

## Teaching About Religion Within Early Childhood and Elementary Social Studies: Exploring how Preservice Teachers Perceive their Rights and Responsibilities as Educators

Rory P. Tannebaum<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative multi-case study is to explore the ways in which preservice teachers seeking either early-childhood or elementary licensure understand their roles and responsibilities in regards to the teaching of religion. Seven participants participated in the study and provided a range of data including – though not limited to – interviews, lesson plans, questionnaires, teaching philosophies, and in-class comments. Findings suggest that preservice teachers have neither the confidence to teach religion nor a strong enough foundation to understand their constitutional rights to expose students to various religions in a non-proselytizing manner. Future scholarship should present practical, meaningful programmatic suggestions for how to best help preservice teachers understand the benefits of teaching various religions and means for doing so effectively.

**Key words:** *Religion, Teacher Education, Social Studies Education, Preservice Teachers, Elementary Education, Early Childhood Education*

### Introduction

Few topics exist in the United States that are as ubiquitous within society or as divisive in conversation as that of religion. Most people come in contact with either spiritual people, principles, or practices on a daily basis as they read the news, attend places of work or school, or simply engage in informal conversations with friends and family. Because of its relatively inescapable nature, everyone seems to have an opinion on religion and its place in society. Despite this, however, a wide-range of empirical studies consistently proves that many Americans – ranging from students in K-12 schooling to those well beyond their formal education - lack even the most foundational knowledge about different religions throughout the world - let alone simply the United States (e.g., Hossain, 2013; Marks, Binkley, Daily, 2014; Moore, 2006).

This consistent finding is troubling and, given the ubiquitous nature of religion in the life of the everyday American, it would seem somewhat necessary for citizens to have – at the very least – a working understanding both of various religions and their role in society (Evans, 2007).

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<sup>1</sup> Assistant Professor of Education, Merrimack College, TannebaumR@Merrimack.edu

And there exists no better place for citizens to learn about religion than in the K-12 classroom where objective facts can be shared across a diverse body of individuals in a mature and educational setting. However, teachers are often hesitant to discuss religion in the classroom for a variety of reasons – many of which are quite reasonable (Evans, 2007). Teachers may fear offending either a parent or a student, they may choose to ignore religions that are not explicitly discussed in their state-provided standards, or – simply – they may not have a strong enough understanding of various religions or their legal rights to feel confident enough to teach about world religions and the place of religion in society (Carey, 2010; Frederick, 1988; Hartwick, Hawkins, & Schroeder, 2016; Moore, 2012).

Regardless of the reason, however, teachers do a disservice to students when they do not speak about religion and work to educate students on various world religions. Because, it has been noted, that schools are the most diverse settings most students will experience in their K-12 years, schools need to be places where students can both share their own beliefs and be exposed to those that may be different than their own. And though there is certainly no single practice or study that help practicing teachers learn how to integrate religion into their curriculums, a good place to start is within teacher education – where enthusiastic and open-minded future educators can begin to learn about the place of religion in their own classrooms.

### **Why the Social Studies?**

Though religion is certainly a part to any good K-12 curriculum regardless of the content area, the social studies is often charged with the task of introducing students to new beliefs systems and teaching them about tolerance and understanding of views different than their own (Barton & James, 2010; Marks, Binkley, Daly, 2014; McClain & Nielsen, 1997). As Parker (2010) notes,

In social studies lessons and units of study, students don't simply experience the world (they always do anyway, in school and out), but are helped systematically to understanding it, to take care for it, to think deeply and critically about it, and to take their place on the public stage, standing on equal footing with others. (p. 3).

Though Parker does not explicitly mention religion within this quote, it is easy to understand where the social studies fits into Parker's purpose statement of the social studies. Teaching about religion allows students to learn about their world and better understand that their beliefs are neither better nor worse than peers who may come from different backgrounds.

Expanding upon Parker's view, the social studies focuses on developing reform-oriented citizens (Hess, 2009), advocacy for helping students to understand the importance of civic engagement (Barton, 2012), and the incorporation of multicultural perspectives and diverse views (NCSS, 2004). It is for these reasons that the social studies is often where standards involving religion are written and placed, where teachers are expected to discuss various religious practices, and where students go to learn about culture in a broad, secular sense.

### **Literature Review**

Countless scholarly articles exist exploring the preparation of preservice teachers who are aware of the value of multicultural education and culturally relevant and responsive pedagogy (e.g., Au, 2009; Barry & Lechner, 1995; Gay & Kirkland, 2003; Yildirim & Tezci, 2016). Teacher education, in this sense, is dominated by articles and presentations that advocate for reform-oriented teachers who seek to include diverse perspectives and beliefs into their pedagogy (Au, 2009; Banks, 1993; Barry & Lechner, 1995; Hess, 2009). Within this body of research, however, there exists less of an emphasis specifically on religion (Moore, 2006; Moore 2012; Subedi, 2006). Somewhat lost in the conversations on race, gender, sexuality, socioeconomic status and other topics on diversity, religion appears to be less emphasized within the literature. While other issues relating to social justice are certainly critical to the field of education, religion's place in these discussions often seems somewhat marginalized within teacher education and that the topic deserves to be treated on occasion as an isolated topic warranting individual attention.

Though limited, there does exist research on the religion's place in the classroom seen through the perspective of both teacher educators and preservice teachers (often conducted outside of the field of the social studies). Anderson, Mathys & Cook (2015), for instance, looked at the relationship between how 22 elementary preservice teachers connected their personal beliefs on religion with their pedagogy within a semester-long field placement. The authors, more specifically, found a positive impact while providing preservice teachers with opportunities to teach about religion throughout their training. Reflecting countless pieces of literature on developing effective educators, this study demonstrated that preservice teachers benefit by having opportunities to learn through trial-and-error with such experiences increasing both their confidence and base of knowledge. Specific to this study, the participants appeared to learn more

about other religions and have higher self-efficacy to teach religion without having their own personal beliefs regarding religion altered based on these new experiences.

And even more specifically, there is little available specifically focusing on how preservice teachers' view the place of religion in their classrooms in addition to their understanding of their rights and responsibilities. Aside from a sole study completed by Marks, Binkley, & Daly (2014) which looked into the knowledge preservice teachers within three teacher education programs had regarding religious knowledge and the First Amendment to the Constitution of the United States, little empirical research exists detailing the relationship between preservice teachers and the teaching of religion.

Though not related specifically to preservice teachers, Zam and Stone (2006) looked specifically at how teacher educators view religion's place within the curriculum. Though their study does not focus on the perceptions of the preservice teachers (due to the fact that such information fell outside of the scope of their study), the findings of the study do help paint a picture of how religion is viewed within teacher education from a different lens. Interestingly enough, the vast majority of their participants noted that K-12 teachers do not have enough time to teach religion in their curriculum and that it was *not* the job of teacher educators to prepare preservice teachers to incorporate religion into their pedagogy. Such findings, albeit counter to the key tenants of this study, do demonstrate why many preservice and in-service teachers lack the necessary foundation of knowledge needed to integrate religion into their classroom.

### **Purpose of Study**

The purpose of this empirical study is to explore the extent to which preservice teachers seeking to teach early childhood or elementary education understand both their roles and responsibilities in regards to teaching about religion. The research questions the study seeks to answer, therefore, include:

1. To what extent do preservice teachers feel confident discussing religion with pre-K – 5 students?
2. To what extent do preservice teachers understand their constitutional rights to discuss religion in their pre-k-5 classrooms?
3. To what extent do preservice teachers associate the teaching of religion with broad principles of diversity and multicultural education?

### **Method**

## **Research Design**

After the development of the research questions, a multi-case study was decided upon as the best approach for collected and analyzing data and, subsequently, drawing conclusions. A multi-case study was appealing in that it provided the opportunity to collect a “rich and robust” body of data and tell a story about each participant through a wide-ranging analysis of their individual data set (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2009). The intent for choosing a multi-case study was to be able to draw conclusions from an array of sources collected over a period of time in which ideas and perspective could both evolve and validate through consistency (Yin, 2009).

## **Context**

The present study occurred at a mid-sized Catholic college in the Northeast United States. The institution – which has an emphasis on Augustinian values and traditions – seeks to instill principles of social justice, community service, and diversity within graduates. To that end, many classes at the college are developed with an expectation of being connected to many of the principles underlying the field of education. Amongst an array of other missions, these themes include emphasizing diversity as a good for society, teaching about the value of collectivity, and promoting various forms of service to the community and, more broadly, society as a whole. That said, however, the participants were viewed through the lens of preservice teachers in the broadest sense. In an attempt to make the study more generalizable and transferable, the religion of the participants was not considered aside from acknowledging their enrollment at an institution with a specific religious association.

More specifically, the study took place within a course dedicated to the teaching of social studies at the early childhood or elementary level. The class ran for six-weeks (as a half-semester course) and was taught by the primary researcher of the present study. The course is the only time in the participants’ undergraduate curriculum in which they are exposed to the social studies in an isolated context. The course, for that matter, only met 12 times and, therefore, could only do a cursory overview of many prevalent topics within the field.

## **Participants**

Participants for this study included seven preservice teachers seeking licensure at the early childhood or elementary level. Each participant was of traditional college age (19-21) and was aiming to teach after graduating either from college or graduate school. The participants ranged in their career intentions in that they ranged in wanting to teach pre-kindergarten students

to fifth grade students. As seen in Table 1, the participants ranged in terms of their ultimate goals and their religious backgrounds and beliefs, but were relatively homogeneous in regards to their age and sex.

**Table 1**

*Participant Information.*

Participant (Pseudonym)	Sex	Early Childhood or Elementary	Preferred Grade Level to Teach
Jill	F	Elementary Education	1 <sup>st</sup> Grade
Meredith	F	Early Childhood Ed.	Pre-K
Amanda	F	Elementary Education	K-1 <sup>st</sup>
Sammy	F	Elementary Education	5 <sup>th</sup>
Kelly	F	Elementary Education	1 <sup>st</sup> - 2 <sup>nd</sup>
Jessica	F	Early Childhood Ed.	3 <sup>rd</sup> Grade
Sarah	F	Elementary Education	1 <sup>st</sup> – 3 <sup>rd</sup> Grade

**Data Collection Tools**

Data for the present study consisted of one qualitative questionnaire completed by participants in class, one semi-structured interview conducted and transcribed outside of class time, and a range of data collected for the course. Both the qualitative questionnaire and the semi-structured interview questions can be seen in Appendix I & II, respectively. Each of these pieces of data was meant to paint a picture of how the participants felt about their understanding of world religions and the extent to which they felt confident teaching world religions. Due to the short duration of the course and the scheduling challenges brought about by the participants' class schedules, the qualitative questionnaire and semi-structured interview occurred over a three-week period at the participants' convenience.

In each case, the data collected as part of the class consisted of a unit plan and multiple lesson plans, a book review, in-class comments, reading response, and a teaching philosophy generated within the context of the social studies. These assignments had been mandated in previous iterations of the course and, therefore, were viewed as periphery data that could contribute to the research, but were not the focus of data collection. Therefore, the researcher/instructor did not seek to “lead” participants as they completed these assignments throughout the course of the semester.

**Data Collection**

Data for the present study was conducted using an open-coding method over a three-week period. (Glaser, 1978). Participants were asked to set up a one-on-one interview with the researcher at their convenience. During this three-week period, participants were asked within the course they were enrolled in to take the questionnaire that was meant to both support and expand upon several of the interview questions. In some cases, participants took the questionnaire prior to taking part in the interview and some participants were interviewed prior to being asked to complete the questionnaire in class.

As data was being collected on each participant, the researcher searched for relevant pieces of evidence and themes and marked them throughout the collection process. Such evidence was determined based on the extent to which the data helped to answer the initial research questions as well those pieces of evidence that were consistently seen across each participant's data. A running "list" was generated as the study progressed (Yin, 2009). In other words, if a participant explored an idea that was relevant to the research questions during an interview, this was noted and, subsequently, added to a running list of key ideas that would ultimately be part of the triangulation process. This list continuously evolved as the study became more complex and data continued to shape the themes. As will be described in the data analysis section, these themes were ultimately developed into both individual case reports and cross-case reports.

## **Data Analysis**

Data for the present study was analyzed in two ways. Initially, individual case reports were generated for each participant (Yin, 2009). As the study progressed, the researcher compiled individual participant research and placed any and all relevant data in a document isolated specifically to that participant. In other words, the researcher organized the data initially based on each individual participant on a Word document and sought to find themes for each participant with these documents. This allowed for a clean and clear picture to be developed specifically about each of the seven participants and their ideas about religion in the K-12 curriculum (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2009).

After the seven individual case reports had been created, the researcher scanned each of the participants' case reports to create a cross-case analysis. Within this step of the data analysis, the research sought to discover themes across the cases that were relevant to one of the three

research questions. If a theme was seen across multiple cases and relevant to the original research questions, it was marked as such and, ultimately, turned into the findings presented within the next section (Yin, 2009).

### **Limitations**

Despite the thorough and diverse body of research collected and analyzed, two key limitations existed in the present study. The first involves the context of the study – a predominantly Catholic school. Though speculative in nature, it is safe to assume that those who attended the institution likely had a bias toward religion that impacted both how they felt about religion as well as how they will teach in the future. Such a study would greatly benefit from either being conducted at a secular institution or analyzed in comparison to preservice teachers attending a public, non-religious institution.

### **Findings**

Four critical findings stemmed from data analysis. Ultimately, it was found that most of the participants were ill-prepared to teach religion at the early childhood or elementary level on account of a lack of knowledge about their legal rights as well as a superficial understanding of the doctrines of prominent religions. In addition to this, there existed widespread concern amongst the participants about upsetting parents who may not support their children being exposed to different religions in either a public or private school setting. This section will provide an overview of each individual finding prior to synthesizing them and providing recommendations to the field for both future research and more efficient preparation of preservice teachers.

#### **Finding I: A Lack of Understanding About Religious Freedom and the First Amendment**

Marks, Binkley, & Daly (2014) conducted a similar study attempting to answer the question of “what preservice teachers and, consequently teachers, actually know about religion and about the first amendment” (p. 248). After completing this study, the authors provided a simple answer: “not much”. The present study drew similar conclusions. Even after completing multiple courses throughout their formal education that dealt with the First Amendment, participants still seemed unsure about its role both in their lives and that of their pedagogy. This finding was not limited to the Establishment Clause, either, as it extended to broad principles of freedom of speech granted in the First Amendment (the latter of which guarantees American



citizens “freedoms concerning religion expression, assembly and the right to petition”). Broadly speaking, the participants lacked fundamental knowledge about the rights that they hold as both citizens and future educators.

This finding primarily stemmed from two questions within the questionnaire asking participants about their knowledge of both the First Amendment and the Bill of Rights. With each question, participants were explicitly asked to not look up what each meant and, instead, to write anything that comes to mind. Kelly, for instance, when asked about what she knew about the Establishment Clause noted that it was “the right to modify the First 10 Amendments to the Constitution”. Somewhat similarly, Sarah claimed that the Bill of Rights made it so that “African Americans/Women can vote”. Each of these comments – though certainly a reflection of a wider problem regarding students’ political knowledge – demonstrates a lack of knowledge about critical components to the rights of American citizens.

Even when the participants did accurately recall the First Amendment or the Bill of Rights, their descriptions appeared limited in depth. Sammy noted that the first Amendment involved “freedom of speech” while Amanda wrote that it involved “Freedom and rights”. Likewise, Meredith simply wrote “freedom of religion” to describe the First Amendment without providing any additional information. Jill, on the other hand, curiously provided a seemingly rote response by claiming that “The first amendment gives freedom to assemble, freedom of speech and religion, and freedom of the press” (Questionnaire).

Likewise, each of the seven participants was asked to describe their knowledge about the Scopes Monkey Trial from 1925 – a case which set the standard for the teaching of evolution in schools and, more broadly, the place of religion in the K-12 curriculum. Six of the seven participants responded by saying they had never heard of the case while the seventh (Kelly) claimed that she had remembered hearing about it, but could not remember what it was or who was involved in the case. Though it is unclear the extent to which the participants had been exposed to the case prior to this study, the idea that six out of seven of the participants had no familiarity with it reflects the findings of Zam and Stone (2006) and Anderson, Mathys & Cook (2013) in which teachers were found to be lacking in essential information needed to effectively teach about religion in their courses.

Because of the sensitive nature of religion (especially within the classroom), it is concerning to see that the participants had such inaccurate or limited understandings of the

separation of church and state, the Establishment Clause of the Constitution, or their own rights that are present within the Bill of Rights. Such knowledge is essential for being able to teach openly and freely about sensitive and critical issues including religion. The participants were given an infinite amount of space to explore and describe these various components to the Constitution and their responses were often missing critical pieces of information needed in order to effectively teach.

### **Finding II: A Lack of Confidence and Religious Knowledge**

Similar to their lack of knowledge about the First Amendment, the participants also consistently emphasized a lack of understanding about religion, in general. Most of the participants, for that matter, made comments regarding their lack of exposure to religions other than their own and their inability to accurately teach about various doctrines and principles of other religions. This lack of understanding – it should be noted – is likely by no fault of their own. The majority of the participants, it is safe to assume, went through an educational system where their instructors suffered from the same lack of confidence and knowledge about how to teach religion to K-12 students (reflecting the work of Anderson, Cook & Mathys, 2013 as well as Zam and Stone, 2006) - thus perpetuating a cycle of limited knowledge regarding “other” religions.

This was seen primarily in the participants’ interviews in which there remained a consistent theme of concern for their own knowledge regarding the various religions of the world that often are part of the K-12 curriculum. Each participant was asked if they would feel confident teaching a lesson to early childhood or elementary students about religion two hours after the interview. By-and-large, their responses reflected a group of preservice teachers who needed time to prepare. When asked about whether she felt confident to teach this type of lesson, Kelly claimed “not really” and said she would need additional time to prepare. Sammy’s response reflected Kelly’s in that she, too, quickly responded to the question by saying “no, not really... I don’t think I could” (Interview, 13 November 2017). Jill, likewise, claimed that she would have to use the two hours prior to the class to study, but that she felt she could successfully do it. Similar to Jill, Meredith noted that she “could do a little but [she’d] have to do a lot more research. Ultimately, only Amanda noted that she felt comfortable enough with the topic of religion to accurately teach it to her students. Amanda, to that end, expressed both in her

interview and her questionnaire that she probably could teach a lesson on religion within a couple of hours if she had been asked to do so.

Pairing this self-proclaimed lack of knowledge regarding religion with a limited understanding about their protected rights under the First Amendment, it is understandable to see why many of the participants expressed a hesitancy to fully embrace the teaching of religion in the K-12 classroom. Though teachers certainly do have a number of rights in regards to integrating religion into their practice, they cannot be expected to take advantage of them if they are neither familiar with these rights or confident in the content they are expected to teach.

### **Finding III: Airing on the Side of Caution due to Parents**

While the majority of participants did believe that teaching about religion is an important component of the social studies, they overwhelmingly aired on the side of caution in regards to teaching religion in their own classrooms. Though a portion of this was on account of a lack of knowledge about world religions and how to teach them, the primary motivation for this sense of caution was the fear of offending parents, teachers, administrators or students and, perhaps subsequently, getting in trouble for doing so. In this sense, the seven participants all opted to be overtly cautious when thinking about their future selves as teachers.

Within the data, this theme was consistent across participants. The most frequent concern was upsetting parents who may not support the teaching of various religions that conflict or undermine their own beliefs (regardless of within a public or private school). Jill, for instance, when asked whether she would teach religion noted that “I feel like students will go home and talk to their parents and then some parents might feel upset that we might be teaching their kids things that they might not believe in or talking about it” (Interview, 13 November 2017). In a similar manner, Amanda in interview claimed that “I don’t know if people would like if I brought that into the classroom. Like, parents may not agree with it. (Interview, 13, November, 2017).

Parents, however, were not the only concern for the participants in regards to the teaching of religion. In Kelly’s interview, for instance, said she’d be okay with teaching about religions but only if “the school was okay with it” (Interview, 13 November 2017). Likewise, when asked whether her administrators (or “bosses”) would feel comfortable with her teaching about religion, Amanda quickly and confidently said “probably not” - again reflecting a sense of concern for support about teaching religion. Collectively and regardless of the data source, there

always appeared to be an assumption by the participants that parents would inevitably become upset by what was being taught if it conflicted with the views and beliefs being taught at home.

However, the concern about parents extending beyond a simple fear of offending parents. Such concern also stemmed from the idea of imparting incorrect wisdom and then having parents upset about this. Meredith, for instance, noted within her interview that she was concerned both with her own knowledge and the reaction of parents. She expressed this sentiment by stating “I don’t want to say something wrong and impart wisdom and then have students go home and say ‘mom this is what I learned today’ and then getting angry emails. That would not be good” (Meredith, Interview, 13 November 2017). Connecting this back to a previous finding, it is clear that the participants, despite going to a religiously-affiliated school themselves, did not feel comfortable with their knowledge to both teach the right content and do so in a manner that did not offend students.

Such a finding, however, was not only seen within the interviews and the questionnaires. In addition to these two data sources, participants also did not once mention the use of various religions in their assigned unit plans that were constructed of multiple lessons for the course they were enrolled in throughout the study. Despite having the opportunity to add religion in at various points in their units and being able to select from a wide-range of state-provided standards that focused on religion, the participants all instead opted to choose topics that they were either familiar with or that were considered less controversial.

#### **Finding IV: Religion Should Be Taught – and Within the Social Studies**

Despite the lack of knowledge that the participants had regarding their rights and various religions and their concern about offending a variety of individuals, the participants mostly agreed that teaching with religion was an important facet of a curriculum and a way to curb some of the ignorance surrounding religion in the twenty-first century. Though they varied in the ways in which they felt it should be taught (i.e., with an historical approach or by considering current issues), the participants consistently found a place for religion within the early-childhood or elementary curriculum and, more often than not, this space was within the social studies.

In her interview, for instance, Amanda noted that religion should be discussed in schools “because the students can have a better understanding of different religions and how other people in the world believe... since they might not believe the same thing” (Interview, 13 November 2017). Likewise, Jessica claimed that she “would be happy to teach various religions because it’s

important to expose children to different cultures and religions in order to help them become a more well-rounded student” (Questionnaire). Kelly, further, noted that religion could help students “understand the world around them” (Interview, 13 November 2017). Though to different extents, each data piece expressed this understanding of the inherent value of religion’s place in the early childhood or elementary classroom and the connection such practices have with providing a curriculum grounded in multiculturalism. This is despite that they were concerned with their background knowledge and concerned about offending parents, students, or administrations.

After each participant expressed some belief of the value in teaching religion in K-12 school, they were asked to situate religion within the context of an early childhood or elementary education curriculum. The participants unanimously noted that religion belongs within the social studies curriculum. Amanda, for instance, noted in her questionnaire that it should be taught “during history courses” and, again, that it should take place “maybe in a specific subject . . . like a history course” in her interview (13 November 2017). Likewise, Jill said in her interview that “it should be taught through history” (13 November 2017). Meredith, similarly, noted that she definitely thinks “it’s more of the social studies history background so definitely when you’re doing that subject”.

### **Discussion**

The vast majority of scholars in the field of education acknowledge both the place and importance of religion in the social studies curriculum. However, clearly there are a wide-range of factors preventing preservice educators from integrating the teaching of religion into their pedagogy. Though there does not exist one single remedy for the lack of confidence preservice teachers hold toward the teaching of religion, there do exist several different means for improving this practice. This section seeks to explore three of those by discussing the importance of educating preservice teachers on: 1) the purpose of teaching religion, 2) their legal rights as educators, and 3) ways to teach religion.

#### **Educate Preservice Teachers on the Purpose of Teaching Religion**

Those within the social studies do a phenomenal job of emphasizing the importance the field in providing an accurate and equal schooling experience for all students. A wide-range of literature is available detailing the need for social studies teachers to expose K-12 students to

different perspectives and narratives from various races, genders, sexual orientations, and the like. Within this conversation on providing K-12 students with an education grounded in multiculturalism should be a continued discussion on how religion fits within this framework. Though there are a variety of ways in which this could be done, a good starting point could be National Council for the Social Studies, whose Ten Strands explicitly note that students should be taught about “belief systems, religious faith [and] religious institutions” (NCSS, 1994). This, too, can be seen within the recently released C3 Framework that preservice teachers should be exposed to and asked to use in their own pedagogical and curricular decisions.

Those within the field of social studies education need to continue advocating for the inclusion of religion within the K-12 curriculum in part because of its prominence in the lives of most citizens of the United States. If those in education want to have an educated, reformed-oriented, and tolerant group of citizens, they must educate our current body of K-12 students on how religion will impact their daily lives and the differences between belief systems within our multicultural society.

### **Educate Preservice Teachers on their Legal Rights**

As demonstrated within this essay, it is common for preservice teachers to fear what may happen if they teach about religion “incorrectly” to K-12 students. Because of this, they err on the side of caution and often avoid the topic entirely or teach it in a relatively “watered-down” manner. It is, therefore, essential for preservice teachers to understand that they will not, in fact, get in trouble if they discuss religion with their students in a manner that exposes them to the content and introduce them to the values and beliefs of those who may be different than them.

Preservice teachers, in other words, must be made aware that they are legally allowed and encouraged to expose students to viewpoints that make up a pluralistic and globalized world. It is when they attempt to indoctrinate or coerce students within a public school environment into believing a viewpoint that they are breaking a law. Though there are certainly grey areas to be considered, the vast majority of fear held by preservice teachers could be curbed if their teacher education programs helped them to better understand their rights and the difference between coercive teaching and simple exposure to diverse viewpoints.

### **Educate Preservice Teachers on Ways to Teach Religion**

As noted by many of the participants of the present study, part of the reason they are unsure about the teaching of religion is due to the lack of knowledge they are provided specifically about *how* to teach it. Beyond simply understanding the topic's importance and the difference between exposure and coercion, preservice teachers need to be introduced to practical pedagogical strategies that help K-12 students engage with world religions in meaningful and engaging ways. In order for this to happen, preservice teachers need to be introduced to pedagogical strategies for exposing students to various religions and provided with simulations on how this can and should occur in the classroom.

Though there is certainly no correct answer for how to do this, one positive step toward doing so would be to better connect methods courses with content-based courses. Often times, methods and content-based courses exist in silos where the students are expected to be the ones to connect the two. However, having better interaction between the two types of courses will, ideally, will help students see that the content they learn about in their World geography, history, and religion courses can and should be integrated into their own pedagogical decision-making within the K-12 classroom. It is, for that matter, not enough for teacher educators to simply express the need for students to be exposed to various religions, these future educators need to see and experience how religion can be integrated into the K-12 classroom.

### **Conclusion and Implications**

The present study's findings reflect those from previous studies in that they demonstrate a lack of understanding by preservice teachers on their roles and responsibilities as teachers. This is not to say that they are ill-intentioned, but that their training has not yet prepared them to see the value in discussing religion or constitutionally-sound ways for including religious-oriented pedagogy into their own practice (as seen in: Barry & Lechner, 1995; Evans, 2007; Marks, Binkley, & Daly 2014).

Reflecting the suggestion of Barry & Lechner (1995), this study demonstrates the need for those in teacher education to reflect on how we prepare preservice teachers to work with diverse bodies of students through an altered approach to our practice in the classroom and the theories written about within formal bodies of scholarship. Preservice teachers need to be exposed both to a variety of religions in their classes (through one another and course-based assignments) and to the legal cases directing teachers about what they can teach and ways in which they can legally do so (Evans, 2007). Ideally, such preparation will lead to a group of

upcoming educators who are confident discussing religion in their classroom and educating younger generations on the religions of the world.

Though there is certainly no one way to teach aspiring educators about all of the religions and the murky waters that they must navigate to do so effectively teach them, it is essential that the field continues to try to explore new and practical approaches for preparing preservice teachers. For instance, Subedi (2006) recommends an interdisciplinary approach (Subedi, 2006) meant to provide students with an understanding of the historical foundations of religion, the present issues surrounding religion in contemporary society, and the general practices and doctrines of various prominent religions throughout the world. This could be done through simple exposure in a social studies methods course, by providing texts that provide preservice teachers with diverse perspectives on religion, or through more concerted attempts to connect the subject-matter preservice teachers learn in their World History and Geography courses with that which occurs in their teacher preparation coursework (Dávila, 2015). Regardless of the method, it is essential that teacher education begins to better prepare preservice teachers to incorporate religion into their K-12 curriculum.



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