2012) supported the view that transformation should be considered as a series of dynamic, non-linear changes rather than one significant epochal change as the “potential for transformation may always be occurring through small daily choices” (p. 203) that ultimately accumulate to make transformation more visible. As teachers learn about Islam in what can be considered to be complex, dynamic and unpredictable times, they may experience changes in their points of view on Islam. The incremental changes in their perceptions and understandings of Islam that may have occurred in the past, are potentially occurring in their present, and are possibly leading to transformational learning are of interest to me.

Mezirow's 1978 study identified ten phases in the process of transformational learning (Mezirow, 2009, p. 19; Mezirow & Associates, 2000, p. 22). These are:

1. A disorienting dilemma
2. Self-examination with feelings of fear, anger, guilt, or shame
3. A critical assessment of assumptions
4. Recognition that one's discontent and the process of transformation are shared
5. Exploration for new roles, relationships, and actions
6. Planning a course of action
7. Acquiring knowledge and skills for implementing one's plans
8. Provisional trying of new roles
9. Building competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships
10. A reintegration into one's life on the basis of conditions dictated by one's new perspective

In examining the core elements of teaching for transformation, E.W. Taylor (2009) highlighted the specific phases of experience, critical reflection and dialogue. Experience, the author suggested, represents the experience an adult learner brings to the learning situation along with the actual experience or disorienting dilemma the learner is confronted with. This is in keeping with earlier developed models of adult learning that view past experiences of adult learners as contributing to the learning process. Critical reflection is the questioning of deeply held assumptions and beliefs, usually prompted when one becomes aware of conflicting thoughts, feelings, actions (E. W. Taylor, 2009). These include reflecting on content (what we perceive, think, feel, act), process (reflecting on how we perform functions of perceiving) and premise (awareness of why

we perceive), the latter of which reinforced E.W.Taylor is the basis of critical reflection. Rossiter and Clark (2007) supported this when they reminded their readers that reflection is on the experience however more than this; it is reflection on the underlying notions that support the interpretation of the experience. In agreement Kreber (2004) concluded in her study on the transformational learning of instructors, that teachers might need to begin with premise reflection. That is, being more concerned with why than with how or what since premise reflection involves critically “questioning our presuppositions underlying our knowledge” (p. 31). In addition, Kreber found that although most participants in her study said they reflect, “few could provide convincing accounts that demonstrated engagement in the kinds of reflection that could lead to a transformation of assumption” (p. 41).

Along with critical reflection, Mezirow and Associates (2000) stressed the importance of discourse in the journey to transformational learning. The authors described discourse as dialogue that supported the examination of alternative perspectives and critical assessment. According to E. W. Taylor (2009) it is through dialogue that critical reflection plays out. Dialogue can occur between people, between a reader and author and with oneself. Feedback and validation through dialogue with others can support incremental changes in thinking (Taylor & Snyder, 2012). As will become evident in the next chapter, my research provided an opportunity for teachers to engage in dialogue about their experiences in teaching about Islam.

In exploring what we do with differences in spaces of dialogue, Schapiro, Wasserman and Gallegos (2012) proposed engagement with others through storytelling, which enables emotional engagement and reflection “not merely in the sharing of the

story, but also in what happens once we share our story” (p. 355). Recent scholarship on transformational learning calls for a holistic approach to transformational learning that includes, but extends beyond, the rational dimensions of discourse and critical reflection (E. W. Taylor, 2008, 2009; Taylor & Cranton, 2012). Along with considering emotion, spirituality and symbolism in transformational learning is a call to pay adequate attention to sociocultural surroundings (E.W. Taylor, 2008). Storytelling and narrative learning in general, is a response to critique of transformational adult learning that focuses on the individual who learns rationally. With an opportunity to share stories through dialogue and since narrative inquiry is my chosen methodology, the literature review now turns from transformative adult learning to narrative learning and subsequently narrative identity which forms the basis of my third research question.

Narrative learning. Narratives or stories, used interchangeably by Clark (2010), can be found at all levels in society. They provide insight into phenomena, are a means by which we connect new and existing knowledge and help us to learn about ourselves. Ultimately, narratives are how we make meaning of our experiences (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Clark, 2001, 2010; Clark & Rossiter, 2008; Rossiter & Clark, 2007; Merriam et al., 2007; Rossiter, 1999; Tennant, 2012). For example in a portfolio-making project undertaken by teachers, Lyons (2002) found conversations on teaching and learning in the portfolios were narrative in nature. Teachers made sense of their experiences and derived meaning from them through stories. This finding was not unusual as “humans are storytelling creatures who, individually and socially, lead storied lives and tell stories of those lives” (Clandinin & Connelly, 1995, p.154).

Along with enabling us to find meaning of our experiences in the world, narrative construction is a powerful learning tool. Narrative learning is about learning through narratives or stories, and stories are ways in which knowledge and learning are brought to awareness. We become conscious of our knowledge through our stories. Lyons and LaBoskey (2002) have found in their experience with teachers who were engaged to story an experience, an increased ability to interrogate aspects of their teaching. The result is a deepening understanding of one's experience (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Clandinin, Connelly & Chan, 2002). Narrative learning can take many forms such as through curriculum, storytelling, autobiography and journaling. This can occur according to Clark and Rossiter (2008) by reading, telling and interpreting stories and also through the actual development of a narrative, which is the focus of my research study. As an orientation to knowledge, Rossiter and Clark (2007) proposed that narratives are "connected, relational and constructivist" (p. 16) in nature. For their dynamic and interactive potential, narratives encourage an active process of construction and learning which enables a learner to be holistically engaged in the learning process. It is for these two reasons, namely making learning an active process and a holistic experience, that narrative learning can help extend our understanding about transformational adult learning.

Narrative as an active process. Telling stories positions learners as actors and authors and not receivers, which enables a deeper engagement and increased capacity to change (Akin, 2002; Clark, 2010; Clark & Rossiter, 2008; Rossiter & Clark, 2007; Rossiter, 1999). The very act of constructing a narrative enables one's understanding to come together and according to Clark (2010) and Clark and Rossiter (2008) involves an active struggle in making things fit together. In this way one can see a development of

one's ideas and interpretations (K. Taylor, 2000). Furthermore, critical reflection on one's story provides a learner the ability to examine it and the authority to rewrite it (Rossiter & Clark, 2007) leading to change. Since habits of mind tend to operate outside our awareness (Mezirow & Associates, 2000) and narrative construction can bring them to the forefront of awareness, they can be critically reflected upon. Kligyte (2011) investigated narratives that describe self-initiated changes in teaching practice using a transformational learning framework for early career higher education academics. Narratives demonstrated a move from non-reflective habitual action to more conscious practice and thus increased agency and confidence in learners. In narrative construction there is always an audience, be it real or imagined, another person or the self (Clark, 2010). This further contributes to narrative learning being an active process as one is telling a narrative for the purposes of it being received. In fact, stories are told to others and in this reciprocity or exchange, the teller is influenced (Clandinin and Connelly, 1995). Since narrative is an active process of making meaning and gaining understanding it renders itself well to learning and change and the associated phases of discourse and critical reflection in transformational learning that require active engagement.

Narrative as a holistic process. A holistic approach recognizes the role of feelings, other ways of knowing and the role of relationships with others in the process of transformative learning. Narrative learning supports a holistic engagement of the learner such that one is engaged cognitively and affectively. In a self-study on the reflective practice of teachers, Akinbode (2013) adopted a methodology that involved dialogue with self through narrative construction. Narratives made room for the expression of emotion and thus a deepened reflective practice, which enabled the uncovering of uncomfortable

issues (Akinbode, 2013). Since transformational learning is about change, and my research is in particular about changes in perceptions and understanding, learning cannot be restricted to rational, cognitive and intellectual engagement of a learner but also involves imagination, emotion, intuition, symbolism (Dirkx, 2006; Rossiter, 1999; Tyler & Swartz, 2012). This provides “an opportunity, for establishing a dialogue with those unconscious aspects of ourselves seeking expression through various images, feelings, and behaviors within the learning setting” (Dirkx, 2006, p. 22). One can see the progression in Clark’s (2001, 2010) research to understanding learning that occurs through narrative. From an interest in embodied and narrative learning as separate and discrete ways to learn, Clark moved on to consolidating the two as embodied narrative transformational learning. The shift she underwent as a researcher occurred through re-storying the meaning she attributed to her health. This was possible as Clark was aware of her original story through the process of constructing it.

Another aspect of an inclusive, holistic view that narrative provides is that narrative construction is not only personal, but social as well. Narrative constructions have an eye to the context (Clark, 2001, 2010; Clark & Rossiter, 2008, E. W. Taylor, 2009) since they are “shaped by the culture in which they are embedded” (Clark, 2010, p. 88). Merriam et al. (2007) extends this into the reciprocal and stated that narratives also shape that which we are narrating since cultural “narratives define our socio-cultural milieu in which we live” (p. 208). E.W. Taylor (2008) differentiated between transformational learning which centers learning around the individual as proposed by Mezirow’s theory and that which centers learning on the sociocultural surroundings. As an example of the locus of learning extending beyond the individual to the broader

sociocultural surrounding is the cultural-spiritual lens with which Tisdell (2003) viewed transformative learning. In this view, meaning is made through spirituality with the important role of culture and the environment, which allows for cognitive, affective, relational and symbolic explorations. More recently, Taylor and Cranton (2012) reminded readers that individual and social considerations need not occur in isolation of each other; transformation can be both individual and social. This includes the value of the sociocultural context in transformational learning, a consideration that is increasingly of importance in practice (E. W. Taylor, 2009).

The active and holistic nature of narrative learning that occurs through its construction can support change. Akin (2002) described her experiences as a teacher using narrative as practice. Using narrative enabled her to re-conceptualize herself as a learner. Through narrative she was able to make connections between experiences, become aware of her assumptions and re-envisage her profession. Rossiter (1999) alluded to this when she wrote of externalizing one's story in order to bring it to awareness. Once this occurs, a platform exists for a re-storying process making this an interesting way to conceptualize how narrative learning can support transformative adult learning.

Tyler and Swartz (2012) poignantly described why storytelling could foster transformational learning. Storytelling, which the authors defined as the oral conveyance of experience, is dynamic, organic and emergent. Due to these characteristics, storytelling serves as a bridge between the space in which habitual and unquestioning habits have been assimilated and influence us, and the space in which they are given language, lived and reflected upon. The bridging effect allows for new connections and thus new possibilities. Having explored transformational adult learning and narrative learning,

which anchor my first 2 research questions and my methodology, I will now move on to narrative identity which informs my third research question: How do experiences of teachers who teach about Islam influence a teacher's narrative religious or nonreligious identity?

Narrative identity. Transformational learning is about change. This change can be a change in what we know and how we come to know. It is also a dramatic change in understanding and knowing of the self (Dirkx, 2012a; Tennant, 2012) since “transformative learning experiences transform our very core identity or worldview” (Tisdell, 2012, p. 25). Coming to know oneself is of particular interest to me as my research supposes that this can occur by encountering and coming to know the other through curriculum and the experience of teaching about Islam and/or Muslims who practice it. What is the resulting change in a teacher's religious or nonreligious self? I will start by presenting various understandings of the self, used interchangeably with identity, in adult education. This exploration will subsequently move into understanding the self as narrative as it is the impact of teaching about Islam on a teacher's religious or non-religious narrative identity that I am particularly interested in uncovering.

Charaniya (2012) suggested from her study on cultural and religious diversity that there is a three-part sequence to transformational learning. The process commences with strong sense of identity that is socialized in religion and culture and that is incomplete. As challenges are confronted, identity is expanded through rational, reflective experiences that ultimately lead to a clearer understanding of self and one's purpose in the world. The question arises, what or who is the self? Tennant (2000) suggested it is important to consider how one conceptualizes the self when considering “its development

or capacity for change” (p. 87). Thus how do we understand the self, which is changing as a result of a transformation?

Two predominant conceptions of the self exist in adult education literature. The first is the unitary self, which is bound, autonomous and individualistic and has the ability to reflect, make choices, be discovered and changed (Clark & Dirkx, 2000; Merriam & Clark, 2006; Tennant, 2000, 2012). However, as present times are characterized by plurality (Clark & Dirkx, 2000; Tennant, 2000), a conception of the self that incorporates experiences in an ongoing way is indicated (Clark & Dirkx, 2000; Clark & Rossiter, 2008; Kilgore, 2001; Merriam & Clark, 2006; Tennant, 2000). A non-unitary self is a self in process, capturing its complex and multidimensional nature (Clark & Dirkx, 2000; Merriam & Clark, 2006; Rossiter & Clark, 2007). In order to depict what they meant by non-unitary self, Clark and Dirkx (2000) conceptualized multiple selves in dialogue with each other. For example, the self is actually comprised of the spiritual Afroza, gendered Afroza, rational Afroza, relational self, autonomous self and fundamentalist religious self. All these engage in dialogue with another, which may create a sense of discomfort, however this also provides opportunities for exploration. The authors suggested the need to re-think transformational adult learning in terms of a changing, unfixed idea of self. Tennant (2000, 2012) captured this idea of self as a relational view of the self. The self in this view is not fixed and self-reflection is not discovering who one is but actually creating who one might become. In the relational understanding of narrative identity, the self is multiple, shifting and open-ended. Thus new ways of relating to others is conceivable and identity changes depending on the relationship one is engaged in (Tennant, 2012). Collins (2002) acknowledged that individuals comprise multiple selves

however found in his research with British Quakers, the need to articulate these selves in such a way so as to promote a unity and harmony tying their various identities into an overarching one.

A non-unitary or relational view of the self supports conceptualizing the self as narrative (Clark, 2010; Clark & Rossiter, 2008; Merriam & Clark, 2006, Tennant, 2000, 2012). A narrative identity “integrates the reconstructed past, perceived present and anticipated future” (Tennant, 2000, p. 93) as it “makes visible the construction and reconstruction of the various selves” (Merriam & Clark, 2006, p. 36) which are accommodating new perspectives. According to Rossiter and Clark (2007) this is empowering, as a storied life is open to interpretation with choice existing on how to imagine, interpret and construct self. Along with being dynamic and suggestive of change, narrative identity is sensitive to the social and cultural milieu within which it is being developed (Clark & Dirkz, 2000; Clark & Rossiter, 2008; Rossiter, 1999). Therefore it is possible to conceive transformational adult learning as a changing story. It is the changed story or the transformed story that reflects the changed self. From this exploration it is evident that narrative not only allows us to conceptualize identity, where a “multiplicity of self-accounts is invited” (Tennant, 2000, p. 96) it also provides “windows into development and transformational learning” (Merriam et al., 2007, p. 214) and can thus be a way to conceptualize change.

As this research will focus on a teacher’s religious or non-religious narrative identity it is of interest to turn to Kort’s (2012) study in which narratives of individuals who disclosed their religious identities were situated on a temporal spectrum. According to Kort’s classification, religious debtors located religion as part of their past. Religious

dwellers ascertained religion and its positive role in the present. Finally, religious diviners displayed a personal quest and paid direct attention to the future. Although Kort's study did not focus on changed narrative identities based on encounters with religious diversity, it provided a space outside of the private realm of homes and places of worship to engage in conversation about religion, its lived experience and its identity as narrative.

Summary

In a critical review of scholarship on transformational learning between 2006-2010, Taylor and Snyder (2012) found a growing interest in cross-cultural experiences and transformation. Even earlier, Daloz (2000) proposed the presence of the other as being relevant since how “we engage with difference makes all the difference” (p. 112). My research seeks to capture transformational learning that occurs when diversity is encountered, in the form of religious diversity and specifically Islam. With its active and holistic attributes, narrative learning provides a way to capture this dynamic process. Thereafter comes the possibility of a changed narrative identity, which in encountering the other has storied a religious or non-religious identity anew. This latter portion of the literature review has attempted to clear a path in the complex conception of religion in Canada, which I covered earlier, to make room for the adult learner who is experiencing, changing, narrating and restorying. I uncovered the sociocultural context once again in my field studies. This time though it was interwoven with daily lived experiences of my teacher participants and the stories they shared about teaching and learning in the World Religions course. How I received and interpreted these stories is shared in the next chapter, which outlines my research methodology and methods.

Chapter 3: Maneuvering through time and space

There are ways in which stories create themselves, bring themselves into being, for their own inscrutable reasons, one of which is to laugh at humanity's attempt to hide from its own clay. The time will come when we realize that stories choose us to bring them into being for the profound needs of humankind. We don't choose them.
(Okri, 1997, p. 44)

When I think about the journey of a researcher in interpretive inquiry I am reminded of the lessons of storytelling shared by Ben Okri (1997). That is, uncovering the experiences of teachers is important, however if I stop there, I am satisfied with only an understanding of the surface. If, on the other hand, uncovering the experiences has led to unearthing the meaning of these experiences, I have penetrated beyond that which is readily observable. The following research questions guided my exploration, across time and space, of the adult learning journey of teachers who teach about Islam in Alberta public schools:

- What are the experiences of teachers who teach about Islam in Alberta public schools?
- How do perceptions and understandings of Islam held by teachers change, if at all, as a result of teaching about Islam?
- How do experiences of teachers who teach about Islam influence a teacher's narrative religious or nonreligious identity?

This chapter commences with a background on my assumptions as an interpretive inquiry researcher. It follows with an exploration of qualitative research and specifically of narrative inquiry, which was the methodology for my research. A method section, detailing my research design and ethical considerations concludes the chapter.

Ontological and Epistemological orientation

In asking what is the nature of the social world I reveal my ontological position, which is seen by Waring (2012) as existing “in a simplistic fashion along a continuum from left to right from realism to constructivism” (p. 16). On the constructivist end of the spectrum is the understanding that reality is not objective nor is it singular. One’s knowledge of reality is constructed through an active process of perception and cognition (Hammersley, 2013) and is deemed real by the one who has experienced it (Patton, 2002). Being subjective, it calls forward the one who is experiencing, to be part of the construction of reality. It does not keep one at bay in an attempt to secure objectivity. This notion of “ontological relativity” (Patton, 2002, p. 97) claims that since people construct their own reality, there are multiple realities. Reality is not fixed nor objective and in constructivism cannot be adequately understood without considering the contribution of time and place in constructing that reality.

My research strived to understand the meanings teachers have constructed about their reality, which is based on their particular experiences in the world and more specifically related to their experiences teaching about Islam. These experiences are embedded in a certain sociocultural context which informs the experience and is thus of relevance as much as the construction of their reality and its associated meaning is, in of itself. Thus I find myself at the intersection of constructivism and social constructivism whereby I construct my own reality however it is influenced by “the culturally shared ways of understanding and talking about the world” (Merriam et al., 2007, p.292) and the interchange between my context, others and myself.

How can what exists be known? That is, what is the nature of knowledge and how can it be acquired? My response to this question sheds light on my epistemological position. “People...actively interpret or make sense of their environment and of themselves” (Hammersley, 2013, p. 26). Knowledge therefore does not exist at arms length; it exists due to one’s interpretation and engagement with it. As the researcher, I explored the understandings and perceptions of Islam acquired by teachers by grasping how they interpret and make meaning of their experiences. These philosophical ideas of the nature of the social world and how knowledge of it is possible underpin my inquiry.

Qualitative Research

Qualitative inquiry strives to understand the meaning of experiences, from the perspective of those experiencing it (Merriam & Associates, 2002; Merriam & Kim, 2012). In addition to understanding, Waring (2012) urged the qualitative researcher to interpret and reconstruct these meanings. The meanings are based on experiences in the life world. They are not isolated from the complex nature of the social world and the contributing influences of one’s surroundings. As an approach to inquiry, qualitative research is inductive (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006; Merriam & Associates, 2002; Minchello & Kottler, 2010). Instead of testing a hypothesis, through control and prediction (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007), data is gathered by observing and listening in order to generate larger principles and concepts. Being responsive, flexible and descriptive are also features of good qualitative research according to many scholars. This enables a deeper level of inquiry into what is happening in the real world and “the complex, contingent and context-sensitive character of social life, and the extent to which

actions and outcomes are produced by people interpreting situations in diverse ways” (Hammersley, 2013, p. 11).

Qualitative research is carried out through the researcher, resulting in the researcher’s previous experiences, assumptions, interpretations and behavior informing the research as it develops and unfolds. It is with “an exploratory orientation” (Hammersley, 2013, p. 29) that I seek to inquire into the learning journey of my teacher participants. Simultaneously I aim to learn, contribute and be changed in the process.

Narrative Inquiry

As early as 1981, one sees an attention to narrative shift from its role as a way in which to carry a message, to a way in which to capture the “situatedness, the contexts, and the complexities of human action in teaching and learning” (Lyons & LaBoskey, 2002, p.3). Lived and told stories are an old practice. Research methodologies that use narrative as a way in which to inquire are newer. There is an array of narrative methodologies in a variety of fields, possessing different epistemological and ontological commitments. What they share is the interest in studying experience. In a mapping exercise of the various approaches to narrative inquiry, Chase (2011) positioned Clandinin’s approach as pragmatic or applied. In this way the focus is on the story and the use of story in directly affecting the quality of the life experience. My research aims to tell stories of participant experiences and to understand if and how transformational learning occurs as they experience. It is for these reasons that I primarily draw on Clandinin’s approach to narrative inquiry, which is a “methodology and a way of understanding experience narratively” (Clandinin, 2013, p. 9). Clandinin and Connelly’s (2000) view of experience is that it is dynamic and changing “characterized by

continuous interaction of human thought with our personal, social and material environment” (p. 39). They are influenced by Dewey’s educational theory that indicates experience is continuous and interactive, and experiences “have an influence upon later experiences” (Dewey, 1938, p. 27). For this reason, Clandinin and Connelly stress temporality and the social dimension of experience, which is well aligned with my interest in experiences across time and space.

In order to map a landscape for narrative inquiry, Clandinin and Connelly highlighted a three-dimensional space of temporality, sociality and place (Clandinin, 2013; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Connelly & Clandinin, 2006; Clandinin and Rosiek, 2007). To research an experience means to do so in all these dimensions simultaneously and in the ways they intersect and oscillate as well. This inquiry transitions between the past, present and future and thereby concedes to the dependence of time and the continuous ways in which experiences occur. Temporality of experience acknowledges that past experiences lead to other experiences, which in turn become part of future ones. Thus, narratives unfold over time. This inquiry also concerns itself with personal and social conditions. Clandinin and Rosiek (2007) defined personal as “feelings, hopes desires, aesthetic reactions, and moral dispositions of the person” (p. 480) and the social as “existential conditions, the environment, surrounding factors and forces, people” (p. 480) and the relationship between the participants and the inquirer. In order to affirm the importance of place in this inquiry space, my study is mindful of specific boundaries of concrete and physical places. In addition, as a researcher, I acknowledge the perpetual tension as it relates to place, at the boundary of narrative inquiry and formalistic, post-positivist outlooks. (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007).

Borderlands are “spaces around philosophical borders of different methodologies” (Clandinin, 2013, p. 137) and although there aren’t sharp divides between ways in which we make sense, these are spaces of tension, struggle or uncertainty. In my research, I welcomed these spaces and experiences as opportunities to critically engage with scholarly ideas in order to find the most suitable way forward.

One of the borderland tensions that I was aware of possibly experiencing in this narrative inquiry was the desire to develop a grand narrative (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000). However, I remained aware that the purpose of narrative inquiry is to study lived and told stories that are very particular in nature and simply cannot be coalesced into an overall narrative. A “sense of tentativeness” (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000, p.31) inherent in narrative inquiry invokes the particular nature of individuals and their specific experiences occurring in particular settings (Clandinin, 2013; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Connelly & Clandinin, 2006; Pinnegar & Daynes; 2007). Clandinin, Connelly and Chan (2002) found in their experiences with doctoral students learning to do narrative inquiry, a sense of uncertainty due to the distinctive nature of each inquiry and each specific participant in an inquiry. I too, faced this uncertainty. Yet I continuously reminded myself of the value of a comprehensive uncovering as it relates to the three-dimensional space, all the while staying committed to a nuanced understanding of the experiences of different research participants.

Another borderland tension experienced by narrative inquirers relates to the place of theory in research. The question arises as to whether one begins an inquiry in reference to theory or begins with experience in stories that are lived and told. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) posed the question of whether literature is providing a framework or

whether the researcher engages in a conversation between theory and life stories. With an eye to transformational adult learning theory, I am aware that I resided in the borderland. According to Merriam and Kim (2012), narrative inquiry is well suited for researching transformational learning as “it allows people to convey personal experience of this type of learning through stories” (p. 63) and stories can be re-structured to accommodate for change and ongoing construction of meaning. In their interest in storytelling as a social process that can foster transformative learning, Tyler and Swartz (2012) illustrated through a case story that storytelling “as an oral conveyance of personal experience” (p. 455) that was emergent, unfinished and dynamic was most connected to transformative learning. That is, stories have to be re-told, have “to transform in order to stay” (p. 463) with us. Clandinin and Connelly (1995) shared the example of a teacher who through her narrative became critically aware of a frame of reference used by her principal relating to classroom discipline. Through narrative construction the teacher awakened to the possibility of another story expressed through retelling. Although she chose not to live this out (reliving), a fundamental change occurred as evidence by narrative, which is “retelling through awakenings and reliving through transformations” (Clandinin & Connelly, 1995, p. 158). Narrative inquiry as research methodology and phenomenon of study (Clandinin and Connelly 2000; Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007) facilitated my exploration of the changes in understandings and perceptions held by teachers on Islam, if and how these changes were transformational in nature, and the role of narrative in enabling and supporting these changes and their expression.

What was my involvement as the researcher and who am I in this narrative inquiry? Clandinin (2013) termed this “narrative beginnings” (p.89), and believed it to be

an important place to start. In chapter one I conveyed personal narratives, which provide a gateway to my research. According to Connelly and Clandinin (2006), research requires an investment of self that manifests as starting with one's own narrative and deliberately imagining oneself as part of the inquiry. It is for this reason that I have structured this research and its presentation through this dissertation as narrative in parts, demonstrating the role of narrative in my meaning making and the value I place in authoring narratives through this inquiry. As part of the inquiry, there was an ongoing, co-influential relationship between the participants and myself (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007) such that I was consistently in the "midst" (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000, p.63) of the three-dimensional inquiry space and the oscillation between living and telling. I expected to be, am, and continue to be changing due to my doctoral journey.

Research Design

This research had two interconnected lines of inquiry. First, it explored the experiences, changes and possible transformations of teachers, as adult learners. Second, it interpreted how experiences, learning and change influences a teacher's narrative identity as it relates to their religious or nonreligious self. I designed this research being mindful of these lines of inquiry and of my theoretical framework of transformational adult learning. I now turn to the following elements of research design: participant selection, methods of gathering data, analysis and ethical considerations.

Participant selection. In order to reflect the purpose of my study, I established several criteria for the recruitment process. These criteria helped me "select a sample from which the most can be learned" (Merriam, 2009) as it relates to my research questions. This study explored teaching about Islam through the World Religions course

in Alberta public schools. My study aimed to uncover the adult learning journey in public schools, which is a microcosm of broader public space. Thus I chose to recruit participants from an Alberta school board in which there may be particular responses to secular understandings. As opposed to recruiting participants from a blend of public, private and charter school systems, I remained committed to recruiting participants from one school district that would have one historical and philosophical outlook as it relates to teaching about religion in schools. Accordingly, the first criterion for inclusion in the study was participants must be senior high teachers in Alberta public schools. Senior high teachers have an opportunity to teach about Islam in a manner that makes room for conversations that may cause tension and uncertainty. Studying the learning journey of senior high teachers enabled a deep exploration of issues as it relates to teaching and learning about Islam. The second criterion narrowed the eligibility to teachers who have taught about Islam, who are currently teaching about Islam or who are embarking on teaching about Islam in the near future through the World Religions course. Although researching the integration of Islam in literature, arts, history, geography and social studies in general and the corresponding learning journey of teachers would have led to great insight, conversations with teachers in Alberta led to the conclusion that outside of the World Religions course, Islam and Muslim cultures is not integrated to a great extent in curriculum. During the second semester of the 2013/2014 academic year, seven out of twenty public high schools were offering the World Religions elective course in one school district, based on student interest, teacher availability and interest, and timetable opportunities. The third criterion in the recruitment invited participants who were willing to share their experiences, perceptions and understandings of Islam, and religious or

nonreligious identity with me. The final criteria in recruiting participants was their willingness to participate in at least 1 individual interview and an optional focus group interview that would occur after all individual interviews were complete. The above criteria demonstrated the use of purposeful sampling in my participant selection process. Patton (2002) described purposeful sampling as a process in which participants are selected because they exemplify the phenomenon of interest and “from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the inquiry” (p. 230).

Merriam (2009) highlighted that one’s research questions and the data being gathered help inform the sample size, referring to the above sampling technique as “purposive sampling” (p.77). In order to fully explore learning and potential transformation of teachers with rich detail and description, I recruited four participants, regardless of their age or gender in my study upon obtaining ethics approval from the University of Calgary and from an Alberta school district. The recruitment process commenced with the school board sending a message and recruitment letter to seven teachers of the World Religions course in the second semester of the 2013/2014 academic year. Through this process I was able to recruit two participants, Connor and Joan. Both participants felt it would benefit them to reflect on their teaching and learning experiences. A second message drafted by myself and sent through the research department of the school district to teachers yielded no further responses. Subsequently, I contacted high school principals of Alberta public schools seeking their support in recruiting teachers from their schools. By contacting individual schools, I was able to finally recruit two more participants, Len and Nina. Len agreed to participate for only a

single individual interview. Nina wanted to be involved as she saw the value of teachers' experiences being documented and informing future course offerings. School principals from other schools in which World Religions was offered advised me that teacher workload prevented teachers from participating in the study. All four recruited participants were given a background on the study through recruitment and information letters along with signed consent forms prior to being interviewed. All teacher participants consented that their own names could be used in communicating research findings. Riesmann (2008) encouraged researchers to keep a record of "decisions and inferences made during the course of a research project" (p. 191). In an attempt to foster critical mindfulness on how the research was being conducted throughout all its stages, the impact of decisions made along the way and as a way to support recollection, I started to keep a daily journal at the onset of the participant selection phase.

Chase (2011) described Clandinin's approach to narrative inquiry as one that does not aim to "generalize from specific stories to broader concepts, nor to impose theoretical concepts...on people's stories" (p. 421). My aspiration is that a reader may converse and identify with specific components of revealing narratives that are shared through portraits and thematic narrative analysis. The thematic analysis as shared later in this chapter, is not meant to impose theoretical concepts on my participants' stories but to frame each story that has a past, present and possible future. Prior to sharing how I gathered and analyzed data, allow me to introduce briefly, my teacher participants.

Who are the storytelling adult learners? By sharing their experiences, perceptions and tales, my research participants also conveyed their personal traits, professional background and individual intentions. I aim now to merely provide an

introduction to my teacher participants, as you will come to know them more deeply in a subsequent chapter.

Connor has taught at various Alberta public schools throughout his teaching career. Having taken a university minor in religious studies, he feels he has the necessary academic background to teach the World Religions course. At the time of this study, Connor was the learning leader for Social Studies at his high school and coached rugby in the spring.

Joan has a long career in teaching middle and high school social studies in Alberta. During the 2013/2014 academic year, she was the school teacher-librarian, which she found very meaningful, as she loves literature. Joan's experience in the school system has provided great insight to other teachers who turn to her regularly for advice and support.

Len is appreciative of the course materials that were passed on to him for the World Religions course, as he never imagined he would be teaching such a course. Len was the school choral director during the time of this study and taught World Religions in his classroom of desks and risers.

Nina loves teaching the World Religions course and thoroughly appreciates how much she has learned. She is particularly excited about inviting guest speakers into the classroom through videos and in person. At the time of this research, Nina was getting ready to move on to another Alberta public school after teaching her entire career thus far in one school.

Gathering data. I engaged in two phases of data collection, which occurred from January to June 2014. Phase A served as the starting point of the inquiry. Using an

interview guide (Appendix A), participants were interviewed using a narrative interviewing technique (Riesmman, 2008) for one and a half hours in a convenient meeting place within their schools. I interviewed Connor, Len and Nina in their classrooms. I met with Joan in a room that extended from the school library. Recording equipment was used for all the interviews. Participants were asked to tell a story about their experiences with, and understandings of Islam prior to, during and after teaching about Islam. They were also asked to story the influence of this experience on their own religious or nonreligious identity. Their understandings and experiences with religion in public space, public schools and in the classroom provided insight on social and organizational contextual factors. According to Chase (2011) during an interview, the relationship needs to change from interviewer and interviewee to narrator and listener. I found it helpful to turn to Reismann (2008), who suggested, “narrative interviewing necessitates following participants down *their* trails” (p. 24). The use of a narrative interviewing technique (Riessman, 2008) created a climate of storytelling and generated “detailed accounts rather than brief answers or general statements” (p. 23). Therefore although I developed questions in the interview guide with transformational adult learning and narrative identity in mind and this served to open and guide the conversation, space in an unconfined manner was created for participants to share their stories in an adaptable and comfortable manner. It also involved, as suggested by Tyler and Swartz (2012) who connected narrative to transformational adult learning, letting what was shared be emergent and even unfinished.

I used probes to seek more information (Merriam, 2009; Patton, 2002) and attended to the 3-dimensional inquiry space. Examples of probing questions that I tried

included: “Can you remember a particular time when...” and “Tell me why that particular moment stands out” (Riesmann, 2008, p. 25) along with “how did that make you feel?” Since one story led to another, and stories are interconnected (Clandinin, 2013), there were shifts in topics. I adopted Riesmann’s recommendation and explored the meanings and associations that connect stories. The purpose of phase A, was to explore:

- What are the experiences of teachers who teach about Islam in Alberta public schools?
- How do perceptions and understandings of Islam held by teachers change, if at all, as a result of teaching about Islam?
- How do the experiences of teachers who teach about Islam influence a teacher’s narrative religious identity?

Upon completing individual interviews, participants were reminded that a second meeting was being requested in the latter half of the semester with other teachers who were part of the study. In addition, teachers were given the option of providing me with supporting field texts such as teacher notes, letters and lesson plans. Two participants provided me with curriculum documents. Connor provided me with electronic materials and Len provided a student workbook immediately after our interview.

During phase B, Joan and Nina participated in a face-to-face dialogue for two hours in June 2014. The interview occurred in one of the classrooms in a teacher participant’s school. Practically, Gibbs (2012) supported my experience in finding the focus group interview “difficult to assemble” (p. 187). I considered the focus group interview to be of value since teachers do not meet across schools often. Thus I probed

Connor and Len why they could not commit. Both teachers advised me they simply did not have time. Those “who are not very articulate or confident” (Gibbs, 2012, p. 187) may have refused to participate, however for this research study it seemed that teacher responsibilities for extracurricular activities was the reason. According to Patton (2002), group interviewing recognizes that ideas and reflections grow out of discussion with others. As they heard what the other participant had to say, my teacher participants had an opportunity to make additional comments and “consider their own views in the context of the views of others” (Patton, 2002, p. 386). As mentioned in chapter 2, dialogue is an important phase of incremental adult transformational learning. The dialogue session combined two interview techniques in which participants were invited to dialogue. An informal conversational interview technique (Patton, 2002), “with questions flowing from the immediate context” (p. 342) occurred following a narrative interview technique.

Using an interview guide (Appendix B) in a re-telling process, teacher participants were asked to share a story about their experiences teaching about Islam. Since “the act itself of narrating a significant life event facilitates positive change” (Chase, 2011, p. 427), phase B was also attentive to further changes after the first interview in which teachers shared their stories. Teacher participants were asked to share their stories and the interview guide was referred to in a semi-structured manner so that I obtained insight on a particular topic, yet in an open-ended, flexible and less structured manner (Merriam, 2009). Both participants readily shared their stories and contributed to my greater understanding of their experiences and learning journey.

Upon providing participants an opportunity to hear from each other about their experiences and changes, the informal conversational interview provided “maximum flexibility to pursue information in whatever direction appears to be appropriate” (Patton, 2002, p. 342). A strength of the informal conversational interview is its ability to match an interview to individuals and circumstances (Patton, 2002). Providing teacher participants an opportunity to dialogue about their experiences teaching about Islam was useful and helpful for teachers. Patton’s described strength of the informal conversational interview surfaced in that the two teachers, both motivated to share, came from either end of the experience spectrum. Due to this circumstance and the ability to engage in intimate dialogue, both contributed a great deal to the learning journey of the other. According to Patton (2002), a weakness of the informal conversational interview is that different information collected from different people can be less systematic than a more formal interview and this contributes to challenges in data organization and analysis. However, maintaining an unstructured outlook did not mean that the conversation lacked focus. Within the overall guiding purpose of participants engaging in dialogue about experiences and changes, flexibility and spontaneity existed which allowed teacher participants to interact openly.

Providing an opportunity for teacher participants to meet, talk and hear one another was an enriching experience. It enabled participants to share their perspectives, to encounter and be challenged by different perspectives and understandings, to engage in dialogue and reflect on their experiences. Using a flexible, adaptable and open-ended process allowed the conversation to be guided by ideas that emerged from participants. This made room for new directions on the topic to materialize. I was aware that

facilitating and conducting a group dialogue would require group process skill and the ability to sensitively engage participants so all views they wanted to share could be heard.

Along with a recording device that was used for both individual and focus group interviews, notes were taken during the interviews to help formulate questions as the interviews progressed. This highlighted early insights that were relevant to pursue (Patton, 2002) and indicated areas that required clarification or probing as participants were responding. Immediately after each interview, I exercised the necessary discipline to make notes in my journal as suggested by Patton (2002). This included making notes on the setting, my observations, elaborations and reflections on what was revealed. In addition I created an inventory for all my data by as recommended by Merriam (2009). This involved marking each interview transcript and curriculum document with identifying notations in order to ensure my data was organized, labeled and easily accessible for analysis.

Data analysis. Using the analogy of a spiral, Creswell (2007) proposed a non-linear approach to data analysis that moves in circles. Using Creswell's approach as a backdrop for data analysis I subsequently drew on particular features of Clandinin and Connelly (2000) and Riessman (2008) that are specific to analysis of data represented in narrative. With a combination of analysis approaches on hand, I organized, described and interpreted my data in what I hope is a clear, interesting and thorough manner.

Creswell (2007) described three loops in the "Data Analysis Spiral" (p. 151). The first loop is termed data management and involves converting data to text units, which can range from a sentence to an entire story. In presenting exemplars of data analysis, Riessman (2008) described one example in which the text unit or unit of analysis as

referred to by Riessman, was a brief, bounded segment of interview text in which a story remained in tact. I began by identifying units of analysis that were responsive to my research questions as suggested by Merriam (2009) who defined a unit of data as “a potential answer or part of an answer to the questions” (p. 176) I have asked. As much as possible, the units of analysis in my data were represented by stories that existed within the overall interview. Managing data by converting it into text units that were coded as experiences of teacher participants (E), changes in perceptions and understandings of Islam held by teachers (C) and impact of teaching on religious or non-religious identity (I) enabled me to organize my data inductively, through the process of “analytical coding” (Merriam, 2009, p. 180). As I read and identified units of analysis in my raw data, I developed a relationship with what my participants had shared. I found myself receiving and giving. I found myself discussing and listening in silence. Managing data by converting it into text units enabled me to focus more on core content of the interviews. This eventually facilitated writing narrative portraits with an eye to the 3-dimensional space. It also supported a narrative thematic-based coding in which I further analyzed and interpreted changes in perceptions and understandings of Islam, determining how they developed, what supported their development and whether they were transformational in nature, if at all.

In the second loop of Creswell’s approach, the researcher is encouraged to obtain a feeling and impression of the whole interview by reading the entirety of the transcript several times in order to get “a sense of the whole” (Patton, 2002, p. 440). Whilst engaging in this second loop, I wrote memos such as phrases, key concepts and ideas in the margins (Creswell, 2007). Interweaving my “thoughts, musings, speculations and

hunches” (Merriam, 2009, p. 174) allowed me to have a conversation with the data through my notes, questions and comments and to see what emerged as it related to experiences, changes and religious identity of teachers.

In the third loop of data analysis, I described, classified and interpreted text units I created from the first loop of analysis. Here, I pulled in analysis techniques of Clandinin and Connelly (2000) to create a narrative portrait for each participant and both Clandinin and Connelly (2000) and Riesmann (2008), to present a narrative thematic analysis across participants.

Key components that are integral to Clandinin and Connelly’s approach to narrative inquiry include the 3-dimensional space and the reflexive relationship between telling and living stories. Field texts, a term used by Clandinin and Connelly to represent data, captures telling, living, retelling and reliving. Field texts in the form of interviews were used to draft a portrait narrative of each person that portrayed essential experiences and changes that I uncovered. Through thoughtful questions and conversations, field texts included dimensions of space, temporality and place by capturing stories of the “past that frame our present standpoints, moving back and forth from the personal to the social, and situating it all in place” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 70), and all the while “constructing an identity for the future” (p. 55). For example, beyond merely describing events, I described them with a past, present, and future, taking the personal and social condition into account and attending to particularities of place such as the classroom, school and society in general. According to Ollerenshaw and Creswall (2002), restorying is the process of reading the transcript, “analyzing this story to understand the lived experiences” (p.330) and then retelling the story in the form of a narrative. When

comparing two restorying data analysis approaches, Ollerenshaw and Creswell (2002) highlighted the use of a table within which cells for each of the components of the 3-dimensional space existed, waiting to be filled in. I used this technique to ensure I was mindful of the 3-dimensional space in narrative inquiry. For this first dimension of analysis, it was not necessary to look across participants since the generation of themes was not the purpose of this component of analysis (Chase, 2011; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Rather, the purpose was to understand each teacher participant's learning journey and to create a compelling narrative portrait that captures the essence of the journey. Upon sharing individual narrative portraits with my participants I asked them to send their reflections and feedback through a telephone conversation or by email. In particular I sought insight on the impact of reading the narrative and whether reading it would stimulate any change in their outlook or practice.

Although Clandinin and Connelly's approach to narrative inquiry resonates with why and how I wanted to explore the learning journey of teachers who teach about Islam, it did not present an approach to deeply explore possible changes in perceptions of Islam and in narrative religious or nonreligious identity. As Clandinin (2013) proclaimed, "narrative inquiry is a way of studying people's experiences, nothing more and nothing less" (p. 38). The second dimension of analysis and presentation of findings drew on Clandinin and Connelly's attention to time, space and place as mentioned above, and also turned to thematic analysis in narrative inquiry. In applying the spiral analysis process to data represented in narrative, Creswell (2007) suggested isolating segments of data within an interview-story in order to look for patterns and meanings as it relates to a theory. Referring to one's theoretical framework and the narrative as the unit of analysis,

Riessman (2008) presented thematic analysis as focusing on content to categorize each participants experience thematically. Riessman encouraged her readers to use theory as a resource for interpretation of spoken and written narratives whilst remaining committed to a participant-centered analysis. This was accomplished in my study by looking for recurrent episodes in one narrative, uncovering novel theoretical insights from data and attending to time and place. In this way the particularity and individuality of narratives was not compromised. Thematic analysis in my narrative inquiry preserved long sequences of data from individual and focus group interviews and the rich detail they provide, whilst turning to theory to serve as a guide for interpretation.

Narrative text units were already coded in the first loop of spiral analysis as experiences (E), changes in perceptions of Islam (C) and changes in religious or nonreligious identity (I). It became evident that along with tending to the present and future impact of teaching about Islam, I needed to tend to the past and recent past of teacher participants. Changes did not occur in isolation of past perceptions and outlooks, and in order to understand them, I needed to ask: what understandings, perceptions and religious or nonreligious identities did teachers bring to their teaching (B)? I coded the data using an “open coding” (Merriam, 2009, p.178) process, creating sub-categories for each theme. Drawing from portrait narratives and from data that was already coded as experiences (E), I asked, what experiences did teachers have teaching about Islam? Lastly, I analyzed changes (C), (I), in light of what teachers brought to their teaching (B), and experienced (E) in teaching about Islam. Interestingly, in this way my thematic analysis is also narrative. It flows across time, space and place. In looking for changes in perceptions and religious or nonreligious identities I found I needed to capture what

teacher participants brought to the experience of teaching and learning in order to understand what emerged. Thus I have carried on telling my teacher participants' stories through the thematic analysis phase.

Following Patton's (2002) suggestion, I evaluated for coding reliability and the convergence of sub-categories based on 2 criteria associated with homogeneity. Internal homogeneity is the extent to which data in a particular category holds together. External heterogeneity is the "extent to which differences among categories are bold and clear" (Patton, 2002, p. 465). I refined my classification and interpretation, the third loop of Creswall's data analysis, by moving and working back and forth between data and classification system and experiencing a true spiral process to analysis. This resulted in a narrative portrait for each participant that captures their essence and experiences, and a thematic analysis that is narrative in nature across all my teacher participants.

My contribution as a researcher in narrative thematic analysis was not in co-constructing a narrative, as intended by and typical of Clandinin and Connelly's approach to analysis. Whereas Clandinin and Connelly advocate on-site and prolonged development of narratives, with active back and forth between researcher and participant, my approach to co-construction involved a dialogue with the participant through their interview. This interaction was folded into a narrative of their experiences. By sharing the narrative with my participant, I was able to verify that it accurately and comfortably represented their experiences and religious or nonreligious identity. My contribution as a researcher also involved positioning the boundary for the unit of analysis, and subsequently interpreting in light of transformational adult learning theory. In addition, my role included analyzing data gathered from the informal conversational interview,

which occurred during the focus group interview for topics that arose as teachers engaged with each other. The analysis process actively engaged my participants by inviting them to comment and provide feedback on ideas that were uncovered and interpreted. This provided an even deeper understanding of my findings. A draft narrative portrait for each participant was prepared based on field texts from individual and focus group interviews. Narratives were sent to each individual participant for his or her input and feedback. Findings from the thematic narrative analysis process were also shared with participants.

Ethical considerations. Since “stories are not static; memories and meanings of experiences change as time passes” (Riessman, 2008, p. 198), it is important to provide participants with a constructive voice at all stages of narrative arrangement. As Clandinin and Connelly (2000) reminded their readers, participants are the first and most important audience for researchers and this necessitates the formation of a relational responsibility. I upheld a relational responsibility with my research participants by obtaining informed consent (including as it pertains to a conversation through a focus group interview), maintaining participant anonymity and protecting confidentiality and, advising teachers at the onset of data collection of my interest in hearing, telling and sharing their story and my interest in transformational adult learning as it relates to their learning journey. In addition, by ensuring the narrative portrait I created and data I interpreted as it relates to transformational adult learning were sent back for individual participant review and feedback, I further upheld the relational responsibility by creating value for participant contribution in analysis and presentation of findings.

Trustworthiness. In facing my reader who will possibly ask, “why should we believe it” (Riessman, 2008, p. 184), I refer to Riessman (2008) who stressed the

importance of two levels of validity – the story as told by the participant and the validity of the analysis, or the story that I tell as the researcher. Narrative researchers refer to “trustworthiness” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Riesmann, 2008) as the validity of a research project. Thus one important question to ask is whether teacher participants told me the truth and/or the wholeness of their story. They may not have shared their experiences and reflections in their entirety. My hope is I created a respectful and welcoming ambience from recruitment through to analysis by being available to my participants, mindful of their time constraints and inviting them to contribute to the analysis phase. In addition I sent teachers interview guides in advance and sought clarification as needed from individual teachers. Ultimately however I am unable to assess if the first level of validity that Riesmann (2008) described as the story as told by the participant is in fact their true story. That being said, if upon taking the necessary steps to ensure complete and accurate stories, teacher participants still abstained in their responses, then I take heart in the notion that the very act of not divulging a thought or idea or experience is in of itself relevant, and I am thankful to capture it as a void or as fiction in the narratives I created.

A second query that alludes to the validity of analysis, and through which I tell my story as a researcher relates to how I contributed to trustworthiness. I have aimed to tell trustworthy stories of teachers’ learning journeys through careful documentation of the process of data collection and interpretation and attention to the context and each particular perspective, which includes the unchanged or negative ones that are equally revealing, I hope these stories shared in portraits and in thematic analysis, invite readers to see something familiar, to engage in interpretation themselves and to use my work as a

basis for research and teaching endeavors. External validity or transferability is not an objective I have for this research study. This “is not to say that nothing can be learned from a qualitative study” (Merriam, 2009, p. 224). Findings from this study are not intended to be applied to other situations, but rather to provide insight, share experiences, inspire new paths in adult education and teaching about Islam and, “for the profound needs of humankind (Okri, 1997, p.44).

Summary

At the intersection of constructivism and social constructivism, this interpretive, qualitative study used narrative inquiry to understand experiences and changes in perceptions and understandings of Islam and in religious or nonreligious identities of teacher participants who teach about Islam. Four teachers who teach World Religions in Alberta public high schools were recruited as research participants. I collected data over the course of six months through participant interviews and a group dialogue. Data was subsequently analyzed using the spiral analysis approach of Creswall (2007) with the third loop of analysis being informed by the 3-dimensionl approach of Clandinin and Connelly (2000) and the narrative thematic analysis approach of Reissman (2008). The narrative portraits I have created and the thematic narrative analysis, which convey teacher participant learning journeys, are presented in the next chapter.

Chapter 4: Crossing paths in time and space

We live by stories, we also live in them. One way or another we are living the stories planted in us early or along the way, or we are also living the stories we planted - knowingly or unknowingly-in ourselves. We live stories that either give our lives meaning or negate it with meaninglessness. If we change the stories we live by, quite possibly we change our lives (Okri, 1997, p. 46).

This chapter commences with narrative portraits I have created that share each teacher participant's experiences, which are part of their learning journeys. In order to explore possible changes in perceptions and understandings of Islam and narrative religious and nonreligious identities, this is followed by a thematic narrative analysis.

Narrative Portraits

Joan. Joan was the first to respond to my request to interview teachers of World Religions. She was eager to meet with me. With a long-standing career in teaching middle and high school social studies in Calgary, she felt she had something to offer. Her timing was flexible as long as it did not interfere with her daily 4 pm visits with her dad, who is in a senior's home. Joan had thoroughly reviewed the research letter and interview questions I had pre-circulated.

I found her in the school library behind the counter helping a student. She led me to a cozy meeting room just off the library. I had to skip along to catch up with her fast pace. She pointed in the direction of a classroom that neighbored our meeting room and told me that was where she taught World Religions. Amidst papers, books and other supplies we found a small clearing on the table and pulled in 2 chairs.

Joan started at the beginning, the very beginning. Her gaze shifted down onto the table, and then up, to an indoor horizon. For the next hour, I did not speak and Joan told her story of religion, of Islam, of family and of teaching World Religions. Our cluttered

surroundings faded away and I was transported to times and places in which Joan was child, wife, mother, mother-in-law, grandmother and teacher. How can one teacher, be so many people?

I wasn't surprised that Joan is a teacher-librarian. She loves books. Two stories she shared stand out for me. In one she is an adult book club member. In another she is a grandma bearing gifts.

Last night Joan was at her book club meeting. The group were discussing Ayaan Hirsi's second book, *Nomad*, in which the author shares her immense suffering and the abandonment of a faith which did not sustain her. The room is filled with friends; the discussion is rich, busy, detailed. As they discuss, Joan compares her own faith to Hirsi's who went from being intensely Muslim to being an atheist. Joan does not believe in organized religion, but she is not an atheist. She believes and takes great comfort in an ever-present God. "For Hirsi, Islam in the end, didn't help her," Joan earnestly shares with her book club. "Yet I think she lost something really valuable in this belief that there's nothing. I don't see that as hopeful. I don't personally see that as hopeful."

I hold this story, of Joan's book club meeting, alongside another one she shares. In the second story, Joan is excited to see her 8-month-old grandson. She scoops him up and pulls out several picture books. She remembers reading to her own children since they were babies. Her daughter-in-law's eyes widen. Joan quickly learns she is not to bring these items into the home because the illustrations include faces with eyes. "This is how Satan gets into one's home," Joan is told. Joan knows this is a very particular and culturally based interpretation of Islam. Still, hurt and confusion is clear in her voice.

In the first experience Joan shares with me, she is sad the author lost hope. In the second she is sad that her grandson cannot accept a loving gift. I look down from her face, to the table. Sadness and anger sweep through me.

Joan reminds me the self is storied. Joan's storied religious self is shaped and continues to be shaped by her family and her experiences. The stories she lives and tells is who she is.

Connor. In a quick one-line response, Connor agreed to meet me for an interview because he felt it was important to reflect on his practice. He is a busy teacher and the learning leader for Social Studies in his high school. With spring around the corner, Connor will be busy coaching rugby and hence he thought it best we meet right away.

The very first thing Connor told me was he minored in religious studies in university. He simply could not imagine teaching the course without this background. I quickly understood why. The curriculum-guiding document from Alberta Education, Connor tells me, is blank. Later, I look up the document on the Alberta Education website. The World Religions course content last revised in 1985 is one page long with four lines of content teachers should cover. I can't help but wonder: what understanding are teachers basing their teaching on?

Without adequate direction from Alberta Education and the school district, Connor is free to design the course as he wishes. He introduces the basic beliefs of each religion and has then chosen to have his students learn through independent research. Connor's students choose a religion to study and present their findings to the class. How different World Religions must look in each school it is taught! I gaze around the classroom where

we are meeting, on either side of Connor's desk. The tables face inwards, in groups of four. I imagine his Grade 12 students working in small groups, and their teacher walking around, checking in on their work.

Connor tells me about one incident during independent study. A student had chosen to study the Ba'hai faith. When Connor came by and inquired what she was up to, she excitedly told her teacher she had gotten in touch with somebody from Israel to learn more about the tradition. "Is that ok?" she asked. "Well, as long as they're not trying to convince you," Connor responded. She assured him they were not. Connor is acutely aware of our rights and freedoms in Canada. The freedom to choose, a fundamental right, mustn't be impinged on as students learn about religion. He is also appreciative of the various ways of learning students can engage in through independent study. Learning about the Baha'i religion by connecting with a Baha'i. "Now that is amazing," he tells me.

Connor helps me realize that often we cannot distinguish the sociocultural context within which adults learn from the learner himself. The Canadian context within which Connor lives and teaches protects religious freedom. By doing this it aims to create an environment in which people are equal and safeguarded from persuasion. I realize that this feature of the context is inherent in Connor's outlook and approach to teaching. From the broader sociocultural context, it has found itself in the specific context of Connor's classroom. The context has shaped the learner and the learner has shaped his context.

Len. I am intrigued with Len's teaching background. He is the choral director at his high school and we met in his classroom of desks and risers. The school wanted to get

the choir going full-year, I learn. Thus they asked Len if he wanted to take the course on. He happily agreed. I can't help imagining what it would be like to learn about religions through the songs they express themselves through.

The majority of Len's World Religions class is Muslim. What's that like? Teaching Islam, as a non-Muslim, to Muslim students who come from diverse cultural backgrounds – Arab, Lebanese, Afghan, Indian! Len feels the World Religions course attracts two types of students. First, the Grade 12 students that need a credit to graduate and don't care to explore deeply, and second the Muslim students, most of whom are knowledgeable and outspoken about their faith. I admire Len's willingness to learn. Both as teacher and as Christian, he values learning about Islam.

Len shared two particular observations he has made about his Muslim students and interreligious relations. The first is related to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that surfaces in some of their journals. Len wonders about the role that parents play in indoctrinating their children. "How can a student of this age," he asks, "have such strong views about *our land*?" The second manifests when the class is getting ready to visit places of worship. Even though he's only had two or three Muslim students bring him notes saying they aren't allowed to go to the Jewish synagogue, these experiences stand out for Len. Interreligious issues aren't the only ones that arise. I was taken aback when Len shared issues around intra-religious relations that surface in the class. I suppose Muslims are a community of communities and sometimes their internal differences are cause for more discomfort than those associated with other religions. For example there was a time when his Muslim students, the majority of which are Sunni Muslim, were

uncomfortable with visiting a Muslim mosque of a different interpretation. Len made a change and the class now visits a Sunni Muslim mosque.

Len helped me understand the experiences of a teacher who is teaching Muslims about their own religion. It requires one to be knowledgeable about Islam and, as with Len, about one's own religion. In Len's classroom, religion is personal and communal. It is private and public. It is about deeply held beliefs and fleeting understandings. How does one understand, extend and receive tolerance in order to live, learn and belong in the classroom space?

Nina. I arrive early and put on the lanyard showing I am an approved visitor to the school. Nina hobbles into the school office to meet me. She has injured her ankle and is wearing a brace. I slow down in order to keep pace with her as we make our way to her classroom. It's open and bright and I can tell she enjoys being in it.

It took Nina many weeks to get back to me. Was it that she wasn't interested, or just too busy? I realize as she starts speaking that it was the latter. Nina is very interested in teaching World Religions and in my research. She generously shares details about her religious background, approach to teaching and what she has learned about Islam with me. I am taken in by her warm and reflective nature.

She tells me, in a confession of sorts, that initially she was comparing Islam to Christianity. The pillars, for example, prayer, fasting, charity, exist as the same essential principles in Christianity. I sense that teaching and learning about Islam has been like venturing into the unknown and comparing it to Christianity has made the journey easier.

Nina doesn't think her students automatically think 'terrorist = Muslim' or 'terrorist = Arab.' After all when 9/11 happened, her students were only 5 years old!

Instead what seems to be on her students' minds, and mostly the girls, is that covering your head is part of being Muslim for some women. Nina responds by showing the class a documentary called 'Me and the Veil.' The filmmaker goes to Pakistan to film her experiences wearing hijjab. She is reluctant to wear a headscarf at first and then ends up perceiving the custom differently than how she imagined. Nina finds this fascinating and its lived experiences such as these that make Islam real for her and her students.

Nina appreciates the commonalities between Islam and other faiths. "You can boil it all down to the 10 Commandments, the 5 pillars; it's just lovely," she shares. Nina feels all the religions her class studies have values and even some practices that are the same. Teaching the course reinforces core beliefs that Nina holds dear, such as: do good; don't do bad; take care of others; and make time to pray or meditate. Focusing on dogma or differences in religions doesn't resonate with Nina. Neither does exploring the conflicts that result over different interpretations. It's nice to be on the outside of all that, she feels.

What I learned from Nina is the immense need we have to make sense of Islam. Where does it fit in and how can it be understood so we can accept and respect it and, feel safe? Nina found comfort in coming to know values Muslims espouse to that are essentially found in all religions. By learning of daily lived experiences of her friends, guest speakers and tour guides she gleans an encouraging Islam that provides hope, connection and certainty.

I heard from a different Nina in the dialogue session. When she was dialoging with another teacher, Nina wondered about versions of Islam that are difficult to tolerate, where we draw the line and how to best expose students to this. She questioned her own tendency to focus on the positive and universal. It made me wonder what it would be like

for teachers to meet other teachers who teach about religion in public school classrooms more often. This space of reflection, dialogue and questioning is so valuable for them.

Thematic Narrative Analysis

It may seem that teachers can teach about Islam in a World Religions course without being influenced by their previous experiences and understandings. I have learned this is simply not possible. In a society and public school classroom that is understood to be secular, religion is still ever-present. Its presence exists in the form of religious identities and interactions that are replete with non-neutral discourse. In this chapter I present teacher perspectives, encounters and changed understandings in relation to my research questions:

- What are the experiences of teachers who teach about Islam in Alberta public school?
- How do perceptions and understandings of Islam held by teachers change, if at all, as a result of teaching about Islam?
- How do experiences of teachers who teach about Islam influence a teacher's narrative religious or nonreligious identity?

I have positioned my research questions on a time continuum. My first research question, explores the present and recent past through narratives of experiences teaching about Islam. While I move across time, space and place within this exploration, in general I am sharing experiences that are situated in the present. In turn my second and third research questions probe the future by interpreting the impact of these experiences on teacher perceptions of Islam and on narrative religious identities. In order to more

fully understand a future that is possibly changed, it is necessary to obtain a sense of the past. Therefore I take myself back, in order that I may understand what transpires ahead.

Moving from the past to the future, I commence by presenting what my teachers bring to the classroom space. This includes the religious orientations of teachers, why they teach about Islam, and their existing perceptions and understandings of Islam. These themes pull me back in time so I may understand present classroom experiences of teachers when they teach about Islam. Turning to the present, I deeply consider experiences and learning in the classroom as it relates to Muslim students and diversity in Islam. Subsequently, I glimpse into the future by delving into the impact of experiences on perceptions of Islam and on a teacher's religious or nonreligious identity. In addition to moving through time in this chapter, I also move through space. Commencing with a focus on my teacher participants, I then oscillate between the teacher and her or his classroom. Ultimately I present participant understandings of the broader context in which teachers live, teach and learn.

What teachers bring forth.

Religious orientation. The four research participants have diverse and storied religious and nonreligious backgrounds. A teacher's narrative identity is influenced by, amongst other things, his or her experiences. The result is a re-storying of beliefs, predispositions and practices. Just as it is important to understand the impact of experiences on one's religious narrative identity, it is valuable to explore the influence of religious identity on one's experiences. Religious and nonreligious identities are not static, contained and removed from the teaching space. Rather they dynamically inform teaching and learning experiences in the World Religions course. In turn, the experiences

of the course inform my participants' narrative religious and nonreligious identities and their changed perceptions and understandings of Islam. Thus although my research question explores how teaching impacts narrative religious identity, it is as revealing to explore how one's religious orientation influences teaching. I commence with Connor since he has a narrative identity that is distinct in many ways from my other participants.

Connor has "chosen to be an atheist." He tells us:

I think every religious belief has to ultimately come down to choice – because it's the perspective that best reflects my core values. Atheism is not amoral. It can be strongly moral. It is not anti-religious. It's anti-indoctrinary, anti-imposition of values, right? That freedom to choose. A freedom to truly understand, on your own terms.

Connor has not always been an atheist. For some time prior, he considered himself to be agnostic. When he engaged in personal search and reflection he realized that his values were aligned with atheism. Connor relishes in having the ability to choose. When he has the freedom to choose, beliefs are not imposed on him. Regardless of disassociating himself from a particular religion, Connor places great value on learning about religion. He feels the freedom he has exercised to choose an orientation is accompanied with the responsibility to choose capably. Thus for this teacher, learning and acquiring knowledge about religion, in order to aptly exercise freedom is important.

Connor's atheist identity influences his approach to teaching World Religions.

For example:

I have them do this so like 'what's the meaning of life?' or 'why do bad things happen to good people?' Existential questions. What I am looking for is that

they've considered what the meaning of that question is. How do different religious perspectives approach that answer so we've gotten a little more than just one perspective there. And then, 'how would you answer it?' and part of whole thing is – 'you might really not have an answer; that's okay but I just want you to go through that experience and explore it.'

The exercise Connor presents to his class demonstrates his openness to exploring other religions even though he himself is nonreligious. It also shows that fundamentally, Connor's desire is for his students to take ownership of their beliefs and exercise their freedom to choose.

Len's religious identity is very different from Connor's. Len is a devout Christian. He "grew up Nazarene, which is a smaller denomination in Canada," and considers himself to be "Protestant (attending) a Pentecostal church." Len is aware that his religious orientation requires an element of faith. He acknowledges:

There has to be a belief. Either you believe or you don't. You can't prove all of this stuff so, if you want proof then probably religion isn't for you. There has to be that faith element, that belief element.

Len is also aware that his religious identity can have bearing on how he teaches World Religions. He tries "to be careful" and acknowledges, "Christianity is what I'm most knowledgeable about so I have to be careful to not push a bias." Len's strong Christian orientation greatly influences his teaching and learning experiences in the classroom. Although he does not impose his Christianity on his students, Len does need to defend and draw upon it in response to his Muslim students. I present this as experiences Len has, later in the chapter.

Connor has a values-based orientation to his nonreligious identity. He is confident and comfortable that atheism is moral, tolerant of other beliefs and value-based. He doesn't need religion to believe in something good from a normative standpoint. Len on the other hand refers to his belief system as faith based. It is based on belief in something beyond the physical, something that cannot necessarily be proven.

Nina and Joan also come from Christian backgrounds. Just as Len does, they too believe in God. However unlike Len, the name they associate with their religious identities has changed. Joan and Nina no longer consider themselves Christian; they call themselves spiritual. That being said, it can be seen through my interpretation below, their spirituality, which enters the classroom space, is anchored in Christianity.

Nina grew up within an ecumenical Christian orientation:

I grew up in Swift Current, Saskatchewan, which is sort of part of the Bible belt of the Prairies and so had been exposed to a lot of different variants of Christianity. I had friends who were Mennonite and a lot of them were from the evangelical Mennonite faith so they were definitely a lot more, literal interpretations and more fundamental, I suppose, in a sense. So even though my parents and my family was United Church, I had a lot of exposure through youth groups and things like that to other aspects of Christianity.

Nina's Christian upbringing has an impact on how she experiences the World

Religions course:

Because I know initially when I started teaching this course and learning about it, I was doing a comparative thing to Christianity, essentially because that was where I was coming from and many of my kids, you know, at the time either had

some knowledge or a good deal of knowledge of Christianity so I think, by starting off that way – and I don't know how implicit it was, or explicit it was with my teaching but I know, with my learning, that's how it was and I was like “oh, this is how it's the same. Oh, this is how it's different.

Although Nina was raised in an exclusively Christian religious context, her activities and interactions were characterized by intra-faith diversity and she has “a lot of interest in travel and different cultures and so on and religion as well.” Presently, Nina does not practice Christianity. She calls herself “spiritual.” For Nina, being spiritual allows her to “recognize the similarities between the faiths.” Nina's spirituality orients the course, which allows students to

recognize the similarities between the faiths. You really see how, even though there are some differences in dogma and what each believes, there is still a lot of commonality in practice and in some of the very core beliefs, with how we treat each other as humans and so on and so, yeah, I think that, yeah, through teaching Islam and the other faiths, that some of those things get reinforced, you know – do good, not bad and take care of others andhaving time to pray or meditate or whatever it is – I think that's really important.

Through her understanding of spirituality we see a Nina who is open and interested in the universal messages found in all religions. This informs her teaching, as does her previous Christian narrative identity.

Joan conveys an orientation that is religiously spiritual, which leads her to see connections between religions and diverse peoples. Both Joan and Nina find meaning and comfort in finding common ground by extending beyond what makes us different, to

what we share as a common humanity. Joan sees herself as spiritual, but her religious roots are Christian. When she was young Joan was influenced by her mother and her “mother was still very much a product of a strongly Catholic upbringing.” She moved between the Catholic and United Church and conveys that “from the time I was 10 until I was about 15, I went to United Church services with my best friend.” Her practice found her back in the Catholic Church when she was raising her children:

We moved back here when my marriage broke up and for a period of time, I took my children to Mass because it gave me some comfort. There were things about it that irked me and irritated me but the Monsignor in our Parish was a gifted speaker. His homilies were – they weren’t preaching, they were like conversations among friends, and when he retired, his replacement was a good man but not as gifted and my own kids were really restless and unhappy and at about that time, we bought a home in another part of the city and it didn’t have a church nearby and so I took the easy way out.

Joan’s teaching clearly draws upon her Christian heritage. She quotes a Catholic Saint the Church honors when she teaches, along with the Book of Ruth:

St. Ignatius of Loyola – give me a child until he is seven, he is mine for life. I use that quote regularly in my class. How are we a product of that upbringing?

If your parents had a Christian ceremony for their wedding, there’s a good chance that Naomi’s words were read at that. ‘Whither thou goest, so will I go. Wither thou lodgest, so will I lodge. Your people will be my people. Thy God my God. And so it shall be until death parts thee from me.’

Joan does not refer to these quotes exclusively when she teaches about

Christianity. She refers to Christian teachings even when she teaches about other religions, because she knows them well. Through her teaching we gain insight on Joan's past-lived experiences being Christian. For example, she refers to Christianity when trying to help her students understand the idea of intra-faith diversity found in all religions:

The text that we have does make mention of a number of strands and I use the Christian experiences as exemplar. And I say to them, "would you know about how this happened?" The Christianity we know today is the Christianity of Paul. It's not the Christianity of Peter and James. I've got a book called, I think it's 'Paul and Jesus' and I thought that was really quite informative, Paul and Jesus. Not the other way around. And we talk about how many fracturings there were and the kids, I can't recall to what extent, it was at one time, extensively taught in Renaissance and in Medieval and Renaissance history, those religious wars in Europe and the fracturing of Christianity there. So if there are this many Christians and we have this many denominations and within each of them, what is it like in other large faiths? It's like that in Hinduism. It's like that in Buddhism. It's like that in Islam.

Joan claims she uses "Christian experiences as exemplar," because "that's what they (her students) know best. That's what they know." Nonetheless it is also what Joan knows best. For example:

So, and I use my parish church which is St. Anthony's, because I was there before the church was built. I know what it looks like. I was married in it, and then we

talk about art and that's a huge topic – and music and film and plays and how those are used to promote an understanding.

Joan refers to her learnings and lived experiences being Christian to explore certain themes in her class. As with Nina, she uses Christianity as a standard against which to understand other religions. Nina however does so with an internal voice and as a way to gain personal understanding. Joan explicitly refers to her Christian background in class. Len, I share later in the chapter, overtly weaves his Christian understandings into his teaching, however predominantly in response to his students. He let's his religious identity into the classroom space in response to the Muslim students who prompt and challenge him. Connor does not share his nonreligious identity with his students unless they ask him about it. Nevertheless, he bases his teaching on the very principles that have led him to be an atheist.

Joan presently calls herself a “lapsed Catholic.” What does her religious orientation look like? First, Joan believes in an “omnipresent God” that pervades through all of life and creation. She feels Hirsi “lost something really valuable in this belief that there's nothing.” Second, Joan's belief is that creation is connected to this ever-present God. This is recognizable in her teaching when the class is “looking for how is it that Islam comes from Christianity and Judaism, and where are the common threads.” This sense of connection and continuity that is portrayed in her understanding of the divine is also evident in Joan's perception of the Quran, Islam's sacred text:

The stories in the Judaic Christian Bible are also part of the Islamic tradition. Her great-grandson is David; David's next generation down is Joseph, husband of Mary, mother of Jesus, those connections through time.

The idea of how we are connected is important to Joan. She works with other teachers to find ways in which students can connect with each other:

So many of our colleagues, especially in high school, so much is driven by the need to expose kids to content and content is really important. The school has been trying to figure this out - personalizing of their understanding because this allows us to see our “connections to each other, so that you can go on and contribute and endeavor to make it a better place to live.

Ultimately, Joan’s spiritual nature and belief in an “omnipresent God,” that connects us, manifest in her beliefs that “we are each other’s keepers.”

When I see somebody like the Dalai Lama or the Aga Khan or Pope Francis say the same things, using somewhat different words, about ‘we are each other’s keepers.’ We are required to look after what God has given us, even if you don’t believe in God. This little blue marble – this is all we’ve got...we look out for one another; you talk about a religious concept. We are each other’s keepers. Every faith that you and I look at says that. To me, every faith says that. That we look out for each other.

Joan calls herself spiritual. She is also Christian. The two orientations interconnect and wind together into a narrative religious identity that passionately flows into her teaching.

My research participants are religiously diverse. They orient themselves with different traditions and outlooks. All however, have experienced change in their religious and nonreligious identities. Their religious identities are storied and re-written at different points in their lives. My research question asks: How do experiences of teachers who teach about Islam influence a teacher’s narrative religious or nonreligious identity? In

order to answer this futuristic question, I have first shared what my participants' narrative identities are in the past and present, and conveyed how these influence teaching. In order to comprehensively understand what influences teaching, I turn now to why my participants teach World Religions. More often than not, this too is affected by my participants' religious and nonreligious identities.

Why teach World Religions? Joan openly claims that “teaching this is a natural extension of my own journey through understanding of faith.” Fundamentally, she says, “every faith that you and I look at says that. To me, every faith says that. That we look out for each other.” Joan constructs that the shared value of taking care of each other that is found in all religions, should lead to positive action. She asks her class:

What are the issues that face us as humans today? What are the big things? And so what comes out from kids is: climate change, war, conflict, poverty, famine. A whole list of them, and then we start, and after I let them go for a while, then we start to get the first world stuff as opposed to the big picture here. Then I say to them ‘so, if you take this course and you understand other peoples’ religious faith, how does that help you in the quest for world peace?’ So how do we as humans make that journey together? How do we know one another to find our strengths together and to help us overcome our weaknesses? How does religion do that and how does religion not do that? And it doesn’t matter whether you are speaking of an Abrahamic faith or an Asian faith or a pagan faith. It is that exploration of those ideas, why we believe what we believe. You need to understand it in order to go forward.

For Joan, learning about religion, helps us come to know one another so we can work together to fulfill the shared value of taking care of each other.

Furthermore, Joan teaches the course to help students understand how “we are a product of (our) upbringing.” Her own religious journey is informed by how she was raised. She wants her students to explore:

How is it that what we believe today was formed in the those early years before you came to school, before you were part of the bigger community in a daily kind of way and what impact does that have in your understanding? How do you learn to think? How do you learn to express ideas? How do you learn to temper? So we do an exploration of the faiths in chronological order.

Connor also aims to instill an ability to critically question, in his students. He has a very clear sense of why he teaches the course, and what it is he is trying to accomplish regarding different religions:

We’re here to understand them. I mean, maybe some kids afterwards will walk away with judgments but that’s human nature and that’s going to happen but that’s not the purpose or the aim of what we’re doing here. We’re simply trying to understand them better so that we can make hopefully informed judgment of our own rather than one that’s been pushed upon us by some political pusher or some religious pusher of perspective, right?

Joan wants her students to understand the role one’s upbringing in developing beliefs, which ultimately should lead to working together for the common good. Connor wants to equip his students to develop their own perspectives and make individually inspired judgments. Both reasons contribute to personal growth of their students. Joan’s

approach extends to community betterment through action. Connor's way alludes to the value of learning about religion beyond oneself:

Religions play such a fundamental role in how we got to where we are, and I would have to assume it's going to play a pretty fundamental role in where we are going to go, right? I think to be ignorant or unaware or work on half-understandings, especially an outsider's misconception of what a religion stands for, well then you are not really dealing with all those people who identify themselves as something.

The idea of judgment weaves its way into Len's rationale for teaching the course. He likes to:

Approach every religion as, have a look at it, see what you think. It's for some people, we can't judge. It's more about tolerant view, just exposing them to different religions.

Thus, for Len teaching World Religions enables exposure to diversity and nurturing tolerance. It is not necessarily about preparing students to make their own decisions as with Connor or calling students to action as with Joan. However, in addition to mere exposure is an educational value Len places on learning about different religions. He wants his students to understand:

Here's what happening in the world, and why is it happening? Because it's culture, it's world religion, it's social studies, geography. So, I really push for them to have, what's the crossover?

Therefore, Len teaches the course to nurture tolerance and to situate religion within a broader understanding of what is happening around the world today. Learning about religion, will help his students decipher what is happening and why.

Nina brings in a similar and at the same time different lens into the inquiry of why my teacher participants teach the course. Nina has “a lot of interest in travel and different cultures and so on and religion as well,” which make her “really excited to teach” World Religions. She demonstrates this in talking to her Muslim friends to “get some of their ideas and perspectives.” Nina willingly assumes the role of learner:

It’s nice to be the learner alongside the student and I would be upfront with them. I would say “well, I know a little bit - I’ve read your textbook but” when we’d go to the different places of worship or have somebody come and talk to us, I was asking as many and sometimes more questions than the students so sometimes they were just more shy and they don’t want to ask the questions but sometimes I would have questions that they wouldn’t have thought of, and questions that really sort of helped build my understanding of the different faiths that we studied.

Nina teaches World Religions because it fuels her interest and enables her to learn. The other participants did not explicitly express this as a reason to teach the course. Learning occurs as a result of teaching as we will explore later in the chapter, but it was not the impetus behind teaching, as shared by Nina. Another reason Nina teaches the course is she appreciates:

The one thing that this course really does well is recognize the similarities between the faiths. You really see how, even though there are some differences in

dogma and what each believes, there is still a lot of commonality in practice and in some of the very core beliefs, with how we treat each other as humans and so on and so, yeah, I think that, yeah, through teaching Islam and the other faiths, that some of those things get reinforced, you know, do good, not bad and take care of others and having time to pray or meditate or whatever it is. I think that's really important.

Joan and Nina find it meaningful that the course leads to the discovery of connections and similarities across different religions. Joan keenly wants this to inspire collective action. Nina concurs but is also inspired by individual practices such as “having time to pray or meditate,” that are commonly found in various religious traditions.

Understanding the reasons my teacher participants teach the course helps us understand what they are bringing to the experience, what they will learn from the experience and how their perceptions and understandings of Islam and narrative religious and nonreligious identities will change, if at all. Along with their religious orientations, and their personal reasons for teaching the course, teachers are arriving to the classroom space with their own understandings of Islam.

Existing perceptions and understandings of Islam. Research participants have different understandings of Islam, which emanate from different origins. These provide a rich portrayal of diversity in knowledge and experience.

Although he is non-religious, Connor is “personally fascinated by religion.” He minored in it in university and pursues his “own PD on it all the time (through) reading.” With respect to Islam, Connor’s knowledge base and understanding is evident:

Islam right now is so much more dynamic than most religions. The cultures in which it is dominant are going through so much change and upheaval – politically, socially, economically – that I think most people just look at it and see it as Islam but it's not just Islam. Events surrounding 9/11 and al Qaeda, I was able to recognize that that's not Islam as a whole. Is it an expression of Islam, sure it is. But is it THE expression of Islam? No, it isn't. And, in fact, it's a very political expression of Islam. And it's not truly, I think, about Islam. It's more about cultural, historical, geopolitical things... And so there are layers and so, are you covering an aspect of the religion? Absolutely. But knowing what I know, I know that it's not as strongly worded in the Sharia Law as it sometimes seems to be portrayed in the media but is the media reflecting Islam or is it reflecting the culture where that practice is?

Connor sheds light on some of the misperceptions that exist about Islam. Len more generally senses “when we get to Islam, there are a lot of biases out there, stereotypes.” He does not share any other previous understandings of Islam, which is drastically different than Connor who illustrates his understanding using the example and practice of head covering:

There is the Islamic answer and then there's the culture from which that Islamic group comes from and their answer. And so there are layers and so, are you covering an aspect of the religion? Absolutely. But knowing what I know, I know that it's not as strongly worded in the Sharia Law as it sometimes seems to be portrayed in the media but is the media reflecting Islam or is it reflecting the

culture where that practice is? And that culture is Islamic. But it's also many other things, right?

Furthermore, he perceives the distinction between form and essence:

And they do often point out, or if they don't, sometimes I will, that modesty which is kind of that message there, right? Isn't simply mandated on women, its also mandated on men.

Connor's existing perceptions and understandings are based on his academic study of religion. From this, and due to his own interest and professional development, Connor has acquired deeper and nuanced understanding of the multidimensional nature of Islamic belief and practice.

So helping students understand how to decipher that and understand, ok, well, what is Islam? So then, what is al Qaeda? What is this? I mean, they are all connected but are they the same thing? No. They are related. What are the relationships? What are the differences? What are the similarities? How can I then make a judgment about one so when you hear people talking about what Islam is, based on their understanding of what al Qaeda is doing, well, that's a problem, right?

Whereas Connor's perceptions and understandings of Islam are founded on formal and continuous education, Joan has acquired understandings that are a result of her personal and family experiences learning about Islam.

Joan's existing understandings of Islam are shaped by a significant encounter with Islam and Muslims through her son and daughter-in-law. This ongoing encounter she reveals "has tried me in many ways." She shares:

They don't consider themselves Wahhabist but I do. And it spoke to both of them that need for a very exact interpretation – almost black and white kind of thing – and they both converted. I didn't feel any compulsion to know a whole lot more. My son became fiercely immersed in it – studied the history of, endeavored to carry out the required elements, the shahada, the prayer, the fasting and coincidentally, he was searching for something to give meaning to his life – his mother has a career, his father has a career, his sister has a career, he does not. And Islam gave him some of that. That sense of 'it will be taken care of, there is a plan, it just hasn't unfolded yet.'

Through her family, Joan has learned a great deal, which she considers to be “a real crash course in Islam. My son's interpretation of it did not jibe with other Muslims of my acquaintance. But I don't live with other people of my acquaintance.”

Prior to this introduction, Joan tells us:

My sense of Islam was very perfunctory. It was essentially Charles Martel pushing back the Mongol hordes, the Arabs at Battle of Tours – so aside from, over the years, the kinds of political experiences that were happening and how that has an impact on me as a citizen.

A disturbing experience for Joan, and one that has informed her perceptions of Islam has to do with her daughter-in-law:

Faith is very important to her (and so) she began to proselytize to me. We would have these discussions about prayer, about the similarities between the Judaic Christian tradition and the Islamic tradition and some of her understandings, frankly, are culturally based. She does not see it that way. So all of these

experiences that I've had, especially in recent times, have colored my understanding.

Joan acknowledges the role culture plays in interpreting Islam, just as Connor shared when he illustrated with the example of head covering. However, her preoccupations reside in understandings that her family holds of Islam, which for her “has often been a struggle.”

Whereas on one hand Joan has a negatively colored understanding of Islam, on the other hand she has a very spiritually charged impression of the same religion. Joan interprets Islam's conception of God, guidance and scripture with spiritual undertones. This sense of spirituality extends to her understanding of Islam, regardless of her “serious concerns” with family.

My daughter-in-law's grandmother died a few years ago and she said her father looked after his mother in her last months and he tried to get her to say the Shahada on her deathbed and she couldn't say it and I said ‘but you don't know that she didn't say it to Allah. That she didn't say it inside, which is what matters. Don't you have any faith that Allah knows these things?’

Considering Joan has struggled with an Islam presented to her by her family, her own spiritual faith in God and His omnipresence, lead her to refer to “Allah” which is God in Arabic, reinforcing to us her spiritually inclined view of Islam. When she refers to Muhammad, Islam's final prophet she refers to him as a spiritual being she wants to emulate. “Mohammed,” Joan shares, “went into a cave and meditated. It is important to go into yourself and think and reflect ...and make sense of it.”

Both Connor and Joan have a history and background with Islam that has led them to hold certain perceptions and understandings. In addition, both have pursued further learning, although for different reasons. Connor however is emotionally and spiritually removed from what he understands and how he has achieved this understanding. Joan on the other hand, is invested emotionally. After all, the Islam Joan has come to know and live with is one her very own son has adopted. In addition to an emotionally charged perception of Islam, is a spiritually inclined understanding of Islam's essential beliefs and messages.

What about Nina? Nina does not have an academic background as Connor does and she has not experienced life-changing events as it relates to Islam or Muslims as Joan has. She has some basic knowledge:

I did know it was monotheistic. And I did know that they shared some rituals, in a sense, in a more broad sense. Like, again, giving to charity or taking care of the community and prayer and so on.

Her understanding of Islam is also centered on a festival and a commonly known Muslim practice of fasting during the month of Ramadan. She conveys:

I had friends that would celebrate, or mark Ramadan but I didn't really know much about it except for the fasting and there was something at the end to mark the end of it. It was really based on just things that would get reported in the news, like Ramadan."

In addition, Nina's understanding of Islam has developed based on when "the media would focus on something like Jihad." She openly professes to her limited knowledge:

Back then, I hadn't even started teaching this class and you just think there's just one type of Islam. That's what I had thought.

Fascinating to me, Nina and Len enter the World Religions teaching space with vastly different understandings and perceptions of Islam than Connor and Joan. Len is aware there are stereotypes associated with Islam, however does not convey knowing too much more prior to teaching about Islam. Nina's grasp of Islam is namely sourced from media and what she knows about Islam from friends. I find this bewildering. If one does not have educational and/or personal background with Islam, which is the situation for the majority of us, how does one know what they know, if anything, about Islam?

My participants readily shared their narrative religious and nonreligious identities, why they teach the World Religions course and their existing understandings and perceptions of Islam with me. Having provided an interpretation of what they bring to the learning space, as teachers and learners of Islam, I turn to what they experience in the classroom and how they respond.

What teachers encounter and carry onward. In this portion of the chapter I portray teacher encounters with new ideas and knowledge about Islam and how teachers have responded to these experiences. The following analysis and interpretation contributes to answering the following research questions:

- How do perceptions and understandings of Islam held by teachers change, if at all, as a result of teaching about Islam?
- How do experiences of teachers who teach about Islam influence a teacher's narrative religious or nonreligious identity?

Having interpreted and shared what orientations, understandings and predispositions my participants bring to the classroom space I am able to better comprehend their responses to new ideas related to Islam and what changes they experience as a result of their responses. Thus, first I am interested in what understandings of Islam are cultivated and taken away by teachers in the classroom space. Secondly, I am curious about the contribution of teaching about Islam on a teacher's narrative religious identity. I have organized what teacher participants encounter into two sub-themes. The first is linked to encounters they have with their Muslim students. The second is encountering knowledge, through the course, of the internal diversity of the Muslim community.

Encountering Muslim students. The teacher participants encounter Muslim students who are taking their World Religions course in what I have classified as two different ways. In the one context, I situate Connor and Len who have a large number of Muslim students, many of whom are vocal and committed to their religious tradition. Len shares that “the most represented religion would be Islam in the class, either overtly hijab and the dress or, they just don't look like it but they are.” In another type of encounter, I situate Joan and Nina who do not have very many Muslim students. For example Nina reflects “that a lot of our kids are of no faith or sort of just very basic ‘oh, I grew up in a Christian household,’ so I haven't really taught a lot of students that are Islamic.” The nature of the encounters and the subsequent responses are influenced by student mannerisms and the predispositions of teacher participants. This results in differing experiences for Joan, Connor, Len and Nina.

Joan interacts positively with one of her Muslim students:

I have a collection of literature, some of it is children's picture books, some of it is various versions of religious texts and some of it is exploration of ideas and one of the books was called 'The Meaning of the Qur'an' and when Usman saw this, his eyes lit up and he said 'could I read this?' and I said 'oh, by all means.' I said to him 'Usman, you tell me what you think. You are more familiar with the Quran than I am.' And he came back to me and he said 'I've read it now three times and every time I read, I get more from it.' He has asked permission to loan to his friends and I said to him 'well, keep loaning it out, the more it circulates, the better. I would like your understanding of this because I'm not familiar with the Quran, certainly not the way I'm familiar with the Bible,' and so he has taken that text and shared it in the same way that kids will read The Hunger Games and say to someone 'you've got to read this.' He said that it has changed his understanding.

Joan is delighted to come together with her Muslim student in this way. She humbly acknowledges that her student is better versed with the Quran than she is, and invites him to share his understanding with her. Joan is happy to share and engage in dialogue. Apart from this incident however, Joan does not share anecdotes of personal contact with her Muslim students.

Connor, unlike Joan, faces Muslim students who take the course and challenge his understanding of Islam.

I have that experience. You run into that with some students and, to a certain degree, when it comes to Islamic students. And it's typically the males. They kind of wear it as a badge – 'you can't understand me.'

Connor demonstrates his knowledge to his students by responding:

‘Well, no, I kind of understand that’ and when you sort of sometimes confront them with ‘that’s not very charitable. That doesn’t really speak to your five pillars.’ Then they realize ‘oh, I can’t use that, you know what you’re talking about.’

Connor’s experiences with his Muslim students, which are often tense, present moments of choice for Connor. He acknowledges that his Muslim students question: “how do I want other people to view and perceive and understand my perspective and world view?” He responds by demonstrating his knowledge and not deepening his understanding about Islam from those who practice the religion he is teaching about. “I don’t typically even try to probe too much personally,” he shares. Joan’s approach is different. However that being said, in the one example she shares, her student assumes the position of a thankful learner rather than an expert of Islam, as Connor’s Muslim students tend to do. Nina’s experience with Muslim students of which “more recently, in the past, there were a few,” is that “oftentimes, they were just generally quiet and would chime in every so often with something. I never felt that they felt that they were the experts.”

Similar to Connor’s situation, Len senses his Muslim students feel “I’m right, you’re wrong.” Len’s encounter may be characterized in this way since “especially with Islam, because again, larger population here, you have to prove that you do know something.” Importantly, even though Len feels he needs to assume an authoritative position as Connor does, he is similar to Joan and admits he has a lot to learn. He shares:

I've certainly learned a lot in discussing with them and they'll say stuff and I'll go and Google. 'What are they talking about?' and try and find out. 'Okay is this right or not? What are people saying about it?' or 'what actually did happen?'

In contrast, Connor concludes that in fact it's his students who lack knowledge and "at the end of it, they are like 'you know, I didn't know as much as I thought I knew' or 'there's a lot more to my religion than I first understood.' They actually have a lot of preconceptions or misunderstandings."

Above, I have shared the orientation teachers have assumed when interacting with their Muslim students. Joan welcomes interaction when her Muslim student approaches her, admitting there is something she can learn. This is the same for Len, who although senses his Muslim students are confrontational, claims "a lot of the Muslim kids are at least knowledgeable about a faith," and this has "forced me to dig a little deeper, especially with Islam." This demonstrates he values interacting with his Muslim students and that it has led to greater knowledge for him. Connor responds differently. He responds to his students by communicating his own understandings. Perhaps this is based on Connor's existing knowledge of Islam. In addition, some of his Muslim students approach him in a standoffish manner, which may provoke such a response from Connor. Nina has not had significant encounters with Muslim students although her demeanor shows openness if the opportunity arose. All my teacher participants do not proactively seek out to understand lived experiences of being Muslim from their students. Rather they respond to initiative taken by students to interact with their teachers.

Are perceptions and understandings of Islam changed? How does encountering

Muslim students impact a teacher's religious or nonreligious identity? Len's frequent and intense contact with his committed and vocal Muslim students, along with his own desire to understand and gain knowledge has led to changed perceptions of Islam and a changed religious narrative identity. This change, due to his encounters with Muslim students, is not as readily available to my other research participants. I turn therefore to a deep exploration of Len's experienced changes, at times integrating the voices of my other participants in order to shed further light on Len's learning journey.

What are the changes Len experiences? Len acquires new perceptions of Islam and a positively strengthened allegiance to his Christian identity. Len shares:

I've heard the kids say 'well we have the same God.' Through my research, I'm thinking 'okay, I don't think so' because the Christian God is this triune: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Whereas I understand it, Allah is a God and they don't branch into this triune. So right there, it doesn't make sense.

Len has very particular understandings of God that are based on his interpretation of God in Christianity. He does not see the historical and shared understanding of God in Christianity and Islam. Len says "Allah is a God", instead of referring to Him simply as God. Joan, as shared earlier, understands Allah to be God. The idea that God is shared in Christianity and Islam is perplexing to Len.

Another example of an Islamic belief Len encounters is related to the last Prophet in Islam, Muhammad.

I have learned some of the history of Muhammad's life, largely from my fellow there (student). Ok, Muhammad could do no wrong. But I researched and I thought 'you know, I don't know if he was as perfect as you think he was, right?'

I have looked it up and his life was a lot of fighting, a lot of conquests. So I've learned about the history of Islam a little bit more.

Len focuses exclusively on Muhammad's role in political conquest. This is different than Joan's focus on Muhammad as one who engages in spiritual search. More likely than not, Prophet Muhammad, a central figure in Islam, assumed both these roles in addition to others. That is why it is surprising that when Nina teaches the course, "there's not a huge focus on the story of Muhammad." It is interesting to see the different facets of Prophet Muhammad that Len and Joan focus on. It is also understandable, based on the orientations and outlooks they bring to the classroom space.

Scripture is another example of what Len has learned about Islam through teaching World Religions. He conveys:

I've had to look at what does the Quran say. And supposedly it is in a sense about world domination. If you're not a Muslim, you are my enemy, kind of thing. So how does that shape up?

Ultimately from all that he has researched and learned about, Len concludes:

They want to be like Christianity...so we're going to copy. 'We're just like you,' is the phrase I've heard a number of times. 'We're just like you.' Oh really? I sit back and I think 'okay,' but it just keeps hitting me. It is kind of like 'we've taken scriptures...the Bible and we pulled out what we live with and then we made this new Quran with some Christians (in it) - Moses and Abraham and Jesus was a prophet. We love Jesus but yet we're over here.' They kind of want to be over here but yet they are over here. Right? So I don't know. Hmm, I don't think so.

On the other hand, Nina ponders a drastically different connection between the Abrahamic traditions:

I don't think I realized the direct link between Judaism, Christianity and Islam. So thinking of Islam as a thing that originated out of something else. That was definitely something that I discovered. I don't think I recognized some of the continuity of that.

Len engages in self-directed learning in order to develop his own understandings and perceptions of Islam. He draws on his religious identity to understand central Islamic beliefs in God, Prophets and sacred text. Many of Len's changed perceptions of Islam and his changed narrative Christian identity arise due to dialogue with his Muslim students. They provoke discussion that leads Len to search for answers and responses. Understandably dedicated and vocal Muslim students make his learning journey complex. At times his Muslim students do not intend to alienate their teacher but to find common ground. Other times this is not the case. One student in particular "wanted to prove how the Bible is in error and here's 101 reasons," forcing Len to "research more about what he was talking about and what my faith was." Len concludes it "was a win-win in some ways. Growth for me too to see, ok, what is his point?"

In the process of learning about Islam, through frequent interactions with his Muslim students, Len's own religious identity is strengthened. "I look at my own faith," he tells me. The result of his interreligious encounter with Muslims is a strengthened and more firmly rooted Christian religious identity. Specifically Len's faith is strengthened in two ways. First, he has an even deeper appreciation of the faith element that is required in religious belief. He conveys:

‘Look at your own faith. Oh yeah, you believe in this guy who rose from the dead and ascended to heaven. Okay, from the outside, that makes a lot of sense’. So it forced me to look at the bizarreness of my own religion in some ways, my own faith, because I was brought up in it. I’ve had to come to grips with it myself, but it sort of just made me step back, especially in the beginning, and say, ‘Well, this is bizarre, well, wait a minute, look at your own. C’mon. Immaculate conception?’ Is your faith strong enough to withstand the questioning, maybe? Which I think is true about a lot of religions.

With this understanding, quite possibly Len agrees that Islam too, has an assumed faith and belief element for Muslims. Perhaps he cannot fully understand Islam, since this is missing for him and exists for him only in his Christian faith.

Along with a renewed appreciation of the faith element of being affiliated with a religious tradition, Len explores the practice of his faith:

In here we call it Mrs. M.V, it’s an acronym for 7 dimensions of religion, like mythic, ritual, social, these sorts of things. We sort of apply those to all the religions. So I had to look at my, ‘okay, this is mythic in Christianity, this may or may not be true, it could be a legend’ that kind of thing, right? So, that’s one thing I know for sure. It made me re-examine. ‘Ok, look it, man- you can’t...’ And then worship practices, you know, darken the doors of the Mosque once a year, twice a year, maybe at Ramadan or, you know, how many Christians would call themselves Christian at Christmas and Easter. So, I sort of look down and say ‘hmm, what do you think about that?’ Do you have to practice your religion or is it okay just to believe it? So, I look at my own faith and say, ‘Hey, can you, ok,

went to church, got that off the list. Okay, I'm good,' or is there a belief embedded in there? So stuff like that, you sort of have to step back.

Len dialogues with his Muslim students, and this strengthens his religious identity as a Christian. Len's narrative religious identity changes because many times he has to defend it, which propels him to search for ideas and knowledge. His search is reflective and articulated, both of which contribute to a deeper connection to Christianity.

The impact of encountering Muslim students on teacher participants is influenced by the nature of Muslim students as we see in Joan and Nina's situation as compared to Connor and Len's experiences, but also by the religious orientations and existing understandings the teachers have of Islam. Len's voice is prominent here as he experiences extensive changes in perceptions and understandings of Islam as well as changes in his narrative religious identity. In the next section, we hear from Connor and most especially from Joan and Nina who are substantially affected by experiential learning in the course.

Diverse communities in Islam. Joan, Nina, Connor and Len take their World Religions classes on field trips to places of worship. Each of their classes visit a temple, church, gurudwara, monastery, synagogue, mosque, jamatkhana or some of these, in order to experience the religious community they are learning about, and be hosted by its members. When they are learning about Islam, Joan and Nina's class visit the same jamatkhana, a place of worship for Shia Ismaili Muslims. Connor and Len's classes on the other hand, visit a Sunni Muslim mosque, albeit different ones. This leads to very different experiences.

Len's class visits a Sunni place of worship and his description focuses on the host:

I think he is a young fellow. He relates well to the kids. He goes around and memorizes their names instantly. He has supposedly memorized the Quran. He is very, he's very in your face, very confident. I think it kind of intimidates them a little bit. They'll have some questions and people we talk to are very good, 'ask me anything. What do you want to know?' And he is the same way- so that's where we go now. I don't even know the exact name of...

When Connor's class visits the mosque, his attention is directed to the decorum with which students, male and female, carry themselves. He forewarns his students:

There are certain expectations on us both, but what's also meaningful is, it's not an uncommon expectation, right? So, whereas for Islam, we start to know that it's religious law and it's Sharia law and that sort of takes on this connotation of firmness, right? But the reality is if you are going into the Jewish synagogue, there are certain expectations. You are portraying outward respect by dressing in this way.

Joan and Nina are profoundly and positively impacted by their experiences in the jamatkhana. Joan reflects:

The couple who were volunteers, who spoke to us about their faith were so erudite, so articulate and so considerate of these young people and their understanding. They explained why the temple was built in the way that it was, what the prayer room meant, why there is this section in the wall. He talked about how important it was to him to have conversations with people outside of his community because he was so angry that his faith had been hijacked by that bearded man in the cave in Afghanistan.

Nina shares:

We go to the Ismaili mosque and so when we go there, it's a husband and wife. 'Where do you think the most Muslims live in the world?' And it's Indonesia but the kids are like 'Saudi Arabia?' They are always going to say an Arab nation. So he (the host) does do a good job of explaining that ...the kids are often not sure what to expect when they go in, if they've never been to a mosque or a jamatakana. They're just always in awe of the beauty of the place and then also very interested, 'oh, so here the woman doesn't have to cover her head, even in the Mosque. So that's been really interesting to see...every time afterwards, the kids are like 'this is one of my favorite religions,' and I think it's because of the stress on the pillars. They really get that idea that, giving to charity and doing this religious pilgrimage and fasting to partly remember that you are thankful for these things that you do have other times...they find really interesting and very tangible.

Joan and Nina value their experiences in the jamatkhana. They speak positively and appreciate learning about the spaces, lived traditions and practices of a particular Muslim community. Both teachers have experiences that deeply touch them. Joan can relate to this Muslim community's members. They express values of consideration, equality and speaking up against injustices, which are values she also reveres. She realizes diversity extends beyond "just the Shia/ Sunni split. That's the obvious demarcation." Nina clearly appreciates learning about "what you do as a Muslim and what you believe in terms of some of the practical day-to-day stuff." From a shared positive experience and common admiration of the community however, Joan and Nina subsequently take different paths.

Joan's reference to the jamatkhana as a 'temple' and not a 'mosque,' which is what it is typically referred to since it is a Muslim place of worship, suggests she differentiates this community from other Muslim communities. Joan compares her experience to the masjid, another Muslim place of worship. She reverts to what she more intimately knows of Islam and, where she has had lived experiences. Joan reflects that the jamatkhana is "very different from that masjid where my son has taken me, where women sit behind men and the Imam is shouting at everyone." She shares:

That was the first time I had been in that building, although I had been to the southwest masjid often and it irritates me hugely, hugely. It's to me, shoddy. My son said "well, mum, it was built in a hurry because we can do it cheaper than this." Well, yeah, you can but it looks like it. And part of that says to me, and of course it irritates me that the women are separated from the men and they are at the back and that the Imam was shouting at everybody. I come from – in a Catholic church, you come in and genuflect and step into your pew and you are respectful of the environment in which you are and of the other worshipers. We don't talk to one another. If you do, it's at the behest – there's a very particular ceremony and ritual.

Joan sees "that these two individuals who are part of my daily life are not necessarily exemplars." She appreciates learning about a more palatable interpretation of Islam and it eases her own personal struggles with Islam to some extent. Yet, we see what preoccupies her heart and mind:

They believe and they believe in their hearts that they are right but they are not tempering they are not yet at that stage. I'm not sure they ever will be at that stage

where they can say ‘we’ll agree to disagree.’ They are right. And we are wrong.

And my daughter-in-law, when she was in one of her funks, said to me ‘you know you’re going to Hell,’ and I said to her ‘well, fortunately it’s not your decision.’

She was not impressed. Talk to the hand!

Joan’s points of view are strong, present, active and emotionally charged. She responds to her new learning with continuous reference to what appears to be a very different Islam, but one that is part of her everyday life.

Nina does not have tense personal circumstances with other Muslims. She positions her new learning alongside previous learning she has encountered about diversity in Islam through the course. Before moving ahead and presenting the changes Nina experiences due to her learning in the jamathkhana, I elaborate on what Nina has already learned and weave in voices of my other participants to enrich the presentation.

Nina’s learning journey commences with a changed understanding of Islam as she “learned the distinctions” between Shia and Sunni interpretations. Nina realizes she was making certain assumptions before she “even started teaching this class,” such as “when you think ‘Islam’ and you think it’s one, whereas in Christianity, many people are familiar that there are Catholic and Baptist.” Nina now understands there are two major communities of interpretation in Islam. Her understanding is illustrated and critically reflected upon. Nina illustrates her learning by comparing the existence of diverse communities to examples of those that exist in Christianity. She reflects on the tendency to be familiar with diverse traditions in Christianity, questioning why she would assume Islam to be homogenous. Unlike Joan who already understood that diversity in the Muslim community is “not just the Shia-Sunni split. That’s the obvious demarcation,”

Nina learns about this for the first time through teaching about Islam in the World Religions course.

Connor also shares his encounter with diverse communities of interpretation in Islam. Although he already knows of Sunni and Shia communities existing in Islam, he conveys “as a teacher, it has been a bit of a struggle to truly understand and wrap my head around Shia versus Sunni.” He elaborates:

So Sunnis don’t really understand Shia right? They know that they are there; they know that this group exists, but they don’t really understand what’s the division or the separation. ‘Why aren’t you like the rest of us?’ Right? And so I have had to try to understand that, to a certain degree, to help them understand that, I’ve tried to understand it a little bit better and I still struggle.

Connor responds to this confusion by referring to his existing knowledge:

I mean, there is an academic point of view of it, which is fairly simple – it’s more political than it is theological. Shia wants that hierarchical institution to persist generationally after generationally, they want that chain of leadership. And so you can point that out but that doesn’t really explain, so what’s the real difference? Do we practice differently? Why is there such a sharp divide?

He asks his students their perspective and what they understand of the differences, however “sadly,” he conveys, “for the most part, they don’t explain it with much depth or detail or specificity that helps shine a light on it for me.”

When Nina learns of, and from the Shia Ismaili Muslim community in the jamatkhana, it builds upon her understandings of diversity in Islam. Nina adds another layer to her understanding of Shia and Sunni communities of interpretation gained in the

classroom. “That’s the obvious demarcation,” as Joan points out. Nina’s changed understanding is there is also cultural diversity in Islam that it is layered on diversity that results from interpretation. Upon visiting the jamatkhana, Nina shapes her teaching in response to learning about Islam and culture, from the Shia Ismaili community. She develops a class assignment “that is about different countries. (Her students) choose a country that has a large Muslim population,” and then research the interplay between religion, culture, politics and economics. Nina gains knowledge and skills in orienting the course to reflect an Islam that is influenced by context and that is lived and practiced in diverse ways, in countries one may have assumed didn’t have a large Muslim population. Nina imparts another example of how she re-directs her teaching:

If we start to talk about stereotypes and things like that – because we’ve done activities where we will start off with stereotypes about Islam and about being a Muslim and a lot of the kids are really reluctant to do that – they’re like ‘but I don’t have any’ or they’re reluctant to admit if they do have it because they’ve already known – like, they’re self-censoring that way. And so often times if we do that activity, we have to do it from – ‘what does the media say – not what you do. Not what you might think.’ And so that’s been interesting because a lot of them are like “no, I don’t carry that stereotype” but, of course, if we were in the wider population, that could be different.

In the above example, Nina reframes the question from the media’s perspective in order to encourage a response from her students. This clearly emanates from the idea of stereotypes that is raised by hosts in the jamatkhana. It is her time with members of the

Shia Ismaili Muslim community that demystifies Islam for Nina and brings to light taken-for-granted assumptions she holds of this religion.

Niina continues to be self-aware and reflect on her learning journey:

I think, yes, the diversity aspect of it. And also just distinguishing between what is cultural and what is faith. The people that came into the class or the people we went to visit for Islam would talk a lot about just 9/11 and how that affected them and the differences between the cultures and the religion. I mean, I know a lot more about the faith, I would say. My friends that are Muslim - more of what I identify with is the cultural aspect of it. 'Here's the food we're eating.' It's not because it's Muslim food. It's just their curry dish, because she is from Pakistan. Or the music, and again I would never associate that with the faith, really. What does it mean to be Muslim, what about the cultural aspects? Is there one culture that's Muslim? Because when I started (teaching this course), I didn't realize there were Sunni and Shia, as I said earlier and then as well, some of the things that I thought were faith-based, even though it was open to interpretation, I learned were more cultural-based.

Len's understanding of diverse communities in Islam changes, however in a different way than my other participants. Len's acquired perception of diversity is related to how his Muslim students perceive diversity in Islam. As well, Len does not narrow in on Shia and Sunni interpretations, or on cultural differences amongst Muslims. His reflections are based more on contentious issues as the following example illustrates:

It's funny, when you, not nail them but when you say 'hey, women's rights, (they claim) 'oh, that's Iran' or 'but that's not our country.' And then I don't push them

but in my mind I am thinking ‘okay, but you don’t separate other religions. This is Islam, this is still the gist of your religion, you can’t get out that easily.’ I guess I question the separation and they would even say ‘yes, but that’s not us.’ You never hear ‘it’s the radical Christians.’ So I always grapple with that. The default is it’s the radicals.

Len feels Muslims should take responsibility for how other Muslims interpret Islam. Even though Muslims may not agree with the interpretation of other Muslims they are still answerable when asked about Islamic beliefs and practices. As shared previously, Len turns to his Christian identity to reinforce his position arguing that Christians do not tend to defer accountability of problematic or radical interpretations.

Teacher participants respond differently to what they learn about diverse communities in Islam. Their responses are shaped by the predispositions and experiences they bring to the classroom space. Connor and Joan respond by referring to and building on what they already know of, and have experienced with Islam. Len compares his new learning of Islam to his understanding of Christianity and applies it to reinforce his existing religious identity. Nina, unlike the others, is profoundly changed due to what she learns about diversity in Islam. Initially her knowledge of Islam was fairly basic. It was derived from the media and what she knew about the religion from her friends. She reflects on her deepening understanding of Islam and continues to learn, engage in dialogue and transfer new ideas and knowledge into her teaching practice.

How is Nina’s narrative religious identity changed? Nina’s spiritual identity is reinforced when she learns about Islam. She does not associate herself with one particular

religion and what she learns about Islam supports her desire to focus on principles we can all live by:

With each faith, there are some really lovely elements in it that you want to take and if you boil it down to the 10 Commandments or whatever the rules are and some of the practices; it's just lovely, right? And when we look at the 5 Pillars of Islam, especially relating to community and so on, people, those are wonderful principles to live by but then you look at the conflict that occurs within the faith over different interpretations of it and what some of those interpretations are and yeah, I think it just, I think it does reinforce that it's nice to be on the outside, in a sense and you know, to take what I want and to not profess a particular faith or believe in a particular set of guidelines beyond a universal humanistic approach, I guess.

Thus, what Nina learns about Islam is compared to other religious traditions in a positive manner. One specific religious framework does not bind Nina's spiritual identity. As Nina learns about conflicts that arise due to religious differences, her spiritual, practical and universal outlook is supported. The understanding she gains validates her narrative identity, which stresses shared beliefs and values.

Moving from the past to a possible future, I have explored what accompanies teachers to the classroom when they teach about Islam, what they experience in the classroom whilst teaching and, the influence of teaching on changes they experience. I visualize their learning journeys on a continuum with less prevalent changes in perceptions and understanding of Islam on one end, and more profound changes on the other.

Connor does not readily experience changes in his understandings of Islam. He brings a great deal of knowledge to the classroom space. This helps us understand why he engages with his Muslim students as an expert, and in an intellectual manner. Joan draws on a spiritual outlook of Islam and personal experiences with family that are challenging for her. She experiences some changes in perceptions and understandings, however brings to the class already developed understandings of Islam and Muslims. These very same understandings she has acquired from family and personal search, impact her learning journey. She learns of a particular Muslim community that moves her, however this does not significantly change her understandings of Islam. Len and Nina experience changes in their perceptions and understandings of Islam that are on the more profound end of the continuum. Through teaching about Islam in the World Religions course, Nina's perceptions and understandings of Islam are deeply altered and acted upon. In particular she learns about the layers of diversity from one religious community, which challenges her previous assumptions that Islam is a monolith. Nina brings forth an interest and desire to learn that lends her to be open to change. Len experiences changes in his perceptions and understandings of Islam as well. Similar to Nina his previous knowledge of Islam was basic. Len however develops negative impressions of many aspects of Islam. These are developed predominantly in response to his Muslim students who challenge his Christian identity.

Nina, Joan, Connor and Len have religious and nonreligious identities that are narrative. They are not static and contained. My research question inquired into how these narrative identities changed as a result of teaching about Islam. However just as deserving of our attention, is gathering how their identities influence teaching and

learning. Thus rather than a linear learning journey, this is a cyclical one in which religious orientations influence the learning journey and in turn may be subsequently influenced.

Len brings forth a Christian religious identity to which he is very committed. Upon encountering his Muslim students, Len wants to understand Islam better. His search ultimately becomes religiously inspired. Through search and articulation of his viewpoints, Len's Christian identity is strengthened when he teaches about Islam. Joan's narrative religious identity shapes how she teaches World Religions. She focuses on how we are connected and responsible to take care of each other. Joan's beliefs inform the course more so than being influenced by teaching about Islam. This is the same for Connor. Freedom to choose, which forms the basis of his atheist non-religious identity informs why and how he teaches World Religions. Finally, Nina's spiritual outlook is validated when she teaches about Islam. Her tendency is to glean positive and universal messages found in all religions, including Islam. Her learning journey is made meaningful in this way and leads her to appreciate the choice she has made to identify herself as spiritual.

Context. Until now I have shared the experiences and changes research participants have experienced from the perspective of teachers and the classroom in which they teach and learn. I now present interpretations of what teacher participants have shared with me on aspects of the broader sociocultural context. This consideration is of great value as it contributes to our understanding of the experiences teachers have and how teachers may influence their contexts. The teacher participants teach about religion. They teach about religion in a public school classroom, which is a microcosm of the

broader public space. There are various terms used to describe the religious and nonreligious nature of Canadian public space. Some examples include tolerant, neutral, secular, and multicultural. I commence with interpretations of teacher participants' understandings of the term secular. I move on to sharing ideas the participants convey on tolerance.

Secular. Joan, Nina, Connor and Len provide revealing and insightful interpretations of what secular means to them. Joan reminds us, “that exploration of vocabulary is very important on many, many levels,” and I concur as it sheds light on the lens teachers look through as they teach about religion in a space that is meant to be neutral yet inclusive of diverse religions. The teacher participants understand secular, and its implications in diverse ways. Nina shares:

Secular to me, and I'm probably using the word exactly the way I'm not supposed to, but, absence of religion or non-religion, right? So not particularly spiritual, although I guess that might be. It's something that I don't think I've thought enough about so my understanding of it is just that.

However Joan claims, there is no such thing:

So what it means to be secular is another one of those freighted words that people, in my experience, say ‘oh that means non-religious, a secular society is not a religious society.’ But there isn't such a thing. There isn't such a thing on this planet, at least I can't think of anything. They are intertwined tremendously.

Joan believes it is not possible to have a society that is non-religious as religious identity is intertwined with many facets of human life. She illustrates how religion is connected to other aspects of life using the relevant example of Bill 44:

I remind students right at the beginning that the government has this legislation that says I have to inform parents when we speak about religion, gender identity or sexuality, so we're going to do all three in this class because it's all part and parcel.

Nina reflects on her school when she ponders about the term secular:

So it's interesting because our school, right now being a public school, therefore not Catholic, is supposed to be inclusive and represent all faiths...what they are trying to do is represent no faiths. There's a push within this particular school to make sure there's no religion within the walls of the school, or at least advertised religions. So, we used to have a Christian prayer group in the school, that's no longer, they are allowed to meet but they're not allowed to advertise. And of course, the Mormons they go to seminary, that's always happened outside of the school...just to sort of not offend everyone. We're not allowed to have a gay and lesbian alliance in our school either.

Nina's update on the situation at her school conjures up certain impressions of what it means to be secular. Does a secular or nonreligious school imply a school in which religion is not imposed on anyone, or does it imply a school in which students and teachers are not made to feel uncomfortable? Or, is it both? Exploring the understanding of secular is important as it has implications on teaching as Joan mentions above, and on what activities are permitted at school and how religious or nonreligious identity is expressed. Joan provides an example of how her school understands secular:

And in my first or second year, the Facilities AP asked me if there was any space in the Learning Commons where this group of Muslim boys could pray with some

privacy. And we managed to appropriate a space that was used occasionally for other purposes. But it was only the boys, not the girls. And it was only this small group and I knew that there were far more Muslim kids in the school but just this particular group of boys and only for that one year. I think, when the young man who led the group moved on, the group had no leadership to continue.

Joan's understanding is that her school chooses a dynamic, flexible and religiously inclusive approach to being a secular public school. Religion is not imposed on anyone however the school is responsive to the diverse religious needs of its student body at any given time. Both Nina and Joan teach in Alberta public schools. Their schools however conceive secular in different ways, which has implications for teachers and students.

Connor brings another view of the term secular. He refers to the value of equality when commenting on what it means to be secular:

It's why I don't share my own particular religious perspectives is. I want everybody to feel like there is an equal footing here, that no one view dominates or anything like that and that we're not here to judge or evaluate religions. So, in that respect, I think it's important to have a time and a place and a space to talk about that, to share and to feel heard and respected on your terms, right? Rather than on some preconceived notions or living up to some kind of stereotype or what have you, right?

Connor doesn't readily share his religious identity in the classroom; thereby he believes he is making the classroom space in which he is teaching World Religions, secular.

Secular to Connor firstly ensures equality in which "no one view dominates." Joan would

object to Connor's stance. She cites the example of Quebec and that in reality equality was severely compromised with the government's understanding of secular:

That repudiation of the Party Quebecois, as somebody who lived in the heart of French separatist Quebec in the first referendum, I thought 'I will not live to see this happen' and it did. And that was also a repudiation of a value that said 'some of us are more equal than others.'

In addition to equality, for Connor, secular assumes a safe place where one is respected and not judged. Above all, Connor maintains that equality and respect are ensured in a secular space, however this does not mean that one cannot learn about religion in this space. There is "a time and place and a space to talk about that." Therefore according to Connor, unlike Joan, it is desirable and possible to have a secular society.

Evidently, my teacher participants conceive secular in diverse ways. Nina understands it to be nonreligious. Connor claims secular is equality, non-judgment, and respect regardless of your background and affiliation. Joan says secular is religiously inclusive and allows one to religiously express themselves, which can look different for different people.

Let us turn to Len who brings in a historical and Christian perspective to secular: We were founded on Christian, Judeo-Christian values, but we are probably considered an atheistic country. Now we adopt the same-sex thing, abortion is...I researched it, I didn't realize abortion can be right up until birth in Canada. In Canada, it's separation of church and state. Now, my thinking is that I don't know if that strengthened our country because almost anything goes and we'll back

anything rather than ‘this is Canada and this is our founding.’ The same with the US. This is what we were founded on and now, maybe they are probably stronger at still maintaining the facade of ‘we are a Christian country. In God we trust,’ okay, that’s great, but Canada may just be more honest. We don’t pretend anymore, right?

Len ponders as to whether the separation of church and state has led Canada to be atheist. This he gathers is a loss and has resulted in “almost anything goes.” Connor recall has a very different understanding of atheist. Atheism is “not amoral. It can be strongly moral,” he shares. Len refers further to Canada as being founded on Christianity, yet in his opinion, present times are characterized by sentiments that are far from pro-Christian:

Christians, as an example, take kind of a beating. That’s outdated; that’s conservative. Society would say that’s just too old-fashioned. We’ve progressed. Now to me, okay, really? This is progress? You know? I guess. But I think, yeah, it (teaching World Religions) should be happening. People are often surprised, ‘Oh, World Religions! Public school,’ right?

Len brings an important historical dimension to the conversation, reminding us of Canada’s historically Christian roots. Joan on the other hand, reflects on the present:

We’re not only a first world country – we’re a country that shouldn’t really hold together and it does. So why does it hold together? And what are those elements that bring us together? And what works to fracture us?

World Religions is taught in Alberta public schools that are understood to be secular. Teacher participants of this study, and the schools which they teach in however, have very different meanings for secular. The question arises, how secular are public

school classrooms in which religion is explored? It is plausible that teachers and students alike bring their religious and nonreligious identities into the learning space in which potentially, all parts of the self, religious and otherwise are present and engaged.

Tolerance. Canada prides itself on being a country that is tolerant of diversity. Tolerance, as with secular, is part of the vocabulary that is associated with religion in Canada. Len, Nina and Joan share their notions of tolerance, which once again demonstrates the varied ways in which teachers understand religion in the broader sociocultural context. “What does it mean,” Joan tells us is very important to ask.

For Len, tolerance is nurtured through exposure to difference. He wants his students to:

Approach every religion as: Have a look at it, see what you think. It’s for some people, we can’t judge. It’s more about tolerant view, just exposing them to different religions.

Len acknowledges that we are different, that diversity is a given. Tolerance is about exposure to this difference and possibly respecting difference as well:

I don’t know whether it’s tolerance or whether it’s acceptance or whether it’s saying ‘we are very different people and (being) respectful and dignified is what matters.’

Nina concurs that the course is fostering tolerance. Nevertheless, she critically reflects:

To some extent you are nurturing tolerance but we’re also giving them a very easy version of the religion to take on. I mean, every single religion we looked at, the kids are like ‘this is really good,’ not too many issues. We’re going to the Ismaili

mosque, well, the jamatkhana and nobody's covering their heads, and we go to the Hindu temple and it's just a nice version and they are very accepting of other faiths – everyone's got their own pathway to go down and not that 'my way is the only way.' So it's relatively easy for them to feel like 'Yeah, I can be tolerant of these faiths,' because nothing's really rubbing them the wrong way.

Nina explains that it is easy to be tolerant when the differences do not cause discomfort. Perhaps discomfort is more likely when there is tension between freedom of religion, a basic right in Canada and other rights and freedoms. Nina wonders:

Do you just stay quiet? Do you challenge some of the beliefs that you think aren't up to Canadian values or standards or your own faith? Yeah I agree with your interpretation of tolerance; it's more an understanding because tolerance, as you said, it sometimes means you just put up with it without thinking about it or because you are worried that you can't challenge it. So sometimes we are silent when we shouldn't be, as a broader society, in the name of tolerance.

It seems the classroom space does not lend itself to this exploration, since according to Nina:

In the classroom, we do have safe conversations, right? Because students don't want to talk about what they don't know or things that they think might be misconceptions about the faith. It is sort of that PC thing that we have where you have to be careful not to offend or whatever. So we do tend to in class, we have more safe conversations and I feel that that's the same in the public sphere.

Len also admits:

I switch it as a positive – I say look around, look at the color, cultures, different nationalities, it is kind of cool and we generally get along and I say ‘this is a microcosm of society but we generally get along here.’

Connor as well does not “delve into the most controversial or the most challenging aspects” of teaching about Islam. Perhaps this approach to teaching World Religions is taken because as Connor shares, the course “talks about something that isn’t sort of comfortably or easily and commonly talked about openly.”

Nurturing tolerance is easier when Nina, Len and Connor keep experiences and conversations about religion safe and comfortable. Joan helps us consider that perhaps the focus should be on what is done with difference, even difference that may be uncomfortable or tense. Joan wants to “model it.” For her, it means:

I listen. I try to understand and, in understanding and asking and discussing with people who have a different perspective, how does that change me? And how do I modify my view or how do I entrench my views?

That being said, perhaps we need to make room for more challenging conversations as Nina suggests:

It may be interesting, if we had time, to expose the kids to some of those views as well and have those kinds of talks, questions about ‘do you just stay quiet? Do you challenge some of the beliefs that you think aren’t up to Canadian values or standards or your own faith?’

Len once again brings another interesting angle to the exploration. He feels that “tolerance is fine as long as it is the popular tolerance. And if you go against those, well

then, we don't want to hear from you." Len feels that which used to be intolerable is now tolerated. Joan once again, proposes a solution:

I will never understand your understanding of red, because we haven't got the vocabulary for it. There is no way to do that. We've gotta find something, otherwise we are not going to be able to live together.

Teacher participants willingly and thankfully share fascinating and personal ideas on the broader sociocultural context in which they are teaching and learning about religion. Their understandings are diverse and perceptive, helping me to consider that which I have not considered in what appears to be secular and tolerant Canadian society.

Summary

As my narrative portraits move through time and space, so too have I organized my thematic narrative analysis across time and space. Themes based on time move my interpretation from past and present to a possible future. The teacher participants bring forth their religious orientations, reasons for teaching World Religions and existing perceptions and understandings of Islam to the teaching and learning space. This provides a sense of their past and also that teaching about Islam in World Religions does not occur in a neutral, removed manner. As Okri (1997) shared "One way or another we are living the stories planted in us early or along the way" (p. 46). In the more recent past and present my teacher participants encounter their Muslim students and diversity in Islam. Learning about Islam is filled abundantly with personal and subjective experiences. Shaped by their predispositions, previous understandings and present experiences in the classroom, teacher participants experience varying degrees of changes in the perceptions and understandings they hold of Islam, and in their religious and nonreligious identities.

Connor and Joan respond to their learning by referring to what they already know, and hold to be true about Islam and about their religious orientations. Len questions some Islamic beliefs and develops a strengthened Christian identity. Nina gains new understandings of the diversity in Islam and in response, changes her teaching practice. Her spiritual orientation is reinforced. Shifting in space, this chapter then moved from the adult learner and their classroom to their understandings of the sociocultural context. Themes of secular and tolerance emerge, once again conveying diverse and thought-provoking understandings held by teacher participants of this study. I explore this zealously further in the next chapter.

Chapter 5: Moving forward in time and space

The fact of possessing imagination means that everything can be redreamed. Each reality can have its alternative possibilities. Human beings are blessed with the necessity of transformation (Okri, 1997, p.49).

The purpose of this study was to explore and interpret the adult learning journey of teachers who teach about Islam in Alberta public schools. It is premised on the collective need to acquire and demonstrate religious literacy so that we may live together in peaceful and meaningful ways. In this chapter I discuss what I have discovered in my research study in conversation with the literature. I commence with a discussion of the larger sociocultural context that conceives religion in broader society, the school system and the classroom. I subsequently move to the adult learner who is teaching and learning in this context. Lastly, I conclude by presenting implications of this study and a possible way forward.

The Canadian Conception of Religion

The Canadian conception of religion is gathered from history, policy and lived realities. It is understood by realizing Canada's Christian roots, examining the nature of separation of church and state, inquiring into the prevalence of conversations about religion in public space and through query of policy that protects religious freedom and diversity. Together, these provide the sociocultural climate within which Joan, Nina, Len and Connor are teaching and learning about religion.

How do teachers conceive religion in Canada? Research participants revealed their conceptions by sharing their understandings and experiences teaching about religion in public school classrooms. As Canadians, teacher conceptions of religion are part of Canada's conceptions. Whether and how teacher understandings affirm, extend and

challenge what the literature shares on religion in Canada is the purpose of this portion of the chapter. The discussion commences with how religion is framed and interpreted in public space and then proceeds to an exploration of tolerance and religion in public policy. Following an exploration of the Christian nature of contemporary Canadian culture, the section ends with an inquiry into religion in public schools.

Religion in private and public space. Scholars of religious studies agree that historically Canada was a Christian society. In order to ensure the viability of multiculturalism and religious freedom introduced in the 1970s, the state evolved into a neutral one that did not espouse to any one particular religion. A constitutional separation of church and state however has never been part of the state's journey in becoming neutral. Rather, neutrality is characterized by public policy that protects religious diversity and freedom, along with a gradual and progressive removal of religion from public life. The lack of a clearly demarcated separation between church and state and a nuanced understanding of religious freedom conveyed in policy, has led to diverse understandings of what it means to be secular. On the one hand are understandings that revolve around openness and inclusion of religious and non-religious convictions (Benson, 2007; Bramadat & Seljak, 2014; C. Taylor, 2008; Farrow, 2004). On the other hand are characterizations that religion should be reserved for the private sphere (Bramadat, 2007, 2009; Toulouse, 2014).

Teacher participants emulate and echo scholars in holding a diverse array of outlooks towards the term secular. Nina suggests in a relatively unsure manner that secular means the absence of religion. Conversely and with great conviction, Joan shares there is no such thing as a non-religious society. According to her interpretation, religion

is intertwined with society and cannot be removed from it. This is in keeping with Habermas (2005) who questioned the ability of the faithful to separate the religious part of themselves from the rest of their being. Beyer (2012) conducted a study on religious diversity with young adults from immigrant families of Muslim, Hindu and Buddhist backgrounds. Participants' "religious orientations and practices were woven into their view of themselves" (Beyer, 2012, p. 22) and the challenges they faced tended to be associated with living in a diverse and secular society.

In yet another interpretation, Len associates secular with the separation of a state founded on Christian values, from the church. The result according to Len, has led Canada to possess an atheist outlook. Therefore for Len secular does not imply a neutral, non-imposing state, but rather characterizes Canada as a country that is no longer oriented towards God. Len's interpretation questions Canada's funding of Roman Catholic schools (Seljak, 2008) and the reference to God in constitutional law (Beaman, 2008, 2010; Farrow, 2004; Ryder, 2008) and in our anthem (Farrow, 2004). Perhaps Len's understanding that Canada has acquired an atheist outlook is in reference to Canadians who have turned away from religion. Although this explanation challenges C. Taylor (2008) who questioned the assumption that secular means commitment to religion has waned, it supports Bramadat (2014), who commented that Canadians are demonstrating less loyalty to institutional religion. Turning to Statistics Canada (2011), dramatic changes in religious identification are evident. There are declines in mainstream Christianity (67% in 2011 and 72% in 2001), growth in non-Christian religious traditions (roughly 8%), and most relevant to this deliberation, levels of "no religion" which are reaching nearly one-quarter of the population (Statistics Canada, 2011). The latter

category includes Canadians who don't associate with a particular religion and who consider themselves to be atheist.

Moon (2014a) inquired whether secular is neutral or based on negativity towards religion. Seljak (2012b) provocatively suggested it's assumed that "to be a good Canadian (egalitarian, democratic, rational and multicultural) one must be secular – or at least the right kind of religious person, that is, one who confines religion to private life" (p. 10). Teaching World Religions in a secular public school classroom poses an interesting conundrum for teachers. Connor does not explore the religious background of his students, nor does he divulge his own unless probed and even then, shares it at the end of the course. Len shares his Christian religious identity only upon being provoked by his students. Even then he discusses it mainly in defense, retiring more personal reflections to the private realm of his thoughts and our interview. Nina appreciates shared values and beliefs amongst religious traditions, but does not share her religious identity and does not necessarily encourage her students to do so. This right is subtly reserved for class guests and hosts at places of worship the students visit. Joan on the other hand concurs with Toulouse (2014) who encouraged readers to consider a "deprivatization of religion" (p. 267) since Canada's commitment to multiculturalism seems to be inconsistent with relegating religion to the private realm. As a matter of fact Toulouse stressed the importance of understanding religion not only through "analytical study" (p. 291) but also through a contextual understanding of religious experience. Joan openly shares her personal situation and experiences with religion, be it Christianity or Islam, as well as her spiritual outlook. The tendency for Nina, Connor and Len to keep their religious identities private and for Joan to be forthcoming about her religious experiences reflects

Moon (2014b) who conveyed that most religious adherents “did not always agree about where the line between private spirituality and public secularism should be drawn”(p. xii). Toulouse (2014) provided further clarification on the dynamic relationship between the private and the public as “one that requires ancient religious traditions with transcendent moral imperatives on the one hand to translate their interests and motivations into a so-called neutral secular discourse of values, and on the other hand to forget that they are engaged in such a process of translation” (p. 931).

Connor adds another face to the kaleidoscope on understandings of secular. Connor claims a secular society ensures equality amongst people since one view does not dominate. For example, if religion is removed from public institutions and spaces, the risk of a prominent or majority-based religion directing how a multi-religious society operates is controlled. Although the literature does not explore equality as it relates to secular, more recently there has been increased scholarship as it relates to tolerance, equality and religious diversity. As Beaman (2012f) shared, “Conversations about diversity, identity, and equality are especially likely to emerge in the context of religion” (p. 1).

Tolerance. There is a call to respond to religious diversity with tolerance (Beaman, 2014). Teacher participants readily shared their perspectives on tolerance with me. For Joan being tolerant means listening and trying to understand a view that is different than her own. Len understands tolerance as exposure to religious differences and respecting those differences. One of the reasons he teaches World Religions is to foster tolerance. Nina agrees the course is aiming to nurture tolerance but questions whether the course is effectively promoting a tolerance that is easy to acquire. The

conversations I had with teacher participants on tolerance provoked a review of the literature on tolerance and religion in Canada. What I have gathered contributes to an interesting perspective on tolerance and equality.

According to Ryan (2010), as religious diversity continues to increase, it would be wise to encourage mutual respect and tolerance through a multiculturalism that addresses religion in evolving ways. However, as stated by Beaman (2011), the idea of tolerance “works to undermine any substantive or deep sense of equality” (p. 442) and provides a sense that religious diversity needs to be ‘managed’ and those religiously different than oneself, sympathized with and accommodated. Beaman (2008, 2011, 2012d, 2012g, 2013a, 2013b) argued that while there is a minimum requirement for tolerance in present-day multicultural Canada, which is governed by a Charter that promises equality, tolerance is no longer a sufficient beginning place and in fact adopts a language in response to religious diversity that is problematic. After all, as Beaman (2011) asked: “What does it feel like to be on the receiving end of this tolerance” (p. 445)? Tolerance possesses a subtle “us/them binary” (Beaman, 2012f, p. 208) effect, which should not be underestimated.

Ryder (2008) alluded to deep equality by referring to equal religious citizenship. Religious freedoms he concluded are aligned with equality as they enable “religious persons to participate equally in Canadian society without abandoning the tenets of their faith” (p. 87). Moon (2014b) assumed the same stance by equating freedom of religion as a form of equality right as it leads to equal treatment. Beaman (2011, 2012c, 2012d, 2012g, 2013b, 2014) on the other hand described deep or substantive equality as commencing from a shared starting point rather than from a position in which the ‘other’

needs to be tolerated. Substantive equality, according to Beaman, looks different from situation to situation and is not about treating everyone the same but employing creative, flexible solutions that dismantles a hierarchical relationship. All too often, the equality that responds to difference is “formal equality, or the notion of equality as sameness” (Beaman, 2013a, p. 726) and although tolerance as a value has made contributions, it is time to move to a new framework of deep equality, which does not relegate religion to the private realm (Beaman, 2013b) and “relocates equality as a process rather than a definition, and as lived rather than prescribed” (Beaman, 2014, p. 96).

Beyer (2012) suggested it is important to query what is being tolerated, is being tolerated against. It is at this juncture that I turn to Nina who reminds me that it is easy to foster tolerance through the course because in reality her students are given versions of religions that are compatible with their understandings of what is religiously acceptable. Nina thoughtfully ponders what would happen if students were exposed to religious views that were interpreted as not being aligned with Canadian values. This provides an interesting perspective. Is tolerance really being nurtured in learners when the tolerance that is being advocated for is an easy one to acquire? As it happens Len admits he keeps the tone in class positive, and Connor as well does not dive into controversial or challenging aspects of religion. Their decisions to keep conversations safe and comfortable make it easier to be tolerant. However, is true tolerance being nurtured? In reality, differences are deep and personal and when learners leave the classroom the situations they are hearing about and experiencing are not comfortable and easy to accept.

In an exploration of tolerance in schools, Moon (2014 b) quoted Chief Justice McLachlin on the School Act’s demand of tolerance:

The demand for tolerance cannot be interpreted as the demand to approve another person's beliefs or practices. When we ask people to be tolerant of others, we don't ask them to abandon their personal convictions. We merely ask them to respect the rights, values and ways of being of those who may not share those convictions. The belief that others are entitled to equal respect depends, not on the belief that their values are right, but only the belief that they have a claim to equal respect regardless of whether they are right (p. 58).

The experiences and ponderings of teacher participants resonate with, and challenge this view. My participants behave and teach in ways that don't encourage an abandoning of one's own values. What they encourage is tolerance and respect for diverse others.

However, their tendency to keep it positive and unchallenging and Nina's articulated reflection of this, does make me wonder if teachers and students are expected to respect and tolerate rights that are not right? In addition, whose right takes precedence?

According to Moon (2012, 2014a), a consideration that can help determine how far we go with tolerance is whether the practice impacts the rights of others. For example a Muslim not eating pork for religious reasons does not overtly affect others. However the York University student who requested accommodation based on his religious beliefs would have an impact on the female students he was seeking to not work with and "could be seen as part of a historical pattern of marginalizing women" (Moon, 2014a, p. 7).

Bramadat and Seljak (2013) recommended that Canadian society be considered post-secular. That is, enabling religious Canadians to practice in open and meaningful ways, however is in keeping with principles in the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms and thereby practicing with the rights and freedoms of others in mind.

The discussion above, ventures into equality as Connor likened this to secular and in addition, equality was raised in the literature on tolerance of religion in Canada. It is worthwhile to explore the impetus of teaching World Religions, and for school districts and schools to frame the course thoughtfully. This is especially important if nurturing a tolerance that does not necessarily foster deep equality is an underpinning rationale of the course.

Religion in policy. The rights and freedoms of Canadians as it pertains to religion are protected in policy such as the Multiculturalism Act and Charter of Rights and Freedoms. It is the Charter, stated Ryder (2008), which protects citizens and prevents government from enforcing the coercion of individuals “to abandon sincerely held religious beliefs and practices” (p. 87). However according to Bramadat and Seljak (2013), policies to manage Christian privilege and accommodate for religious diversity are ironically addressing the complexity of religious issues occurring today, inadequately. Perhaps this is why from the four teacher participants in this study, it is only Connor who explicitly translates policy on rights and freedoms into practice in the classroom. Although he does not overtly address the Multiculturalism Act, religious freedom protected in the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms and the Alberta Human Rights, Citizenship and Multiculturalism Act is weaved into Connor’s outlook and into his teaching. How does this manifest? First Connor bases his atheist non-religious identity on his freedom to choose. Policy on religion is framed as protection of minority rights (Anctil, 2011; Biles & Ibrahim, 2009; Bramadat, 2008; Bramadat & Seljak, 2013; Seljak, 2012b), and so too is Connor’s interpretation of it. Also, he doesn’t share his nonreligious identity with his students ensuring everyone is on equal footing and can

exercise their own freedom to choose. Second, Connor lets his students choose the religion they want to study in the course, and encourages students to ponder how they, as individuals would answer existential questions that religions aim to address. As with his understanding of secular, Connor's approach in exercising freedom to choose is based on equality. This challenges Habermas (2005) who concluded that the "introduction of the freedom of religion was the appropriate political answer to the challenges of religious pluralism" (p. 12), although it does not guarantee equal religious freedoms. It also questions Moon (2008b, 2014b) who claimed religious freedom is framed in more secular terms and religion does not really fit in equality rights.

Although the literature communicates that policy does not address how religion is lived and experienced and does not engage with the idea of equality, Connor elaborates Canadian policy on religion into practice. However this occurs through the secular lens of freedom of religion and not necessarily by addressing the complexity of lived experiences of religion. For the most part, except for Joan, teacher participants hesitate to fully divulge their religious and nonreligious identities. In addition, they universally do not seek out experiences and religious identities of their students.

What becomes evident as we engage in this discussion is an ensuing tension. On the one hand is Canadian policy that protects religious diversity. On the other hand is policy that does not provide direction on how best to engage with religious diversity in ways that are beyond mere tolerance. Berger (2008) suggested the reason for this challenge is that within Canadian policy and law, religion is rendered normatively "through the mechanism of Charter protections" (p. 288). If religion, on the other hand were regarded from a truly cultural outlook, it would move us beyond the objective of

protecting it, to obtaining a deep and contextually sensitive understanding of the role of religion in a Canadian's life (Berger, 2008). A cultural understanding of religion, Berger affirmed, would encourage us to re-think the divide between private and public and "might also have the capacity to touch on the whole of the committed individual" (p. 288) including their actions. After all, religious practices, "form part of what one brings to one's everyday experiences and decision" (Beaman, 2010, p. 272) and "a religious person's faith is understood as a fundamental aspect of his or her identity that pervades all aspects of life" (Ryder, 2008, p. 88). At this point I ask you, the reader to take special note of Berger's suggestion as although the scholar does not expand on his thinking, reserving more deliberation for future work, his reference to a cultural studies approach to understanding religion is echoed by scholars in education and will be addressed later in this discussion.

Christian culture. Canada has moved from being a Christian country to a country that protects religious diversity. This has resulted in what is understood to be a neutral state that does not impose any one particular belief and in a tendency to house religion in the private sphere. Essentially however, as my literature review shared, Canada remains culturally Christian. Christianity is intertwined in Canadian society (Beaman, 2006, 2012b, 2012e, 2012f, 2013b; Beyer, 2012; Biles & Ibrahim, 2009, Bramadat, 2014; Bramadat & Seljak, 2013; McAndrew, 2011; Seljak, 2012), which in turn, carries messages of privilege and tolerance (Beaman, 2012g). In point of fact, Christianity "remains the constitutionally referenced baseline or 'normal' against which other religions or spiritual practices are referenced" (Beaman, 2012b, p. 243).

The experiences and approaches of teacher participants, mirrors these observations noted in the literature. Nina learns about other religions by comparing them to Christianity. In particular, Nina refers to Christianity to understand Islam. She also admits to assuming her students know a great deal more about Christianity than other religions. Joan conveys she uses Christian examples as exemplar when teaching, because that is what her students know best. Nina and Joan's reference to Christianity is understandably based on their Christian upbringing. Nonetheless it is plausible that it is also influenced by the pervasive Christian culture around them. Perhaps Len turns to his Christian identity more in response to his experiences in the classroom rather than reacting to cultural norms in society. That being said, Len reminds me that historically Canada has Christian roots and contemporarily the majority of Canadians are Christians. That in of itself will have an impact on how society as a whole sees itself and functions religiously. Although Connor is not Christian, he too is influenced by Canada's Christian culture. Connor shapes his teaching on some of Canada's laws, which according to Bramadat (2014) are implicitly Christian and specifically Protestant in nature. Beaman (2013b) proposed imagining difference as not different from Christianity, which has shaped Canada and continues to have powerful forces, but rather different among pluralities or different from other religious groups. This requires an astute awareness of the tendency to compare other religions to Christianity and a conscious shift to imagine difference as distinct from other religions in general. I now turn to the school system, where this challenging call can be received and responded to by schools, curriculum and teaching methods.

Religion in schools. The removal of religion from non-religiously based Canadian public schools secured state neutrality and accommodated for religious diversity (Collet, 2007; Seljak, 2008, 2009, 2012; Zwibel, 2012). What does this look like in Alberta public schools for the teachers who are participating in this study? Nina shares that an administration change in her school resulted in a shift from a religiously inclusive school space to one that is now void of religion. For example, the Christian prayer group is no longer allowed to be promoted through advertisement or to meet. In Joan's school, religious expression is more readily supported. She illustrates by describing a prayer space in the Learning Commons that was dedicated for Muslim students upon their request. Len gives the impression that his school supports diverse religious groups and aims to support their needs. Thus schools interpret what it means to have religion removed from Canadian public schools today in different ways. Just as the terms secular and neutral to describe public space have diverse meanings, so too does what it means to be a public, non-religiously based school.

It is interesting to explore what it means to teach about religion in public schools that do not espouse to any one particular religion. Teaching about religion is permitted as long as it is not for the purposes of indoctrination and initiation (Alberta Civil Liberties Research Centre, 2004; Benson, 2007; Clarke, 2005; Seljak, 2012a; Zwibel, 2012). In this way freedom of religion and protection of minorities is upheld, as schools are not permitted to impose a religious view nor engage in devotional instruction.

Teacher participants in my study do not teach about religion in order to indoctrinate their students. Why teachers teach World Religions forms an important component of my understanding of what teachers bring to the classroom. Connor teaches

about religion because it plays a major role in world events. Also, it is important to understand different religions so students can make their own informed decisions. Len teaches World Religions in order to foster tolerance and understand the role of religion in what is happening in the world today. He also acknowledges there are many biases and assumptions with Islam in particular. Joan wants her students to see that the world faces big problems and in order to care for each other we need to understand each other's perspectives. In addition, Joan feels it is important to ascertain the role of one's upbringing in the development of their religious convictions. Nina teaches World Religions because she sees value in uncovering how different religions are similar and in order to understand practices and lived experiences of being religious. She also realizes there are misconceptions that need to be corrected. The roster of reasons that research participants teach World Religions resonates with the literature in two ways. First, the literature states the purpose is not to indoctrinate, initiate or practice a religion. Teacher participants do not teach the course in order to indoctrinate or engage in religious practice. As a matter of fact, as previously discussed, they also don't seek to know about the religious experiences of their students nor do they readily share their own. Second, the various purposes these teachers share for teaching World Religions, albeit different from each other, in sum are aligned with D.L Moore (2007, 2010). That is, religion is an important part of human experience, teaching about religion encourages critical thinking and supports questioning of assumptions and, learning about religion increases knowledge without which there would be misunderstanding. Joan, Connor, Len and Nina do not have the same reasons for teaching about religion and in reality they customize the

rationale provided by D.L. Moore (2007,2010). That being said, in essence and in totality they are aligned with scholarship on this topic.

In Alberta, an amendment to the Alberta Human Rights Act in 2009 was the result of Bill 44 that requires teachers to inform parents when they are covering topics about religion or sexuality (Alberta Human Rights Commission, 2013). In response, scholarship provided the impression this would result in practical challenges for teachers, negatively impact teaching and compromise the rights of children (Gereluk, 2011; Theobald, 2009). Findings from this study challenge these views. Teachers did not share any complications or sensitivities with having to comply with Bill 44. Joan is the only teacher who references Bill 44, and this relates to her understanding of secular. This could be a result of religion being taught through a formal World Religions course rather than introduced in other subjects, the latter of which may result in more challenges for teachers. It could also be that Bill 44 is not the focus of my study and it has been a few years since this legislation has passed. Regardless, with what is evident in the literature and what was clearly apparent in the media, I would have thought teachers would have raised this issue rather than convey comfort and even silence on the matter.

Having discussed religion in public schools in general, this portion of the chapter turns to a specific deliberation on how to teach about religion. Asani (2011) summarized the approaches as devotional, textual and contextual. A devotional approach involves understanding religion in terms of the doctrines, rituals and practices of a religious tradition. As evident in my interpretation of participant interviews and curriculum documents shared with me, all four teachers approach teaching religion by comparing and contrasting beliefs and practices. Connor adds a dimension of independent study and

Nina welcomes guests into the classroom to further this approach. D. L. Moore (2007) cautioned though, that this adopts a method that is ahistorical with traditions being presented as “timeless, uniform, and unchanging systems of belief” (p. 69) that are separate from other aspects of human experience (D. L. Moore, 2010b).

In a textual approach to teaching about religion, Asani (2011) described understanding religion through scriptures, cautioning against the exclusive use of a de-contextualized and static approach to exploring religion. Although teachers introduce the Quran as the sacred text in Islam, Nina, Joan, Len and Connor do not examine verses from the Quran when they teach about Islam, nor do they do this for other religions that have scripture.

My opinion of the ideal approach adopts a cultural studies lens to teaching about religion. It is based on Diane Moore’s efforts with the American Academy of Religious Studies and through her own research and teaching. In this approach, the complex web of cultural, social, economic and political factors affecting religious belief and practice are part of the exploration (D. L. Moore, 2007, 2008, 2010a, 2010b). Thus, “students encounter religion as they study history, literature, art, music, social studies, world civilizations, geography” (Asani, 2011, p.2). With the way World Religions is positioned in Alberta provincial curriculum, it is evident that students do not encounter religion in any substantial way, in subjects other than World Religions. Also, the path taken by teacher participants in this study by and large does not use a cultural studies approach to teaching World Religions. The course is framed as a comparative course on religion using the method of learning about religions through a sequential exploration of beliefs, doctrines and practices. For example, when Islam is taught, the five pillars are an integral

part of the exploration along with an understanding of Prophet Muhammad, basic Shia/Sunni interpretations and the Quran as sacred text for Muslims. The Alberta program of studies also does not frame the course with a cultural studies lens. It states that the purpose to study religion is to experience issues from a religious point of view and to study it as a distinct discipline in order to develop a philosophy based on ethical and moral behavior (Alberta Education, 2015). Overall, a contextual understanding of religion is not weaved extensively and consistently by teachers into World Religions curriculum and learning activities.

There are glimpses however of the value that teachers place on this approach. For example, Connor shares the importance of considering the broader culture that religion is embedded in. Furthermore he acknowledges diversity in Islam and that current events are a reflection of cultural practices and interpretations and not necessarily of Islam in of itself. These understandings manifest as discussions with his students when the group on Islam presents their findings. Joan discusses how religious communities express themselves through art with her students. Also, she introduces the course by examining how religious communities are responding to local issues such as homelessness. Thus one sees glimpses of teaching about religion by understanding the broader context within which it is embedded. Nina extends this beyond Canada and specifically as it relates to Islam. She asks her students to explore the economic, cultural and political landscape of countries that have predominantly Muslim populations. Len does not provide specific examples of using a cultural studies approach to teaching about religion however shares that he does explore current events and their connection to religious belief and practice. According to D. L. Moore (2007, 2010b), few teachers have had the opportunity to learn

about religion in a way that is appropriate for teaching in public schools and are now “teaching about religion in the context of deeply rooted and widespread religious illiteracy” (2007, p. 181). Upon spending time in conversation with teacher participants, I am hard pressed to claim they are religiously illiterate. Self-directed learning on the part of teachers, which supports Aown’s (2011) recommendation, shows teachers read, question, deliberate and have a sincere desire to learn and teach with the highest quality possible. Although their approaches demonstrate a cultural studies approach to learning about religion is not pervasive, it is most certainly sprinkled into the learning experience. Perhaps clearer direction from Alberta Education and increased support from the school district would help teachers develop capacity, comfort and further interest to teach this way.

Encountering Muslim students. Len and Connor frequently encounter Muslim students coming from diverse backgrounds while teaching about Islam. Their interactions are at times tense and teachers are faced with the perceived need to prove themselves and defend their positions. Niyozov and Pluim (2011) conducted a study with what they termed Western teachers working with Muslim students. They acknowledged that teachers are increasingly encountering “ethnic, socio-economic, linguistic, theological, and cultural diversity” (p. 638) of Muslim students along with the diverse ways in which they identify themselves, such as citizenship, race or branch in Islam. Therefore there isn’t one way of being Muslim and there aren’t universal considerations teachers can adopt in teaching Muslims. The authors questioned the prevalent view that teachers should be implicated in the marginalization of Muslim students. Preliminary findings from the Muslim Education Project, which the authors have led at Ontario Institute for

Studies in Education, University of Toronto, indicate that teachers do not contribute to the marginalization of Muslim students. In addition, teachers know much more now than ever before about Muslims and their religious, social, and academic needs. “Indeed many public school teachers are religious and they identify similarities between their and their Muslim students’ ideas and practices” (Niyozov & Pluim, 2011, p. 660).

The teacher participants’ experiences teaching Muslim students echo and challenge these findings. In support, from my conversations with Joan, Len, Connor and Nina, it is clear they do not conduct themselves in ways that marginalize or discriminate against Muslim students. The tense encounters between Len and Connor with their Muslim students in World Religions is largely in response to the confrontational nature with which some Muslim students approach their teachers, rather than preconceived notions teachers have of their Muslim students. My findings however, challenge Niyozov and Pluim (2011) in their claim that teachers know much more now than ever before about Muslims and their needs. First of all the teacher participants do not inquire with any great depth about their Muslim students’ perspectives, ideas and practices. What they learn about Islam and Muslim life experiences comes from books, websites, guests and hosts at Muslim places of worship. Second, Len in particular identifies significant differences in religious belief between his Muslim students and himself. While Len is reflective and appreciates learning, what he learns about Islam from his Muslim students and from self-directed learning leads to a strengthened Christian identity that is perceived to be at odds with Muslim identity.

My study gives a voice to teachers in what is relatively a new discourse on non-Muslim educators teaching Muslim students. It brings to the forefront the idea of having

conversations about religious identity with students and the impact of having Muslim students in class, on teaching and learning. Conversations about lived experiences being Muslim and religious for that matter, which may cause more challenging themes to surface, would result in relationships between diverse peoples that is characterized by deep equality and more meaningful understanding. This would hopefully carry over into broader society where learners are increasingly encountering diverse ways of being.

In summary, the sociocultural context of religion in Canada includes policy, culture and how religion is conceived in public spaces and schools. This affects conversations about religion, understandings of secular and tolerance and influences how religion is taught. The Canadian conception of religion forms the broader context within which adult learners are teaching and learning about Islam. In this latter half of the chapter I now narrow in on the learner who is learning, changing and possibly being transformed through their experiences. The discussion commences with a brief overview of transformational adult learning, which theoretically frames my study. The discussion moves on to delving into the contribution of emotion and religious conviction that teachers may or may not bring to their learning experiences. Subsequently, the chapter presents one teacher participant's journey that has features of transformational adult learning. Finally, the chapter closes by discussing implications of this study and a possible way forward.

Transformational Adult Learning

Learning is about change. Teacher participants have changed through their experiences teaching and learning about Islam. Not all learning however leads to deep change. Transformational learning is associated with a “deep shift in perspective”

(Cranton & Taylor, 2012, p. 3) and “substantial change” (Groen & Kawalilak, 2014, p.153). As a reminder from the review of literature on transformational adult learning, it assumes that adults construct meanings from their experiences and that they have the autonomy and ability to examine the perceptions they have of their experiences and revise them. A premise of the theory is that our perspectives, assumptions and beliefs are assimilated from our social and cultural world (Mezirow and Associates, 2000; Mezirow, 2012) and we have the ability to change them. The perspectives, assumptions and beliefs that teachers bring forth to their learning journeys are important to consider. These include beliefs, perspectives and outlooks in general, and those that are in particular related to Islam. Perspectives that are created from past interpretations and experiences (Mezirow & Associates, 2000) form teachers’ frames of reference. Frames of reference are assumptions and expectations and provide the contours by “which we choose what and how an experience is to be understood and appropriated” (Mezirow, 2012; Mezirow & Associates, 2000). They influence “thinking, beliefs, and action (E.W. Taylor, 2008, p. 5). After all, as Dirkx (2001a) reminded his readers: “What you learn is fundamentally grounded in the way you think about yourself and your world” (p. 15).

Teacher participants hold an array of understandings of Islam. Based on their experiences teaching about Islam, these understandings change, or they don’t change. In order to fully understand how and why this happens in a unique way for each teacher, I embark on an exploration of literature on emotion and learning, and non-learning to understand Connor and Joan’s learning journey. I delve into scholarship on religious conviction and adult learning in order to grasp Len’s learning. Finally, Nina encourages me to re-visit and further pursue literature on transformational adult learning. For all

teacher participants I explore the literature on the nature of frames of reference that support transformational adult learning.

Emotion and learning and non-learning. Connor's perspectives about Islam do not isolate the religion from the culture and context within which it is practiced. He readily acknowledges the role of history, culture and geopolitics in the creation of a diverse community of Muslims who express themselves in different ways. This is based on Connor's academic background and also his self directed professional development and personal interest. The previous chapter shared that Connor's perceptions and understandings of Islam did not change. If frames of reference provide the backdrop against which choices are made as to how an experience is understood, then it is foreseeable that Connor's existing extensive knowledge precludes him from learning substantially more. That is, there needs to be a sufficient gap in understanding which determines the need to acquire knowledge. Another possible reason that Connor does not acquire any significant changes in perceptions and understandings of Islam is that he engages with knowledge in a predominantly cognitive manner. Connor is emotionally and spiritually removed from belief in a religion. This may extend to the manner in which he learns. For example he responds to his Muslim students and to his lack of full understanding of Shia and Sunni Islam in a predominantly rational manner. Connor aims to understand without considering the spiritual and emotional aspects of identifying with one interpretation. He wants it to make sense. That being said, perhaps I did not create space in our dialogue to explore emotion with Connor. Instead it seems I inadvertently reinforced a rational approach to learning with the "use of reason and reflection to learn from the experience" (Dirkx, 2001, p. 63). I turn now to the role of emotions in

transformational adult learning in order to better understand Connor's learning journey, and to provide a gateway into Joan's learning journey.

Emotions are an important and valuable way in which we interpret and make meaning of our experiences (Clark & Dirkx, 2008; Dirkx, 2001b; Jarvis, 2006). They can be positive or negative (Groen & Kawalilak, 2014) and facilitate or impede adult learning experiences (Dirkx, 2001b; Jarvis, 2006; Kucukaydin & Cranton, 2012). Theory and practice in adult education shows a history of marginalizing emotion and focusing on rationality (Dirkx, 2000; Dirkx, 2001b; Dirkx, 2006; Dirkx, 2008; E.W. Taylor, 2001; Kucukaydin & Cranton, 2012; Yorks & Kasl, 2006). The manifestation of emotions was and is still regarded as a "potential disruption of the learning experience, (and) a need that has to be addressed before actual learning can take place" (Dirkx, 2006, p. 16). In fact emotion is regarded as having to be managed, controlled or redirected (Dirkx, 2001b).

The field of adult education is witnessing an increasing attention to emotional aspects of learning (Dirkx, 2001; Dirkx, 2008; E.W. Taylor, 2007). Taylor proposed that in reality, "without emotions rationality cannot work...Emotions can be understood as guiding the process of reasoning—or distorting them" (E.W. Taylor, 2001. p. 223). Thus for some scholars, emotion is not only an important dimension of the learning process, but also necessary for learning to occur. According to Dirkx (2001b), "significant and meaningful learning is fundamentally grounded in and is derived from the adult's emotional, imaginative connection with the self and with the broader social world" (p. 64) because it is this that will "inform us of deeply personal, meaningful connections that are being made within an experience" (p. 67).

An increased attention to the value and role of emotion is also evident in scholarship on transformational adult learning. Yorks and Kasl (2006) insisted that transformational adult learning must consider the learner as a whole person, which includes affective experiences. After all, how can deep change occur if all or some of a learner's emotion, spirituality and body are not involved? Dirkx (2006) suggested a way in which emotions are inherently involved in transformational adult learning. Critical reflection, which is an important phase in the learning process, invites a learner to consider and explore an alternative way of being in the world. This can be accompanied with feelings of guilt, fear, anger and other emotions. Therefore emotions are essentially part of critical reflection. Yorks and Kasl (2006) concurred because critical reflection and "bringing into consciousness and critiquing the taken-for-granted assumptions" (p. 60) involves emotions, and according to Baumgartner (2001), also involves working through them. However, although emotions are seen as essential to transformational adult learning, "little is known about how to effectively engage emotions in practice (E.W. Taylor, 2007, p. 188). Dirkx (2006) suggested approaching emotions literally "as windows that reveal experienced realities" (p. 17), or in a symbolic manner "as standing for a deeper, underlying personal or transpersonal issue that has been evoked" (p. 17). Regardless, both approaches require attention to underlying meanings that are shaping a learner's response. In fact, frames of reference themselves can be considered to be emotionally charged feelings rather than a set of beliefs (Dirkx, Mezirow & Cranton, 2006).

My aim in understanding changes in perceptions and understandings of Islam held by Connor and other teacher participants was not characterized by intentionally exploring

emotions associated with teacher experiences. As suggested by Dirkx (2001b), teachers could have been encouraged to ask and share: “What do these emotions feel like, remind me of? What other times have I felt this way; experienced these emotions? What was going on then? Who was involved in that incident?” (p. 69). Yorks and Kasl (2006) went further and suggested evoking emotion intentionally to really understand transformational learning. Perhaps Connor’s perceived lack of emotion is in reality my inability to provoke it, which would have led to a more comprehensive discovery of his changed perceptions and understandings of Islam.

I see great value in the consideration of emotion in transformational adult learning when I reflect on Joan’s learning journey. Unlike Connor, Joan appears to be fully invested emotionally when learning about Islam. Joan’s perspectives of Islam are based on challenging experiences with family. In addition she is spiritually committed when learning and teaching about Islam as demonstrated by her reference to esoteric messages of personal search found in Islam. Joan learns about Islam and is particularly moved by her experiences at the Shia Ismaili place of worship, however she does not experience deep change. Joan’s personal and challenging experiences with her family’s interpretation of Islam prevent her from changing her outlook. A consideration of the role of emotions in transformational adult learning is worthwhile when emotion seems to be lacking, but also when it is so evidently strong. Dirkx (2000) suggested the myo-poetic perspective of extra-rational transformational adult learning which leads one to “deep-seated emotional or spiritual issues and concerns” (p. 3). This enables the expression of what is difficult to express through words alone, through the use of images. Although Joan is forthcoming with her negative feelings about her son and daughter-in law’s

interpretation of Islam and her positive feelings at the Shia Ismaili jamathkhana, emotions could have been further elaborated on to deepen Joan's and my understanding of the meanings she attributes to her experiences. This can be challenging as Dirkx (2001a) affirmed since "We have many selves (and) in any given situation, we unconsciously identify with, and unknowingly act for, one or more of these selves" (p. 15). Joan is a mother, mother-in-law, teacher, learner, librarian and spiritual. Although she appreciates what she learns about Islam through World Religions she likely identifies at the time with her self as parent, and bases her perceptions on this sense of self. This supports the literature I reviewed on conceptualizing the self in terms of a changing, unfixed idea of self. A non-unitary self is a self in process, capturing its complex and multidimensional nature (Clark & Dirkx, 2000; Merriam & Clark, 2006; Rossiter & Clark, 2007).

Connor and Joan do not experience significant changes in their understandings and perceptions of Islam. Perhaps Connor's lack of emotion or my inability to probe into it is not the reason for unapparent changes in his perceptions and understandings of Islam. It is simply due to non-learning, which may also be the situation for Joan. Jarvis (2006) presented the phenomenon of non-learning as a real possibility for adult learners when exposed to something new or different, that is, a "disjuncture" (p. 7). Non-learning according to Jarvis (2006, 2012) can occur for a number of reasons. For example a person may simply refuse to consider new ideas. Negative experiences from one's past, lack of interest or ease with disjuncture are other reasons for non-learning. In addition, some adults may "recognize disharmony but do not need to seek to rectify it immediately" (Jarvis, 2006, p. 28). Finally, Jarvis (2006) elaborated non-learning can be characterized

by incidental learning that is not translated into knowledge, skills and attitudes. For example, Connor may learn something incidentally from his students who present on Islam and Joan possibly learns about the Quran from the perspectives of her Muslim student. This does not necessarily lead to change. Non-learning can be problematic when there isn't awareness of how one is responding to a disjuncture, which may prevent learning (Jarvis, 2012). Connor is willing to learn the difference between Shia and Sunni interpretations in Islam but he feels that explanations that he receives from his Muslim students are unsatisfactory. Perhaps the differences are multiple and various perspectives, including those of his students are required to understand fully. In sum, Connor may very well have simply experienced non-learning as it relates to Islam through the course, of which he already has strong knowledge.

Similar to Connor, Joan has prior knowledge and understandings of Islam, which forms her frames of reference. These also provide the backdrop and contours for how future experiences are interpreted. Once again, I ask: Do frames of reference have to reflect significant gaps in knowledge about Islam in order to be deeply changed? As scholarship in the field of adult education does not delve into this area, or what frames are more conducive to transformation in general, I deem it fitting that the area be supported with theorization and research in the field.

Religious conviction and learning. Teaching about Islam in the World Religions course is invariably influenced by teachers' religious and nonreligious orientations, which in turn are influenced through the teaching experience. The religious and nonreligious identities of teacher participants have changed over time. Connor was agnostic and is now an atheist. Joan and Nina identified themselves as Christian and now

call themselves spiritual. Prior to teaching the course Len's religious identity was characterized with small movements within Christian dominations. While teaching the course over the last five years however, Len's Christian identity has significantly strengthened. Changed religious orientations held by my teachers, supports the idea that identity is storied. A narrative identity "integrates the reconstructed past, perceived present and anticipated future" (Tennant, 2000, p. 93) as it "makes visible the construction and reconstruction of the various selves" (Merriam & Clark, 2006, p. 36) which are accommodating new perspectives. According to Rossiter and Clark (2007) this is empowering, as a storied life is open to interpretation with choice existing on how to imagine, interpret and construct self. Along with being dynamic and suggestive of change, narrative identity is sensitive to the social and cultural milieu within which it is being developed (Clark & Dirkz, 2000; Clark & Rossiter, 2008; Rossiter, 1999). The social and cultural context within which teachers are forming and re-forming their religious and non-religious identities is also showing great changes. As noted earlier in the chapter the religious landscape in Canada shows there are declines in Christianity, growth in non-Christianity and profound growth in identifying as non-religious. Canada's religious identity is narrative as well!

Len admits to bringing forth a limited understanding of Islam prior to teaching World Religions. He is open to learning more and chooses to pursue further learning when he encounters new ideas. In the World Religions course, Len is encountering Islam, a religion different than his own. Len's strongly held Christian belief is what he turns to when exposed to new learning about Islam. Although Len is keen to learn, he acquires negative perceptions of Islam. Is this because his Christian identity is challenged? The

field of adult education has not theorized, researched and published on the impact of religious convictions on learning about diverse religious traditions. Thus I turn to literature on interreligious learning to gain insight on Len's learning journey. I focus on Len in this discussion as his experience with interreligious learning leads to a uniquely strengthened Christian identity and negative perceptions of Islam. Do his frames of reference, which comprise a deep belief in Christianity, prevent positively oriented interreligious learning about Islam?

The primary preoccupation of scholars of interreligious education can be understood as a dilemma. How does one remain committed to one's particular religious identity and at the same time, open to those of diverse others (Boys, Lee & Bass, 1995; Collins, 1996; Mendes-Flohr, 2013)? On one hand is the need for religious commitment that emanates from a clear, rooted and particular identity. On the other hand is an identity that needs to become "ambiguous, adaptable, and pluralistic" (Boys, Lee & Bass, 1995, p. 257). Thus first, in order to have authentic and meaningful interreligious learning, it is important to have knowledge about one's own religious tradition and also to be committed to it (Boys, Lee & Bass; Collins, 1996). In a narration of their experiences learning about a religion different than their own, Charaniya and Walsh (2004) and Collins (1996) professed to the essentiality of a strong commitment to their religion. In addition, authors communicated a deepened understanding and commitment to their faith upon encountering religious difference. Len commences teaching the course with strong Christian beliefs that he is committed to and practices. His experiences support the literature and he too experiences a strengthened Christian identity.

In order for interreligious learning to be effective however, scholars of interreligious learning suggest that Len also needs to have openness to the religious commitment of Muslims to Islam. What does this openness entail? “Ultimately, interreligious learning requires humility” (Collins, 1996, p. 471). Mendes-Flohr (2013) presented humility as emanating from moral relativism, which is an uncertainty as to whether one’s religious tradition is exclusively the only way to believe and practice. At the core, Mendes-Flohr (2013) urged, is a common humanity and that we have “shared spiritual sensibilities” (p. 7). This is characterized according to Mendes-Flohr with a tolerance of the human being hidden behind the religion. Genuine tolerance leads to strong pluralism, carrying a message that each religion is of equal moral and spiritual values, versus weak pluralism in which all religions are the same (Mendes-Flohr (2013). This is supported by Boys, Lee and Bass (1995) and Collins (1996), who also conveyed that interreligious learning should not lead to relativism and a sense that all religions are in the end, the same. Focusing on similarity instead of exclusively on sameness or exclusively on difference can provoke the development of positive narratives about interreligious encounters (Beaman, 2014).

Boys, Lee and Bass (1995) developed an ‘interreligious learning model’ (IRL) with the hopes of supporting an educational method that allows for a balanced approach to religious particularity and openness to religiously diverse others. The scholars urged readers to consider the ability to converse as a required ingredient for positive interreligious learning. Although this is “labor-intensive and complicated and conflictual” (Boys, Lee & Bass, 1995, p. 259), it allows one to teach about their tradition in such a way that it fosters further dialogue. This dialogue is characterized by the ability of

teachers and students to articulate, listen, show respect, defend one's position and be willing to change if the evidence exists that warrants this. According to the authors, "Educationally, this comes under the rubric of 'transformative learning.' Theorist Jack Mezirow identifies six elements of transformative learning" (p. 261). The six elements described by Boys, Lee and Bass (1995) are: awareness of beliefs and feelings, critique of assumptions and premises, assessment of alternative perspectives, decision-making, taking action, and fitting new perspectives into one's context.

O'Keefe (2009) reported on a study using the IRL model when engaging in interreligious learning through dialogue. The findings resonate with my study in two ways. First, the author claimed learners need to be intentional about conversations, as they won't just happen. Allowing "each speaker to be the expert of their own insights or experience" (by asking) "how is this belief or practice valuable to you?" (O'Keefe, 2009, p. 209) is effective. In addition, avoiding controversy limits conversation. This seems to be the conundrum teachers who teach about Islam face. Conversations about personally held religious convictions of teachers and students might lead to the uncovering of controversial and challenging ideas that then have to be managed. So, they tend to be avoided by teacher participants in the classroom. However it is this very controversy and inquiry into lived experiences with religion that contributes to meaningful dialogue and interreligious learning. The second way in which findings resonate with my study is O'Keefe's (2009) observation of defense mechanisms being used by her participants. Apti (2009) shared that learners "may return and consolidate a previous frame of reference even more strongly, in the hope that it can be reinforced and will continue to remain valid. This is more likely to occur when the trigger raises doubts about central

aspects of a participant's identity" (p. 182). Len's reactions and experiences encountering Muslim students support this finding. As Boys, Lee and Bass (1995) claimed, conversations can be "complicated and conflictual" (p. 259) and Len holds, as many do, his religious identity with great conviction.

I am uncertain whether Len's deep belief in Christianity prevents positively oriented interreligious learning about Islam. Perhaps it is important to know whether the religious doctrines he believes in support moral relativism and deep pluralism (Mendes-Flohr (2013). Regardless, an important area of further research in the field of religious education and adult learning is the influence of religious and nonreligious frames of reference on one's learning journey.

Transformation. The discussion now turns to Nina's learning journey. Initially, Nina carried fairly narrow understandings of Islam. She had basic knowledge about rituals and practices from friends and understanding of current issues around the world from the media. Nina shares she thought there was only one type of Islam and that she is interested and very willing to learn. This forms part of her frames of reference. Nina learns that Islam is linked to other Abrahamic traditions and there are diverse communities of interpretation in Islam. She examines her assumptions with feelings of surprise. She reflects on why she imagined only one type of Islam when there are many interpretations and expressions in Christianity. An important phase in transformational adult learning as depicted in my literature review is critical reflection. Critical reflection is the questioning of deeply held assumptions and beliefs, usually prompted when one becomes aware of conflicting thoughts, feelings, actions (E. W. Taylor, 2009). These include reflecting on content (what we perceive, think, feel, act), process (reflecting on

how we perform functions of perceiving) and premise (awareness of why we perceive). Nina's reflection on her assumption that Islam is a monolith is an example of critically reflecting on content.

Nina's critical reflection leads to changes in her outlook and aspects of her teaching practice. For example based on her experience at the jamatkhana, Nina develops a class assignment that has students research various countries in which Muslims reside to study the interplay between religion, culture, politics and economics. This may not have happened immediately for as Aпти (2009) proposed, "Initial actions based on a transformed frame of reference are often quite tentative and exploratory" (p. 184). Nina has visited the jamatkhana and heard from the same hosts several times over the five years she has taught the course and since her "experiments indicate positive possibilities, the participant is more likely to continue to develop and test the transformed frame of reference" (p. 185).

Thus, Nina gains knowledge and skills in orienting the course to reflect an Islam that is connected to other traditions and an Islam that is lived and practiced in different ways. Her misperceptions change and new understandings arise. Nina willingly shares her learning about Islam with her Muslim friend. She shares that Jesus is a prophet in Islam. It is through dialogue that Nina may be creating "conditions that support and provoke (further) self-reflection and critical reflection" (Cranton & Taylor, 2012, p. 200). She also continues to teach about Islam in a manner that reflects changes in her understanding. There are signs that transformational adult learning is occurring. Mezirow's 1978 study identified ten phases in the process of transformational learning (Mezirow, 2009, p. 19; Mezirow & Associates, 2000, p. 22). Nina's learning does not

follow the phases in order. She moves back and forth from experiencing new learning to dialogue to reflection and changes in practice in a non-linear manner. This mirrors Apte (2009) who has found in studies with adult learners “that transformative learning rarely occurs sequentially” (p. 172). In reality, disorienting dilemmas can be drawn out and experienced over again through several episodes that eventually converge (Baumgartner, 2001). This points to transformational adult learning that is occurring gradually and in a non-linear manner.

Along with a non-linear characteristic to Nina’s learning, is the incremental nature of her transformational learning. It is not a sudden and dramatic transformation. Rather it occurs over the five years of teaching the course, occurring incrementally through a series of progressive transformations (Mezirow, 2009; Mezirow & Associates, 2000; E. W. Taylor, 2008). According to Brookfield (2000), learning can only be transformational if it is epochal in that there is a major shift in one’s assumptions and a “fundamental questioning a reordering of how one thinks or acts” (p. 139). E. W. Taylor (2001) also suggested that transformation be understood as a significant event of a personal nature. Kegan (2000) on the other hand, conceived the idea of dramatic change as moving beyond informational learning to a change in the way one knows. Thus, according to Kegan transformation in its truest sense is probably occurring gradually, through several shifts and successive changes. Dirkx (2001a, 2006), Dirkx, Mezirow and Cranton (2006) and Formenti and Dirkx (2014) agreed that extraordinary events are not necessary for transformative learning. Furthermore, “nor does it always require that we think deeply and analytically about our beliefs and assumptions” (Dirkx, 2001a, p. 16). Lange (2012) maintained the view that transformation should be considered as a series of dynamic,

non-linear changes rather than one significant epochal change as the “potential for transformation may always be occurring through small daily choices” (p. 203) that ultimately accumulate to make transformation more visible. Nina’s learning journey is characterized by consistent reflection and dialogue. Her incremental transformation involves objective and subjective reframing (Dirkx, Mezirow & Cranton, 2006). Objective reframing is task oriented and is reflected in changes Nina makes in her teaching practice. Subjective reframing is self-reflective and manifests in Nina’s premise reflection on her previous assumptions about Islam. According to Formenti and Dirkx (2014) the shift in one’s perspective as a result of deep learning is due to the development of a connection. The connection that develops is between what one has known, and what has been unknown, “potentially challenging his or her way of being in the world” (p. 127). Nina makes a connection between what she considered Islam to be, a monolith, to what she now understands it to be. That is, a religion followed by culturally diverse Muslims who interpret in diverse ways and who are influenced by the context within which they believe and practice. With this new understanding and connection, she is challenged to be a different teacher and a different person.

My aim in this study was to use storytelling because ultimately, narratives are how we make meaning of our experiences (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Clark, 2001, 2010; Clark & Rossiter, 2008; Rossiter & Clark, 2007; Merriam et al., 2007; Rossiter, 1999; Tennant, 2012). Also, Tyler and Swartz (2012) poignantly described how storytelling fosters transformational learning. Storytelling, which the authors defined as the oral conveyance of experience, is dynamic, organic and emergent. Due to these characteristics, storytelling serves as a bridge between the space in which habitual and

unquestioning habits have been assimilated and influence us, and the space in which they are given language, lived and reflected upon. The bridging effect allows for new connections and thus new possibilities. Although my intention was to have participants share their stories and then reflect on the impact of doing so, in reality I could not generate data on this. This was in large part due to inadequate time with participants. My study remains a narrative inquiry. I collected and viewed data as short stories, from which I developed narrative portraits and a thematic analysis that was narrative. However, I need to reserve studying the contribution of narrative to transformational adult learning for the future.

What is compelling to me is that Nina is acquiring religious literacy. Religious literacy, as shared previously, can be defined as a basic understanding of the world's religious traditions, the internal diversity of expressions and beliefs within each tradition and the role of religion in social, cultural and political life (D. L. Moore, 2007, 2008, 2010). What is contributing to her transformation? First, Nina holds new understandings of Islam through teaching the course, in which she learns about diversity in the Muslim community and the lived and contextually specific experiences Muslims have. Second, Nina's frames of reference are characterized by relatively little understanding of Islam, a willingness to learn and a spiritual outlook that is open to difference. In her study of transformational adult learning, Apte (2009) indicated that one's "previous knowing, strategies and personal strengths may be blocking the emergence of new solutions" (p. 170). Conversely, it could very well be that previous knowledge and one's demeanor may facilitate the emergence of transformed beliefs and perceptions. This is an important area for the field of adult education to continue to engage in, as it would contribute to better

understanding of transformational adult learning that does not occur in isolation of what one brings to the learning experience, including one's existing knowledge, emotions and religious or nonreligious self.

A Way Forward

Through this research study, I have discovered, interpreted and presented experiences of teacher participants, who are adult learners. It is therefore understandable that the two major implications of my study I describe below, reside in the field of curriculum studies and teaching, and in the field of adult education.

Teachers are teaching about Islam in interesting and challenging times. Although it seems conversations about religion are not prevalent in public space, there is a heightened consciousness of radical and resurgent movements in Muslim societies and the impact of these broadly and also in Canada. There is increased awareness of the repercussions that arise when religious beliefs intersect with equality, freedom of speech and rights of women. Recent examples include the crisis with the Charlie Hebdo magazine and some Muslim women wanting to wear the niqqab at the Canadian citizenship ceremony. How do teachers best explore complicated issues that have a religious component in an appropriate manner with their students? A World Religions class has the potential to nurture religious literacy in learners. A cultural studies approach to teaching about Islam, along with other religions, can develop critical skills in students that help them understand current events in the multidimensional manner that they exist. In order to develop such an approach teachers need the opportunity to dialogue, share and learn informally and more formally through professional development strategies. The two teachers in my study who were able to commit to a focus group interview greatly valued

the opportunity provided to them to share their experiences and ideas. Adults learn best when learning is connected to their needs, to their experiences and to other learners. The movement to redevelop and revitalize curriculum and teaching on the part of Alberta Education provides a timely opportunity to explore, with teachers, how best to teach and learn about World Religions.

It would be wise for Alberta school districts and the public schools that fall under them, to understand how their teachers conceive ideas and terms such as secular, tolerance, equality and interreligious learning. The diverse ways in which these terms are understood has impact on teaching and classroom experiences. In a country and world in which we are increasingly encountering diverse others, the understanding and practice of these terms shape how we live, work and study together.

In the field of adult education, there has traditionally been a focus on Christian traditions and their role in the empowerment of citizens. Researching adult learning and other religions, such as Islam, as this study has endeavored to do, in of itself provides a basis for further research. Also, there is a tendency for research and scholarship in transformational adult learning to focus on what happens after a learner encounters a new idea, person, situation, disorienting dilemma or disjuncture. What about what a learner brings forth to their learning journey? My exploration in this study recognizes what existing understandings of Islam and religious and non-religious identities teachers bring to the classroom. These outlooks, beliefs and experiences greatly inform teaching and teacher responses to learning. The nature of frames of reference that adult learners have and the impact of these on learning is an area requiring further development in the field of adult education. For example, as it relates to transformational adult learning, it is

important to explore the impact of frames of reference that are characterized by strong religious conviction or no religious conviction on learning about a different religion. The contribution of emotion or lack thereof to transformational adult learning is also an important consideration; thereby ensuring adult learning is viewed in the multidimensional way that it occurs. Furthermore, the field of adult education would benefit from further research on the impact of narrative learning on transformational adult learning. I shared extensively in chapter two, that narratives can be re-structured to accommodate for change and can play a role in supporting changes and their expression. Although there is ample evidence of theorization, there are minimal studies to understand the consequences of connecting this model, theory and approach to learning.

Lastly, although adult learning and spirituality is being increasingly explored in adult education, increased efforts are needed in the area of religion and adult learning. Most of the scholarship on religion and adult learning finds a home within a particular religious tradition. In the interesting times we are living in, there would be great benefit in exploring interreligious learning and the tensions, challenges and potential benefits associated with this.

Conclusion

The complexities of religion and Islam in particular, in a multicultural and secular society are all around us. Most recently, Webber Academy, a private school in Calgary was in violation with the Alberta Human Rights Commission. When Muslim boys started praying in a corner or outside in the playground because a separate sacred space was not available to them, their re-enrolment the following year was not accepted. Conversations about lived experiences with religion do not occur readily between students, teachers,

colleagues, friends and neighbors. Those conversations that do enter public space more recently, are related to managing religious diversity and religious freedom, such as the above example of religion in a Calgary school. What do adult learners know about Islam and how do they know it? After all, Muslim experiences, amongst others, are part of human experiences and part of all of us. How can we come to learn about and from one another so that we can rejoice in deep equality and religious literacy? As a woman of faith, I relate to Ben Okri:

To be truly religious does not require an institution, it requires terror, faith, compassion, imagination, and a belief in more than three dimensions. It also requires love. Religion touches us at the place where imagination blends into the divine (Okri, 1997 p. 3).

As my participants have, I too have moved across time and space. I have changed through coming to know my teacher participants. I knew theoretically that as adult learners they bring forth experiences. I now know emotionally, viscerally and spiritually that their experiences and orientations inform and are informed by teaching about Islam. I thank them for taking on the valuable work of teaching about Islam. Religion is seen as part of the problem in what is happening around the world when in fact, it should contribute to the solution. As Karen Armstrong (2010) reminds me, “it is hard to think of a time when the compassionate voice of religion has been so sorely needed” (p. 5).

In my opening chapter I shared my desire to tell and re-tell a story from the Ojibway First Nations tradition, narrated by Wagamese (2010). I end for now, with a retelling of the story.

One cold winter day a chickadee was hopping along and came under a beautiful tamarack tree. The small bird sought shelter and warmth from the grand, tall tree.

However the tamarack tree refused to help a creature so tiny. The bird, shivering and cold, walked along and came upon a pine tree. Looking up, the chickadee asked for warmth. Immediately, the pine tree lowered its branches and provided the bird with shelter and warmth. The story goes on that the Creator was watching. The Creator turned to the tamarack tree and told it that due to its pride, the tree would stand tall and beautiful however would lose its leaves every winter. The tree would stand beautiful, but bare. To the pine tree the Creator said, for compassion shown, it would retain its needles. In addition, its lowermost branches would be permanently inclined to the ground as a sign of its humility.

I value this story. It is my constant as I move, learn, teach and change across time and space. The value of stories, of diverse traditions as sources of wisdom and of coming to know those different than me are timeless and have no boundary.

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Appendix A: Sample guide for narrative interview

Every person's life experiences can be written as a story. I would like you to think about your experience teaching about Islam as if you were telling a story. I'm going to ask you questions along the way to help you think about the experiences you have had like the parts of a story.

- Every story starts with an opening scene. When and how did your story begin?
- What has happened between the opening scene and today? Try and share three experiences you have had teaching about Islam that will help you tell me your story. Of course these can be positive and/or negative and/or neutral.
- Are changes in perceptions and understandings you hold of Islam part of your story? What has changed? How? Why do you think this has happened?
- Add your religious or non-religious identity as a story within the overall story you are telling me now. Has this mini-story changed due to the experience of teaching about Islam? If so, how?
- Please place the story you have told me within a larger story of religion in Canada. What is your sense of the conversations we have about religion in society and in schools?
- What do you envision for teaching about Islam in schools?
- Lastly, how does your story end?
- What should I have asked you that I didn't think to ask?

Appendix B: Sample guide for focus group interview

Narrative interview:

Last time you shared your story about your experiences teaching about Islam with me. I would like to further understand these experiences and capture any others you may have had. In addition, sharing your story with the group will provide some background that will help us engage in some conversation toward the latter half of our time together.

Please share your story about your experiences teaching about Islam with the group. You may include changes in perceptions and understandings of Islam you have experienced and the impact of teaching about Islam on your own religious or nonreligious identity.

Informal conversational interview:

You now have an opportunity to seek clarification from each other, share ideas, agree or disagree and engage in some conversation. Who would like to start us off?