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# Christian Privilege and Oppression in Canadian Public Schools

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UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY

Christian Privilege and Oppression in Canadian Public Schools

by

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A THESIS

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## **Abstract**

There is evidence that the Christian religion has privilege in Canadian public schools. This is problematic in a multicultural country where people of various faiths reside. This research explores the manner in which Christian privilege exists and promotes a certain message in public schools. Thirty-two individuals were interviewed, including students, parents, educators and administrators in an effort to access many experiences. Using thematic analysis, specific themes emerged and were examined and categorized. Findings support that there is a place for religion in public schools, but not when it marginalizes or inflicts specific beliefs onto anyone, particularly students. Instead, teaching about religion from a non-biased perspective should be included as meaningful and purposeful instruction. A multicultural model of education is proposed in order to create safe schools grounded on inclusion, and offer meaningful instruction where many world views are embraced, challenged and celebrated in order to create informed global citizens.

**KEY WORDS:** Christian privilege, hegemony, religion and education, teaching about religion, multiculturalism, global citizenship

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FAREWELL! It's time to get healthy again!

## Table of Contents

Abstract .....	ii
Acknowledgements .....	iii
Dedication .....	iv
Table of Contents .....	v
<b>Chapter 1: Introduction to the Topic &amp; Theoretical Framework .....</b>	<b>1</b>
1.1 Background .....	1
1.2 Definitions .....	5
1.3 Assumptions .....	8
1.4 Theoretical Framework: Critical Theory .....	9
<b>Chapter 2: Review of the Literature .....</b>	<b>13</b>
2.1 Introduction .....	13
2.2 A Review of Current Research .....	13
2.3 An Overview of Religion in Canadian Public Schools .....	24
2.4 A History of the Role of Religion in Canada .....	32
2.5 Canada as a Multicultural Country .....	44
<b>Chapter 3: Methodology .....</b>	<b>50</b>
3.1 Background .....	50
3.2 Accessing the Setting .....	51
3.3 Understanding the Language and Culture (and Religion) of the Respondents .....	52
3.4 Deciding How to Present Oneself .....	53
3.5 Locating an Informant .....	53
3.6 Gaining Trust & Establishing Rapport .....	53
3.7 Collecting Empirical Material .....	55
3.8 Analyzing & Interpreting Empirical Data .....	55
3.9 Concerns and Considerations .....	57
<b>Chapter 4: Findings .....</b>	<b>59</b>
4.1 Justification .....	59
4.2 The Teachers .....	60
4.2.1 Teachers Responses: Religion in the Classroom .....	61
4.2.2 Teachers Perspectives on Religious Privilege .....	65

4.2.3 Inclusion and Religion .....	69
4.3 The Parent Perspective .....	70
4.3.1 Should Children Be Learning About Religion in Schools? .....	78
4.3.2 A Different Perspective: A Private Religious Education .....	80
4.3.3 Christian Privilege: Catholic Schools .....	82
4.3.4 Parental Perspectives: A Loss of Privilege? .....	83
4.4 The Students .....	84
4.4.1 Conversations Around Religion: Celebrations and Holidays .....	85
4.4.2 Students Perspectives: Should Children Learn About Other Religions? ....	85
4.5 The Administrators .....	87
4.5.1 Christmas, Celebrations and Public Schools .....	88
4.5.2 More Perspectives on Christian Privilege .....	94
4.5.3 Religion and Inclusion .....	102
4.6 Other Emerging Themes: Parent Voice and Power .....	107
4.7 Conclusion .....	108
<b>Chapter 5: Analysis .....</b>	<b>110</b>
5.1 Implications .....	111
5.1.1 Implications for the Education Profession .....	114
5.1.2 Implications for Parents .....	118
5.1.3 Implications for Students .....	119
5.2 Other Emerging Themes .....	120
5.2.1 Christmas and Other Celebrations in Canada .....	121
5.2.2 Samaritan’s Purse and Operation Christmas Child in Public Schools .....	122
<b>Chapter 6: Conclusion .....</b>	<b>125</b>
6.1 Limitations .....	126
6.1.2 The Challenge of Teaching About Religion in Public Schools .....	129
6.2 Directions for Future Research .....	132
6.3 Concluding Comments .....	134
References .....	136
Appendix A: Interview Questions (Students, Parents, Teachers Administrators) .....	145
Appendix B: Interview Questions (Other Parents) .....	149

## **Chapter 1: Introduction to the Topic & Theoretical Framework**

### **1.1 Background**

Many public elementary schools across Canada claim to offer inclusive education programs where students from various cultures, races and belief systems attend, creating a diverse place of learning in which all individuals are recognized, valued, and respected. However, when examined closer, this is not necessarily the case. Schools are microcosms of the society in which they exist. Meaning, the societal norms and expectations, power dynamics and relationships that are prevalent in the larger society can be seen within the walls of Canadian public schools. While some may claim that Canadian public schools are secular places that honour a multicultural society and the many cultures and religions that make up the Canadian mosaic, I contend that public schools are actually places where privilege and oppression exist, often so entrenched in our societal norms and institutions that these conditions are difficult to identify.

In Canadian society, the Christian religion is deemed “normal,” making its followers a privileged group. This makes sense, as it was individuals that adhered to the Christian religion who colonized Canada. In 1871, for example, 98 percent of the population belonged to one of two major denominational groups – Protestant or Catholic Christian – and this was true for 96 percent of the total population as recently as 1951 (Statistics Canada, *Religious Groups in Canada*, 2001, p. 3). However, as we live in a multicultural society that continues to become increasingly more diverse, Canadians should become aware of the people, cultures, and belief systems that make up our country. The 2001 Census, 2011 National Household Survey and recent subsequent publications by the Policy Research Initiative pertaining to the existence of religion in Canada indicates that the number of Christian adherents continues to decline, while those who follow “other” religions, such as Islam, Buddhism, Judaism, and have no religious affiliation are on the rise. According to a publication by Statistics Canada, *Religious Groups in Canada* (2001),



in 1999, 30 percent of Canadians said they belonged to one of the Protestant denominations, but this was down from 41 percent in 1981 and around 50 percent in both 1951 and 1961. There has been an increase in the proportion of Canadians reporting they are affiliated with a religion other than Catholic or Protestant. In 1999, 6 percent of the population said they belonged to a group other than Catholic or Protestant, up from 4 percent in 1981 (p. 4). The latest data pertaining to specific religious demographics in Canada was collected in the 2011 National Household Survey, which was released in 2013. Prior to that, information about religious affiliation was from the 2001 Census. Data about religious affiliation in Canada is collected every ten years. In 2001, the percentage of Christians (Catholic, Protestant, Orthodox, and Christian in general) was 77 percent, with Catholics being the majority, followed next by Protestant Christians. The next largest group was those with no religious affiliation, in the amount of 16.5 percent of the total population. Finally, “other” religions, made up of Islam, Buddhism, Judaism, Sikhism, Hinduism, and other Eastern Religions made up 6.5 percent of the population (Statistics Canada, 2001). In 2011, according to the 2011 National Household Survey, the total population of Christian adherents was 67 percent, those with no religious affiliation was 23 percent and the remaining 10 percent was made up by a number of different belief systems, including: Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, Wicca, Taoist, Humanism, and a vast number of others too long to list here. It is clear that Canada’s diversity continues to evolve, as is evident by the decline in Christians, and the growth of numerous other groups — both faith and non-faith based. It is also worth mentioning that the 2011 National Household Survey was far more inclusive of specific religious groups and sub-groups, perhaps a sign that officials are more aware of the diversity within religious groups. A report published in 2009 by the Policy Research Initiative entitled, *Understanding Canada’s “3M” (Multicultural, Multi-linguistic and Multi-religious) Reality in the 21st Century*, identifies

opportunities and pressures for fostering inclusive citizenship in multicultural Canada (p. ii). One of their findings is that the process of dealing with multicultural diversity needs to change as social realities change (p. ii). It goes further, acknowledging that religious diversity is a major part of Canadian society and is a topic that needs to be revisited. Essentially, as Canadian society continues to become more diverse, multicultural policies and practices need to be examined in an effort to ensure that they are meeting the needs of all citizens. This includes religion.

Canada was the first country in the world to embrace multiculturalism as an official policy. Adopted in 1971, this policy works to ensure that all Canadian citizens are valued and granted dignity, regardless of their race, religion, ethnicity, language or background. According to Citizenship and Immigration Canada (2012):

Multiculturalism ensures that all citizens can keep their identities, can take pride in their ancestry and have a sense of belonging. Acceptance gives Canadians a feeling of security and self-confidence, making them more open to, and accepting of, diverse cultures. The Canadian experience has shown that multiculturalism encourages racial and ethnic harmony and cross-cultural understanding. (n.p.)

The conversation around multiculturalism and diversity continues to be relevant today. On January 21, 2016, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau spoke at the World Economic Forum in Switzerland. The video, focusing on the role of education in promoting diversity, was shared on various news and social media sites. In it, he says:

Instead of looking at multiculturalism as a whole bunch of a mainstream cultures going into a school gym on a given day and going to different booths and sampling samosas here and going to see a Berber dance over here... we have instead the entire school celebrating Diwali, the Festival of Lights. Or looking up your Chinese Horoscopes, or talking

about how to support your friends going through Ramadan. The range of experiences become the mainstream in Canada. For me, that happens in our public schools; that happens within our education, and that is, for me the answer when people say, ‘these folks aren’t integrating into our value systems quick enough.’ For me, how we ensure that education gives people the tools to understand that you don’t have to choose between the identity that your parents have and being a full citizen of Canada... these are things that do not weaken the fabric of who you are and the society you belong to. And it’s not easy; that’s why you can’t do it over night, but that’s where a diverse, open and inclusive education system and open circle of friends is what we have to work towards in our communities.”  
(The Star News, January 21, 2016)

In this study, I address Christian privilege and explore its effects on Canadian public schools, a topic that is rarely discussed in Canada. I examine a variety of examples of Christian privilege, specifically in Alberta. Through the lens of critical theory, I examine the creation of knowledge and what is deemed worthy of knowing, not only in Canadian society, but specifically in Canadian public schools. Reviewing the work of social justice scholars and their research in the field of privilege and oppression allows me to delve into a topic that unconsciously or overtly may affect every single Canadian. I explore various legislative documents, including School Acts, and other government policies that pertain to this topic, as well as review various documents outlining Canada as a multicultural country and how religion and culture are considered in that. Finally, in an effort to access the experiences of various stakeholders, I interview public school students, public school teachers, parents of children who attend public school and public school administrators. An interview with a parent who has purposefully chosen an alternative to public education is also included in this study. The final two chapters will be a review of my

findings and solutions brought forward to create an inclusive education model that includes religion and culture. As Sensoy (2008) writes, “we must work at making visible that which is cloaked” (p. 329). It is my intent to draw attention to an issue that affects all Canadians regardless of their belief systems, and it is my hope that through awareness and education, our diverse schools can become places of inclusion, including religion and culture, and less divisive towards the minority.

## **1.2 Definitions**

Much like defining “religion,” arriving at a definition of “Christian” that satisfies everyone proves to be challenging. When one speaks of the Christian religion, the following groups are included: Protestant Christians (Baptist, Anglican, Lutheran, Methodist, Presbyterian, Pentecostal, Mennonite, Adventist, and other forms of Evangelical), Catholics (Roman and Ukrainian), Orthodox Christian (such as Greek, Serbian, Ukrainian), Coptic Christians, as well as those groups often considered to be more on the periphery such as Latter Day Saints, Seventh Day Adventists and Jehovah’s Witnesses. Although vastly different, these are groups who believe in Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior and adhere to the teachings of the Old and New Testament. Minority (religious) groups in Canada include non-Christian groups: Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Wicca and other spiritual religions, and even agnostics and atheists. Even combined, these latter groups hold less power than the Christian adherents in Canadian society, as demonstrated earlier by the percentage of Christian followers.

Privilege is a social construction in which one group (the dominant group) holds power over another or others (the minority group). The beliefs and values of the dominant group are made to be “normal.” What is unique in this “relationship” is the fact that members of the dominant group do not need to do anything in order for this oppression to occur as it is naturally built

into society and considered “normal.” For example, in North American society being identified as racialized White or “Caucasian” is “normal.” As such, these people can move with great ease through society, whereas people of other ethnicities deemed racialized “non-White” historically have not been able to and still encounter prejudice and discrimination as a result of their race or ethnicity. As Sensoy and DiAngelo (2012) explain, “to oppress is to deny a social group full access and potential in a given society” (p. 39). Peggy McIntosh (1988) describes the normalized White and male privilege as being an “invisible knapsack” that people wear which allows them to move seamlessly through society (p. 1). Christian privilege works in the same way. In Canada, Christianity as an institutional power oppresses non-Christians as the minority group, without even trying to do so.

Christian hegemony unites the Christian majority by deeming their beliefs and practices to be “normal.” Hegemony is the idea that a certain ideology maintains control in society (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012, p. 50). Canada was founded on Christian principles and ideas that are perpetuated by the current Christian majority, thus allowing the Christian belief system to be normalized into Canadian society. Blumenfeld and Jaekel (2012) provide a succinct explanation of how this works:

Christian hegemony is the overarching system of advantages bestowed on Christians. It is the institutionalization of a Christian norm or standard, which establishes and perpetuates the notion that all people are or should be Christian thereby privileging Christians and Christianity, and excluding the needs, concerns, ethno/religious cultural practices, and life experiences of people who are not Christian. Often overt, though at times subtle, Christian hegemony is oppression by intent and design, but also it comes in the form of neglect, omission, erasure, and distortion. (p. 196)

Christian privilege is evident in the hallways, classrooms and teachings of Canadian public schools. Some examples of Christian privilege in Canadian public schools may include the following: Decorations at Christmas will undoubtedly include Christmas trees, reindeer and Santa, as well as red and green colour schemes. Students may bring home various Christmas crafts, including wreaths and cotton ball Santas. There could be a Christmas themed classroom door decorating contest; you may even find a Christmas tree decorated at the front of the school. A Christmas (or “Winter”) concert is always held at this time of the year. Finally, there is the fact that the school break coincides with Christmas. The claim by many is that Christmas is actually a secular holiday and that Christmas is a national holiday, which indeed, it is. While many celebrate Christmas as a secular holiday, it is in fact a Christian celebration, honouring the birth of Jesus Christ. This simply contributes to the claim that Christian privilege is inherent in Canadian society: No other religious group could have their holiday referred to as “secular” and openly practiced by the greater majority publicly.

There are visible forms of the presence of the Christian religion in public schools across Canada, some causing recent controversy. For example, in November, 2013, in Taber, Alberta, a parent filed a complaint with the Horizon School Division, stating that her child was disciplined for not knowing the words to The Lord’s Prayer (Gerson, 2013). In 2011, the same issue arose in the Sturgeon School Division in Saint Albert, Alberta (CBC News, October 13, 2011). In October, 2015, in Busby, Alberta, a similar situation arose in the Pembina Hills School Division, when a parent brought a concern forward regarding the recitation of the Lord’s Prayer. However, the public school at hand chose to be proactive in order to accommodate its students. Starting in Grade 1, children are assigned a “home base” room for morning announcements, the national anthem and the option of reciting the Lords’ Prayer (Zabjek, 2015). Most recently, in January

2016, Dusti Hennenfent, a mother in Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan, raised concerns over The Lord's Prayer being recited in her child's public school in the Prairie South School Division. She asked, "Is this is a school-sponsored religion? Is there recognition that not all students are Christian and if there's recognition of that, is the purpose that perhaps maybe they all should be Christian?" (Modjeski, 2016). After consultation with the parent community, it was determined that it was the will of the Lindale School community to continue reciting the Lord's Prayer during opening activities. In turn, Hennenfent started a petition asking for amendments to the Education Act (Modjeski, 2016). Students who do not wish to participate in prayer may be excused from the exercises or classes. It seems parents can argue in favour of diversity or claim that allowing Christian prayer in schools alienates non-Christians, but in the end the majority — often Christian or affiliated with Christian beliefs or those impartial to the issue — appear to have the loudest voice. While the majority of these public schools are a Christian majority due to their rural nature, it is apparent that this controversy is recurring year after year in many school boards.

### **1.3 Assumptions**

At this time, I would like to point out that schools have put forth many efforts to accommodate other minority groups — whether it be race, gender, physical or mental ability — at risk of it becoming a human rights issue. It is time for religion to be a factor in creating inclusive and safe places for our children. Imagine a school official telling the parent of a student using a wheelchair or crutches that they will not accommodate their needs by refusing to install a ramp, making the school inaccessible for that student. Consider the impact of a teacher informing a student with special learning needs that they can go work in a separate area while the rest of the class learns in the classroom. Differentiation and inclusive education must also include accommodating those students that do not fall under the religious or cultural majority, particularly since

Canada is becoming more diverse on a daily basis. There is no room for religious privilege in any public school classroom, just as there is no room for privilege of other forms. It is through awareness, critical thinking, and education that public schools can become a space for students where they feel safe, accepted and understood to express their religious identity, be it Christian or not.

#### **1.4 Theoretical Framework: Critical Theory**

Throughout this study, it is my intent to draw attention to the various ways Christian privilege can be found in Canadian public schools. The question that drives my research is: In what ways is Christian privilege present in the Canadian public school setting, and what are its effects? In addition, it is my intent to explore the following:

What is the role of legislation and policy as they pertain to religion in public education?

How is the religious demographic of Canada changing?

What are the perspectives/experiences of the majority and minority groups as they pertain to Christian privilege? (students, parents, educators, and administrators)

Is there a place for religion in the classroom, and if so, what is it?

I argue that there is a place for religion in public schools: through the academic study of religion — not by favouring or granting privilege to one particular group. By drawing awareness to both these topics, as well as conversing with interview participants, it is thought that people will begin to think critically about an issue that they may have little to no experience with. This is how change happens. As Jennifer, a parent said, “it’s not something I think about often.” Perhaps more Canadians need more opportunities to think about this topic?

Using Sensoy and DiAngelo’s (2012) article, “Two Dimensions of Thinking Critically about Knowledge,” the construction of what is deemed worthy of knowing, contributing to the



perpetuation of Christian hegemony in Canadian society, will be considered here. Their interpretation is based on Critical Theory, a form of scholarship that investigates how society works (p. 4). According to Sensoy and DiAngelo, knowledge is constantly changing and evolving and is dependent on the moment in history and the cultural reference point of the society that accepts it (p. 2). The first aspect of thinking critically about knowledge is the acquisition of new information that may challenge our common sense (p. 2). In other words, questioning the status quo and norms of any given society. The second feature is, understanding the meaning given to information (p. 2). Therefore, “knowledge” as it exists, must be understood in the cultural and historical context in which it came to be and is maintained. “Thinking critically requires the ability to recognize and analyze how meaning (knowledge) is socially constructed and infused with ideology. Critical thinking is not just acquiring new knowledge, it is also understanding the social dimension of knowledge” (p. 3). By following a critical framework, the creation and passing on of certain knowledge is examined critically. What is knowledge worthy, by whom and for what purpose is of importance. According to Giroux (1983), critical theory “points to a body of thought that is, in my view, invaluable for educational theorists; it also exemplifies a body of work that both demonstrates and simultaneously calls for the necessity of ongoing critique, one in which the claims of any theory must be confronted with the distinction between the world it examines and portrays, and the world as it actually exists” (p. 1). And finally, McLaren and Giarelli (1995) write, “critical theory is, at its center, an effort to join the empirical investigation, the task of interpretation, and a critique of this reality... to improve human existence by viewing knowledge for its emancipatory or repressive potential (p 2).

When we examine Christian privilege from the framework provided by Sensoy & DiAngelo (2012), one argues that by attaining new information about religion and culture (other than

the dominant one), not only are people becoming more aware, this begins the process of changing the power inherently possessed by the dominant group; the “other” has the potential to now become more normalized, understood and embraced. Inevitably, this will lead to societal change. As an example, the more that students know about religions and cultures, other than their own, and the more “normal” this becomes, the easier it will be for a “multicultural hegemony” to become the norm. If schooling is a way to sustain and extend societal norms, then what is deemed “normal” needs to change in order for all Canadian citizens to be considered, not just one group. The written curriculum (what is legislated as knowledge worthy) is a prime example of what could change, and the emphasis of the unwritten or hidden curriculum (what is taught indirectly) could be altered. Provincial curriculum could be critically examined to ensure that it is not White, Christian, and European focused, and instead is more inclusive of the many diverse groups that make up Canadian society. The unwritten curriculum, or what is passed on subconsciously, could also be altered so that educators and students engage in learning tasks that are more critical of social norms — this is social justice education. Additionally, what school boards and school administrators choose to pay attention to or focus on could be examined from a more critical lens. For example, in a school with a diverse student population, is it logical to only put up a Christmas tree and have a Christmas Concert, or does it make more sense to acknowledge the various celebrations that all the students and their families participate in? While it is true that change is happening, it is a feat to overcome the hundreds of years of tradition that have become institutionalized in our society.

For the sake of this study, it is important to mention Paulo Freire, whose work, *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), has been both influential and controversial in education and critical pedagogy. Freire writes of the relationship between the oppressor and the oppressed, and

how this struggle substantiates the other. Freire's principles of working collectively against oppression have influenced my research in that they allowed for critical reflection on the position of both the oppressed and the oppressor and the dialectical relationship they are in. Finally, one facet of critical theory that is extremely pertinent to this study is lived experience. Accessing the experiences of both minority and majority groups — all stakeholders in public education in Canada — is key to drawing attention to an issue that affects many Canadians. I will be including the words and experiences of numerous individuals, including, educators, administrators, students, and teachers, and will be examined and scrutinized later in this analysis. It is their words and experiences that help provide insight about how to move forward with this topic. The next section will focus on various literature and resources pertaining to Christian privilege, the history of religion and education in Canada, and multiculturalism as a policy in Canada.

## **Chapter 2: Review of the Literature**

### **2.1 Introduction**

The research and work of numerous social justice scholars and activists, plus various government policies and documents, are relevant to this study. This chapter is divided into three sections: a review of current literature pertaining to the topic of Christian privilege, an overview of Christian privilege in Canadian schools, including reference to school legislation and policies, and finally, an overview of Canada as a multicultural country. In the first section, I review existing research, as it pertains to the field of social justice, illustrating examples of Christian privilege mainly from American scholars and relating it back to Canada. The work of scholars, as their research pertains to Christian privilege and hegemony, as well as reactions to and some of the ways Christian privilege is denied is investigated. It is important to note that there is currently not a plethora of research pertaining to Christian privilege in Canada. In addition, solutions for an education model that addresses privilege and power dynamics is explored. The next section focuses on school legislation and various provincial documents that have contributed to the state of the current public school system, and reviews various examples of Christian privilege and religious oppression that currently exist in public schools. Finally, what defines Canada as multicultural, and many associated obstacles with being a multicultural country are examined

### **2.2 A Review of Current Research**

Religious oppression and dominance must be considered in the realm of social justice. I believe that as awareness increases more people will become conscious of religious privilege and the role it plays in social inequities. As Paul Kivel (2013) writes, “buried even deeper than policies and actions of institutions, there seems to be a dominant Christian worldview that has shaped and skewed Western culture so profoundly that it is difficult to delineate fully. We have

words for sexism, racism and economic inequality, but what would we even call the underlying, often hidden power of Christianity: Christianity? Christian dominance?” (p. 1) The Christian religion has played an important role in the creation and evolution of Western society, and as such, it cannot be ignored. Much like White privilege and male privilege has been and continues to be challenged, Christian privilege must be critically examined in an effort to create a society that is more just and fair.

The field or focus of religious privilege is a relatively new one. While research pertaining to various forms of privilege, including male and White privilege and diversity and multiculturalism are prevalent in the Canadian context, one has to look mainly to American scholars when investigating religious — Christian — privilege. Social justice researchers and activists are constantly breaking down barriers in order to draw attention to and educate about issues of inequity in society and culture. However, it is extremely difficult to do so when privilege, in whatever form, is accepted as the status quo, going unquestioned for decades or even centuries, becoming institutionalized and deemed “normal.” This is the case with Christian privilege in Canada. The oppressor and the oppressed both play an important role in maintaining this “normalcy,” as both internalize their place in this relationship as the norm, resulting in the perpetuation of the dominant power, and the marginalization of the oppressed group. As Warren Blumenfeld (2006) writes, “when people from minority groups do not see themselves or people from their community in the larger society, they start to feel that their identity is not valued, and they feel discriminated against and oppressed and view themselves through the eyes of the oppressor” (p. 199). And so, both the oppressed and the oppressor play an important role in this relationship.

The work of Peggy McIntosh, in particular, *White Privilege and Male Privilege: A Personal Account of Coming to See Correspondence Through Work in Women’s Studies*, is essen-

tial to any discussions about privilege. In it, she mentions that privilege (in this case she focuses on White and male privilege, but this can be applied to any form of institutional privilege), is like wearing an invisible knapsack that allows you to move with complete ease through society, with special provisions, assurances, tools, guides, codebooks, and so on (pp. 2-3). Those bestowed with such forms of privilege are taught not to recognize their privilege (p. 2). This is similar to Lewis Schlosser's (2003) research in which he suggests that, similar to a fish in its natural environment that does not recognize that it exists within water, Christians are not likely to know (or believe) that the environment is oppressive because that environment has never been oppressive to them for being Christian. Thus, Christian privilege is likely to be the result of Christianity being a non-conscious ideology (p. 47). Some specific examples of this can be found in Schlosser's "beginning list of Christian privileges," which mentions multiple examples of how Christians do not experience oppression, and instead can move through society with utmost ease. Some of his examples include:

I can be sure to hear music on the radio and watch specials on television that celebrate the holidays of my religion (#1); I can assume that I will not have to go to work or go to school on my significant holidays (#3); I can be sure that when told about the history of civilization, I am shown people of my religion who made it what it is (#5); I do not need to worry about the ramifications of disclosing my religious identity to others (#9); I can be sure when I hear someone talking in the media about g-d that they are talking about my (the Christian) g-d (#23); I can remain oblivious to the language and customs of other religious groups without feeling any penalty for such a lack of interest and/or knowledge (#26). (pp. 48-49)

This list supplies a multitude of examples of how Christian privilege exists and is prevalent in North American society. Kivel (2013) also includes a list of examples of Christian hegemony in the United States, such as:

Closing public and private buildings, services, stores and workplaces on Sunday rather than on Friday or Saturday, the Muslim and Jewish Sabbaths (for example); religious values underlying such groups as the Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts and twelve-step programs that provide what are often perceived as secular services. (pp. 11-12)

Kivel goes on to include a checklist citing how Christian dominance may impact citizens' lives. Some examples are:

You attended a Christian-based recreational organization as a young person, such as a church-based summer camp, or participated in a program of a non-religious youth organization based in Christian beliefs such as the Girl Scouts and Boy Scouts; You have taken Christian holidays such as Christmas or Easter off, whether you practice them as Christian holidays or not, or have taken Sunday off or think of it, in any way, as a day of rest; You have been given a school vacation or paid holiday related to Christmas or Easter when school vacations or paid holidays for non-Christian religious celebrations such as Ramadan or the Jewish High Holidays were not observed. (pp. 13-14)

These are just some of thirty-three examples included on the checklist.

Hegemony is a focus for many scholars and activists of religious privilege. Warren Blumenfeld (2006) defines Christian hegemony as:

The institutionalization of a Christian norm or standard, which establishes and perpetuates the notion that all people are or should be Christian, thereby privileging Christians and Christianity, and excluding the needs, concerns, religious cultural practices, and life

experiences of people who are not Christian. At times subtle, Christian hegemony is oppression by neglect, omission, erasure, and distortion. (p. 196)

Kivel describes hegemony as the everyday, systematic set of Christian values, individuals and institutions that dominate all aspects of US society (p. 3). He goes on to explain that a hegemonic society functions not just to establish a homogeneous way of thinking, but also to try to make any alternative disappear (p. 2). This is an important piece in my analysis of Christian privilege: we can use residential schools in Canada as an example. Established by Christian missionaries or churches, the goal of these schools was to educate the Indigenous people about the Christian way of life, and far too often, it was done coercively: children were taken from their parents, they were not permitted to speak their native language, their long hair was cut off, and they were not permitted to dress in their traditional clothing. They were forced to disengage with their culture and accept the new – Christian – way of life. This was a blatant attempt at making an “alternative disappear,” but one could suggest that the wide acceptance of Christian holidays, specifically Christmas in Canada, is another example. It is often the perception of new Canadians that if you live in Canada you celebrate Christmas, and so they set up a Christmas tree, decorate for Christmas, Santa brings presents, and so on. While this may seem like harmless fun, it demonstrates the pervasive nature of the Christian religion in this country. Christian hegemony has a profound effect on both the privileged group and the oppressed groups as it silently cultivates and embraces the subtle or not so subtleness of Christianity, making Christian practices the norm in Canadian society, and alienating non-Christian traditions. For example, our calendar is aligned with Christian holidays, but non-Christians are still expected to attend school or work on their days of celebration, or request special permission to observe or attend their own religious events. In elementary schools, in some instances, teachers will have students write letters to Santa, forgetting



that not every student in their class celebrates Christmas. Blumenfeld (2006) argues that, victims of marginalization and systematic oppression are susceptible to the effects of internalized oppression, whereby they internalize, consciously or unconsciously, attitudes of inferiority or “otherness,” and this can result in low self-esteem, shame, depression, hostility toward members of the dominant group, prejudiced attitudes towards members of their own religious community, and efforts to “pass” or to convert to membership in the dominant religion (p. 199). This is a reality pertaining to minority groups in public schools and something to be considered as this conversation continues.

A significant component in this dialogue is a focus on the denial of privilege. According to McIntosh, these denials can protect and "prevent awareness" about the type of privilege at hand (p. 2). Many Christians do not accept — and in fact, deny — that Christian privilege exists. I will revisit this issue later during the interview process, specifically while interviewing practicing Christians. Denial not only prevents awareness, it protects and propagates a societal norm, continuing the cycle of power and oppression. Since Canada was “founded” by Christians, Christian hegemony is accepted as the norm, the explanation that Canada is a "Christian nation" — and that the majority of the population is Christian — are often used to promulgate Christian privilege. This is true even when arguing against secular tendencies or efforts. Blumenfeld (2006) explains:

The effect of the so-called “secularization of religion,” in fact, not only fortifies but, indeed, strengthens Christian privilege by perpetuating Christian hegemony in such a way as to avoid detection as religion or circumvent violating the constitutional requirements for the separation of religion and government. Christian dominance, therefore, is maintained by its relative invisibility, and with this invisibility, privilege is neither analyzed nor scrutinized, neither interrogated nor confronted. (p. 206)

The secularization of Christmas is one such example. The fact that a Christian holiday has now become a secular one exemplifies that Christian privilege is alive and well in Canada, regardless of what is thought about it no longer being a “Christian holiday.” The perceived “War on Christmas” is another example of this. Some Christians feel “attacked” and that by wishing people, “Happy Holidays,” instead of “Merry Christmas,” this is an attempt to do away with Christmas. Blumenfeld (2013) explains that this is a common strategy in the psychology of dominant group denial. By labeling the targets of oppression as perpetrators, as with the terminology of “reverse discrimination,” those with privilege can feel secure in the belief that they are not the oppressors (p. 136).

As has been outlined, by default, Christians possess a certain level of entitlement. Through her investigation, McIntosh appears to struggle with the actual attributes of “privilege.” Privilege denotes being in a state of favour, or advantage, whether through birth or luck, inherently granting power. However, privilege brings with it a certain level of ignorance, dominance, and control, all of which McIntosh argues should not be referred to as desirable attributes (p. 12). And yet, like the fish in water metaphor mentioned earlier, it is often a challenge to see past one’s reality. The lists of Christian privilege examples from above indicate the level of power that Christians have in (Canadian) society. As will be outlined later, many of the Christian adherents whom I interviewed did not believe Christian privilege to exist, felt that they had to fight for what they had, and in some situations, felt discriminated against for being Christian. The interviews also provide evidence of the unfamiliarity of other cultures and religions, another indication of Christian privilege. Through no fault of their own, educated individuals simply do not have the awareness of this topic. It is not my intent with this research to “call out” these people; rather, it is simply to demonstrate that, due to the institutionalized nature of the Christian religion

in Canadian society, knowledge about religions other than Christianity is just not the norm. As an example, one interview participant referred to the religion/culture in India as “Hindi,” when that is in fact one of the many languages spoken there. Another example is when a participant commented about how she now knew more about that “celebration where they fast.” The name of the celebration, Ramadan, was given and she replied, “yeah, that’s the one.” Of course, these are extremely trifling examples, and actually demonstrate a greater knowledge than most, but it is rare to hear incorrect terminology when Christianity is concerned, just one more example of Christian privilege.

Relating Christian privilege to public education in Canada is the focus of this research, and yet, it appears that religious (namely, Christian) privilege is a topic relatively untouched in Canada. Most of the scholarship, at this time, is focused on the United States. Blumenfeld is a leading researcher on Christian privilege in the United States, and he has written numerous journal articles and co-edited a book on the same topic. Much of his research is focused on the ways teachers coming to the teaching profession can be educated about the implications and effects of Christian privilege on their student body. In *Exploring Levels of Christian Privilege Awareness Among Preservice Teachers*, Blumenfeld and Jaekel (2012) examine the level of understanding of Christian privilege found amongst preservice teachers who identify as “Christian” (p. 130). Teaching at a university with a student population from predominately small rural communities, with relatively little diversity, Blumenfeld explains that often times his students are reluctant to participate in dialogue that draws attention to power dynamics and social inequalities and the relationship between the two (p. 131). One could argue that such unwillingness should not be confined to rural communities. In his teaching, he draws attention to various inequalities and forms of privilege found in the United States context, such as male, White, heterosexual, English

speaking, on so on, but states that “none of these discussions bring to the surface as much reaction and resistance as does... Christian privilege and hegemony” (p. 131). Blumenfeld (2006) examines both the dynamics of Christian privilege and oppression of religious minority groups and non-believers in the United States, as he argues the two exist in a symbiotic relationship. He contends that oppression toward non-Christians gives rise to Christian privilege in the United States, and Christian privilege maintains oppression toward non-Christian individuals and faith communities (p. 196). Christian privilege is so entrenched in society that it is not only hard to identify, it is hard to overcome within a system that normalizes and sustains it.

Models that involve critical thinking, evaluation and alternative solutions do exist. Blumenfeld (2013) advocates for a framework of “critical multiculturalism” and for teaching about Christian privilege. As a teacher educator, he places emphasis on social justice and multicultural education in his teacher preparation classes. Through a series of activities, he asks students to identify at least four points about themselves, including a physical description of their body, social identities, moral or ethical values, and their educational background. This allows for a multitude of identities and voices to exist. He then outlines various forms of dominant group privilege, distributing lists, such as Lewis Schlosser’s list of Christian privilege, as well as assigns various readings related to the topic, along with discussion points for consideration, related to the history of the United States and who “discovered” the country. Ultimately this leads to excited conversation about the questions directly, but also about other important points. Students are confronted with various “volatile” concepts, such as oppression, dominance, discrimination, and Christian privilege, which led to defensiveness and anger by some of the students. Finally, often he will bring in guest speakers to talk about their firsthand experience with privilege, bringing this to life for his students. He supports the idea that we need to practice social justice and multicultural ed-

ucation; the goal behind all of this is that education is a tool to “draw out” or “lead” his students to new knowledge. He explains that, “for genuine learning to occur, for it to be transformative, it must be student centred – grounded in the shared experiences of learners – and composed of at least two essential elements or domains: the affective (feelings) and the cognitive (informational)... Education, as I have learned from Freire, is a path toward permanent liberation in which people become aware (conscientized) of their position, and through praxis (reflection and action) transform the world” (emphasis in original, pp. 139-140).

Many scholars of social justice advocate for multicultural education in schools and there are various interpretations of how to put this into practice. The goal of a multicultural education is to create equal opportunities for all students, regardless of their culture, race, belief system, or socio-economic class. It aims to draw attention to the inherent power dynamics and to create a system where all voices and opinions are heard and respected. According to Sensoy and DiAngelo (2012), far too often it manifests as simply “celebrating diversity” (p. 118), what one often sees as food, flags, and festivals. They write that, “in practice, the “celebrating differences” approach to multicultural education is the ideology of individualism applied to each “unique” ethnic group in a school. Celebrating diversity is important, but because it tends to occur without a study of power, this celebration actually reinforces structural inequality by obscuring unequal power between groups” (p. 119). In 2010, Sensoy and DiAngelo wrote an article entitled, *OK, I Get It! Now Tell Me How to Do It: Why We Can’t Just Tell You How to Do Critical Multicultural Education*. In it they address the challenge of tackling multicultural education in their teacher preparation courses. As instructors, they were struggling in that their students — future teachers — accepted the premise of multicultural education, but wanted a “how to” inventory of how to model their classrooms and teaching in the philosophy. As they explain, “one of the pri-

mary tenets of critical multicultural education is the need for each of us to examine our own socialized stereotypes and assumptions about marginalized groups to which we do not belong, and how this socialization shapes our relationships with those groups” (p. 99). Numerous analogies of possible student questions are listed in the article, including reasons why “recipe cards” about how to teach through a multicultural lens are just not realistic. As they outline, “a critical multicultural pedagogy requires a deep and sophisticated analysis, self-awareness, inter-group experience, and on-going education. That is why we can’t just tell you how to do it” (p. 102). In the end, there are many possibilities when considering multicultural education, but not one right way to do so. Blumenfeld (2013), also a proponent of multicultural education, explains that, “a foundational element in critical multiculturalism or social justice education is social reconstruction, in which the educator’s role is to help prepare future citizens to reconstruct society to better serve the interests of all groups of people, and to transform society toward greater equity for all” (p. 140).

A more robust and complete model of multicultural education includes conversations about religion, as well as identifying differentiations of power, and the historical context in which all of these exist. That means educators must be willing to have those difficult conversations, and be confident in their decisions to do so. This is where there is a disconnect in our public schools, as in order to have these conversations teachers must be informed, to some extent, of this reality. They must accept that social injustices exist, confront their own biases, and be comfortable to explore this with their students. And yet, our curriculum and teacher preparation programs are often void of any opportunities to do so. This is where modifications need to happen, as it is by teaching and learning through a critical lens that true change will occur. The struggle to overcome this, of course, is with the institutional nature of Christian privilege, and the need

for a more nuanced understanding of multiculturalism. This will be discussed later in more detail, as various solutions and suggestions are brought to the attention of the reader. The next section provides an analysis — albeit, brief — of the history of religion in Canadian public schools, a rather intricate narrative.

### **2.3 An Overview of Religion in Canadian Public Schools**

The diversity of Canada is represented in the variety of religions and cultures present in its public schools. It is here where opportunities to overcome barriers, recognize differences and discuss disparities in power exist. However, Christian privilege is evident in the hallways, classrooms and teachings of Canadian public schools. In this section I provide numerous examples of the ways that Christian privilege is present in public schools, including recent examples of prayer in public schools and the distribution of religious books. I also include a discussion around Christmas shoeboxes – Operation Christmas Child, an organization governed by Samaritan’s Purse, of which many people are not aware of the religious affiliation and the subversive nature of such items.

There is visible evidence of the Christian religion in public schools, some causing recent controversy. As mentioned earlier, Christian prayer is a most recent example, thanks to an events across Canada. An online poll (Canadian Broadcasting Company, 2013) was conducted in conjunction with a story of Christian prayer in public schools. As of February 1, 2014, 4632 people had responded to the survey, which asked whether The Lord’s Prayer should be recited in schools. The survey revealed that 62 percent of those who answered the questions said, “No, public schools should not be promoting a specific religion”; 17 percent responded with, “Yes, it’s part of our cultural heritage”; 2.3 percent said that “it should be decided on a school-by-school basis”; and 19.0 percent responded with “only if students are free to skip it without reper-

cussions.” Writing about prayer in public schools, Calgary lawyer and Christian activist John Carpay (2013) states that, “while atheist, agnostic and other non-Christian parents have every right to demand that their children not be required to recite the Lord’s Prayer in school, their position is neither neutral nor objective” (n.p.). He failed to mention that the position of Christian parents is neither neutral nor objective as well. By doing so, it seems that he claims the Christian faith to be the norm. He claims that, “the use of public schools to indoctrinate children into one single ideology is a hallmark of totalitarian regimes” (n.p.). As Naomi Lakritz (2013), a Calgary Herald columnist, writes, “the bottom line is that no faith should prevail, and there is no reason for any prayer to be recited in a public school” (n.p.). She goes on to compare public education with public transportation:

Nobody insists that a Calgary Transit bus driver lead his passengers in the Lord's Prayer before he pulls away from a stop – because a bus is not a place for prayer. Neither is a public school... moreover, the notion that non-Christian children can “opt out” of the Lord's Prayer is ridiculous. Either they must listen to it anyway, even if they don't repeat it – and listening to it day after day through all the years in school constitutes indoctrination – or they must leave the classroom, which immediately slaps them with the label of The Other. The message they receive is: “You are not one of us. You are an outsider.” And that kind of differentiation among students also has no place in a public school. (Lakritz, 2013, n.p.)

This will be explained in further detail later, as it pertains to a discussion of Alberta’s policies and legislation in public schools.

In the past and even presently, many Canadian public schools chose to participate in the annual Operation Christmas Child project, an undertaking led by Samaritan’s Purse, a nonde-



nominal evangelical Christian organization run by Franklin Graham. The decision to support a Christmas gift giving campaign is made by school administration, a letter is sent home, families purchase gifts and needed items, pack up the shoeboxes and deliver their gift to the school by the suggested date. It is important to point out that Samaritan's Purse does do important aid work around the world. Working in forty-five countries around the world, the organization leads many development projects, including emergency relief programs, medical and water sanitation projects (Samaritan's Purse website). As Christopher Stonebanks and Melanie Stonebanks (2009) explain, "this program has found its way into our public school system, and administrators, teachers, and the young children themselves are now acting, whether consciously or not, as missionaries, in effect promoting a religious view of the world that has on more than one occasion denounced those who hold beliefs different from their own" (p. 314).

It is clear what the mission of Samaritan's Purse is by reading their Annual Reports. The 2012 Annual Report states, "Our Operation Christmas Child project is about more than coloring books, toys, and toothbrushes. Your gifts enable Samaritan's Purse to share the Good News of God's greatest gift His Son, Jesus Christ — with boys and girls who need to know how much Jesus loves them" (p. 2). The 2013 Annual Report corroborates this message by stating:

Each shoebox provides an opportunity for a local church to share the Gospel of Jesus Christ with children and their families... A group of local Christians, ministry partners of Samaritan's Purse, hand-delivered the gifts. They told the children and their families about the true meaning of Christmas, the birth of the One who would be the Savior for all who believe in Him... "Operation Christmas Child is not just about the shoeboxes," said Alain Limbo, who coordinates distributions in Cameroon, Africa. "It's about the Gospel

that brings light to life. When we give them the boxes, the doors are opened, and we can now reach them with the Gospel.’ (Samaritan’s Purse 2013-2014 Ministry Report, p. 12)

Finally, the 2014-2015 Ministry Report stated, “millions of children who have received Operation Christmas Child shoebox gifts have been invited to participate in our follow-up discipleship program, The Greatest Journey. This 12-lesson Bible study, offered through partner churches, teaches children to be faithful followers of Christ and to share the Gospel with others” (p. 15). I have specifically chosen to include precise quotes from the Samaritan’s Purse website instead of paraphrasing in order to provide tangible evidence of the mission of Samaritan’s Purse. A document outlining The Journey of a Shoebox explains in more detail what happens once the shoeboxes are collected and delivered:

The shoe box is given to a child at an event organized by a local church in cooperation with the National Leadership Team. Church members go into their community and invite children living in situations of disaster, war, and poverty to the event. At the event, if culturally appropriate, a pastor or teacher will share the message of salvation through Jesus Christ, often using music and drama. Every child then receives a shoe box as an unconditional gift regardless of race, religion, or gender. A child is not required to accept anything or make a confession of faith to receive a shoe box. Each child is also offered a copy of The Greatest Gift, a colorful booklet that tells the Good News of Jesus Christ. In the weeks following the shoe box distribution, the local church follows up with the children who received a shoe box and invites them to be part of The Greatest Journey, a 12-lesson Bible study program. Upon graduation from The Greatest Journey, many of the children receive a New Testament Bible to help them grow in their faith. (The Journey of a Shoebox, p. 1)

According to the 2013-2014 Annual Report, in the year 2013, 664,066 shoeboxes were sent from Canada (p. 12) and according to the 2014-2015 Annual Report, in the year 2014, 700,474 were sent from Canada, with 10,440,333 being collected worldwide (p. 13). In Calgary and the surrounding area, many students attending public schools take part in this endeavour. A recent and thorough internet search of The Calgary Board of Education (CBE) website and school newsletters has turned up very little information regarding the Samaritan's Purse, Operation Christmas Child campaign, whereas in past years it was evident that numerous schools were avidly supporting the organization. A 2014 Newsletter from a CBE elementary school states:

The Calgary Board of Education does not currently support classroom involvement in Samaritan's Purse programs. However, we know that many families in our school support the work of Samaritan's Purse locally and abroad. A local contact person is willing to collect items for Operation Christmas Child, to be put together in the shoebox program and sent to underprivileged children in Haiti. Any families wishing to donate small items for the shoebox program, such as small toys, personal toiletries, school items, etc. are welcome to drop them at the school office, where they will be passed along for a local shoebox stuffing bee later this month. All donated items must be received by Nov. 21.  
(Altadore School November 2014 Newsletter)

So, while the school board does not endorse this organization, this school still does and has found a way around the board "policy." In the past, a simple Google search was all that was required to find local school communities supporting Operation Christmas Child. The December 2012 school newsletter from Cedarbrae School includes:

Once again the families of Cedarbrae School have displayed their generosity with an overwhelming response to the Operation Christmas Child shoebox collection. Students

are learning firsthand the difference they can make beyond the borders of their own community to help support those in need. These boxes were sent off to children in hospitals, orphanages, homeless shelters and poor communities. We are extremely proud of the effort and thoughtfulness demonstrated during this event. (Cedarbrae School December 2012 newsletter).

According to the Palliser Regional Schools website, in 2013, “several schools in Palliser (Regional Schools) contribute to this effort organized through Samaritan's Purse” (November 5, 2013). There are further examples that I could cite here, but the overwhelming evidence is that this proselytizing Christian ministry is allowed to use public school space, personnel, and resources to undertake their fundraising and missionary work through this project.

Undoubtedly, the many families of various faiths who choose to participate in Operation Christmas Child have very little or no knowledge of the goals and underlying intentions of this organization. Their compassion and generosity may be seen as a clear example of well-meaning parents being taken advantage of. While it appears that it is optional for students to participate in this project, a conflicting message is being sent to students and their families. Religion is considered a taboo subject in public school and many school policies state that they will not endorse any religion over another one. The Calgary Board of Education has an administrative regulation stating just this. However, we may be unintentionally telling our students from a variety of backgrounds that the Christian religion is valued over other spiritual beliefs and that the public school system sponsors and endorses an organization that blatantly promotes intolerance for other religions, with the intent of conversion.

The distribution of the Bible in public schools is another method through which Christian hegemony exists. The Gideon's International hand out Bibles throughout different sectors of so-

ciety, including public schools and have been doing so in Canada for decades. Their mission is to “win the lost for Christ” and the method in which they do so is by handing out Bibles to students grade five and up, prisoners, police, fire, and medical personal (The Gideon’s International in Canada website n.p.). In Canada, this can be a contentious issue as these books are distributed in some public schools. In 2012, even after a ruling that banned the Gideon’s Bibles (and any religious texts) in Bluewater, Ontario, parents and supporters of the distribution of Bibles in schools signed a petition insisting on the continuation of this. Outraged parents, speaking with disappointment, argued that this was initiated by atheists, and one parent stated, “if they had the Lord in their life, they wouldn't be tempted by a lot of the things that are out there” (CTV News, March 21, 2012). This issue also arose in in Chilliwack, British Columbia in 2012. Richard Ajabu, a parent of a grade five student attending a Chilliwack public school, became concerned when his daughter came home from school with a permission form to receive a free Bible. He complained to the BC Education Minister, Don McRae, that the forms were “too promotional” (Slivinski, 2012). When asked about the consent forms and the Bibles themselves, a representative from Gideon’s International in Canada responded, “the cover of the New Testament is indeed created as an attractive, eye-catching cover for students. Like any book that is designed for young readers, the cover has been designed to interest youth and create curiosity about what’s written inside” (Silvinski, 2012). There are a few issues relevant to this study to be considered in the Gideon’s Bible example. In British Columbia, under the School Act (1996), “all schools and Provincial schools must be conducted on strictly secular and non-sectarian principles” and “the highest morality must be inculcated, but no religious dogma or creed is to be taught in a school or Provincial school” (Section 76). By endorsing one religion over all others, as could be suggested is being done here, that particular religion is given priority. Simply put, it is not fair. As

one parent states, “I am a religious person, but I don’t think that it’s fair to all families because not everybody believes in a higher faith, so I don’t think they should be doing that” (Slivinski, 2012). Not everyone follows the same scripture or religious doctrine either. These stories arise year after year, but most recently, as of June 14, 2016, the Abbotsford School District has announced that it will no longer be distributing Bibles or other religious materials in their schools. This public school district was the last one in British Columbia to be distributing Bibles (Brown, 2016). It is possible to obtain more examples of the distribution of Gideon’s Bibles in Canadian public schools and the protests of numerous parents. However, it has proven difficult to find instances in Canada where religious minority groups have sought and been granted permission to distribute religious books of any sort in public schools. According to Luisa D’Amato (2011), a Muslim group in Waterloo, Ontario requested permission from the Waterloo Regional District School Board to distribute a permission slip and their holy book, the Quran, to grade five students in a similar fashion as the Gideons. In response, a local news station, 570 News, wrote that the request from the Kitchener Masjid was withdrawn. However, no explanation could be found as to why.

Christian privilege exists in Canadian society and it is present in our public schools. It is clear that this is evolving, in part due to an effort to accommodate our increasingly more diverse student population, but also thanks to growing awareness. Due to the institutionalization of the Christian culture and belief systems in Canadian society, it is obvious that there is still much progress needing to occur at this time to make schools more respectful to a wider range of religious diversity. In the next section, I examine the history and place of the Christian religion in the Canadian education system, as well as policies and legislations that exist in an effort to ensure Canada is an inclusive, accepting society.

## **2.4 A History of the Role of Religion in Canada**

Canada's history and education policies have contributed to the place of religion in society and in Canadian public schools. Alberta, specifically, has a unique history that must be evaluated in this discussion since this is the location of the research and interviews conducted for this study. The history of education in Ontario is also integral to this discussion as Ontario is at the heart of Canada's history. Consideration will be given to events and policies in Alberta, Saskatchewan, Ontario and British Columbia, in an effort to draw attention to the distinct nature of each, while recognizing that each province falls under the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. In this section, I provide a brief overview of the history of education in Canada, followed by an examination of a number of provincial and federal policies, legislations, and acts that have contributed to the current model of education, specifically in Alberta.

When considering the history of education in Canada, we must reflect on the context in which it arose. In the early eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, survival alone would have been a focus of Canadian inhabitants; therefore, formal education would not have been an immediate priority. According to Paul Axelrod (1997), the first formal schools were established in the early 1600s, run by the French, were available mostly to boys, and adhered to a religious (Christian) framework. Schools for girls were established by the Ursuline nuns shortly after, and focused on Biblical studies, domestic work, and etiquette. Such schools would have been available to only the wealthy who could afford to pay tuition. Therefore, education and religion were intrinsically related and Christian doctrine as educational material was the norm. Even those who could not afford to send their children to school would have made attempts to ensure their children knew Bible stories within the confines of their own homes in order to maintain societal expectations.

Power struggles and conquests between the French and the British in new Canada meant changes with power and societal control. When the American Revolution ended in 1776, many people came to Canada “prepared to swear allegiance to the British Crown” and aligned themselves to the Anglican church (Axelrod, 1997, p. 6). Eventually this led to the establishment of government policies that favoured this Christian group as the dominant group. This resulted in the founding of educational institutions under the Anglican Church. Immigration during the early 1800s from the British Isles meant an influx of English speakers, who also brought their (Christian) religions with them. This included various forms of Protestantism and Catholicism:

Immigrants brought with them a diversity of cultural traditions that helped shape the religious and educational life of the British colonies. In Canada West (Ontario), for example, Church of England adherents constituted 22 per cent of the population in 1842, still the largest denomination. But their numbers were almost equaled and would soon be surpassed by Presbyterians and Methodists. (Axelrod, p. 9)

In 1807, the Upper Canada government passed an act which authorized the creation of publicly funded schools which eventually led to the creation of two parallel systems, the public system and the separate system (Ontario Ministry of Education, 1993, p. 1). While the separate schools were mainly Catholic in nature, and the public schools were Christian, the public schools were considered to be non-denominational. It was believed that the schools were the place for moral and ethical teachings to occur, “and that moral teaching should be based on Christian teaching” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 1993, p. 1). Ryerson Egerton, a Methodist, and considered to be the “Father of Public Education in Ontario” (Richter, 2006, p. 2), played an important role in the development of public education in Ontario, which naturally included religious instruction: “The 1846 School Act devised by Egerton Ryerson provided for public educa-



tion that was non-denominational but based on the Bible and the notion of a common Christianity” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 1993, p. 1). Later school acts in Ontario – and Alberta as will be revealed and discussed later – came to include specifics about the type and amount of religious instruction on a daily basis. It is important to note that all of these policies included a note stating that parents could choose to exempt their children from religious instruction at any given time. However, this does not change the fact that Christian doctrine was the norm for moral teachings in both the public and separate school systems from the inception of formal education in Canada, leading to its institutionalization in Canadian public schools.

Each Canadian province has its own complex history of religion in schools and policies pertaining to religion in the classroom. It is difficult to chronicle even one province’s experiences on this topic without considering national and provincial legislation, the date a province joined Confederation, school funding, family involvement, and regional laws. It is a convoluted matter. Section 93 of the Canadian Constitution Act, 1867, states that, “in and for each Province the Legislature may exclusively make Laws in relation to Education...” (Canadian Constitution Act, 1867), meaning that all matters pertaining to education fall under the jurisdiction of the provinces. However, subsection 93 (3) states that:

Where in any Province a System of Separate or Dissident Schools exists by Law at the Union or is thereafter established by the Legislature of the Province, an Appeal shall lie to the Governor General in Council from any Act or Decision of any Provincial Authority affecting any Right or Privilege of the Protestant or Roman Catholic Minority of the Queen's Subjects in relation to Education. (Canadian Constitution Act, 1867)

What this means is that while education is considered a provincial matter, federal legislation must be considered as well. As the Alberta Civil Liberties Research Centre outlines in their doc-

ument, Religion in Public Schools: The Alberta Situation, 2004, that “section 93(3) prescribes a commitment within the provincial domain of education to minority rights that acknowledge the (albeit limited) diversity that existed at the national level” (p. 5). Ultimately, the federal government is responsible for ensuring minority rights, and as such the Provinces and Territories must pay close attention to this. Historically it was the Constitution Act, 1867 that provided all regulations pertaining to education. Today, provinces must be cognizant of The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms (1982) as it ultimately usurps all policies written at the provincial level. It is this document that “primarily carries the force of ensuring rights, such as the minority rights intimated in section 93(3) (Alberta Civil Liberties Research Centre, 2004, p. 5). The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms states that everyone has “a) freedom of conscience and religion; b) freedom of thought, belief, opinion and expression...” In this case, one argues that freedom of religion would also mean freedom from religion. The Alberta Civil Liberties Research Centre (ACLRC) agrees: “religious freedom is to be interpreted to mean the right to pursue and practice religion also means the right not to pursue any religion... one should be free from having another’s religious beliefs imposed upon him or her, irrespective of whether one practices any religion at all” (pp. 6-7).

Within each of these provincial legislations the role of religion is mentioned. In British Columbia, section 76 of the School Act (1996) states that, “1) All schools and Provincial schools must be conducted on strictly secular and non-sectarian principles; and 2) The highest morality must be inculcated, but no religious dogma or creed is to be taught in a school or Provincial school” (British Columbia School Act, 1996). Regulation 28 and 29 of The Ontario Education Act states that:

28.1). A board may provide in grades one to eight and in its secondary schools an optional program of education about religion; 2). A program of education about religion shall, (a) promote respect for the freedom of conscience and religion guaranteed by the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms; and (b) provide for the study of different religions and religious beliefs in Canada and the world, without giving primacy to, and without indoctrination in, any particular religion or religious belief. 3). A program of education about religion shall not exceed sixty minutes of instruction per week in an elementary school; and, 29). Subject to subsections (2) and (3), a board shall not permit any person to conduct religious exercises or to provide instruction that includes indoctrination in a particular religion or religious belief in a school. (Ontario Education Act, 1990)

These legislations are quite similar, recognising that religion can be discussed and taught, but no specific belief system should be given credence over another. Both of these regulations have been brought up when parental complaints have been brought forward in each province, as was mentioned earlier. The Ontario Education Act does include further sections that mention that religious instruction can occur, under specific circumstances. For example, the exercises are not conducted, or the instruction is not provided by, or under the auspices of the board; the exercises are conducted or the instruction is provided on a school day at a time that is before or after the school's instructional program, or on a day that is not a school day; and, no person is required by the board to attend the exercises or instruction" (Regulation 29 (3) a, b, c). This certainly does accommodate for the religious diversity of Ontario, while still acknowledging the secular nature of the province.

Alberta has a unique and complicated history when considering religion in the classroom. Alberta became a province in 1905. As was mentioned earlier, the provinces adhered to section

93 of the Canadian Constitution Act, 1867 in all matters pertaining to education. Alberta, however, substituted this section with section 17 of the Alberta Act of 1905 (ACLRC, p. 23) as follows:

Section 93 of the Canadian Constitution Act, 1867 shall apply to the said province, with the substitution for paragraph (1) of the said section 93, of the following paragraph:

Nothing in any such law shall prejudicially affect any right or privilege with respect to separate schools which any class of persons have at the date of the passing of this Act, under the terms of chapters 29 and 30 of the Ordinances of the North-west Territories, passed in the year 1901, or with respect to religious instruction in any public or separate school as provided for in the said ordinances. (Alberta Act, 1905)

This legislation clearly protects separate school supporters, all as a result of the listed school ordinances created prior to 1905, the North-west Territories School Ordinance and the North-west Territories School Assessment Ordinance (ACLRC, p. 24). From these documents, what is of importance for Alberta to this day is the dependency on section 137 of the North-west Territories School Ordinance, which states:

(1) No religious instruction except as hereinafter provided shall be permitted in the school of any district from the opening of such school until one half hour previous to its closing in the afternoon after which time any such instruction permitted or desired by the board may be given. (2) It shall however be permissible for the board of any district to direct that the school be opened by the recitation of the Lord's prayer. (An Ordinance Respecting Schools, 1901, p. 28)

Finally, section 138 of The North West Territories School Ordinance (1901) asserts that “any child shall have the privilege of leaving the school room at the compulsory during time at

which religious instruction is commenced as provided for in the religious exercise next preceding section or on remaining without taking part in any religious instruction that may be given if the parents or guardians do desire.” Therefore, due to the regulations outlined in section 17 of the Alberta Act of 1905, which is still referenced today, religious instruction can still occur for the last thirty minutes of the school day and The Lord’s Prayer may still be recited in schools; however, students may be exempt from religious exercise if their parents so desire. Essentially prayer, specifically The Lord’s Prayer – a Christian prayer, is constitutionally protected. This makes for an interesting consideration in the case of Alberta, in that, “either way, the courts across Canada have provided clear guidelines with respect to religious exercises and instructions in public schools, and the supremacy of the Charter” (ACLRC, p. 32). Yet it is still an intricate issue. For example, in November, 2013, the Horizon School Division, a school board in Southern Alberta, received a formal complaint from a parent in Taber stating that her son had been disciplined for not participating in the Lord’s Prayer being recited at Dr. Hamman School, the only public school in Taber still saying the prayer. Melanie Bell, the boy’s mother, and an agnostic, explained to the CBC, “we teach diversity and acceptance as parents, as a school and as a community. There is no diversity and acceptance of other religions with the Lord’s Prayer. You want religion in the public school system? Teach them all.” (CBC News, 2013). The school division requested that all prayers be stopped until a final decision was made, explaining that up until that point it had been left at the discretion of each school whether students participated in the prayer. A later press release from the Horizon School Division, released on November 26, 2013, stated the following:

As an inclusive learning environment that recognizes diversity and promotes understanding and respect for individuals and groups, the Horizon School Division Board of Trus-

tees recognizes the complexity of decisions regarding the direction of religious practices within its schools. Trustees are also sensitive to the inherent dignity of all persons and the diverse cultural and religious composition of its families. Upon gathering, processing, and evaluating information from multiple sources and extensive deliberation, the Board of Trustees, guided by its beliefs and values, and considering the interests of all the students the jurisdiction serves, has motioned that under some circumstances schools can play a role in supporting parents with regard to religious practice as afforded within the School Act and provisions set forth within section 93 of the Constitution Act of 1867 as amended by section 17 of the 1905 Alberta Act which references section 137 and 138 of the Ordinance of the Northwest Territories.” (Horizon School Division, 2013)

More recently, in October 2015, a similar situation arose in the community of Busby, Alberta. Jennye Blain, whose daughter was a grade six student, questioned the decision for prayer to be included in daily activities at the school. “It also makes us all bow to the Christians. It says that we all have to take time out of our day to acknowledge how important they are. There’s nothing in their religion that says they have to pray at school” (Zabjek, 2015). In the end, a public meeting was held, and a vote of 30 to 3 in favour of continuing the practice determined the continued fate of prayer at the school. The unique nature of these two situations is that the majority of the students that attend these schools are adherents of the Christian faith. Similar situations would include schools that exist on Hutterite colonies, or have a large Mennonite population, or are the only public school in a small town made up of mainly Christian residents. However, with the Taber case, there are also non-Christian students attending some of these schools and in cases where prayer is being permitted, it is up to each individual school to ensure that accommodations

are made for those non-Christian students. This debate has occurred in Alberta previously to this and will unquestionably arise again in the future, due to the nature of its legislations.

In Alberta a new Education Act was passed in the Legislature and received Royal Assent on December 10, 2012. It is awaiting proclamation and is currently under review by the New Democratic Party government. According to the Alberta Education website, “the School Act will remain in effect for the 2016/17 school year. It is expected that, later in 2016, education stakeholders will be engaged in further discussion regarding education legislation.” However, section 58 on religious and patriotic instruction or exercises remains the same. It states that:

A board may (a) prescribe religious instruction to be offered to its students; (b) prescribe religious exercises for its students; (c) prescribe patriotic instruction to be offered to its students; (d) prescribe patriotic exercises for its students; (e) permit persons other than teachers to provide religious instruction or exercises to its students. (2) Where a teacher or other person providing religious instruction or exercises or a teacher providing patriotic instruction or exercises receives a written request signed by a parent of a student that the student be excluded from religious instruction or exercises or patriotic instruction or exercises, or both, the teacher or other person shall, in accordance with the request of the parent, permit the student (a) to leave the classroom or place where the instruction or exercises are taking place for the duration of the instruction or exercises, or (b) to remain in the classroom or place without taking part in the instruction or exercises. (Alberta School Act, 2012, p. 55)

The above implies that religious instruction can be provided to students in Alberta schools, but that in these cases parents may choose to exempt their children from such learning. It is clear

from the history of Alberta and its complicated legislation pertaining to religion in schools that it is and may continue to be an uncertain topic; the Taber situation demonstrates this.

While adhering to provincial regulations and being cognizant of federal legislation, some school boards write specific policies pertaining to religion. The Calgary Board of Education is one such school board. The Calgary Board of Education (CBE) aligns Administrative Regulation 3067 — Religion in Education (2005) with the Alberta School Act. This is evident in the preamble: “All education programs offered and instructional materials used in schools must reflect the diverse nature and heritage of society in Alberta, promote understanding and respect for others and honor and respect the common values and beliefs of Alberta” (p. 1). This will need to be updated to reflect the revised act and regulations on this matter which now states:

All courses or programs of study and instructional materials used in a school must reflect the diverse nature and heritage of society in Alberta, promote understanding and respect for others and honour and respect the common values and beliefs of Albertans. (1) For greater certainty, the courses or programs of study and instructional materials referred to in subsection (2) must not promote or foster doctrines of racial or ethnic superiority or persecution, social change through violent action or disobedience of laws. (Alberta School Act, Regulation 16(1) & 16(2), 2012)

Ultimately, the aim of the CBE is to teach students about religion, not the teaching of religion (p. 1). Administrative Regulation 3067 outlines the manner in which teaching about religion should occur as “either embedded in existing units of study or in the Alberta Education Program of Studies (p. 2). While teachers are “encouraged to involve students in age appropriate discussions of religious, moral and spiritual topics whenever such topics become relevant in the curriculum”



(p. 2), it is very clear that any activity considered an act of worship or the propagation of religious belief are not permitted. It is laid out in objective 3(2) that school leaders should consider their entire school community and the religious holidays observed by the entire community. It also states that this in no way indicates that a school should cancel Christmas or Easter celebrations (p. 2). The remaining headings also address religious holidays, personal religious expression in school, the enforcement of religious obligations (it is made very clear that this is the responsibility of the parents, not teachers), religious objects, and the protocol for having guest speakers present in these public schools (pp. 1-4). The Calgary Board of Education seems to be aware of the need for acknowledging religious diversity, demonstrating the board's emphasis on its many unique learners. It appears that not every school board has such descriptive regulations and policies pertaining to religion. Complicating all of this in Alberta is legislation that is often referred to as Bill 44. Introduced as an amendment of the provincial human rights act, it was sworn into law by former Alberta premier, Alison Redford. Section 11 of the Bill states that schools must provide notice to parents when a topic that includes religion, sexuality or sexual orientation is being purposefully taught or discussed in the classroom. Teachers and schools must then provide accommodations, such as excluding students from these learning experiences, when parents have provided written notice that their children be exempt (Bill 44, Section 11.1). This Bill could potentially open up educators to human rights complaints from parents when what could be perceived to be a controversial topic arises in the classroom. However, since its inception in 2009, I have not been able to discover the existence of any formal parental complaints. Is this because teachers are afraid to discuss these "controversial" topics, or that teachers are sensitive to the needs of their families, or that parents realize that educators have the good intentions with regards to their children's' education? No matter what the reason, there does not seem to be

the flurry that was anticipated, at least in regards to the inclusion of religion in the classroom. Perhaps parents feel that they at least have some options when it comes to topics they do not want their children exposed to or that they feel is their responsibility to teach.

In Alberta, there are many schooling choices available to parents. The Alberta School Act empowers a school board to offer alternative programming to parents, such as charter and religious schools, both viable options in schooling. Religious schools and charter schools with a very specific purpose have been established across Canada, most likely a reaction to the public school programs offered. These include Christian schools affiliated with various denominations, and Islamic, Jewish, and Sikh schools, amongst others. The motive of these schools is to provide an education grounded in a particular faith and as an alternative to a mainstream, public education. From the perspective of the parents, the advantages of such schools are quite clear: their children are being educated in a place with similar values, this ensures the continuation of a specific belief system, specifically for minority groups, it instills a sense of community for their children, and, in some cases, as Lois Sweet (1997) writes, “students are far less likely to adopt the attitudes of their secular peers” (p. 74). For many it is about religious identity: “The idea is that children who are educated in a secure, familiar, affirmative environment will grow up knowing who they are and where they’ve come from. This will then give them the strength and self-assurance to confront the dominant culture on equal terms” (Sweet, p. 72). As Sweet goes on to explain, “the Sikhs, Jews, and Muslims argue, of course, that their schools contribute to a more stable society, because their students grow up connected to their communities and religious beliefs” (p. 80). However, one could easily argue that schools such as this may lead to isolationist tendencies, where students learning alongside others of a similar religious heritage, albeit for the greatest intentions of the parents, are actually leading to a society of individuals that do not know

about their neighbours and fellow Canadians. This could be perceived as problematic in a Canadian society that is becoming increasingly more diverse. It is apparent that religion in public education is a topic for consideration in Canada. As Canada continues to become more diverse, Canadians can no longer adhere to the Christian foundations in which the institution of education originated. Canada is no longer a country consisting mainly of Christians; it is a multicultural country that prides itself on its diversity. As is discussed in the next section, the fact that Canada is multicultural is a critical point when discussing Christian privilege.

## **2.5 Canada as a Multicultural Country**

Canada is a multicultural country and it is the perception that all cultures and races (and therefore religions) are embraced within it. I will not be addressing directly the lasting destructive legacy of colonialism, nor the specific tendencies of Canada's immigration policies in this study, but it is important to mention that throughout history, various diverse cultural groups have been admitted entry into Canada depending on the political scene and interests at the time. Multiculturalism, as a policy, was adapted in 1971 by then Prime Minister, Pierre Trudeau, and the Multiculturalism Act was passed in 1988, making it official. It states that the policy stands to:

- (a) recognize and promote the understanding that multiculturalism reflects the cultural and racial diversity of Canadian society and acknowledges the freedom of all members of Canadian society to preserve, enhance and share their cultural heritage;
- (b) recognize and promote the understanding that multiculturalism is a fundamental characteristic of the Canadian heritage and identity and that it provides an invaluable resource in the shaping of Canada's future;
- (c) promote the full and equitable participation of individuals and communities of all origins in the continuing evolution and shaping of all aspects of Cana-

dian society and assist them in the elimination of any barrier to that participation;

(d) recognize the existence of communities whose members share a common origin and their historic contribution to Canadian society, and enhance their development; (e) ensure that all individuals receive equal treatment and equal protection under the law, while respecting and valuing their diversity; (f) encourage and assist the social, cultural, economic and political institutions of Canada to be both respectful and inclusive of Canada's multicultural character; (g) promote the understanding and creativity that arise from the interaction between individuals and communities of different origins; (h) foster the recognition and appreciation of the diverse cultures of Canadian society and promote the reflection and the evolving expressions of those cultures; (i) preserve and enhance the use of languages other than English and French, while strengthening the status and use of the official languages of Canada; and (j) advance multiculturalism throughout Canada in harmony with the national commitment to the official languages of Canada. (Canadian Multiculturalism Act, 1985)

All citizens are protected and have the legal right to practice their own religion, while at the same time the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms also grants citizens the right to be free from religion.

Multiculturalism in Canada should be an ideal system to unite a country made up of such diverse cultures. And yet doing so is a challenge continuously faced by citizens, officials and policy makers. A 2007 report released by The Policy Research Initiative (PRI) through the Government of Canada, *From Mosaic to Harmony: Multicultural Canada in the 21 Century (Results from Regional Roundtables)*, centered its research and findings around two areas: "1) how to foster diversity without divisiveness and 2) whether Canada's multiculturalism policies need review

in light of today's social and geopolitical realities (p. 3). The project was conducted through the use of roundtable discussions, which resulted in agreement that a focus is needed in four areas. The one of most importance to us here is: "Integrate Faith into Modern Multicultural Discourse" (p. 5). The findings of the roundtable discussions were intriguing: it became apparent that many perceive multiculturalism as being an issue for the visible minorities, or minority groups only.

The document states:

According to many participants, multiculturalism sets a vision for Canada and a framework for intercultural relations within a single society. That said, most Canadians understand multiculturalism as a policy to facilitate the integration of non-European newcomers and their immediate descendants. While there is general goodwill towards multicultural diversity, participants felt that Canada should not promote cultural differences at the expense of shared Canadian values. (p. 5)

Another conclusion from these roundtable discussions included:

Discussions on cultural diversity also generally involve only members of visible minorities and newcomers, who represent only one fifth of Canada's population. Aboriginal groups and those who are not visible minorities are not represented in consultations. This practice reinforces perceptions that multiculturalism is only for visible minorities, exacerbating the "us vs. them" dichotomy. (p. 6)

It is clear from these results that conversations primarily focus on and involve the minority groups, presumably because the majority — Whites — do not consider it an issue or concern for them. This truly illustrates White and Christian privilege at its prime. Yet, "there was near consensus among participants that all governments need to improve and expand their outreach efforts, especially through schools and public education, to communicate the principles of multi-

culturalism, and show Canadians how they are reflected in these policies” (p. 9). However, religion, as a topic in any realm, is often shied away from. As Sweet (1997) explains, “A major part of the problem today is that religion is something people rarely talk about outside of religious institutions — except in the most guarded and polite terms... religious belief has been conveniently relegated to a social category stamped “private” (p. 4). Yet, it is apparent that religion is present in the lives of many Canadians. In fact, according to Statistics Canada, 77 percent of Canadians identify with some religion (2011 National Household Survey), although this is down from 86 percent in the 2001 Canadian Census. According to the Pew Research Centre, in 2013,

The percentage of Canadians who identify as Catholic has dropped from 47 percent to 39 percent over the last four decades, while the share that identifies as Protestant has fallen even more steeply, from 41 percent to 27 percent. Concurrently, the number of Canadians who belong to other religions — including Islam, Hinduism, Sikhism, Buddhism, Judaism and Eastern Christianity — is growing. Collectively, these smaller religious groups account for more than one-in-ten Canadians (11 percent), up from not quite one-in-twenty (4 percent) in 1981. (p. 2)

The document goes on to outline that those with no religious affiliation continues to rise, going from 4 percent of the total population in 1971 to nearly 24 percent in 2011. This clearly demonstrates the changing face of Canada. “About 20 percent of Canada’s current population was born in some other country” (Pew Research Centre, p. 6), and this certainly affects the religious demographic of the country, particularly since “nearly half of Canada’s immigrant population have come from Asia, Africa and the Middle East (p. 6).

Multiculturalism and secularism are not synonymous, and yet, the two are frequently used interchangeably. The Merriam-Webster definition of “secular” is not spiritual: of or relating

to the physical world and not the spiritual world; not religious,” whereas “multicultural” means, “of, relating to, reflecting, or adapted to diverse cultures,” and included within that is religion (Merriam Webster Online Dictionary). In Canada, religion should not be ignored or avoided. Instead, culture, religion, race, power dynamics, history, relationships, and the like should be addressed and discussed in order to demonstrate the true diverse population that is Canada. In the end, this is a discussion of cultural and religious literacy. Not only does the difference between secularism and multiculturalism need to be more clear, more efforts need to be made for a better understanding of the multitude of cultures, faiths and belief systems entrenched within our society. As stated in the PRI: “People lack knowledge about the tenets of various religious beliefs and how they interact with public policy issues” (p. 7). From these round table discussions emerged the reality that multicultural policy and practice are two very different things, and often Canadian citizens are not informed of either. “The concept of multiculturalism as a framework for intercultural relations within a single society is largely alien” (p. 11). A better effort of teaching for and about multiculturalism needs to be inherent in our schools, institutions and systems, and this includes culture, race and religion. As was outlined,

Religion is identified as an area of special concern. As some participants observed, this form of diversity is generally alien to the theory and practice of multiculturalism – instead, differences are more commonly attributed to race, country of origin, and other more visible forms of difference. This can frustrate our understanding of the issues we face. Many of the roundtables touched on the fact that religious diversity lies at the core of many current debates about multiculturalism.... It appears that religion is a dimension that current conceptions of multiculturalism are ill prepared to handle. (p. 11)

The Final Report for Understanding Canada’s “3M” (Multicultural, Multi-linguistic and Multi-religious) Reality in the 21st Century also outlines that how religious identities and beliefs interact with societal institutions may need to be revisited (p. ii). This policy research project from 2006 examined Canada’s approach to multicultural diversity, exploring two questions: “In light of emerging social and demographic trends, what policies might Canada wish to adopt in the wake of growing ethno-cultural diversity resulting from immigration? And, how can inclusive citizenship be developed in pluralistic societies such as Canada, where individuals and communities are globally connected but diverse in culture, religion and language?” The first phase consisted of roundtables (the report mentioned earlier), and the second phase allowed for deeper analysis of those topics deemed worthy of further investigation after the roundtable discussions — religious diversity was one of these: “many participants in the roundtables observed that it is religious diversity that lies at the core of many of the cultural “flashpoints” driving current debates about multiculturalism” (p. 12).

It was once believed that over time religion would diminish or disappear, and yet it remains a stronghold in our current society. The question becomes, how are religion, culture and religious diversity being addressed in our pluralistic, multicultural society, and specifically for this study, in public schools? In order to uncover a variety of responses, it is my intent to use personal accounts from various public school stakeholders, including students, parents, teachers and administrators. Their experiences and stories will now be outlined in an upcoming chapter. The next section focuses on the types of methodologies used in this research study.



## Chapter 3: Methodology

### 3.1 Background

This chapter provides the reader with an overview of the methodologies utilized in this study. In an effort to ascertain the experiences of various people on the topic of Christian privilege in Canadian society and public schools, an authentic and appropriate way to access perspectives in this study was through the use of qualitative research. Qualitative research crosses many disciplines and encompasses many terms and concepts; further, it means different things to different fields, scholars, and eras. For the sake of this study, according to Denzin and Lincoln (2008):

Qualitative research involves the studies use and collection of a variety of empirical materials — case study; personal experience... interview... that describe routine and problematic moments and meanings in individuals' lives... qualitative researchers deploy a wide range of interconnected interpretive practices, hoping always to get a better understanding of the subject matter at hand. (p. 4)

In order to access a variety of personal experiences, face-to-face interviews were conducted. A result of such interviews is that a question is asked and the respondent answers spontaneously. Another benefit is the potential of further elaboration from the research participants if and when more information is needed. As Perakyla (2008) explains, the researcher can reach areas of reality that would otherwise remain inaccessible through the use of an interview. I used a combination of structured and unstructured interviews, often referred to as semi-structured interviews. During these, I asked a series of consistent interview questions, depending on the role of the participant, including eight administrators, eight teachers, eight parents and eight students (please Appendix A for these questions). Due to the nature of this interview, opportunities for elaboration

tion and deeper discussion were possible, allowing the researcher to delve deeper into certain questions, and to access the experiences and perspectives of the person being interviewed. As Fontana and Frey (2008) explain, unstructured interviewing can provide greater breadth (p. 129), allowing for open-ended discussions, expanding on the topic at hand. They outline a “how to” approach to interviewing. This includes addressing access to the individuals for interviewing, understanding the language and culture of the respondents, how to present oneself, locating an informant, gaining trust, establishing rapport, and gaining empirical data (pp. 131-133). I will use these categories to further explain the process through which I attained evidence for this study.

### **3.2 Accessing the Setting**

In order to access representatives from the four varying groups, convenience — namely snowball — sampling was used. According to Bryman (2016), “snowball sampling is a technique in which the researcher initially samples a small group of people relevant to the research questions, and these sampled participants propose other participants who have had the experience or characteristics relevant to the research” (p. 415). These preexisting relationships allowed for ease of establishing contacts, even though it proved to be a challenge at times for people to commit to interviews. As a former Calgary Board of Education employee and current teacher in Alberta, I have many contacts, both personal and professional, whom I was able to contact. I was able to connect with teachers and administrators employed in various quadrants of the city of Calgary and surrounding areas. Regarding students and parents, I was able to share my information letter and request interviews with a variety of individuals, both friends and acquaintances. Due to my connection to the dance community in Calgary, I was also able to appeal to the students and parents at my dance studio to participate in the conversation, most of whom happily

obliged and were intrigued by the topic. As my focus is on Christian privilege in the public school system, it was my intent to interview individuals associated with The Calgary Board of Education as well as other local public school systems. In addition, one participant was sought out because she explicitly chose not to send her children to public school (please refer to Appendix B for the interview questions for this individual). In many of these interviews cases, names of individuals who, “would be interested in being interviewed,” or who were thought to have insight on my topic were suggested. The face-to-face interviews consistently took place in an agreed upon location by both parties, and included local coffee shops, participants’ homes, my own home, or at a dance studio. My connections in the field of education made accessing people in the various groups possible; however, conducting interviews in actual schools meant school board clearance was a requirement. Therefore, to expedite the research process, interviews were not conducted in any public school. In some situations, due to the busy schedule of both the participant and the interviewer, a FaceTime interview was conducted. I recorded the dialogue for each interview and later transcribed and analyzed the data.

### **3.3 Understanding the Language and Culture (and Religion) of the Respondents**

Being able to respectfully connect with and understand one another was an integral part of this interview process. Of the interviews conducted, all participants spoke English fluently, so there was never a concern of needing an interpreter, which adds a layer of difficulty. As Fontana and Frey (2008) explain, doing so may result in “disastrous misunderstandings” (p. 131). However, interviews with the students, particularly the younger children, proved to be challenging at times, due to the way the questions were phrased. In some instances, I would have to rephrase the question in more kid friendly language in order to elicit a conversation related to the topic. In addition, for some of the children, the topic may have been “over their heads.” However, they

were able to provide examples of various in school activities, and even the youngest ones were able to respond to the question, “do you think that religion should be in schools? If so, in what ways?” and provide well thought out responses.

### **3.4 Deciding How to Present Oneself**

According to Fontana and Frey (2008), once the interviewer’s presentational self is “cast,” this leaves a profound impression on the respondents and has a great influence on the success of the study (or lack thereof) (p. 132). In meeting with students, teachers and parents, one attempted to create an environment that was welcoming, and not overbearing or pretentious. For example, I always dressed professionally, yet maintained a level of casualness or openness. I played the part of a learner or student, I believe, with great success.

### **3.5 Locating an Informant**

As outlined above, my connections within various local communities allowed me to connect with numerous students, teachers, administrators and parents. In some cases, the participants contacted me expressing interest in the topic. I found it to be extremely challenging for people to commit to being interviewed; I had to ask repeatedly, and often was turned down due to people’s busy lives. I was also told by some people whom I had asked to interview that not enough was known about Christian privilege and therefore they did not feel comfortable participating in an interview on a topic they knew so little about. It was a particular challenge establishing interviews with administrators, I assume, because of the perceived time commitment, albeit, the topic at hand could have been a contributing factor.

### **3.6 Gaining Trust & Establishing Rapport**

Although I did not spend months, weeks, or even days observing and interviewing active participants, I asked questions that revolved around what could be considered a sensitive topic.

As such, earning the trust, or at least creating a certain level of comfort for those being interviewed was vital. It was important to inform the respondents that their perspective and experiences were completely anonymous and their names, credentials, and the like would not be published. All participants were given or chose a pseudonym and their information was kept completely confidential. It was also important to be completely forthcoming regarding the intents and purposes of my study, as well as to assure the respondents that no judgement or criticism would come onto them. According to Holstein and Gubrium (2011), “the interview should be an occasion that displays the interviewer’s willingness to share his or her own feelings and deepest thoughts. This is done to assure respondents that they can, in turn, share their own intimate thoughts and feelings” (p. 155). In an attempt to receive authentic responses from the individuals being interviewed, it is the responsibility of the active interviewer to converse with them in a way that elicits genuine and candid responses, not just what the interviewer expects or wants to hear. If it is experiences that one seeks, one must listen and ask poignant questions, seeking further information, if necessary. Holstein and Gubrium (2011) go on to explain, “the animated interviewer’s role is to stimulate respondents’ answers, working up responses to interview questions or comments in the process” (p. 158). In many interviews – but not all – a prior relationship between the participant and myself existed, allowing for a level of comfort that may not have existed otherwise. In addition, each interview began with me outlining the study, the interview process, and asking the participant if they had any questions. I believe that opening the conversation up immediately and making room for questions created an atmosphere of honesty for both parties.

### **3.7 Collecting Empirical Material**

In order to attain the experiences of a variety of people, information letters were distributed to various individuals. If they were interested, a consent form was completed (or, in the case of the students, an assent form and a consent form were signed), and an interview time was established (either face to face in person, or face to face on a video conferencing tool). A series of questions, which allowed for dialogue and candid responses (see Appendix A and B), were asked of each participant. The interviews were recorded (audio only), with the permission of the individuals being interviewed, in addition to notes being recorded by myself. Each interview varied in length, depending on the dialogue. The student group responded with very little detail, and as such the interviews were approximately ten minutes in length. The parent, educator and administrator interviews also varied in length – some were merely fifteen minutes, and others were upwards of seventy-five minutes. On average, the interviews took thirty minutes. Note taking during these interviews was important, not only to draw out points of importance for myself, but also to identify various themes that seemed to emerge, which I will focus on in a subsequent chapter.

### **3.8 Analyzing & Interpreting Empirical Data**

Thematic analysis was used to scrutinize the information sets emerging from within the spoken interviews in this study. As Braun and Clarke (2006) explain, “thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns (themes) within data. It minimally organizes and describes your data set in (rich) detail” (p. 79). Flexible in nature, this form of analysis allows the researcher to examine various themes that arise as a result of an investigation, in this case, interviews. As outlined, “a theme captures something important about the data in relation to the research question, and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within

the data set” (p. 82). It is the researcher that determines what a theme is, and what theme is of importance when analyzing the data, which one feels is important, as it captures what is important to the initial research question(s). Braun and Clarke (2006) elaborate on this, describing inductive and theoretical thematic analysis. For this study, an inductive approach was used, meaning the themes identified are strongly linked to the data themselves (p. 83). Essentially, “thematic analysis involves the searching across a data set — be that a number of interviews or focus groups, or a range of texts — to find repeated patterns of meaning” (p. 86).

As Braun & Clarke (2006) describe, thematic analysis follows a six step process, which I will now outline, then connect with the research process undertaken in this study.

The first step is to familiarize yourself with the data set, transcribing data (if necessary), reading and rereading the data, noting down initial ideas. The second step is to generate initial codes. Coding interesting features of the data in a systematic fashion across the entire data set, collating data relevant to each code. The third step is searching for themes. Collating codes into potential themes, gathering all data relevant to each potential theme. The fourth step, reviewing themes involves checking if the themes work in relation to the coded extracts (Level 1) and the entire data set (Level 2), generating a thematic ‘map’ of the analysis. Then, the fifth step is defining and naming themes. Ongoing analysis to refine the specifics of each theme, and the overall story the analysis tells, generating clear definitions and names for each theme. Finally, the sixth step is producing the report. The final opportunity for analysis. Selection of vivid, compelling extract examples, final analysis of selected extracts, relating back of the analysis to the research question and literature, producing a scholarly report of the analysis. (p. 87)

For the purpose of this study, data sets were grouped according to whether they were students, teachers, parents or administrators (for ease of analyzing and organizational purposes). Then, within each section, a close reading of each text was completed and notes made alongside it, drawing out important ideas. It was then that the eight interviews from each group were placed side by side, and each question's response was examined, once again looking for parallels and common threads, and more notes were made. It was also at this time that I made notes comparing the number of responses aligning with other responses. For example, responses to the question, "Do you think religion should be taught in schools?" were assigned numerical data (i.e., four in favour, three against, one was not sure), and the respondents' comments were included as evidence in response to the interview questions. The data sets were constantly evaluated as to how they related back to the overarching research questions, while ensuring they remained connected to each other. Finally, a draft of this report, and the final analysis of the research was completed. It is worth noting here that not all of the evidence gathered was presented in this final report. Instead, as Mertler (2009) explains, "it is of primary importance that you try not to report every bit of data collected; this will only overwhelm your readers. Instead, your goal is to describe the most meaningful trends or patterns that you saw emerge from your analyses" (p. 160). It is my hope that this analysis provides the reader with compelling evidence that offers a snapshot from the lived experiences of a small sampling of Canadians pertaining to Christian privilege in Canadian public schools.

### **3.9 Concerns and Considerations**

When proposing this study, I grappled with some areas of the interview process, and asked myself the following questions: Will members of any of the groups interviewed feel pressured to respond in a certain way since they are being questioned by a White, middle-class wom-



an? Would an anonymous email or online or pen to paper interview elicit different responses? As religion is a controversial topic, will certain groups and individuals experience anxiety speaking out in favour of or against the religious majority? Would the results be different if presented in an asynchronous manner (eg., in an online survey)? Another dilemma was how to draw out authentic responses – opening up to share intimate thoughts and feelings requires trust – can a true level of trust be achieved through such a short interaction? Attempting to create a series of questions that addressed the perspective of various groups was challenging, as was receiving in-depth responses to the questions. In many cases my presuppositions were challenged when the participant provided me with answers I was not expecting. Perhaps approaching this without pre-judgement would have meant less of a surprise, but this demonstrates my own biases. For example, people of a variety of faiths, ethnic backgrounds, or racialized identities may not actually believe that Christian privilege exists in public schools (for whatever reason), but ultimately their experiences (and their knowledge and awareness) dictate their responses. Fontana and Frey (2008) write that “the spoken or written word always has a residue of ambiguity, no matter how carefully we word the questions and how carefully we report or code the answers” (p. 118). However, the spoken word in this case allows for a deeper exploration of the topic than a simple questionnaire would. For me, the most effective way to access the experiences of various people was through face-to-face interviews, even though I may not have always received the answers I would have expected.

The next chapter provides some important insights into the experiences of various individuals on the topic of religion in Canadian public schools, Christian privilege, and multiple perspectives and experiences.

## Chapter 4: Findings

### 4.1 Justification

To gather various perspectives on the subject of Christian privilege in Canadian public schools, I interviewed a number of individuals face to face, including students, parents, educators, and administrators. At the beginning of every interview the premise of this study was explained, outlining Christian privilege, and the participants confirmed that they had read the recruitment letter (which included the interview questions and information pertaining to the study). They were asked whether they had any questions before the interview began. A number of the participants asked for additional information, such as why this topic was of interest, or what the completion of this study and degree would result in career-wise, but none of the participants asked for elaboration on the actual topic. Interestingly enough, later in the actual discussion, some of those interviewed commented that they did not read the information letter I sent to them, or asked me to explain Christian privilege. While I try to not begrudge this situation, I wonder whether people had enough background knowledge on the topic of privilege, and if that alone could have skewed some the responses I received. However, this reveals a lingering question for me: Could it be that people lack a clear understanding of privilege and Christian privilege specifically? In addition, did people state they had read the information and did not have questions because they did not want to appear ignorant on the topic? This will be explored in more detail in the next chapter. For now, the focus is on the interview responses themselves. The following section is divided into four headings for each of the groups interviewed: teachers, students, parents and administration.

## 4.2 The Teachers

Eight educators from the province of Alberta were interviewed in this study. Seven were female and one was male. Six were elementary teachers (ranging from kindergarten to grade six) and two were middle school (grades seven, eight and nine) and high school (grades ten, eleven, and twelve) teachers. Two teachers taught at rural public school boards outside of Calgary. One teacher taught at a public school in a town just outside of Edmonton. The remaining five teachers were all employed with The Calgary Board of Education, one of the largest public school boards in the province. Six teachers were very clear in our discussions that their school population was quite diverse, one mentioned that her school was White-dominated, and one did not make mention of the demographics. Of the eight teachers interviewed, most seemed to have an understanding of privilege in a general sense. As I am sure is the case in any interview situation, some answers demonstrated a lack of knowledge on the topic. As one respondent, Laura, said laughing, “I should have read this,” referring to my interview questions and information letter. However, all of the discussions were rich and elaborate, allowing me to see inside the walls of many different classrooms and schools.

The main themes that emerged from my discussions with these eight educators was that teachers appear to be cautious to include religion in their teaching (and seem to tread carefully around the subject), but believe that instruction about religion should be included in teaching. Second, the majority of the teachers interviewed believe Christian privilege exists at a societal level and can be found within the walls of Canadian public schools. Finally, the topic of inclusivity and the dilemma of how to include religious and cultural diversity emerged. In the section following I will delve deeper into all of these matters.

#### 4.2.1 Teachers' Responses: Religion in the Classroom

The first point of consideration is in what ways religion is included in classroom discussions and instruction, or whether it is included at all. In some instances, religion can be discussed as it pertains to the Alberta Program of Studies, or the curriculum. As Elizabeth, a grade two and three teacher explained, “we’ve started looking at different countries. So we will be looking at Peru, Tunisia, Ukraine, and India. So with that we have already started investigating that and we have been talking about Holi and talking about how they divided India from West Pakistan and how they divided it by religion...” Kim, another grade three teacher explained that:

Part of the grade three curriculum is the global citizenship part, so it’s kind of nice and easy, I guess, I feel that it’s okay if I talk more explicitly about it. So, like I said, recently we did, *If the World Were a Village* about religious freedoms and we talked about the different religions just represented in our classroom. But, I by no means — I don’t claim to be an expert on any other religions — so we had them do a project because the school I am at we have homework as part of our mandate, and so they all had to do homework on one of the celebrations that their family celebrates, and what it looks like in their family, and how they celebrate it. I didn’t explicitly teach it, they taught to their peers what they do. So, if it was Halloween, or Kwanza, some even put birthdays, and then they got to exclusively teach what it looks like in their household and then answer those questions.

(Kim)

The grade three Social Studies curriculum in Alberta lends itself well to include conversations about culture and religion, as it focuses on four diverse countries. The General Outcome states, “Students will demonstrate an understanding and appreciation of how geographic, social, cultural and linguistic factors affect quality of life in communities in India, Tunisia, Ukraine and

Peru” (Alberta Program of Studies, 2005, p. 37). However, it is entirely up to the teacher to include religion in that conversation, as it is not explicitly included in the curriculum.

Discussions about religion also arise as “teachable moments” — in instances where students ask questions that pertain to or include religion or where teachers attempt to draw out commonalities amongst their students as they arise in daily interactions in their classroom. Robin, for example, explained that in her grade three/four classroom:

I think the conversations I have had are more around tolerance, so picking on other students because of their beliefs or not understanding their beliefs, like a student coming to school wearing henna because it’s the E’id celebration. So, more conversations just around tolerance and giving those students the chance just to explain their celebrations to the other kids, but I think other than that I have never directly taught religion. (Robin)

Elizabeth discussed the ways in which she openly talks about religion and her students’ personal identities, as they arise. For example:

When we were talking about what our parents did, one of them mentioned that his dad is a pastor... And then he will often talk about his church and that he went to church on Sunday when we talk about our weekends. And then I had another little girl... and she mentioned to me — or we were talking about different ways that we can greet people — and so I said an introduction that I know. In Bangladesh it’s, “Assalam’ Alaikum,” which is... peace be upon you... and she was like, “That’s in my language”... And she told me about her E’id and stuff like that too. So, I have been able to talk to her about E’id and her celebrations. (Elizabeth)

Upon further questioning, it was determined that conversations like these occurred within the larger group, often during opening daily activities in Elizabeth’s classroom. Another teacher,

Chad, who taught middle school science classes at the time, explained that while conversations that included religion did arise, it was important to tread lightly at times:

There was occasionally a time in grade 9 we were talking about... it was about Charles Darwin and there's some religions, like the very hardcore Christian, for example, would believe that the earth is only six thousand years old and that people didn't evolve. And I know there was one family (because we talked about it in the teachers' lounge) who was very religious, and we talked about how when they taught this stuff to their older sisters and brothers they just had to be very careful. So... we talked about, here's another way that other people look at it. In science class we look at it in a science way. (Chad)

So, while it is obvious that conversations or teachable moments about religion or including religion arise in various instances, it seems it is rare for explicit instruction about religion to occur. And yet, out of the eight teachers interviewed, every single person indicated that they thought religion should be taught in public schools. They are not advocating for a specific dogma or religious belief to be taught; instead, they argue that learning about religion from a historical or cultural perspective or a general awareness of religion should be the norm. The educators were asked, "do you think religion should be taught in schools, and if so, in what capacity?" Elizabeth responded as follows:

I think all religions should be taught in schools. And I know that is a very scary thing for people to talk about is the idea that you are teaching religion in schools and that we should just take everything out. I don't think it should be taught in the practices as in you must follow this. I think it should be taught as information because without that what are we doing? I mean that is an educator's job to teach children about everything to build that understanding, to build that common knowledge so that they listen to each other. I think

that religion is now something that we socially hide away from and we don't want to talk about any of it. (Elizabeth)

Izzle agreed. She explained that she thought religion should be part of the curriculum from kindergarten — or even preschool, if applicable:

Get them while they're young. Because that's the change that will impact how future generations see religion... and if you're looking at creating global citizens or community minded individuals, and that is part of your curriculum, then religion should be part and parcel of that. (Izzle)

Kim stated that, "I think it should (be taught), but I don't think one religion should be taught. Like, I think world religions should be taught. I think it's important to understand where everybody else is coming from."

Some of these educators believe that education about religion to encourage respect, understanding and tolerance is a step in the right direction. As Chad said:

I think it's important to teach a general awareness and understanding of... some of the big religions anyways — it's hard to get them all. But, that's something I wish I had learned more about in school or at some point in my life — the different faiths and what their main beliefs are, some of the holidays. It's important to have that level of understanding and respect for it. (Chad)

Similarly, Robin believed that discussions revolving around tolerance, which might include religion, would be helpful. She explained that, "with the way society is changing, I think school is the place to address that and talk about tolerance and just respect for the country, as a person. And religion might come into that, but I think if we don't then we're going to have more of these

cases where we have our young children that they don't feel they belong to any group wanting to find a group to join..." Jen, a kindergarten teacher, agrees. She said that:

Religion should be taught in a sharing capacity. Of saying, you know, these are the things we celebrate and we find are important in our culture or our religion.... but I don't think religion should be taught... there definitely needs to be an awareness. But I don't know if kids need to go to religion classes in public schools. (Jen)

The general consensus was that religion should be taught from a cultural perspective or from a place of understanding and connection. So, if this is the case, then why is it that so many educators really are afraid to include instruction about and have conversations about religion in their classrooms?

#### **4.2.2 Teachers' Perspectives on Religious Privilege**

As this research focuses on Christian privilege in public schools, there was much discussion on the topic during the interviews. The following questions were asked of the participants: "Do you feel that Christians have advantages as Christians in Canadian society?" "Do you feel that being Christian in Canada opens any doors in everyday life?" and "Do you think there are any examples of Christian privilege within the walls of Canadian public schools?" Of the eight teachers interviewed, five confirmed that they believed Christian privilege to exist in Canadian society, one was not sure, and two said no, they did not believe it existed. This range of answers was interesting, particularly since some of the participants were adherents of the Christian faith. Of the two who indicated that they did not believe Christian privilege to exist, one individual was Christian, and one was not. Band Geek, a Christian, said:

I see Christian privilege slipping away... I see an awful lot of stuff against Christians in much the same way that I see stuff against Muslims. And taking the very extreme form of



a religion and criticizing that and applying that stereotype right across the board, when one really has very little to do with the other. (Band Geek)

Another participant, Robin, said she thought that privilege in Canadian society had more to do with the “haves and the have-nots. I don’t think it’s religious per se.” Elizabeth, also a Christian, although stating that she thinks Christian privilege exists, added:

Sometimes I think that in any faith you also get hurt for being outwardly or outspoken about your faith because people will generally put you into a group with the extremists. So, I think that happens a lot with Christians and Muslims and Hindus alike - is that you are brought in with the extremists and some people just don’t want to talk to you about it and they automatically assume that your actions will be a certain way or you will speak a certain way about something and so in that way I think that sometimes you are hindered by it rather than giving it privilege. (Elizabeth)

This claim, that Christian privilege is slipping away, is an important consideration in this study. The perceived “War on Christmas” is one example of how privilege is vanishing. The way one sees this is, as the oppressed group gains power in society, the oppressor believes their own power to be slipping away, when in fact the other group is simply becoming more “equal.” As minority religious groups gain more status in Canadian society, it is entirely feasible that some Christians feel this way. The remaining five participants indicated that Christian privilege is alive and well, through the history of Canada — its traditions and norms, Canadian holidays and special celebrations, and assumptions. Chad summed it up by explaining that, “I think it comes down to the common belief that the Christian way is the norm and that’s just the benchmark and that everything else has to flex around that. So, that is where the privilege might live — is that’s the standard and everything else works around it.” Elizabeth would agree, as she said, “I think

that there is the privilege in understanding because a lot of our cultural community is set up so that it is based on what was once a traditional Christian community, right? Our community has diversified a lot, but our traditions are still the same.” And finally, Jen discussed that, “there’s a lot of assumptions about beliefs and just the fact that people know what they (the dominant culture) celebrate.” Referring to the minority groups in Canada, she then explained further, “the majority of people do not understand people’s culture and religions. And if you don’t have an understanding of it you don’t really think it’s important or valid.”

When asked if they thought whether being Christian in Canada opened doors in everyday life, two of the participants said no, two indicated they were not certain, and the other half said yes. Of those who argued in favour, the reasons varied, from making flying and getting jobs easier (Izzle), to the existence of the separate schools for Catholic students (Kim), to opportunities, economic factors, and celebrations. As Jen explained:

I think that it might be hard for people, especially those that are new to Canada or new to certain places and they are the different religion or that sort of thing. I think it would be definitely difficult to be in a school — like if I had different beliefs but went to a school in Canada, and they celebrated Christmas and Easter and I don’t celebrate any of that, I would feel totally out of the loop and you would feel that you don’t belong and that’s bad. (Jen)

Kim spoke of the presence of separate Catholic school boards in Canada, specifically the Calgary Separate School Division: “Even as a teacher, it’s not open for me to apply to the Catholic board. And if I do... there is a limitation on employment potential that is based solely on my religion, not on my teaching competencies.” All in all, there are various examples listed which explain how being Christian has the potential to open doors.

Finally, the participants were all asked whether they believe Christian privilege was present in Canadian public schools. Six teachers interviewed said yes, and two indicated that they were not sure. It is interesting to note that the statistics were different when the participants were asked if they thought Christian privilege was present in Canadian society. What caused the answers to change? Was it the conversation that ensued for the duration of the interview, or do educators believe public schools are not necessarily representative of Canada, like I have argued? Band Geek explained she expected it (Christian privilege) exists, but she didn't see it. Robin, a teacher in a diverse school, where Christians are the minority, also didn't see it, but believed it probably does exist, just not with the population of students she has taught. The remaining six teachers argued that Christian privilege is present in Canadian public schools. As Izzle explained:

I don't know how I would feel if I was the minority and the majority's celebrations were the ones being celebrated and the time off too (meaning the breaks during the school calendar). You could take time off as a student for various celebrations and that would be okay but then you're missing out on what's being taught in class and I don't know what the answer is. (Izzle)

Chad said, "I think it would be a privilege that you get to celebrate your Christian beliefs and your holidays and all things attached to that", and Jen corroborated this by explaining that the mere fact concerts are called "Christmas concerts" instead of "Winter concerts" indicates the presence of privilege. Elizabeth's perspective was that a student who knows about the beliefs, customs and traditions is:

Going to feel closely tied to that school and more at community with that school. Whereas if you aren't, then how do you relate to that or even in those conversations? If I have a

student who practices at home and another student who practices at home and one who doesn't then who is going to be able to have a conversation about that? (Elizabeth)

Essentially, having the knowledge and experience of the mainstream cultural — Christian — practices will help a student to be more present in the class and school community since it is these celebrations that are known and accepted. It is rare for the majority of students to recognize or understand the beliefs and practices of minority groups. It is this point that one hopes continues to evolve and change as our Canadian society becomes more diverse.

#### **4.2.3 Inclusion and Religion**

The final point that arose in conversations with teachers was inclusivity, and how religion and culture might fit in. Many conversations that revolve around inclusivity include, physical abilities, mental abilities, learning abilities and styles, gender, and economic status, but seldom include culture and religion. Some of the educators talked about how when the rest of the school was singing Christmas Carols, a group of students who don't celebrate Christmas would be invited to read books or do work in the library. Similarly, at Halloween, students who don't celebrate often don't come to school or also visit the school library while classroom festivities are taking place. It is almost as though these students are being excluded, due to their different beliefs. As Chad explained:

The alternative was to go sit in a library to sit by themselves. It was not, let's change the party and make it a December party or something like that. No, we're still going to have the party but you go somewhere or they just wouldn't show up for it... so I don't know what the solution is, because then you're, well — some people would say you're punishing the kids who do celebrate (Halloween), but how do you make it fair for everyone? (Chad)

While arriving at a solution to this problem is a challenge, it is definitely something at the forefront of many teachers' thinking. Additionally, religion is a precarious subject; teachers are afraid to broach the subject and often are not aware of the intricacies of the topic. They are afraid "to go there." The question then becomes, how can teachers be encouraged to feel comfortable to address religion in their classrooms in a way that allows all students to feel safe and welcome? I intend to delve into this question later, as this is an integral component of my argument. A final observation that is worth including in this discussion and throughout the findings of the four groups interviewed is parental voice and the influence parents wield on school events. Public schools have a panel of parent volunteers who serve on "parent council", and assist with fundraising, helping to determine where monies are allocated, plan special events in the school, and so on, in conjunction with the school principal. It was mentioned in the interviews that the parent council — and even the general parent population — can have great influence in their children's schools, albeit, rightly so since they have a vested interest in their children's education. As an example of this, Kim mentioned that her school is "super diverse and that means the parent population can be quite sensitive to that. Even yoga is not called "yoga", due to parent complaints. It's called, animal stretching." There are more examples of parental voice in the following sections.

### **4.3 The Parent Perspective**

Parents certainly have an important influence when it comes to their children's education. The topic of religion brought up interesting dialogue, particularly considering adults seem to be more confident about their own systems of belief. This section of interviews consisted of a group of seven parents whose children attend publicly funded schools (charter and public), and one parent who had specifically chosen not to send her children to public schools, and instead were

attending an independent (private) religious school. The individuals who agreed to be interviewed had children in the following grades: kindergarten, grade one, grade two, grade six, grade seven, and grade ten. All of them attend school in and around the Calgary area and the parents represent both religious and non-religious groups. Of the eight parents interviewed, only one was male.

The main themes that emerged amongst the group of parents was that Christian privilege was present in Canadian society, although one did not believe this to be the case. All of the parents interviewed thought Christian privilege was prevalent in Canadian public schools. In addition, with the exception of one parent, the general consensus was that children should be learning about other religions in schools. The questions the participants whose children attend public schools were asked focused on what they knew about their children's experiences in school with religion, celebrations and any learning about religion. The questions then turned to whether they thought Christian privilege existed in Canadian society and, if so, in what ways, and if they thought it existed in Canadian public schools. For the participant whose children attend an independent school, the questions were quite similar, with the exception of being asked to explain why she chose not send her children to a publicly funded school. They were asked the following questions:

Do you feel that Christians have advantages or privileges as Christians in this society?

What privileges do you feel are granted because of the fact that they are Christian?

Do you feel that being Christian in Canada opens any doors in everyday life? (Either way, how do you feel about this?)

Do you think that there are examples of Christian privilege that exist within the walls of Canadian public schools? (What are some examples?)

In your opinion, do you think that Christian privilege affects non-Christian students? If so, in what ways?

What was compelling to me was the mention of “mainstream culture” by Sarah, and how Christian beliefs happen to be the “default” by Sydney. When I asked Sarah to elaborate upon her daughter’s school experience, she provided plenty of examples of where they may have talked about religion, but what specifically stood out was that they had sung “Christmas songs because that is the culture we are in”, much like how “you hear Jewish people talk about not being religious Jews, but cultural Jews, and they do stuff that are just traditions.” The mention of Christmas can be complicated, as it is not necessarily viewed as a religious holiday, and yet, as I have explained, a religious holiday being considered a secular one is actually a sign of privilege. So, this provides evidence in favour of the argument that Christians have privilege when it is considered the mainstream culture. Privilege, however, is a difficult concept to fully comprehend. When asked if she thought Christian privilege existed in Canadian public schools, Sydney said, “I don’t know if I’d call it privilege — it’s the default.” That is, indeed, privilege.

In some interviews, as the conversations got deeper, and people contemplated further, their answers became more elaborate. Consider Sarah’s response when asked if Christians have privilege:

I think that they probably do as primarily... I don’t know if Christians or White Anglo Saxon... I think that there’s still systemic advantages to being the dominant culture and race, even from an immigration and settling — like, coming to North America, saying you’ve discovered it and displacing Indigenous populations over the years. What was your question again? (Question was repeated) Yes, I think they do, just as the conquering culture and still being in a majority position. I think they do. (Sarah)

Kelly also provided a detailed response regarding Christian privilege:

I think the fact that as a Christian you can pretty much guarantee that you are going to have a paid day off unless you work shift work around your — or if you have to work you'll be compensated extra — for working on a day that coincides with your particular beliefs. And you would never have to think twice about that as a privilege. That you are able to take your kids out of school around those particular holidays, whereas if you practice a different religion that is not a possibility for you. That you're guaranteed, for example, to not have to write an exam on a day that would conflict with your religious beliefs — all of those things are a result of that privilege... I think people assume there is a cultural context around their religion that everybody understands. So, I think that Christians would feel offended if someone used the Lord's name in vain in a public place, whereas that's because, quote on quote, "unacceptable" in our culture. (Kelly)

Jennifer admitted that Christian privilege is "not something I think about often", but then proceeded to explain, "it just seems that Christian holidays are celebrated more vastly, and you know, with things like days off work, and you know, days off school, etcetera, etcetera, based upon Christian holidays, even if they're not labelled Christian holidays." Mark and Violet, a husband and wife team who were interviewed together, were asked this same question. Mark explained:

At first, you'd say no because everyone operates in the same laws and structures, but the whole Canadian culture is developed from a Christian perspective, so from that sense, if you're different... like if you come as a Muslim or throughout history they've been forced to change. We don't change, they do. In that sense then that's a privilege in that way. But as far as day to day, I don't think there are privileges. But actually, if you're in the cate-



gory of a devout Christian, you kind of lose some privileges in the same way others religions would just because it's not as accepted today as it was 30 years ago... but, from the perspective that the whole secular culture is based on the Judeo-Christian culture. Like, our laws are based off of that. In that sense, there is a privilege. (Mark)

Violet interjected at this point:

Even in the simple sense that when someone says Christmas we know what they're talking about. When someone says Kwanza or Hanukkah, it's like "oh, can you explain that?" So it's more of a privilege in that people understand. It's more — even just understood and everyone has heard something about that — it's not like what's that? Explain it. What are you doing? It's just like, oh you're a Christian... Like some big understanding of that in some sense. Easter or any of that. (Violet)

It was interesting listening to Mark and Violet speak, as it demonstrated how people interpret situations and concepts differently based on their experiences and knowledge. My conversation with Mark and Violet was informative in many ways; the interview questions were not intended to single any one group out. In fact, every effort was taken to ensure they were not targeting anyone, specifically Christians. It was my intent to purposefully include an array of perspectives, religious and non-religious, in my research. And yet, I wonder if Mark felt insulted by my questions when he said:

Like, I kind of feel that question (the questions pertaining to Christian privilege) is targeted towards a specific culture of evangelical Christian that I think misrepresents me and what I believe. I am not a guy that walks down the street hoping to convert someone. I am just a person that is trying to find purpose with my life and do the right thing. This is

where I've come. But, as you can see, not very many of my friends see it the same way, but we have common values. (Mark)

My goal is to draw attention to an issue that I feel affects all Canadian citizens. However, this is a topic that is fraught with controversy and emotion. Questioning institutionalized power structures and having discussions that involve a group to which you are affiliated is undoubtedly uncomfortable.

With the exception of one parent, all of the participants believed Christian privilege existed in Canadian public schools in some capacity. While schools make every attempt to accommodate for learning needs and physical abilities or inabilities, I believe that they fail to meet the religious and cultural needs of their students. Kelly explained this:

I do believe that, and I think the fact that schools continue to practice exclusively Christian holidays... so, I don't think there's a problem with having a Christmas concert. I think there's a problem with having Christmas concert and not acknowledging that it's around Hanukkah or E'id or those other cultural traditions that belong to the children that go to those schools for the most part. And again, not having to — so, kids who are Jewish have to go to school — so there could be parent teacher interviews on a Friday night, which is not a possibility for them, but there's not consideration for those kids. There's no consideration for kids that are fasting during Ramadan, if they're in junior high or high school and they're old enough to be fasting. Those kinds of things. I just think people don't think about it. It's not that it's malicious or conscious; it's just that it's not considered that people might need the same kinds of considerations that we give to Christians like having a whole week off at Christmas. (Kelly)

Simple accommodations based on understanding are essentially all that are required in order to make public schools more inclusive. As Mark stated,

I do disagree with the 2% deciding on the 98%, but at the same time, it's like, if you're able to accommodate someone then you do. And if a rule is really hurtful, then get rid of it. And always remember why the rule was there — there was a use for it at a time, but if you don't remember the spirit of the law, so to speak, then you're never going to change.

I see our school systems are changing.” (Mark)

He later said, “I think if you become aware of the privilege then you start to change your behaviour. It's like, I don't want to be privileged in that sense.” This is an integral piece to my argument, as I believe it is fair to say that awareness and knowledge are what bring about the potential for change. If more people become aware of theirs/our/mine/his/her privilege, we are more susceptible to open our minds. And in turn, is it possible that Christian privilege, if it does exist in public schools, could affect non-Christian students? The following quotes are related to this question. As Violet said:

Do I think Christian privilege affects non-Christians? I would naturally say, no, it doesn't. But, then if I thought the opposite, like, if I started thinking, what if I was Hindu? Even in my daughter's school that I think does a pretty good job of like, just nullifying the religious debate. There are aspects of it, because even in the thing (referring to the school newsletter), it says the words Good Friday and Easter, Easter Monday. That does come up. And they definitely don't have any other words affiliated with a Hindu religion or Buddhism. We don't use those words. I mean, they kind of do because they do yoga and breathing exercises, but it isn't what you would think have anything to do with religion. So, it's very easy to say that, as a Christian, no, they're not affected by it, but you

were asking about another religion. Then I would have to recognize that another religion is nowhere present. (Violet)

Corroborating this, Sydney explained:

If kids grow up in the school that totally either shies away from religious education because they're afraid of offending someone, then you have this situation where kids are like, what do you mean we don't celebrate this or this and they see that other as weird or different rather than learning about it all. Even if there isn't a Jewish kid in the class or a Muslim kid or a Hindu kid or whatever — just to learn about those different celebrations as part of the curriculum. And then if you do have a kid then you have a connection, like, oh you're Jewish! I learned a little bit about Hanukkah last year. Can you tell me more about that? (Sydney)

And, finally, Kelly outlined:

I mean, the very definition of privilege is that when you belong to the privileged group you don't even notice it. So, then for those kids who don't belong to that power structure, they are left on the outside looking in. And they're left feeling that if they say anything that they're whiners or they're trying to take advantage or they're trying to get everyone else to change. So, they're left in that awkward spot of needing either to deny their own traditions... or feeling like they can't say anything because they're trying to be part of that group. I think that would be the most obvious. And I think there's a lot more insidious subtext about Christians — or people who aren't Christian being less than people who are Christian and that other religions' cultural traditions are less than Christianity and what would be considered mainstream Canadian culture. And I think that does effect especially young kids. When they see something so different than what's in their homes and it's be-

ing devalued I think that has a huge detrimental effect on those relationships outside of school as well as in school. (Kelly)

By recognizing that instruction (whether implicit or explicit) about other cultures and religions is lacking in presence from a public school, we are able to acknowledge that Christian privilege may in fact affect non-Christian students, alienating them from daily tasks and activities, preventing them from forming deeper friendships, and causing them to be conflicted about their own identities, all of which a public education tries to avoid and prevent. This is a situation that needs to be considered as we move forward.

#### **4.3.1 Should Children Be Learning About Religion in Schools?**

When the parents were asked if they thought children should be learning about religion in public schools, it was a unanimous “yes”, with the exception of one person. The parents interviewed admitted that they believed learning about religion to be of value in the sense that it might open up their children’s eyes, allow them to attain new knowledge, and lead them towards increased tolerance, respect and understanding. Hearing such receptive responses to learning about religion made me to feel excited for the possibilities. The parents spoke with such openness, that one could not help but smile and nod in complete agreement. Here are all of their responses, as I believe it is important to include each of their testimonies. To start, Hannah explained, “I think that it teaches them to be accepting of people’s beliefs. And it’s just an educational piece that we should know about cultures and it’s a learning piece, that’s all. I think it’s good to understand where other people are coming from.” Sydney said, “yes, I do think children should learn about other religions in school, just for understanding what other people believe and it’s just a part of our world.” Jennifer stated, “Well, yeah, I think that if everybody has a little

knowledge about different things then they can respect different people's beliefs, even if they don't agree with them." Sarah explained:

I think that they should just from the context of the human story, because religions are part of the human story, but I think it's important that they learn a multiplicity of — and that they also learn the idea of more humanist ideals are common. And I suppose I'd also want them to be critical of religion as well and the negative outcomes of religion historically and in the present day. (Sarah)

This brings up an important point as learning about religion could also include conversations about atheism, agnosticism and humanism, which are all part of the human attempt at understanding. Mark and Violet, both practicing Christians, were in agreement about learning about different religions in school (I think it is important to mention this as often religious adherents are stereotyped as being restricted in their thinking and only allow their children to learn what they believe, which is not always the case). However, Mark was quick to explain that he was uncertain if and when it became the emphasis. Violet went on to say,

I would like it — I think it would be nice to have a class offering of understanding all — the more historical background where everything came from... they never talked about Hanukkah or Kwanza.... I think it would be beneficial because religion is a part of so many people's lives and so to have a basic understanding of what Hindu versus Islam versus... I think it would be beneficial. Not even integrated, but in every day. (Violet)

Kelly's response is a great way to conclude this section as it is focused on inclusion and the children themselves:

I think they (children) are going to encounter people in their lives from different walks of life and while they are in school they should be building their own values and morals and

views of the world. And so doing that demands exposure to different ways of thinking and different traditions, as opposed to just one right or common way of doing things. And I think the academic study of religion is very important in that context so kids — they only know what they know — so, it's a good idea to give them that opportunity to learn about other cultures and it's a good idea to give kids who are from other cultures, or who identify with other cultures and religions, a chance to be heard and understand and feel like they're part of the group as well. (Kelly)

It is apparent that parents believe religion and culture have an important part in their children's education.

#### **4.3.2 A Different Perspective: A Private Religious Education**

An important piece for the interviews was interviewing a parent who chose not to send her children to Canadian public schools. Renata and her family are practicing Muslims and she and her husband chose to send their children to a private religious school. She explained why:

Well, first thing I wanted them to access religious studies classes and I didn't really believe that, you know, that it was balanced for a child to be in school five days a week and then on the weekends have to go to Sunday school. Secondly, it's the environment and the impact of society on a child's beliefs, especially while they're still young and still building their identity. Considering that public schools, a lot of holidays are practiced that actually have religious roots... Many issues that are accepted widely in society now, we find they're against our religious beliefs. (Renata)

The option to find a school that fits with your belief system and religion is definitely an advantage of being a Canadian citizen, particularly in urban areas. When asked if she felt Christians had advantages or privileges in Canadian society, Renata stated, "Christians, no, I don't

think so... I think Caucasian people do. But not necessarily Christians, because you can't tell if someone is a Christian or not." And yet, when asked if Christian privilege existed in public schools, her answer was slightly varied:

I'd say pretty much the curriculum itself is inclusive of the holidays, and they're actually Canadian public holidays, so this is a federal issue. This is not necessarily Calgary Board of Education or a specific board, it's a federal issue because they have made these Christian holidays or they have been because it used to be a Christian dominant society that they made them public holidays. So obviously, everything is kind of built around that. And then you know the teachers I don't think have been guided properly on how to address some of these issues. And it has come pretty much... this is pretty much from the friends that I have and their children attend public schools, you know you have if you have a really understanding principal, a lot of these things are dated, they're not practiced in schools. But some of them are very traditional, especially if you live in parts of the city where Christians are the majority, then it's very dominant. (Renata)

Renata's perspective is similar to many parents in Canada. They want their children to grow and develop in a system that is in line with their own beliefs; this is why there are so many private religious schools available from which parents can choose. Renata does not believe that children should learn about religion in public schools. She explains:

I think in their religious schools they should. In a public school, no. Because public schools should be secular places. And the reason we don't have our children in public schools is because they're not secular. Not secular in the sense that there's no God; it's secular in that they don't follow any domination or any religion, or practice it or encourage it in any shape or form, address it more than other ones. (Renata)



In this case, it is her belief that no religion should be included as it is a public school. Renata's perspective is an important one as she represents an undetermined percentage of parents in Canada who choose not to send their children to public schools, for whatever reason. It is within their rights to make choices such as this, and it is an entirely justified view, as they believe their religious identities to be vital in their children's upbringing. This choice is an integral part of Canadian identity.

#### **4.3.3 Christian Privilege: Catholic Schools**

Often, the relationship between the terms "Catholic" and "Christian" are confused. People may use the terms synonymously, or may believe "Christian" falls under the "Catholic" umbrella, or vice versa. In the case of this paper, "Catholic" is a sub-section of "Christian", as it represents the second largest group of Christians in Canada, Protestant Christians being the largest. The topic of Catholic schools came up a number of times when participants were asked whether they thought Christians had privilege in Canada. Catholic schools have an interesting history, as was outlined much earlier, but still have a prominent role in the Canadian school system, being publicly funded. It is a common misperception that Catholic schools receive additional funding (from the church), as in Alberta they receive the same funding as public schools. They are simply a separate board from the public board. When asked about Christian privilege in Canadian society, Hannah stated:

I know that Catholics get their own schools (I don't know if that's considered Christian).

I do feel that they have an advantage. They get their own schools. Do you know what I mean? Where funding gets funded to them. I feel that public school gets — I think that — like, they get funding from churches too, right? Like, there's a lot of money there. The tax payer dollars. When they say it's designated to Catholic and they get that portion as

well. And public just gets, you know, the public funding. But what if I am Buddhist? Now I don't get the extra funding because I believe in a different religion... I think that they get a lot of extra support and money from different places and the public school system do not. (Hannah)

Sarah agrees. When asked if there were examples of Christian privilege in Canadian public schools, she explained that, "there must be in the sense that we have a Catholic school board, especially in Alberta and Ontario... I mean you're isolating the jobs to people of your faith. Although, perhaps they say you don't have to be..." Kim, an elementary teacher in a public school, mentioned that since she is not Catholic it is far more challenging to find employment in a Catholic school. She also explained that:

They (the Catholic school board) technically do have to admit students that aren't practicing Catholics, but if ever they come to a point where they're at full capacity, they do have a right to decline any students that aren't Catholic. Whereas in the public board, we don't have that at all. (Kim)

While this is the section on parental input, I felt it important to include Kim's viewpoint as well, as it is connected to the idea of Christian privilege and the Catholic board.

#### **4.3.4 Parental Perspectives: A Loss of Privilege?**

I would like to comment briefly on what is often perceived to be discrimination against Christians, or what one could refer to as the Christian loss of privilege, which came up in my discussions, albeit, not frequently. I believe it worthy of mentioning in this discussion on privilege. Mark, a practicing Christian, mentioned that "if you're in the category of a devout Christian, you kind of lose some privileges in the same way other religions would just because it's not as accepted as it was thirty years ago." Elizabeth, a teacher, made mention of this as well. What

some people see as a loss of privilege, others see as an increase of power amongst traditionally oppressed or minority groups. There is increased presence of these groups, a growth of awareness, and with that, more knowledge. In turn, Christians may feel a slight change or loss of power. You will hear this at Christmas, with mentions of the “War on Christmas”, or when individuals are told they are too “politically correct” as if it is a negative quality. Ensuring the rights of others is not a negative thing, it is an attempt to change the power dynamics in a place that has typically been controlled by a (White) Christian (male) majority. As Canada becomes more diverse, this will continue to evolve, and unfortunately, Christians may cry “foul.” It will be interesting to witness this change.

#### **4.4 The Students**

The next group to be interviewed was the students. It consisted of eight children, ranging in age from grade two to grade ten, attending elementary, middle or senior high public schools in Calgary. Of the participants, three identified as male, five as female, and three identified as Christian, and five as having no religion.

Eliciting responses from the children was challenging. In many cases, this was their first “formal” interview, and on a topic rather foreign to them. This meant simple answers. They were shy and often reluctant participants. However, what was clear was that in many cases they were already talking about religion in school, although in a very limited sense. Many of the children interviewed were of the opinion that religion should be taught in schools, and it was apparent that Christmas was a big celebration in many of these public schools.

#### **4.4.1 Conversations Around Religion: Celebrations and Holidays**

When asked if they talk about religion, including celebrations and holidays, the general responses were “no,” “not really,” but then when asked about specific celebrations, it appears that Christmas was most common, Easter was seldom discussed, but other holidays arose, including Halloween, St. Patrick’s Day, and Earth Day. Maddie explained that at her school they sang Christmas songs, such as “Jingle Bells, but it has a bunch of new words and it’s called the Canadian Jingle Bells,” and made Christmas card crafts, but did not have a Christmas concert. Mollie, a grade seven student, said that at her junior high school, they had a Christmas dance, a Christmas bake sale, and a Christmas concert. Jack, her brother, attending a different school, explained that at his school they had a winter festival show “because not everyone celebrates it” (Christmas). The school he attends is a fine arts school, which may be the reason for such a decision. Sami, also a grade seven student, explained that while conversations about religion seldom came up, “it’s not how much we are talking about it, it’s just, like, respect them. If you don’t believe in that religion, then you can’t disrespect that religion.” She also outlined that they have a Christmas dance, and “fun” craft stations at Easter and Christmas that the students really enjoy participating in. Olivia, a grade ten student, said that at her high school only the band has a Christmas concert, but that overall very little is discussed around any holidays or celebrations. Finally, at Nicky and Jack’s school, in their grade two classrooms, the whole class participated in writing letters to Santa Claus.

#### **4.4.2 Students Perspectives: Should Children Learn About Other Religions?**

When asked if any other celebrations, such as Diwali or Hanukkah or Ramadan were ever mentioned or celebrated, Mellie, a grade three student mentioned, “we have two Jewish people in our class and they celebrate Hanukkah and so we did a Hanukkah celebration... we made

dreidels.” Maddie said, “I’ve heard of Hanukkah but I have never done anything for them.”

Nicky and Jack, both grade two students mentioned that at their school all the students contributed to a class book about “holiday traditions, not just Christmas” that they celebrated in their own families, but were unable to recall what some of the other celebrations were. The remaining students responded, “no” they did not talk about other religious traditions or celebrations.

When the question, “do you think children should be learning about different religions in school?” was presented to the students the responses were interesting. Two children said, “I don’t know”, but the remaining six indicated that they thought instruction about religion should be included in their learning. Sami said, “I think it depends on what school you go to. If you go to a Catholic or Christian or one of those schools, then I feel like, yes, you should because you go to one of those schools. If it’s public you can talk about it... I don’t know. It’s not something I really talk about...” Olivia explained that, “I feel like it would be good to learn because I don’t know a lot about Hanukkah or any other celebrations like that or other religions.... I feel like it shouldn’t be forced to learn about that, but maybe know a bit more than what I know.” Maddie said, “Yes... because you can learn about different cultures and what they have and when we do the cultures for social studies, we have centres and sometimes there is a games centre that I really like.” Mollie’s response was that, “so that they can be aware that there are many different beliefs... yes, we should celebrate religions and know what it’s like to be different.” Jack replied, “Yes, because people don’t really understand what they are doing, and they speak different languages with different words.” Finally, Mellie answered, “Yes, so they can choose what religion they like the most.” When pressed a little further, and asked to elaborate on her response, Mellie explained, (they should be learning about) “holidays, all the days that they use for their religions. And if they play any fun games — like Hanukkah.”

Finally, when asked if they thought one religion was treated more special than another, four replied, “no”, three appeared to be unsure, or did not understand the question, and finally, Olivia said, “yes.” She explained:

Maybe Christianity because we still have Winter Break, but it’s more like Christmas.

And then there is Hanukkah throughout December and they don’t give them time off school to do that... I don’t really have a strong opinion about it, but I feel that if I had a different religion then I might feel more strongly about how it’s treated. (Olivia)

So, in the end it is apparent that while many of the questions challenged their thinking, most of these public school students believe there is a place for learning about religion in their education. I argue that even though these questions may have been confusing, it is these kinds of problems and topics which need to be raised in order to challenge the status quo, starting at a young age.

#### **4.5 The Administrators**

The final group of participants consisted of public school administrators, including principals, assistant principals, and learning or curriculum leaders from local elementary and junior high schools. All of them identified as female. The populations of these schools varied from mostly Christian or secular, with a few visible minorities — albeit their religions were not necessarily known — to very diverse communities, such as Andrea’s school, where over forty languages and cultures were represented.

The emerging themes from the interview process include the importance of Christmas in each school over any other celebration. Some of the administrators included descriptions of other celebrations, but Christmas was the most prominent. The dialogue that surrounded Christian privilege was interesting and included many perspectives and experiences. All of the teachers felt

there was a place for learning about religion in public schools, and each was able to recount various instances where they had to accommodate for certain religions or how religion affected their teaching. Some other important topics of conversation were the ways in which diversity and inclusion seldom include religion and culture, and the focus or lack thereof on diversity, culture, religion and social justice in their teacher and administration preparation courses, as well as the power and voice of the parent council and parent body over decision making.

#### **4.5.1 Christmas, Celebrations and Public Schools**

Christmas appears to be a celebration in the majority of Canadian public schools. It is apparent that Christmas is a big deal — whether the reason is the commercial aspect, the fact that it's a tradition celebrated by the majority of the Canadian population, or the sights, the smells, the gifts — it's a force to be reckoned with. It is up to each school's administration team to determine how it is celebrated. Of those interviewed, all eight administrators had a Christmas concert in some capacity, all eight administrators stated that Christmas carols were sung and/or played in the weeks leading up to Winter Break, and Christmas crafts or activities were done during curricular time. Some of the schools had school wide Christmas themed decorating contests and trees set up throughout the school. All of those interviewed explained that they did not go to such extremes for any other celebration. Janine described that her principal left the responsibility of decorating the school up to the parent council, as “she didn't want anything to do with the Christmas trees put up in the foyer.” Although her school did not put a big emphasis on Christmas, there was still a Christmas concert, “some of the songs were the more traditional music. So, she (the music teacher) chose a theme or a play — a musical theatre type thing. The younger kids did the Must be Santa kind of stuff and the older kids did more of the pop culture kind of stuff.” She was quick to point out that there was very little emphasis on the religious as-

pects of Christmas, it was more of what is considered “secular.” At Andrea’s school, the students participated in Christmas crafts, Christmas carols were played over the intercom, and there was a Christmas concert. She explained (about the Christmas concert), “we do and it’s extremely well attended and we absolutely cannot get rid of it. It’s actually part of the TLC (Traditional Learning Centre) mandate that we celebrate all of the different cultures, that we very much participate in all of the holidays” (I did peruse various documentation pertaining to the Traditional Learning Centre programs at The Calgary Board of Education and was unable to locate this claim). She also explained that:

They won’t sing the traditional songs like Hark the Herald Angels Sing, but it’ll be over the PA when they are making crafts so those traditional pieces are there. And so they do the decorations, they decorate the gym for Christmas holidays. (Andrea)

Krithea said that at her school:

I guess we do call it a Christmas concert. However, we don’t tend to do religious based songs, we do more of a winter based concert. However, with that being said, we do sing traditional Christmas Carols, such as Silent Night or The Little Drummer Boy... most of them in the past have just been Christmas around the world. We’ve done a snowman theme. So, we’re trying to stay away from the religious theme — the Christmas concert is usually just song and dance. (Krithea)

She also explained:

We decorate Christmas trees at school. We do something called Deck the Halls, where they decorate the front of their doorway and it would be a winter theme, to presents, to... Santa Claus I have seen. We also do where we have something called The Night Before Christmas, where the children come to school on the last day in their pajamas, and we



break off and read these different themed stories with different teachers around the school and then the children participate in Christmas themed crafts that day. (Krithea)

Tilea, a junior high teacher, also outlined the Christmas activities at her school:

They're called Winter Celebrations but we have a Christmas tree that is put up in our front foyer. The majority of the students in my school are either Christian or celebrate secular holidays... it's there for about two weeks, and on the second or the last Friday before we get let off, our parent council puts on a hot chocolate day. So from about 8:30-10:00 — so it goes into our instructional time — we all as a school get together, have hot chocolate and our choir teacher and her choir sing Christmas songs. (Tilea)

When asked to elaborate on the Christmas songs sung, she said, "I think they have sung Away in a Manger, Frosty the Snowman and all the secular songs, definitely... Angels We Have Heard on High." She went on to explain a curricular connected event that occurred with the grade seven students, as a wrap up to a Language Arts unit on Dr. Seuss — the teachers host a Roast Beast Feast, based on How the Grinch Stole Christmas:

Parents cook turkeys and bring them in... we all eat and then we break off and do different things... some students go on the computers and there are three different movies going on — The Grinch is always offered but then there are two other movies that are not "Christmas" in any way or Christmas related. (Tilea)

At Amy's school, due to a large student population, they were not able to host an actual Christmas Concert (in the traditional sense). Instead, the division I and II choirs performed various song selections, the rest of the school attended a choral performance, and evening choral performances were put on for the parents. According to Amy, "very traditional Christmas carols like Come All Ye Faithful were sung." She pointed out that the majority of her students identify as

Christian, or are more secular in their beliefs, with a small minority group of non-Christian students. She also stated that all the teachers engaged in Christmas crafts or classroom activities in some form: “And some even did presents — Secret Santa gifts. One of the teachers I work with did a full on Secret Santa where kids had to buy a \$10-\$15 gift to exchange for Christmas. I have never seen that. Everybody participated, everybody had a gift, everybody wrapped it. I have never seen that.” At Amelia’s school, the administration planned a winter wonderland where:

We would all spend a whole afternoon but also days before and days after setting up each hallway on a theme and have the kids study a book on the theme of winter wonderland but like one hallway did Jan Brett, and another did Polar Express and another hallway did something else about Santa’s toyshop. And we all had to read the book and I was the learning leader for one of the hallways and was like, look you can do whatever Jan Brett book you want, as long as it’s winter... but it was like halting other teaching which bugged me... we spent weeks before gathering equipment and we decorated the whole school with so much stuff and then there was this evening and it was like three hours long and it was assigned time but it was in the evening and the kids moved between spaces and did a craft in every room and it was an enormous expense on the parent council paying for all this craft equipment and in the end I am not sure if we would have been happier with something more joyful for the kids and less so work for the kids. In the end everyone was happy because they got what they wanted and that was Christmas. (Amelia)

Amelia went on to explain that there were multiple decorated Christmas trees located throughout her school, “and then we sang carols all week and each class had a party.” It is important to note that her school body consists of a large community of “Mormon children and Evangelical Christians... there is also a smattering of secular Israeli Jewish people and seculars, like a really small

smattering.” Jena, an administrator at a diverse school, also has a Christmas concert, but it is left at the discretion of the music teacher. So, past concerts have included a focus on snowmen, because of a connection to Frozen, and in other years they have done entirely all Christmas carols. The school also has “a door decorating day. We have arts and craft day. It’s big at my school. It always has been and it’s a tradition that I have chosen not to mess with.” Finally, Laura, also an administrator at a school with a diverse population, explained:

A couple years ago we tried not to have a Christmas concert and that was a total uproar from the parents. There is a very strong parent base in that community that want a Christmas concert and then we have just as big a Chinese New Year. So that was our thing — we talked about can we not have a Christmas concert but have a Chinese New Year concert because that’s a huge part. So there was a huge vote back and forth and we have a Chinese New Year concert and a Christmas concert... with traditional Christmas carol type music. (Laura)

At her school there is also Christmas caroling in the weeks leading up to Winter Break, with traditional Christian Christmas songs, such as, Oh Holy Night. It is obvious in this small sampling of schools across Calgary that Christmas is a big celebration regardless of the student population.

When asked what other celebrations were included at these local public schools, the responses were quite varied. Christmas was still the main event, but other celebrations were included, depending on the administration, the teachers and the students. It seems that unless there is a percentage of students from different belief systems, it is not included in classroom discussions. As Jena explained:

It has to be a bigger population. If we had more Jewish kids we'd be doing a lot more Hanukkah. But we don't not do it because we don't have those kids, do you know what I mean? We recognize it. We believe in one school and everyone participates in it. (Jena)

And so, it is school dependent, but it seems that non-Christian celebrations are being included in some regard. At Laura's school, the population is largely enrolled in the Mandarin bilingual program, and as such Chinese New Year is a celebration — in addition to Christmas:

Those are really the focus. I mean we would celebrate the Mid-Autumn Festival, Christmas, Chinese New Year, Easter. But that's still surrounding those two cultures and religions. But nothing around Ramadan or anything else like Hanukkah, or anything like that or Yom Kippur. (Laura)

At Janine's school, the teachers were permitted to celebrate Halloween, but other than Christmas, as far as she knew, there were no other cultural or religious celebrations recognized. At Amelia's school, because she herself is Jewish, she makes a point to acknowledge Jewish celebrations:

We lit the Hanukkah candles with the kids and we set up the Braha on the New Year because I was missing school and I showed them what that was about and then all the grade 3/4 teachers wanted that. We acknowledged Ukrainian Christmas because we were studying Ukraine and Diwali because we were studying India. But, it was incidental... I had this calendar and it's like celebrations around the year and pretty much every day on the calendar there's something. So when the kids check the calendar in the morning, they say, "oh, it's something something day"... But I think that the purpose of this calendar is that every day is a celebration and they call that out... and then the books in my classroom — I pull them out month by month thematically. So if E'id is that month I'll pull out those books and put them at the forefront of my class. (Amelia)

At Amy's school very few other celebrations are recognized, other than Halloween where the kids dressed up in costumes, there was an afternoon assembly, and the classrooms had parties. She also mentioned that Remembrance Day and Earth Day were important days in her school. At Tilea's school, Halloween holds a place of prominence: students dress up, there is a planned dance, and a costume contest that the students all really enjoy. When asked, "Has your school ever talked about or celebrated or included a discussion about other celebrations, such as Diwali, Hanukkah or E'id? Tilea responded:

It's definitely not a mass school wide thing... if it comes up in classrooms it's talked about, but that is kids bringing it up... our librarian decorates and she has this cabinet and that changes depending on the season or depending on the celebration and she is Christian and she puts up a whole bunch of villages but she also puts up the Hanukkah candles — the menorah — but that is probably it. (Tilea)

When asked what kinds of holidays and special celebrations are at her school, Krithea said:

When I taught grade 3 — India is in the curriculum, so we celebrated Diwali in class, but that was not a school event. That was just for my 22 children that I work with. And then in terms of holidays we do Valentine's Day, Earth Day, Halloween, Aboriginal Day. I think that is it. No other religious holidays. (Krithea)

She also mentioned that at her school some teachers do Easter themed activities, such as eggs or bunnies, but that she herself avoids Easter. At Andrea's school, again, a very diverse school, she explained that they celebrate Chinese New Year, Ramadan and E'id, as well as Easter.

#### **4.5.2 More Perspectives on Christian Privilege**

Of the eight teachers interviewed, seven stated that they thought Christians had privilege in Canada, six believed that being Christian opens doors in Canadian society, and six believed

that Christian privilege exists within the walls of public schools. While Jena said, “Christians do think that they have more rights than anyone else”, when asked if being Christian opens any doors, she explained:

I don't think it's being Christian. I think it's being White. And Christian often gets assimilated with White. I would say that White people, Caucasian people, have what I would say continue to have a lot more of what I would perceive as rights and freedoms and sense of entitlement than I would say people of colour. So, it's not really religion. It's more race. (Jena)

On the topic of Christian privilege, Andrea commented:

I actually think they don't have privileges. I think we get the raw deal many times. I think that we are expected to be incredibly accommodating and not necessarily stand up for anything, so I think it's a little harder because we are, in many cases, especially at the school where I am now, we are the minority. And that is a very hard piece that doesn't necessarily stand out and I am not sure that we actually get privilege for that and I think that in some ways it's a little harder for us. (Andrea)

When asked if she thought being Christian opens any doors in everyday life, she replied:

Nope. Again, this is going to sound so not the way I want it to, but I think again, because we are not outspoken or more accommodating, or we're Canadian for generations, I think we have a different mindset, so we are much more flexible or willing, to yep, let's help the minority, let's welcome them, let's do this and so I think in many ways we end up shafting ourselves. Oh, wait a minute! What's happening? I don't have any say anymore! It can be frustrating because you can see it happening. At the same time, you want to teach your children both at school and at home, we need to be accommodating, and we

need to be welcoming, and we need to have open minds, and we need to figure out how we can all coincide together. I think there is value to it, it's just trying to find that balance. (Andrea)

The question of Christian privilege in Canada was posed to Laura, to which she replied, "I think that it is centred around the Christian religion and that other religions kind of right now I do feel that living in Canada we are expected to go with the flow with what's happening." When asked what privileges might be granted because they are Christian, she stated:

I would say the basic privilege of being able to practice their religion and celebrate the holidays without ridicule or questioning. You know, there's kind of an understanding that that's okay versus if you're another religion it's more why is that happening? Or why are you doing that? Whereas it just seems that everyone has to follow along with what's going on in the Christian religion and holidays... You're having to explain yourself much less in the Christian religion and have to jump through less hoops to explain what you're doing... I would say that just not having to jump through hoops or explain yourself or even when it just comes down to holidays, so if it's not a Christian religious holiday asking your holiday for that time off or even if you're — I am sure there are people who don't ask for that time off because they're worried about what that person is going to think or say... and the fact that we have Christian holidays off already — our calendar year — it's built into our school system. It's built into our society. (Laura)

Laura went on to explain that she sees evidence of Christian privilege in Canadian public schools:

I would say even the singing of Oh Canada — there's the word God in there and we sing that every week, every Monday. Also, the fact that — the privilege that we celebrate hol-

idays like Christmas and Easter at school — that alone is a privilege right there and the children of other religions in my class or at our school for that matter their religions (celebrations) come and go. And even now I am thinking I have to do a better job of making sure that that doesn't happen. (Laura)

Janine made an interesting observation about parent voice and power, of which I will comment more on later. When asked if she thought whether Christians had advantages or privileges, she replied, "I'd say they fight for it more than other cultures. I don't know if they have more privileges, but definitely in the school setting, they will fight for it and the parents will fight for it more than the parents that don't have it." She is referring to the power of the parents, those with the loudest voice. In this case, she was very clear that it was the White, Christian parents. She went on:

There is definitely more stat holidays. The holidays fall around the Christian — religious celebrations. They definitely — schools are definitely being more open with the other religions and if they want to take time off for their celebrations or if they're fasting or things like that, but there is no set holidays situated around those other kinds of religions, so it definitely opens more doors for people. (Janine)

When asked if she thought Christian privilege was present in Canadian public schools, Amy mentioned an event that is important for leadership in all schools to contemplate. She explained:

One thing I can think of specifically was when the PATs (Provincial Achievement Tests) — in grade 6 — were during the same time as Ramadan, so we had kids writing PATs and fasting with no water and no food during the day. So I know that became an issue. I know that the government didn't acknowledge it until the week before, and said that if there were any issues then parents could reschedule them. It was not a common press re-



lease. It was a, if your students' parents have a concern, we can adjust the times for those students. That is definitely one time that I really noticed that it was something scheduled and didn't really consider other different religions. Yet we have our holiday off for Easter, and Good Friday, etc. (Amy)

I did look back at the dates of the PATs and Ramadan, and they did coincide. This is definitely a situation that administration and education officials need to be sensitive of. Amy also made mention of how end of year sports or activity days may also coincide with Ramadan or other religious celebrations, and the effect this could have on our students. Likewise, Tilea, a dance teacher with The Calgary Board of Education, indicated that she would need to be aware of the effects of fasting during Ramadan or other dietary concerns. When asked if she thought Christian privilege affects non-Christian students, she said:

Yes, I think that non-Christian students are more aware of non-Christian beliefs than the other way around because of it (privilege). I think that it can go a couple ways. I think that some kids like that they're aware because of — how can I say this? I don't think that if they were raised in a school based on their religion they know as much about Christianity because of it... maybe people view that as them being more educated about the faith and Christian beliefs, but I think that if it is being done with one it should be more widespread and we should be teaching — and we should know who our kids are and know what they're celebrating, and build them up and celebrate with them, all of them. (Tilea)

Krithea, too, believes that Christians have advantages in Canada. She explained:

I just feel that our daily routines — schedules — are aligned with more of Christian values. Just thinking our days are set, no prayer for other cultures, and we definitely revolve around the Christian calendar, whereas there is a strong emphasis in society on Christian

holidays and stores and on TV and through media. So, I can see that it definitely has a real influence for us on our society. (Krithea)

She went on to state:

I feel that because we're so aligned to the norms of Christianity around us, that perhaps that might affect non-Christians in some way. I guess being that their beliefs or their customs aren't the majority that they're surrounded by might equate with feelings of feeling underprivileged or disadvantaged in some way. I guess it really falls on the individual student and how they perceive it too. (Krithea)

Amelia believes there is Christian privilege in Canada, and recalled an interesting experience:

Growing up in Winnipeg with mostly Jewish people was one thing. Then I came here and I wasn't mostly with Jewish people and people were like, so are you Israeli? I mean, it's okay for people to be ignorant but like, I am not. And people are like, well how did you learn to speak Hebrew? And I'm like, I went to Hebrew camp. Do your parents speak Hebrew? Not a word. Well how can you be Jewish if you're not Israeli? Like, it's different. So there's a lot of explaining that you have to do. But there's not when you're Christian. (Amelia)

When asked what privileges she felt might be granted because of the fact people are Christian,

Amelia responded:

There is no explanation; they don't have to explain away things... there's a lot more acceptance; its simpler to understand... you get more opportunities to criticize; you can criticize Muslims and Jews and the poor and the underprivileged and newcomers because your faith is based in something that is what our laws are based on. (Amelia)

And finally, when asked if she thought there were examples of Christian privilege in the walls of Canadian public schools, she was quick to respond:

I think our text books are blatantly outright Christian based. We don't use text books as much as we used to. I think the contents in our libraries are. I think you can find — for every fifty Christmas based story books you can find one other book. I just think a lot of our content is and a lot of our teachers are... You educate a society based on your beliefs.

(Amelia)

This final comment stands out in an profound way to me, as it is fundamental to the argument of this thesis: You educate a society based on your beliefs.

All eight administrators believe that there is a place for religion in public schools, to some degree. They did not believe that religion from a faith perspective should be addressed in schools, but that for the most part, teaching world religions or honoring religious celebrations would be appropriate. It is important to note that Andrea showed some hesitation:

I think teaching religion is dangerous because... teachers don't have the expertise in that. I wouldn't want to teach it... I think having the opportunity to have those discussions or even celebrate together with some of those religions is kind of what we are doing. I don't need to know what this is necessarily about. I need to know this is important to you and there is a religious aspect to it and there's a celebration... Let's celebrate together. But the nitty gritty of why we're celebrating this or who died on this, or what belief it is. I don't need to know that, but let's celebrate that together. (Andrea)

As she mentioned, teachers often don't have the expertise in religion (and culture). I will return to this point in the next chapter as I think it is worthy of further analysis. Amelia explained:

I think that religion should be — maybe not taught — but experienced. It should be an element of our curriculum that we don't gloss over this just because. It's so much a part of people... it begins as a place of sharing and not an assumption. (Amelia)

Amy said, "I think if religion was taught in school, maybe a class about world religions or understanding about different religions. I personally don't think it should be in public schools, like public schools from a belief perspective..." Likewise, Laura believes that:

Teaching about different religions should be taught in schools. I wouldn't say that teaching a religion in public schools is definitely appropriate especially since everyone comes from different backgrounds and different belief systems, and different values and so do the children. But teaching about different religions? I think we need to do a better job of that because I know that I don't necessarily teach about the Christian religion either but I don't do a good job of teaching about any religions, Christianity as well. So I'd say not teaching religion but teaching about religion. (Laura)

Krithea also believes that world religions should be the focus. She explained:

I personally think that world religions should be taught in schools. I feel that we should be more aware of the diversity in our country and the people that are our neighbours and I feel that a lot of us aren't aware of that. And I think that could do everyone good to have some sort of world religions. And it's not so much teaching the religion; it's just informing about the practices that are in our country... and I guess for me, I am an elementary teacher. However, I feel that maybe that is something that could start in junior high. I know there are options in high school. But it could be for grade 5 and up. (Krithea)

Tilea is in agreement, as she stated, "I think that in public schools not the practice of religion, but understanding and education of what they are should be taught. I think that it would make our

youth far more educated and understanding towards one another.” Finally, both Jena and Janine believe there is a place for religion, but they articulated it a bit differently. Jena argued that, “I think religion should be recognized in schools in the capacity of world unity and we all belong, and no one’s religion dominates another religion. I would say, I would encourage that kind of a development.” And finally, Janine said:

I think culture should be taught in schools. I am not sure if religion should be taught in schools, but I believe that in order to understand where the beliefs and all that are coming from, I believe that it should be part of it — they learn about the First Nations and they learn about that culture... and I believe — if we’re going to embrace other cultures coming into Canada, we need to understand where they are coming from — maybe not their spiritual beliefs — but understanding where their ideas or where their actions are coming from. And tolerance. It’s the not knowing what’s going on that creates people to be upset about it; they just don’t understand it. (Janine)

And so, it is apparent that administrators feel there is a need for conversations and teaching to include religion, but more from an academic perspective, through the teaching of world religions; it is more teaching about religion, not the teaching of religion that would be supported.

### **4.5.3 Religion and Inclusion**

In conversation with the administrators, they made mention of various accommodations that they had taken in regards to religion or the religion of their students. This represents the many ways in which school officials and teachers work to meet the various individual needs of their students. Examples included students from various faith backgrounds being excluded from certain classes, events, assemblies, celebrations, class parties, and so on. Amelia recounted a story of a little girl who:

Came to our school and she'd been like two months in Canada before she attended in September and her dad wrote a note that said, I need to get the paperwork started to dis-clude my child from music because my faith — my brand of Muslim — doesn't support music. No music. No singing. (Amelia)

In addition, Amy spoke of instances where fathers would not shake her hand, or mothers wouldn't speak to male teachers as a result of their religious beliefs, in addition to students being exempted from various class events, such as watching certain movies, or participating in dance units or music class. Tilea explained that having a student who was an active Jehovah's Witness presented some challenges:

So she was not allowed to participate in any celebrations such as Remembrance Day and Halloween based things — so you know, like any secular or military based things... so she would be given choices of what she would like to do. She loved to read so her choice would always be to go to the library and read, so it wasn't a punishment at all... if she preferred to do something different she was certainly welcome to do it. Sometimes her mom would offer that she didn't have to go to school that day. But she loved coming to school and was okay with spending that time elsewhere. (Tilea)

Laura mentioned that there was an aboriginal club at her school to help meet the needs of the high First Nation's population at her school, in addition to numerous sessions of professional development on cultural sensitivity around aboriginal culture. Similarly, Jena explained that to meet the needs of their aboriginal families, they:

Have elders come in. We invite the families in. We honour the circle that they do — the Circle of Courage... They get into a circle and they discuss things... So, if we have an issue with a parent we invite them to come have a problem circle (sic). (Jena)

She also mentioned that at a previous school with an elevated refugee population, due to the high incidences of trauma:

We did everything possible to honour them and to feel welcome because we had to build trust with them. They used to hide their praying and so instead of hiding it, we decided to recognize it. We gave them a little room so they could pray. (Jena)

Krithea also referred to a prayer room for one of her students:

We had a special room that we set up with the support of the family and they helped us decide where it should be and what it should look like... the little boy in grade 4 had a timer on his watch that went off and when it beeped he knew that was his quiet time to go and then he would just come back to class. (Krithea)

Krithea explained another time in which she had to accommodate a student and family because of their religious beliefs:

For a movement break when I was in a kindergarten class, I used to do yoga... I did have a family that was Christian ask for that not to happen in the classroom because it was more eastern based. I guess if you're thinking of yoga in its traditional way. So, I would say that affected my classroom unit as a whole because a lot of children really did benefit from yoga in terms of a calming exercise and a physical exercise and there was no religious undertone. And I would say that having to stop that did have an effect on the other children who did enjoy it, but obviously I had to respect that family and what they were asking and their religious beliefs. (Krithea)

Interestingly enough, the entire class had to stop the activity, even though in Krithea's opinion, it benefitted the majority of her students. This student could have participated in a different form of a body break, but instead this parent had a loud voice. I will speak more to the power of the par-

ent voice later in the analysis. Finally, Andrea did mention that at a previous school, the administration had been approached to create a prayer room. As she said:

That becomes tricky because then it becomes about supervision. Once you are in junior high then I don't need to supervise you, but when you're in grade 4, I still have to have direct supervision over you. So, we were able to broach that topic with their parents — sorry, I don't have supervision, I don't have a prayer room for you during instructional hours, there is no room. (Andrea)

Administration, where possible and appropriate, will typically go above and beyond to ensure that the students are accommodated and needs considered. An important point that arose numerous times is how to meet these students' religious and cultural needs while still remaining inclusive. For example, could it be perceived as punitive to send a student or a group of students to another classroom or to the office or to library simply because they are not permitted to participate in a class Halloween party or Christmas activity? In instances where religion has impacted the teachers or students at her school, Janine commented:

I can just say the activities that are chosen have to be stopped or be modified for those students. So, those students, for the Christmas concert, for example, they just did something else in another room while they were practicing and preparing. (Janine)

Some administrators and teachers seemed to be uncomfortable with this. In Amelia's example of the girl whose parents would not permit her to participate in music class, "at music time she takes a book and she goes into the hallway which I didn't think was fair. We thought well maybe she could go join another class for a bit..." Likewise, Krithea was uncomfortable with how this potentially singles students out:



I guess I can say too, those students who do have to sit in the office during things like a Halloween parade, I do wonder about that because I don't know that that is going to make them feel great about missing out on fun and excitement that everyone else is doing. I am sure they understand why, because part of it is their family, but I sometimes wonder how they feel inside when they have to do that. (Krithea)

Laura touched upon a situation from the previous year where, during planned school — wide Christmas activities, a handful of students “had some kind of centre thing set up so they went somewhere else in another classroom or with an Ed Assistant sitting maybe somewhere in the library.” She then went on to explain that:

When I had children in my class that could not participate in any activities — I did know that it affected them because I definitely tried to do way less last year, trying to be sensitive to that... I still think that it affected them. I still think that they knew they had to be removed from the group for a reason and the reason realistically was they didn't believe in what the other people believed in, and so then do they internalize that that belief is wrong? (Laura)

This is an issue that troubles the minds of some teachers, particularly when diversity and inclusion is an integral part of teaching and learning. When asked for details regarding their teacher preparation and administration courses, it was apparent that while diversity and inclusion were mainstays, religion and culture were seldom included; where it was brought up was specifically through the interests of the students in the program. As Amy explained, “diversity and inclusion is more about special learning needs and not about religion.” In addition, Krithea stated:

I feel like there is a big emphasis on other kinds of diversity, such as ELL (English Language Learners) or special needs, even now a big focus on gender. The mainstream. But I

still don't see often that there is an opportunity to learn about religion or culture.

(Krithea)

Religion is such an important part of a student's identity; it is unfortunate that it is frequently glossed over or ignored.

#### **4.6 Other Emerging Themes: Parent Voice and Power**

Another theme that emerged through these interviews and that is worth mentioning is the power and voice that some parents, including the parent council, have over decision-making at the school. As Janine explained, the previous principal at her school had made the decision to remove all religious and secular celebrations, making the school essentially celebration free. And yet, as she outlined:

The parent council forced it. And she said that if that is what you want, you have to put it up and you have to take it down (referring to a Christmas tree). I am not aware of anything that other parents of other cultures would say anything about it. Just that group is why key people on that parent council felt that it was very important to have. (Janine)

Krithea's earlier story of having to cancel yoga is another example of the power of parent voice: one parent complained and the entire student group felt the repercussions. Amelia also recalled a situation where she read a story about a boy in a mosque and the following day had inquiries from a parent regarding the name of the book and what values were discussed. Of course, this is just a small sampling and therefore, this is not the majority of parental interactions. Parents are generally supportive of decisions made by administration. I argue these examples were worth mentioning as part of the reality faced by public school teachers and administrators regarding religion in the classroom, as it certainly will continue to be questioned.

It is worth recognizing that none of the administration interviewed participate in Samaritan's Purse — Operation Christmas Child or the distribution of Gideon's Bibles to grade five students. Both Amelia and Jena explained that Operation Christmas Child had been suggested as a school wide fundraising activity by a teacher, but the administration disallowed it due to the religious connections of the organization. They felt supporting local charities would be a more worthwhile cause for their student population.

In conclusion, I believe it is important to include the reflections of two administrators, Krithea and Laura. Krithea ended our conversation by saying:

I don't think we do enough to really think about the religion and culture of our students and the fact that I knew things about different religions, I can see that that might not necessarily be the norm, I think that there might be people at my school that aren't that aware... Your questions definitely encouraged me to think about this more... and brought up some ideas about how we can focus on that more. (Krithea)

Laura said, "being reflective on my own practice, it's made me think about my own work more and I've talked to colleagues at work about it. It made me really think about this..." If anything, that is the intent of this research and conversation: for people to be critical of their own teaching practice and to consider ways to make Canadian public schools more inclusive to the needs and identities of all students, including their culture and religion — all religions.

#### **4.7 Conclusion**

In conclusion, by accessing the experiences, thoughts and opinions of various public school stakeholders, it is apparent that further conversations need to occur around the topic of religious — Christian — privilege in our Canadian public schools, including reassessing and perhaps expanding our definitions and practices of inclusion. This study has allowed me to delve

deeper into this issue, and access the perspectives of many individuals, and engage in important dialogue. The next chapter will expand on these findings, and explore the ways in which religion and culture might be integrated into student learning, particularly as Canada's diversity continues to grow.

## Chapter 5: Analysis

Religion has a role in the public school classroom. Many stakeholders in public education agree. The challenge is to create a learning environment where people feel safe and confident exploring this topic, without any negative repercussions. I am not suggesting that teachers need to be informed about all of the day-to-day practices of multiple religions, although that would definitely be an advantage in relating to their students. Instead, what I am arguing in favour of is creating an educational setting where students and teachers feel safe to address difficult conversations, and to inquire into and explore the historical and institutional implications of various power and oppressive hierarchies. It would also be vital to discuss the role that culture, race and religion have played in these inequalities. Finally, classrooms where religious and cultural diversity is celebrated and recognized as being part of an individual's identity is ideal. As was outlined in the roundtable discussions earlier, many Canadians believe that more effort needs to be made to address religious diversity in Canada. Furthermore, multiculturalism needs to be more clearly defined as it relates to all Canadians, not just minoritized groups. I contend that the place for this to happen is in the public school classroom.

In this chapter, I provide an overview of my discoveries, specifically from the personal accounts of the interview participants and the implications of these findings. Recommendations on how to move forward with a focus on multicultural education, including religion and culture, both in public school classrooms and teacher preparation programs, will be included. I also include a discussion about specific themes that consistently arose during my discussions and research. It is my hope that through critical thinking and the inclusion of these topics in public education, well informed global citizens will be the result, those who both recognize and celebrate diversity, and who also work to overcome inequalities and disparities in Canadian society.

## 5.1 Implications

Christian privilege was the overarching theme throughout this entire investigation, and as such, was an integral aspect to the many interviews and discussions. Other than the students, whose interviews did not include as pointed a question as, “do you believe Christians have advantages or privileges as Christians in this society?” (or related inquiries), the responses were overwhelmingly in agreement that some level of Christian privilege is prevalent in Canadian society. Whether it was the “default,” as Sydney indicated, or the “mainstream culture,” as outlined by Sarah, the parents, teachers and administrators acknowledged the existence of Christian privilege. In fact, the majority of those interviewed from these three groups said there was some degree of Christian privilege in Canadian society. Participants were also asked whether they believed Christian privilege to be present in some capacity in public schools. Again, omitting the input from the students, the majority (seventeen out of twenty-four) of the adults interviewed believed Christian privilege was present in some capacity in the walls of Canadian public schools. It would be interesting to discover if and how these percentages might be altered with a larger sampling, including one that was more culturally and religiously diverse. In the end, however, it is clear that the majority of the participants recognize that the Christian religion plays an intricate role both in Canadian society and Canadian public schools. Therefore, it is apparent that Christianity has had and will have a lasting effect on Canadian society. Yet, this does not take away from what I argue is critical work. Just like attention to White and male privilege resulted in gradual change and efforts to create a more just and equitable society, critical thinking and reflections on the status quo of Christian privilege are essential. Canada is not a Christian country, and our beliefs, practices and actions should reflect this. Of course, like any systemic change, it

is going to take time. However, as arduous a task it may be, it is an important change that will truly reflect the unique cultural mosaic that is Canada.

Through my research and professional efforts (and that of others), I would like to propose an openness, acknowledgement, and conversation around Christian privilege, articulating its effects on both Christians and non-Christians alike. Blumenfeld (2006) suggests there needs to be an “unpacking” of Christian privilege: “Unpacking the knapsack of privilege (whether it be Christian, White, male, heterosexual, owning class, temporarily able-bodied, English as first language speakers, and others) is to become aware and to develop critical consciousness of its existence and how it impacts the daily lives of both those with and those without this privilege” (p. 196). But that is not enough. We must educate and inform Canadian citizens, starting with children, not only about the beliefs, practices, celebrations of various religions and cultures, but also the differentiation of power that exists as a result of hundreds of years of Christian hegemony in Canada. Similar to the gay rights movement, there needs to be a “grassroots” movement, accompanied with allies, to draw attention to this issue. As Freire (1970) argued, the oppressed must be their own liberators: “The pedagogy of the oppressed cannot be developed or practiced by the oppressors. It would be a contradiction in terms if the oppressors not only defended but actually implemented a liberating education” (p. 36). Christian hegemony is so tightly interspersed in our culture, media, and institutions. If efforts are being made to break down other forms of power, such as male privilege and White privilege, then religious privilege needs to be considered as well, not just from those aware of the issues, but most importantly, by those affected by it. Canadians need to acknowledge that the Christian way of life does not represent the Canadian way of life. The Canadian worldview is constantly being altered to become all-encompassing of the cultures represented: we are not a Christian country, we are not a secular country, we are a multicul-

tural country based on colonized land. There need to be more purposeful and direct conversations about what this means as multiculturalism involves all Canadians, not just “visible minorities.”

Christian hegemony, as it is often promoted as secular in Canadian society, particularly in Canadian public schools, needs to be questioned and broken down in an effort to create a more inclusive environment where all students feel valued. As Kivel (2013) writes, “the impact on people who are not Christian but who live inside Christian-dominated cultures is, perhaps, more complex as we are forced to resist the constant aggressive pressure to accept the dominant worldview. Inevitably some of those influences are internalized, others are rejected and still others are synthesized with non-Christian beliefs and values” (p. 9). Changing a worldview, in this case, to multiculturalism, involves everyone. Changes in societal norms must be forged with not for. As Freire (1970) wrote, “this thinking makes oppression and its causes objects of reflection by the oppressed” (p. 30). Dialogue is an important piece of Freire’s argument. It is “the encounter between men, mediated by the world, in order to name the world” (p. 69). He explains that dialogue can only exist with profound love for the world and for people, it cannot exist without humility, and requires an “intense faith in humankind, faith in their power to make and remake, to create and re-create, faith in their vocation to be more fully human” (p. 71). The result of all of this would be mutual trust. He continues:

Dialogue cannot exist without hope, and that true dialogue cannot exist unless the dialoguers engage in critical thinking: thinking which discerns an indivisible solidarity between the world and the people and admits of no dichotomy between them — thinking which perceives reality as process, as transformation, rather than as a static entity —



thinking which does separate itself from action, but constantly immerses itself in temporality without fear of the risks involved. (p. 73)

Freire is adamant that critical thinking is generated through dialogue and that without this communication there is no education. I believe this point to be important in my research due to the emphasis on critical thinking, awareness and education.

### **5.1.1 Implications for the Education Profession**

It is apparent that education is paramount to this conversation. Not only should public school administrators and teachers make an effort to ensure that religion and culture are part of everyday conversations, the true significance of multiculturalism needs to be explored by all Canadians. Canada's existence as a multicultural country is still unexamined in many institutions, and is an issue affecting not only minority groups. Education about multiculturalism, religion, culture, race, and social justice issues (amongst others) must be a priority. Canada is a nation made up of a multitude of cultures, racial groups, religions, nationalities, and languages, and yet, much change needs to happen in order for its citizens to become more informed, aware and accepting of this. Provincial curriculum needs to be open-ended enough to allow exploration of these topics, but also be specific enough to include multiculturalism (including culture, race, religion) for all students to develop a better understanding of. To start, more efforts need to be in place for school reform to occur: for children to approach curriculum from a critical lens, questioning the status quo, and exploring controversial issues, all in an effort to understand our ethnically, racially, and religiously diverse country.

A multicultural education model would aim to create learning spaces that are equal for all students. As Patrick (2015) states, "if Canadians wish to minimize the possibility that those belonging to religious minorities will encounter discrimination, then multicultural education should

equip students to recognize such discrimination and take steps to mitigate it” (p. 154). I propose that if teacher preparation programs made the study of social justice more of a priority, educators would gain knowledge about topics that go beyond curriculum and classroom management, embrace (or at least better understand) a multicultural model of education, and therefore alter the institution of education from the inside out. Classrooms continuously become more heterogeneous, and this diversity should be addressed as a key part of teacher preparation programs, not something new teachers are thrust into while managing many other responsibilities. Writing about his teacher preparation courses, Blumenfeld (2012) explains:

Realizing that students come from disparate backgrounds in terms of social identities, and that students learn in a variety of ways, we base the course on the notion that educators must center their pedagogy on “culturally relevant” principles and must understand the historical and cultural backgrounds of diverse student populations in their multiple identities, pedagogical frameworks, theories of cognitive development, personality types, preferred sensory modes of learning, and others. (p. 131)

There is so much to consider in the lives of students, not only their learning style, but also their personal identities, including culture and religion. Patrick writes, “if religious education is to be incorporated into social studies, then teacher preparation programs must also address religion in their curriculum and, perhaps most importantly, provide future teachers with a rationale for why religion is important to study in education” (p. 170). Knowing your students means knowing some aspects of their religion and culture and the implications of them.

In addition, administrators might consider the consequences of such learning and thinking, and assume responsibility to make it common knowledge. Again, education is key: in order for this systematic change to take place, training and professional development needs to occur.

Blumenfeld (2006) includes a list of foundational guidelines for educators and administrators to consider addressing social inequalities. For example,

Personnel Trainings: Offer training to all school personnel, including guidance counselors and social workers, in religious diversity and bullying prevention, and specifically to address the religious accommodation needs of students and school personnel; Library Collections: Develop and maintain up-to-date and age-appropriate collections of books, videos/DVDs, and other academic materials pertaining to world religions and non-believers; Curriculum and School Programs: Include accurate, honest, up-to-date, and age-appropriate information regarding religious issues presented uniformly and without bias or judgment. In this regard, when introducing a controversial topic, such as Christian privilege and religious oppression, it is effective to bring into the classroom a panel of outside speakers, composed of, for example, those who identify as Christian and understand the benefits they are accorded on the basis of their religious identity. Often students, particularly those who follow primarily Christian faiths, will be more inclined to “hear” those who are most like themselves. Also on the panel could be members of other faith communities as well as non-believers. (p. 207)

This list goes on and could provide practical examples for many educators in an effort to ensure that the experiences of minority groups are considered in all aspects of teaching and learning.

Professional development is an ideal approach for administrators and educators to become more informed about various topics that impact their students. A model of support within The Calgary Board of Education includes Diversity and Learning Support Advisors. According to a document found on the school board’s website, this team of eleven individuals works “with schools to build an understanding of students’ strengths and abilities and acknowledge students’

learning experiences and differences which contribute to CBE becoming a culturally competent and inclusive learning organization” (n.p.). Their responsibilities include advising families, providing learning support to students and their families, liaise with community and religious leaders, and “support schools in building cultural capacity and learning practices,” and more (Diversity and Learning Support Advisors “Welcome” Brochure). This group of individuals could provide informative and worthwhile professional development, working with staff to further enhance conversations around diversity and inclusion. In addition, connections with local universities, in Religious Studies, Cultural Anthropology, Sociology and Education departments, could offer meaningful support to this discussion as well. Teachers should feel safe with appropriate support from their school board and administration to explore topics such as religious beliefs, cultural relations, and the like, without repercussion. Of course, it is impossible to “know it all.” I am not insisting that all educators must be equipped and informed to teach about all religions and world views, knowing the details of the many factions, practices, and cultural influences on various belief systems.

What I am advocating for is an environment where it is acceptable to discuss religion, share ideas, practices and opinions, celebrate the diversity of these religions, and indeed, in some cases, teachers would possess background knowledge about the beliefs and practices of their students. That is good teaching — connecting with your students in individual ways. To many of these students, religion is part of their identity. It cannot go on ignored if we are to be a true multicultural society. As Patrick (2015) argues, “Canadian theorists believe knowledge about religion enables Canadians to better live out the values expressed in the Multiculturalism Act and Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms” (p. 156). Essentially, religion should play an integral role in classroom instruction in order to promote multiculturalism, diversity, and equality. Writ-

ing in favour of teaching about religion in the public school classroom, specifically the social studies classroom, Patrick (2015) explains some advantages of religious education, including:

It provides students with the opportunity to study the religious stereotypes they may have and teach them about religions other than their own... religious education may prompt students to reflect on their own identity, perspective and response to issues... it helps students recognize fundamentalism in its many forms, which is beneficial to the society at large... Religious education contributes to difficult citizenship by alerting students to the dangers of essentializing groups of people and equipping them to evaluate arguments made in public debates. The recent debate about face coverings in Quebec provides a perfect example in that it unleashed fervent arguments by proponents of both religious freedom and women's rights. Students cannot thoroughly understand the debate if they do not grasp the religious issues involved. (p. 161)

She makes a valid point that without comprehending religious issues — and in many cases, religious practices — students (and Canadian citizens in general) will not truly understand “the debate.” This is true on so many levels, from debating whether women who wear the hijab are or are not oppressed, to the involvement of the Catholic Church in residential schools, to the “war on Christmas,” and whether Christian privilege exists in Canadian society, therefore marginalizing non-Christians. All of these issues are conversations that can and should occur in the public school setting, both as relevant current events, or historical events that impact Canadians today.

### **5.1.2 Implications for Parents**

Parents play an important role in dialogue pertaining to Christian privilege and other social justice issues. They are the primary models and support for their children, and as such, children will learn from the positions their parents take, and the actions and statements they make.

Following the most recent American election, there has been a lot of discussion, articles, internet memes and dialogue about privilege and oppression. While it is unfortunate that it takes such largely publicized global events to draw attention to these issues, this undoubtedly results in reflective thinking and difficult conversations, perhaps forcing people to confront their own biases and to think critically. Some of the dialogue I have observed revolves around the idea of how moving towards equality for all can feel like oppression when you're so accustomed to your own privilege. This idea is reflective in Andrea's comments about how she felt that Christians were being oppressed and had to give something up in favour of the minority groups. Discussions about privilege and oppression may be more challenging for some races, religious groups and even generations, but it is vital to creating safe spaces in schools for all our children. Again, it is through education about the topic where parents (and other influential people) are able to begin to break down these barriers. It is reassuring that the majority of those parents interviewed believe education about religion is important, and that a welcome place for it is in public schools. Of course, for those who don't believe that it is a priority, they have every right to remove their children from those discussions about religion. The goal of social justice is to work towards a society where all individuals and groups feel safe and supported and have equal opportunity to participate and have equal access to meet their needs. I would assume that all parents want this for their children, but in addition, for all children.

### **5.1.3 Implications for Students**

Naturally, the ones to reap the benefits of educational change are the students. It is the next generation that will be in a position to embrace (or deny) change and accept it as the status quo. However, change is a slow process and Christian hegemony could continue to alienate non-Christian students from their Christian counterparts. Public schools are meant to be places of in-

clusion where all students feel safe. Just like any oppressive or hierarchical system, it is a challenge to overcome these barriers. Yet, it is imperative that attention is drawn to these issues in order to make public schools and curriculum accessible to all. Children have an exceptional understanding of what is fair and just. It is with our students, even the youngest ones, that such discussions can and should occur. As was mentioned, a multicultural education model is one that would truly benefit all students in Canadian public schools. However, more effort is needed to develop understanding around such a model, and teacher understanding and professional development needs to be expanded and curriculum development needs to reflect it. With time such change is feasible.

In conclusion, I am advocating for a system of education founded on principles of multiculturalism and diversity: Where differences are recognized and shared; where difficult conversations are had; where children and adults think critically and work together in an attempt to create a society built on understanding and respect; and finally, where all people feel safe and accepted in doing so. Religion has an integral place to play in the public school classroom, and I believe that the majority of Canadian citizens would agree. It is time for religion, both as essential to personal identity and a strong unifying (and dividing) force, to be addressed meaningfully and respectfully in Canadian society and Canadian public schools. Religion is here to stay and, as such, must be acknowledged and embraced, not shied away from.

## **5.2 Other Emerging Themes**

Many other themes arose during my discussions which I believe are important to draw attention to. These include the notable presence of Christmas in public schools, as well as how other celebrations are either included or disregarded. Another theme, connected to Christian privilege — and that is an area of interest of mine — is the Operation Christmas Child campaign that

occurs every year in support of Samaritan's Purse. These are both associated with the overarching theme of Christian privilege and may have great effects on public school students.

### **5.2.1 Christmas and Other Celebrations in Canada**

It quickly became clear that Christmas is a prominent characteristic of being a Canadian citizen and attending public school in Canada, at least in Alberta. Of those interviewed, twenty-nine individuals stated that they celebrated Christmas in some capacity in their public school. This may have been as minute as singing Christmas carols in the gym as a whole school, or having door decorating contests, or Christmas crafts during curricular time, to full-fledged Christmas Concerts and Christmas decorations throughout the school. The remaining interview participants had children attending an alternative publicly funded school and a private religious school, with no presence of Christmas. So, what is the excitement over Christmas? One argument is that the commercial nature of our society has played a major role in making this celebration into a long drawn out season, capitalizing on the (so-called) focus of the season: giving. Christmas, as a celebration, has many appealing features: beautiful lights and colours, tantalizing treats and food, delicious smells, a focus on family and friends, gift-giving, charitable giving, and the like. Christmas truly can be perceived as the "most wonderful time of the year." However, by spending so much time favouring this one Christian holiday over others, particularly in our diverse public schools, not only is important curricular time being lost, but the message that may be conveyed is that the holidays, celebrations, and beliefs of those who don't celebrate Christmas aren't important. This brings me to my next point: participants were asked if "other cultural or religious celebrations were recognized in their or their child's school, such as E'id, Ramadan, Hanukkah, Yom Kippur, and so on." For the most part this was not the case.



A small number of participants indicated that other celebrations — such as Ramadan, E’id, Hanukkah, and so on, were mentioned in some capacity at their or their child’s school. In many of these cases it was because there was a child in their class who celebrated and they shared some of their traditions as teachable moments. Alternatively, it was in the curriculum (in the Alberta grade 3 Program of Studies, students learn about India so many teachers will include some basic information about Diwali during Social Studies, as an example), or the teacher valued the learning involved and made a point of bringing it up. Over half of the respondents explained that there was no mention of religious or cultural celebrations such as E’id or Ramadan, or “other” celebrations, and only a few indicated they were not sure if their school did. When probed further, some of the other celebrations or special events mentioned include, Remembrance Day, Thanksgiving, Easter, St Patrick’s Day, Valentine’s Day, Earth Day, and Chinese New Year. Rarely were E’id, Diwali, Hanukkah and other religious holidays celebrated with the whole school, except in a small number of instances, where the majority of the population was non-Christian. If one were to conduct these interviews again, asking more clear-cut questions, such as, “what kinds of holidays and special celebrations have you had in your school? Have you ever celebrated or talked about Easter or Christmas in your school? Or other celebrations such as Diwali, Hanukkah, E’id, etc.?” would have been posed, but asked with a checklist of specific holidays, special days and celebrations, which may have led to more specific responses.

### **5.2.2 Samaritan’s Purse and Operation Christmas Child in Public Schools**

One additional area of interest for me has been the manner in which certain religious groups surreptitiously make advances into schools, in particular, Samaritan’s Purse. In the past — both through research and my role as a public school educator — I learned that numerous public schools participated in the Operation Christmas Child campaign. These would be whole

school ventures, with information sent home in school newsletters and large media campaigns. In fact, in the past, a local singer and celebrity was involved in the collection of these boxes at the local Calgary Board of Education “media” school. The concern here lies not only in the fact that children, with a desire to help other children, may not have been aware of the religious affiliation of Operation Christmas Child, these families truly do believe they are helping a worthwhile cause. There is also the inclusion of Biblical literature with the shoeboxes, and the goal of religious conversion by Samaritan’s Purse is made very clear by browsing their website. Additionally, the items chosen to be put in the shoeboxes are frequently purchased at the local dollar store, often made in China or another country known to use child labour. From a humanitarian lens this is problematic in that exploiting children to “help” others — for the underlying goal of religious conversion — is quite underhanded. However, it is evident that most Calgary Board of Education schools no longer partake in this effort. In fact, through education and information on my own part, some schools that once participated have made the decision to no longer do so and instead support local charitable organizations and giving campaigns. As Chad indicated, “when I taught grade eight... we were doing Samaritan’s Purse, and I pulled the principal aside and I said hey, you should really look into what that actually is. And she did, and the next day the project was changed to a local food bank. So we filled shoeboxes for the local food bank or shelter.” At Jenna’s school, where she is in an administrative role, she has received requests from teachers to participate in the shoebox campaign: “it was brought in by a very strong Christian-based teacher who wanted to do something for her church and she wanted to expand into her classroom and I let it happen without being educated.” She has since disallowed it in her school, and the staff and students chose a local charity to support during the season of giving. This has not prevented some parents, students and educators to continue to suggest participation however. In fact, Eliza-

beth, a local elementary teacher, explained that she “ran Operation Christmas Child,” meaning that she picked up the boxes, sent out the letter and organized the small campaign at her school. As part of their social justice clubs, some schools will participate in this endeavor, so while it is not a whole school initiative, public school students and their families are still supporting a religious — Christian — organization that is intent on conversion. Admittedly, there are significantly fewer schools supporting Operation Christmas Child, at least in The Calgary Board of Education, than in the past. Information is valuable when making a decision to support international organizations and humanitarian efforts should not have strings attached.

The next and final chapter will focus on certain limitations encountered during this study, as well as potential challenges of including religion in public school curriculum. Finally, directions for further research and my concluding remarks will be addressed.

## Chapter 6: Conclusion

Christian privilege is present in Canadian public schools. From Kelly's mention of being guaranteed a day off when it coincides with your holiday, to Nicky and Jack explaining that all of the students in their grade two classes wrote letters to Santa, to Sydney discussing how religion is a topic avoided by so many people because they are "nervous" and "don't have the background knowledge", the vast majority of people interviewed were able to provide some example of how Christian privilege is present in Canadian society and its public school system. There is nothing more telling than this. It is the words and experiences of the interview participants that confirmed for me the presence of Christian privilege and oppression, which then validated my argument that they are both well established in our society and its systems and often hard to see. And yet, even those with a basic understanding of Christian privilege were able to identify it. Imagine the awareness that could be drawn to the topic if deeper understanding was made a priority.

Critical theory is vital to my argument as it asks the question: what is worth knowing? By questioning and challenging the status quo and the current education system, stakeholders can enact change, both tangibly through curriculum and what is endorsed and supported in the classrooms, and philosophically by altering societal perspectives on what is considered the norm. The importance of this was manifested when various educators and administrators explained how this study made them consider their current teaching practice. Knowledge can and should change over time to reflect the world we live in; critical theory makes this possible. More educators and to-be teachers need to be in a position to learn about this model of thinking and consider the implications of it in their classrooms, especially as demographics continue to change. Change is a slow process, especially when what is being asked to change is so fixed in our society and educa-

tion system, both unconsciously and consciously. Even more problematic, however, is when what is being sought to change, in this case Christian privilege in public schools, is embedded within legislation and guiding educational documents. However, change is truly inevitable, and can currently be seen through various efforts. For example, The Calgary Board of Education's outlook on religion through Administrative Regulation 3067 (2005) very clearly demonstrates the place of religion, according to this school board. Moving forward, one believes that more school boards will have to clearly define their stance on religion, diversity and inclusion. Awareness and education is key to this change. It is my goal that continued research on this topic will expand to include larger studies, drawing attention to the issues, and encouraging more stakeholders in education to think and act critically. As numerous participants in this study explained, they either did not think about these issues, or were led to reflect on their own teaching practice and search for ways to create more inclusive classrooms and schools. The fact that the majority of the parents in this study were in support of teaching about religion in the classroom makes me hopeful that this would reflect many Canadians across the country. Time is needed to see progress, however, leadership in the area is integral.

## **6.1 Limitations**

While I would argue that this research study was a successful one, increased efforts in various areas, I feel, could have led to deeper information about the subject at hand. Conducting interviews for this study was an arduous task. People are generally quite busy, the topic can be perceived as controversial, people shy away from topics they do not feel comfortable discussing, and some participants may have felt that their own beliefs were being questioned or threatened. However, thirty-two interviews were conducted with varying responses. Of that total, eight were parents, eight were students, eight were educators, and eight were school administrators. The

most challenging group to find willing participants was both the teachers and school administrators, mainly because of the perceived time commitment as well as the topic. Many teachers who were approached and chose not to participate indicated that they did not feel comfortable contributing as they were not well informed on the topic. When it was explained that knowledge on religion or social justice issues was not required, it became quite clear by their non-responses and lack of interest that they were not keen to participate.

Upon reflection, I believe that my interview questions could have been more open-ended, perhaps resulting in more depth of responses. A number of the questions were rather simple, resulting in “yes” or “no” responses; had I phrased them differently, I am certain the participants would have granted me greater access into their experiences and lives. Perhaps if they had been structured in a less “rigid” manner, there would have been a larger range of experiences, with more specific examples of their experiences with Christian privilege.

Ideally, a more diverse population is desirable to have been represented in this study. The majority of the participants were White — twenty-eight out of thirty-two participants. Five out of thirty-two were male, so more variation here would have been ideal. The majority appeared to have no religious affiliation, although this was not a question included in all of the interviews, but extrapolated from the interview responses themselves. Therefore, for richness and variety of data, more diversity in religion and culture in the participant group would have been the preference. The participants were all from Alberta, mainly the Calgary area. It would be an interesting study to compare responses from various areas of Alberta, and expand that further to various provinces and territories across the country. Undoubtedly, each area, depending on its demographics and other social and regional factors, would draw out different responses from participants. Additionally, I would like to point out that the use of personal connections through pro-

fessional relationships, and personal friends and family meant a circle of participants that potentially adhered to more of a “liberal” viewpoint, similar to my own. It is entirely possible that the results would have been quite different with a different representation of participants. This is something to consider should further research be conducted.

The student group was difficult to engage in deep conversation with. For some this was their first “interview” and, as such, they were quite reserved. Millie, for example, provided short, quiet, one-word responses to many of the questions. Even when probed further, she continued to supply brief answers. In other situations, the children did not understand the question, and it had to be repeated numerous times, or rephrased in more child-friendly language. Still in others, as the interviewer, I had to press for more information, asking pointed questions connected to the original questions to elucidate responses. In retrospect, questions in more child-friendly language would have been ideal for younger students, but it was entirely possible to stop, reflect on, and rephrase the question.

The responses received from administrators were noteworthy, as they truly demonstrated an understanding of the issues addressed here. In addition, it is reassuring that these are the leaders in our schools as they are the change-makers and revolutionaries, making decisions based on children and for children. Many administrators indicated that this study encouraged them to critically examine their own practice and consider ways to impart change in their schools. The critical thinking and evaluative efforts mentioned by these participants is important, in my opinion, in order to see change happen in regard to the importance of teaching about religion in schools, and is a major part of this discussion.

At times my own assumptions may have inevitably influenced or limited the interview process. It was my hypothesis that non-Christian people of colour or people from minority reli-

gious/cultural groups would believe Christian privilege to exist and provide numerous examples of how they had been marginalized personally, or witnessed it happen to members of their religion. This was not necessarily the case. Perhaps if a more diverse group of people had been interviewed the responses would have been more aligned with that thought process. I did not want to “lead” the subjects, so I never deviated too far from the questions or discussions, even though there were times that I was tempted to inquire further into a wider range of their experiences. Instead, I allowed them the space to talk openly, as it was their lived experiences that I was wanting to access. In addition, including more Christian perspectives would have been beneficial. Nine out of the thirty-two participants identified as Christian. Admittedly, I experienced nervousness when interviewing the openly Christian participants, as I was anticipating the possibility of confrontation. In the end, all conversations were respectful and resulted in satisfying dialogue.

### **6.1.2 The Challenge of Teaching About Religion in Public Schools**

Most of those individuals interviewed truly believe there is a place for teaching about religion in public schools and that it is a valuable component to learning. What was most promising is that almost all of the participants interviewed clearly stated that religion, in some capacity, should be included or taught in schools, but not from a faith perspective. The range of responses represents the dilemma of how to go about including religion and/or instruction about religion from a non-faith perspective. This is where a significant challenge lies, particularly when personal biases, beliefs and identities, and a lack of understanding of religion are taken into consideration. As Andrea explained:

I think teaching religion is dangerous because nobody — teachers — don't have the expertise in that... I think having the opportunity to have discussions or even celebrate together with some of those religions is kind of what we are doing... let's celebrate together



er. But the nitty gritty of why we're celebrating this or who died on this, or what belief it is. I don't need to know that, but let's celebrate that together. (Andrea)

Andrea may not support purposeful instruction about religion and religious beliefs, but is in agreement that honouring and celebrating the students and their cultural and religious identities is important to create an atmosphere of openness and caring. It has been suggested that religion should not be included in instruction because teachers themselves are not knowledgeable about it. And yet, in many instances, no teacher is necessarily an "expert" on any given subject — and even if they are teachers with a subject area specialization, even then it is not a guarantee. If they adhere to current pedagogy of experiential and inquiry learning then this not a concern, as teachers would create learning experiences for their students to acquire this new information which they would then receive as well. It is creating a learning environment and mindset where teachers and students are able and willing to include these "difficult" topics that should be the focus, not whether the teacher knows all the specific religious histories and facts. Many responses made reference to "awareness" — namely, that teaching about religion should bring more awareness. When asked if religion should be taught in schools, Band Geek replied:

I do believe that religion should be taught in schools. I think we should teach because we are so multicultural and because culture is so closely linked to religion in so many ways... I think that to know the essence what each religion is about or what each religion teaches, helps us to understand one another better. We don't have to do that in a conversion capacity. We just do it as a way of letting know who you're sitting beside at that table over there. And that's who you have to respect and you have to respect them for what they believe. I think that we forget that we are all raised in different ways. How we are raised, those values we are raised with, you don't just change those overnight and whether

they're right or wrong, it is difficult to change core values that you have been raised with from infancy. (Band Geek)

Many others who were interviewed acknowledged that religion definitely has a role to play in education. Izzle explained that, "if you're looking to create global citizens or community minded individuals, and that is part of your curriculum, then religion should be part and parcel of that." Sydney explained that, "I do think that children should learn about other religions in school, just for understanding what other people believe and it's just part of our world. So, just like we learn about lots of other things that are just part of our world, we should learn about that." Hannah agreed: "I think they (children) should (learn about religions in school). I think that it teaches them to be accepting of people's beliefs. And it's just an educational piece that we should know about cultures and it's a learning piece, that's all. I think it's good to know where other people are coming from..." Mark, while he acknowledged that it was important, explained that he would be hesitant should teaching about religions become the emphasis. Finally, to summarize the range of responses, but drawing attention to the fact that they all align with similar goals, Elizabeth stated:

I think all religions should be taught in schools. And I know that is a very scary thing for people to talk about is the idea that you are teaching religion in schools and that we should just take everything out. I don't think it should be taught in the practices as in you must follow this. I think it should be taught as information because without that what are we doing? I mean that is an educators job to teach children about everything to build that understanding, to build that common knowledge so that they listen to each other. I think that religion is now something that we socially hide away from and we don't want to talk

about any of it. But then if it's such a huge part to me and such a part to you... and even culturally around the world it's such a huge thing. (Elizabeth)

People are aware that including religion in any teaching is a controversial and sensitive topic. And yet, it is abundantly clear that they believe it has a place in public education. The challenge is creating a level of comfort so teachers can explore these topics with their students. Christianity has had a lasting legacy on Canadian society, and as such, we cannot deny its impact. Follow up research could further explore the historical impact of the Christian religion on Canadian culture and society in more detail. The purpose of this current research is to draw attention to, and better understand the Christian influence in a multicultural society, various power differentials, and inherent oppression that exists within Canadian public schools, and also what can be done moving forward to ensure that children from non-Christian backgrounds are considered. Furthermore, the inclusion of religion in public education from an academic perspective is integral to creating a multicultural society that is inclusive of all cultures and religions.

## **6.2 Directions for Future Research**

There is a need for further research and attention in the area of Christian privilege in Canada, and its public education system. Just like other forms of privilege have a body of scholarly research, Christian privilege and how it connects to Canada's emphasis on diversity and education should be an area of concern. Research on Christian privilege in the United States is a step in the right direction, but Canada's history and multicultural policies make it rather unique in comparison. Further investigation on Christian privilege, religion, culture, and race as well as the experiences of a variety of individuals and groups is critical. Yet, that is not enough for our schools to grow and evolve. A cultural shift at the societal level needs to occur, and while many would suggest this change happens in a "trickle down" fashion, I argue that it needs to be a

“grassroots” movement, or, from the ground up. By educating our students from a young age about religion, culture and inclusiveness, they will be the change makers. This doesn’t mean change can’t happen at the macro level — it can and should happen as well. Educators have an important role in laying the foundations for change in Canadian society. This can be accomplished by revising provincial curriculum standards to include a more substantial focus on multiculturalism, religion and culture. The current Alberta Program of Studies - Social Studies (2005) is a step in the right direction: diversity, citizenship, culture and community are integral threads throughout it. Some grade levels, including grade five, have a specific focus on multiculturalism, albeit, brief and dependent on the teacher to make it a priority in teaching and learning.

What is missing in all of this is a social justice component and a multicultural model of education. Students are not necessarily given the opportunity to learn about privilege and oppression, nor the fact that specific cultural groups, religions or races are granted or born into privilege and how this has affected the development of Canadian society and relationships amongst people, unless an educator has made it a priority. Far too often teachers do not feel knowledgeable or supported enough to delve into these conversations which are frequently perceived as controversial. This is where attention and care needs to be given. Through professional development opportunities, such as working in partnership with experts in these areas, and creating branches of expertise within school boards, diversity and education that include religion and culture can become more of a priority. In addition, teacher preparation programs can and should be including multiculturalism, religion, and culture as part of their pedagogy.

A thorough review of the round table discussions, and an effort to initiate change through information learned and sharing this new knowledge, would be ideal. In fact, perhaps a similar process should be conducted again across the country, especially in light of Canada’s recent em-

phasis on immigration and world events. As was mentioned numerous times in the round table results and in this research, it is believed that multiculturalism is thought to only be a minority issue. This is an area of concern as multiculturalism affects all Canadians, regardless of religion, race or culture.

In addition, I believe that further research as it pertains to policies at the societal level, and in relation to the public school system is necessary. Alberta, particularly, with its outdated policies that favour the Christian religion, need to be reexamined to be more focused on inclusivity.

Finally, a more in-depth study of perspectives on Christian privilege and religious oppression would be advantageous to draw attention to an issue that affects all Canadians, regardless of their religion or viewpoint. While this small study examined public schools and Christian privilege solely in Alberta (and more specifically, Calgary and surrounding areas), it would be fascinating to look at a range of perspectives from across the country, including rural and urban, Christian and non-Christian, White and non-White individuals, to name a few. Including the perspectives of a diverse group of individuals from across the country in a much larger study with more directed questions would be intriguing.

### **6.3 Concluding Comments**

In conclusion, in order for change to occur and to allow for further inclusivity, awareness of Christian privilege in Canadian society, and more specifically, Canadian public schools, needs to happen. This study is merely one small step in drawing attention to the issue. However, what resulted was the ability to recognize that Christian privilege is present, and that Canadian citizens — albeit a small representation in this study — believe in the importance of educating about religion and culture in our schools. Supplemental information needs to be gathered and shared in a

more comprehensive study to represent all of Canada. This country is a multicultural one, made up of a multitude of cultures and religions, and while its history is grounded in a Christian ideology, this no longer adequately represents the diversity of all of Canada. Christian privilege and oppression are inherent in both our society and school systems, and it is through education that these barriers can be challenged and overcome.

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## **Appendix A: Interview Questions (Students, Parents, Teacher, Administrators)**

### **Student Interview Questions**

What grade are you in?

What religion does your family practice?

Do you know if there are children in your class that practice any other religions and if so, what are they? (Can you tell me what you know about any of their beliefs or traditions?)

Can you think of any examples from school where you have talked about or learned about religion, or anything to do with religion?

What kinds of holidays and special celebrations have you had in school while you have been a student? (Have you ever celebrated or talked about Easter or Christmas in your school? Or other celebrations such as Diwali, Hanukkah, E'id. etc.?)

Have you ever sung Christmas songs, games or done Christmas crafts in your school? (If so, what were they?)

Does your school have a Christmas Concert?

Have you ever done any Easter crafts, games or projects in your school? (If so, what were they?)

Have you ever done any other holiday crafts, games or projects in school? (If so, what were they?) Do you ever do crafts, songs, games or activities that are a part of your religion? (Either way, how do you feel about this?)

Does your teacher ever ask you about your religious beliefs and traditions? Do any of the other students? (Either way, how does that make you feel?)

Do you think children should be learning about different religions in school? Why or why not?

Do you think one religious group is treated more special than another? (If so, why?) Which religion? (How does that make you feel?)

Do you think that religion should be in schools? If so, in what ways?



## **Parent Interview Questions**

What grade is/are your child/ren in?

What religion does your family practice?

Can you think of any examples from your child's school experience where they have talked about or learned about religion, or anything to do with religion?

What kinds of holidays and special celebrations take place at your child's school? (Have you ever celebrated or talked about Easter or Christmas in your school? Or other celebrations such as Diwali, Hanukkah, E'id. etc.?)

Do you know if your child has ever sung Christmas songs, games or done Christmas crafts in school? (If so, what were they?)

Does your child's school have a Christmas Concert?

Do you know if your child has ever done any Easter crafts, games or projects in your school? (If so, what were they?)

Do you know if your child has ever done any other holiday crafts, games or projects in school? (If so, what were they?) Has your child ever do crafts, songs, games or activities that are a part of your religion? (Either way, how do you feel about this?)

Do you know if your child has ever been asked about his/her religious beliefs and traditions? (Either way, how does that make you feel?)

Do you think children should be learning about different religions in school? Why or why not?

Do you feel that Christians have advantages or privileges as Christians in this society?

What privileges do you feel are granted because of the fact that they are Christian?

Do you feel that being Christian in Canada opens any doors in everyday life? (Either way, how do you feel about this?)

Do you think that there are examples of Christian privilege that exist within the walls of Canadian public schools? (What are some examples?)

In your opinion, do you think that Christian privilege affects non-Christian students? If so, in what ways?

## **Teacher Interview Questions**

What grade do you currently teach?

Do you know what religions the children in your class practice and if so, what are they? (Can you tell me what you know about any of their beliefs or traditions?)

Do you ever include instruction (implicit or explicit) about religion, religious beliefs, or anything to do with religion? (Can you give examples)

What kinds of holidays and special celebrations have you had in your classroom? In your school? (Have you ever celebrated or talked about Easter or Christmas in your classroom? school? Or other celebrations such as Diwali, Hanukkah, E'id. etc.?)

Have you ever sung Christmas songs, games or done Christmas crafts in your school? (If so, what were they?)

Does your school have a Christmas Concert?

Have you ever done any Easter crafts, games or projects in your school? (If so, what were they?)

Have you ever done any other holiday crafts, games or projects in school? (If so, what were they?)

Have you or your school ever participated in activities such as Samaritan's Purse, Operation Christmas Child, or where Gideon's offer New Testaments?

Do you feel that Christians have advantages or privileges as Christians in this society?

What privileges do you feel are granted because of the fact that they are Christian?

Do you feel that being Christian in Canada opens any doors in everyday life? (Either way, how do you feel about this?)

Do you think that there are examples of Christian privilege that exist within the walls of Canadian public schools? (What are some examples?)

In your opinion, do you think that Christian privilege affects non-Christian students? If so, in what ways?

Do you think religion should be taught in schools? In what capacity?

Have you ever had any instances where religion affected your teaching or your students?

How do you or have you had to accommodate different religions in your class?

In your teacher preparation courses did the topic of inclusion, diversity, cultures, religion and education ever arise? Or, were courses on social justice education included in your mandatory courses or elective course selection?

## **Administrator Interview Questions**

Do you know any of the religions the children in your school practice and if so, what are they?  
(Can you tell me what you know about any of their beliefs or traditions?)

Do you ever include professional development about culture, religion, religious beliefs, or anything to do with religion for your teachers? (Have you considered doing so?)

What kinds of holidays and special celebrations have you had in your school? In your school?  
(Have you ever celebrated or talked about Easter or Christmas in your school? Or other celebrations such as Diwali, Hanukkah, E'id. etc.?)

Does your school have a Christmas Concert?

Do the teachers in your school do Christmas activities, such as crafts, songs, games, etc?

Do the teachers in your school do Easter activities, such as crafts, songs, games, etc?

Do the teachers in your school do any other activities associated with various holidays or celebrations, such as crafts, songs, games, etc?

Have you or your school ever participated in activities such as Samaritan's Purse, Operation Christmas Child, or where Gideon's offer New Testaments?

Do you feel that Christians have advantages or privileges as Christians in this society?

What privileges do you feel are granted because of the fact that they are Christian?

Do you feel that being Christian in Canada opens any doors in everyday life? (Either way, how do you feel about this?)

Do you think that there are examples of Christian privilege that exist within the walls of Canadian public schools? (What are some examples?)

In your opinion, do you think that Christian privilege affects non-Christian students? If so, in what ways?

Does your school board have a policy pertaining to religion? If so, what are its contents?

Do you think religion should be taught in schools? If so, in what capacity?

Have you ever had any instances where religion affected your students or teachers?

How do you or have you had to accommodate different religions in your school?

In your teacher and/or administrator preparation courses did the topic of inclusion, diversity, cultures, religion and education ever arise? Or, were courses on social justice education included in your mandatory courses or elective course selection?

## **Appendix B: Parent Interview Questions (Private or Other School)**

What grade is/are your child/ren in?

What religion does your family practice?

What are your experiences with public schools in Canada?

Can you explain why you chose not to send your child(ren) to a publicly funded school?

Do you think children should be learning about different religions in school? Why or why not?

Do you feel that Christians have advantages or privileges as Christians in this society?

What privileges do you feel are granted because of the fact that they are Christian?

Do you feel that being Christian in Canada opens any doors in everyday life? (Either way, how do you feel about this?)

Do you think that there are examples of Christian privilege that exist within the walls of Canadian public schools? (What are some examples?)

In your opinion, do you think that Christian privilege affects non-Christian students? If so, in what ways?