



Introduction

Religious Diversity in Canada

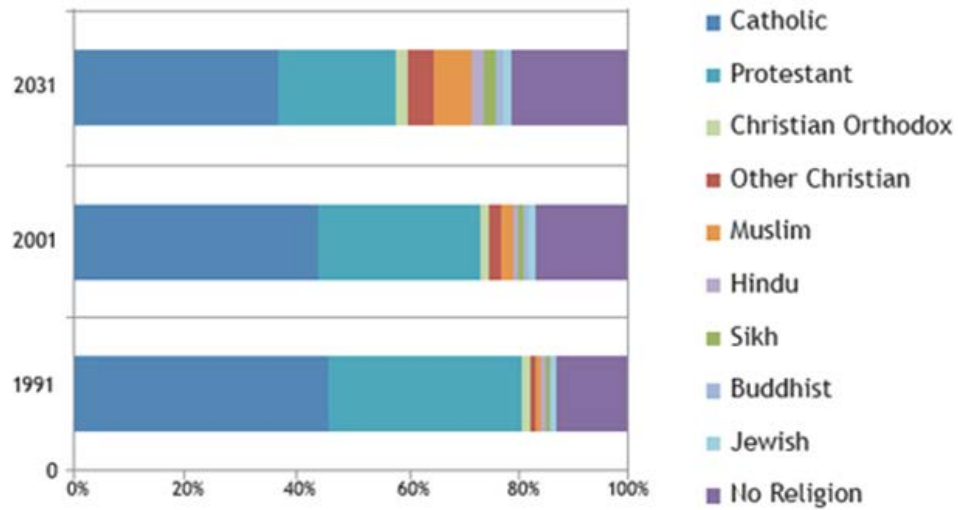
From the beginning, Canada has been a diverse society with a history of welcoming and accommodating newcomers. Historically, diversity in Canada was built on three primary groups of peoples: Indigenous Peoples, French, and British. Over time, this initial diversity has been complemented and expanded by the millions of newcomers from around the world who brought with them a diversity of cultures, languages, and religions. This trend continues today. Canadians are increasingly diverse in their religious perspectives and affiliations. The charts that follow provide an overview of the past, present, and future of religious diversity in Canada.

While the majority of Canadians today identify as belonging to a Christian faith, they increasingly reflect the major religions of the world. As well, indigenous peoples increasingly identify with and practice traditional spirituality.

There are some interesting trends that should be noted, among which the following:

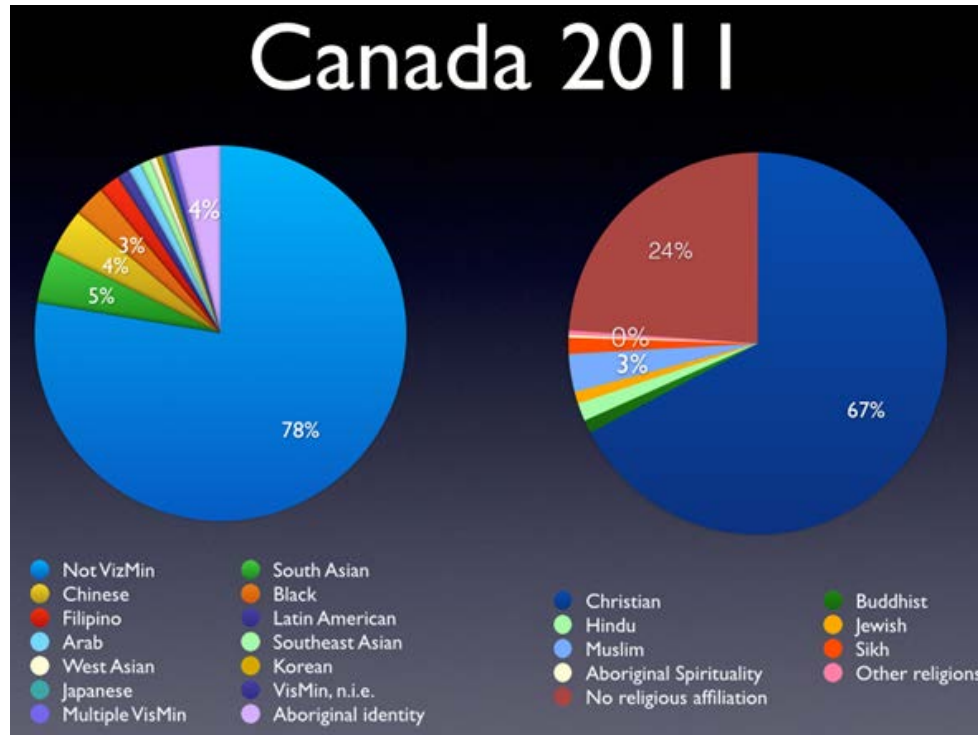
- The number of Canadians reporting no religious affiliation was 17% in 2011 and, at that point, was expected to grow to over 21% in 2016.
- The Muslim community is growing rapidly.
- Christianity is increasingly diverse.

Figure 1: Major Faith Groups in Canada



Source: Citizenship and Immigration Canada. "Annual Report on the Operation of the Canadian Multiculturalism Act 2010–2011." 09 February 2012. *Government of Canada*. 02 June 2016, http://publications.gc.ca/collections/collection_2012/cic/Ci95-1-2011-eng.pdf.

Figure 2: Cultural and Religious Diversity in Canada 2011



Source: Griffith, Andrew. "Happy Multiculturalism Day!" 27 June 2014. *Multicultural Meanderings*. 02 June 2016, <https://multiculturalmeanderings.wordpress.com/2014/06/27/happy-multiculturalism-day/>. All rights reserved.

Understanding Our History: Overcoming Intolerance and Working Towards Acceptance

In exploring the diversity of world religions and perspectives, it is important to acknowledge Canada's history of religious discrimination. For much of Canada's history, cultural and religious diversity was often seen as a problem to overcome. The perpetuation of diversity was not desired and there was a strong emphasis on assimilation (total assimilation of new Canadians of non-English and Christian origins). These xenophobic attitudes and beliefs were, at one point, widespread throughout society.

“Assimilationist ideology was applied in its most explicit and energetic form to immigrants of non-French and non-British background. All the major books on immigration published prior to 1920, and written by progressives and reactionaries alike, (including J. S. Woodsworth's *Strangers Within Our Gates*; Ralph Connor's *The Foreigner*; Alfred Fitzpatrick's *Handbook for New Canadians*; C. A. McGrath's *Canada's Growth and Some Problems Affecting It*; C. B. Sisson's *Bilingual Schools in Canada*; and W. G. Smith's *A Study in Canadian Immigration*) were based on assumptions of Anglo-conformity.” (Maella, p. 63)

Woodsworth was concerned about the influx of immigrants to Canada and the potential negative effects of such immigration. He writes in the preface to *Strangers within Our Gates*, “this little book is an attempt to introduce the motley crowd of immigrants to our Canadian people and to bring before our young people some of the problems of the population with which we must deal in the very near future” (Woodsworth, p. 5). He then goes on to detail what he believes to be the main challenge resulting from immigration, “English and Russians, French and Germans, Austrians and Italians, Japanese and Hindus—a mixed multitude, they are being dumped into Canadian by a kind of endless chain. They sort themselves out after a fashion, and each seeks to find a corner somewhere. But how shall we weld this heterogeneous mass into one people? That is our problem.” (Woodsworth, p. 203)

J. S. Woodsworth was not against all immigration. Generally, he was welcoming of some immigrants and acknowledged the positive aspects of peoples of diverse languages and cultures, and their contributions (e.g., he had positive views with respect to Jews). That being said, he argued for restricting immigration of certain groups—those that, in his view, were from cultures, religions, and races which made them difficult, if not impossible, to assimilate or who may even resist assimilation. Even this well-known, progressive individual and advocate for the poor and the working class did not escape the dominant belief in Anglo-Saxon superiority and the prejudice toward non-Christian, non-Protestant, non-European peoples and ethnicities. His fear of the emergence of ethnic and religious ghettos, and arguments for keeping some people out of Canada is expressed in *Strangers Within Our Gates* at various points.

Alan Mills, a well-known professor of political studies with the University of Winnipeg makes several observations about Woodsworth's views on immigration and diversity.

"Woodsworth did not believe in the equality of all cultures. Because of a mixture of factors—historical and environmental good fortune, genetic inheritance or cultural distinctiveness (he was unclear on this matter)—he held that Anglo-Saxon peoples were highly civilized and superior."
(Mills, p. 107)

"Finally, implicit in Woodsworth's early account of the immigrant question is a celebration of an independent, democratic, free-hold yeomanry. He observed that many of the immigrants to Canada before World War I had come from areas dominated by Habsburg and Tsarist absolutism, where serfdom was still a remembered reality. Often their religion was of a Catholic type. Such people embodied a condition of political, economic, and religious backwardness. They were unused to the management of farms, were deferential to authority, and politically apathetic; they had embraced a purely local perspective on the world, were illiterate and superstitious, and thus likely to be ignorant and immoral. To Woodsworth they were serfs and barbarians and unworthy of inclusion in the Canadian ideal of educated, independent, Protestant, and technically innovative yeoman farmers." (Mills, p. 108–109)

Woodsworth himself wrote:

"It is generally agreed that the two races are not likely to "mix". Ultimately, then, the question resolves itself into the desirability of a white caste and a yellow, or black caste existing side by side, or above and below in the same country. We confess that the idea of a homogeneous people seems in accord with our democratic institutions and conducive to the general welfare. This need not exclude small communities of black or red or yellow peoples. It is well to remember that we are not the only people on earth. The idealist may still dream of a final state of development, when white and black and red and yellow shall have ceased to exist, or have become merged into some neutral gray. We may love all men yet prefer to maintain our own family life."
(Woodsworth, p. 277)

"We, in Canada, have certain more or less clearly defined ideals of national well-being. These ideals must never be lost sight of. Non-ideal elements there must be, but they should be capable of assimilation. Essentially non-assimilable elements are clearly detrimental to our highest national development, and hence should be vigorously excluded."
(Woodsworth, p. 278)

Woodsworth's views on immigration remind us that while Canada is often seen as a historically welcoming nation that is open to immigration and diversity, the reality is that historical records are at odds with this view. At various times throughout Canada's history, specific ethno-religious groups were targeted and faced significant discrimination and limitations on their rights as citizens, or were denied entry into Canada. For example,

- The historical repression and prohibition of Indigenous spiritual practices through the Indian Act
- The denial of the right to vote for Hindus in British Columbia and later restrictions on immigration of Hindus and Sikhs, including the Komogata Maru incident
- The restriction of Mennonite immigration to Canada post World War I because of their pacifist beliefs (Conscientious Objectors)
- The 'none is too many' approach towards Jewish immigration before and during World War II

It is also important to note that religious discrimination and exclusion is not just a Canadian issue. The Pew Research Center reported that, in 2013, the share of countries with a high or very high level of **social hostilities involving religion** had declined somewhat after having reached a six-year peak in 2012. According to the study by the Pew Research Center, "the share of countries with high or very high levels of **social hostilities involving religion** dropped from 33% in 2012 to 27% in 2013." The hostilities experienced range from vandalism of religious property and desecration of sacred texts, to violent assaults resulting in injuries and deaths. (Pew Research Center, 2015)

However, the percentage of countries with high or very high **government restrictions on religion** stayed about the same, dropping slightly from 29% in 2012 to 27% in 2013. (Pew Research Center, 2015)

Overall, the study found that restrictions on religion were high or very high in 39% of countries when restrictions from government policies or from hostile acts by private individuals, organizations, and social groups were considered. (Pew Research Center, 2015)

The Pew Research study found that "among the world's 25 most populous countries, the highest overall levels of restrictions were found in Burma (Myanmar), Egypt, Indonesia, Pakistan and Russia, where both the government and society at large impose numerous limits on religious beliefs and practices." (Pew Research Center, 2015)

Similar to studies done in previous years, Christians and Muslims, who collectively make up more than half of the world's population, faced harassment in the largest number of countries. "Christians were harassed, either by government or social groups, in 102 of the 198 countries included in the study (52%), while Muslims were harassed in 99 countries (50%)." (Pew Research Center, 2015)

Towards Religious Literacy

**Just as reading and writing are considered essential skills for us to survive and thrive in this world, our knowledge of each other's religions is also key. When we aim to better understand each other's faiths, something happens. We begin to stop essentializing each other's religions.
(Kassamali)**

In recent years, the issue of religious illiteracy/literacy has come to the forefront as an example of the barriers North American societies face with respect to inclusion and social cohesion, as well as with regard to understanding of and interaction within the multifaith, global village in which we live.

Paul Bramadat, a well-known Manitoban (former professor at the University of Winnipeg) as well as a Canadian professor of religious studies and diversity, argues that “the virtual exclusion of religion from public discourse (including its absence from, or awkward presence in, national ceremonies, media coverage, and in most public schools) has produced a kind of religious illiteracy the result of which is that Canadians are increasingly ignorant about world religions, including Christianity.” (Bramadat, p. 5)

James Ron, a secular Jew and associate professor at the Norman Paterson School of International Affairs, Carleton University, as well as a former Canada Research Chair at McGill University, states in a 2012 editorial opinion he wrote for the Toronto Star that, in the “graduate program where I now teach, Canada's finest global affairs students seem virtually illiterate when it comes to their own religion, or to the religions of others. Although they eagerly achieve competence in secular politics, they express little interest in learning the basics of Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism or Judaism.” (Ron)

Stephen Prothero, in his book *Religious Literacy* (2008), argues that the United States is one of the most religious places on earth, but it is also a nation of shocking religious illiteracy. As evidence of this he pointed out that

- Only 10% of American teenagers could name all five major world religions and 15% could not name any of them.
- Nearly two-thirds of Americans believed that the Bible holds the answers to all or most of life's basic questions, yet only half of American adults could name even one of the four gospels and most Americans could not name the first book of the Bible.

(Prothero)

The PEW Research Centre on Religion and Public found that atheists, agnostics, Jews, and Mormons in the United States correctly answered between 20 and 21 of the Pew Forum's 32 questions on Christianity, world religions, and laws governing faith in public life. In contrast, white evangelicals, averaged scores of only 17 questions correctly answered, while white Catholics and mainline Protestants were able to answer just 16 of the questions. (Pew Research Center, 2010)

A fall 2011 poll in Canada, by Leger, found that people with a good knowledge of other cultures and religions were more likely to have a high level of knowledge about their own religious community and culture (78 per cent) while among those with little knowledge of other religions and cultures, only 23 per cent had good knowledge of their own religion and culture. In addition, people familiar with other cultures and faiths also were more likely to feel confident interacting with people from an unfamiliar culture (84 per cent) than people without that knowledge (33 per cent).

Diane L. Moore of the Harvard School of Divinity, in her book *Overcoming Religious Illiteracy: A Multicultural Approach to Teaching about Religion in Secondary Schools*, suggests that there is not only widespread religious illiteracy in North America but across the world. Moore believes that one of the most problematic and urgent consequences of this religious illiteracy is that it often breeds and fuels prejudice and antagonism, consequently limiting efforts aimed at promoting respect for diversity, peaceful coexistence, and cooperative action at the local, national, and global levels. (Moore)

For the purposes of this document, we have adopted the definition of religious illiteracy as defined in *Guidelines for Teaching about Religion: In K-12 Public Schools in the United States*. "Religious illiteracy as a lack of understanding about the following:

- the basic tenets of the world's religious traditions and other religious expressions not categorized by tradition;
- the diversity of expressions and beliefs within traditions and representations; and
- the profound role that religion plays in human social, cultural, and political life historically and today."

(Moore, 2010, p. 4)

Both Prothero and Moore believe that it is possible to address religious illiteracy by teaching about religion from a non-sectarian and non-devotional approach in primary and secondary schools.

Moore defines religious literacy to be the ability to recognize and analyze the fundamental intersections of religion and social, political, and cultural life “through multiple lenses.” Moore’s concept of a religiously literate person is one who possesses

1. a basic understanding of the history, central texts (where applicable), beliefs, practices, and current manifestations of several of the world’s religious traditions as they grew out of and continue to be shaped by particular social, historical, and cultural contexts
2. the ability to recognize and explore the religious dimensions of political, social, and cultural expressions across time and place

Moore’s definitions assume that religion is a socio-cultural phenomenon that is embedded in human political, social, and cultural life. They also assume that religion shapes and is shaped by the social and historical contexts out of which a particular religious expression or tradition and its influences emerged. Lastly, these definitions presuppose that there is a difference between religion understood through the **lens of personal devotional practice** and the **academic or non-sectarian study of religion**. In other words, one is about *religious learning* (or *learning religion*) through a devotional lens and the other is *learning about religion* from an academic and non-devotional stance. While both are legitimate human activities, they serve complementary but distinctive ends.

Difference between Teaching of Religion and Teaching about Religion

While there are long, historical ties to religion within the context of education in Manitoba, most have been of a strictly theological or participatory nature. That is, there has been historically less teaching *about* religion than teaching *of* religion. With that in mind, any educational resource package that touches upon religion is bound to raise concerns among educators, students, and community members. What follows are specific concerns or problems in the design of such a program, and suggestions for their amelioration with regard to the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedom and the provincial educational mandates.

- **Concerns over proselytization:** One of the most significant concerns over the inclusion of religion in public school curriculum is whether said materials operate either overtly or covertly to promote a particular religious ideology. The matter is not as simple as granting equal time to each tradition, but also involves equipping educators to effectively include traditions with which they (and students) may not be familiar. At the same time, humanistic, secular, and atheistic perspectives also cannot be ignored.

- **Additional concerns:** The study of religion is often tightly linked to instruction in particularistic moral values held by dominant socio-cultural groups. What is proposed instead is an examination of *how* various groups respond to the (near-) universal existential questions that are not answerable from a strictly scientific perspective. Moral values, when discussed, would be more equitably framed in terms of citizenship and community, rather than their restriction to individual faith communities.

Religious literacy is, at its core, teaching *about* world religions and exploring religious diversity, and not teaching *of* religion (religious education, indoctrination, or devotion). The differences between teaching about religion in contrast with teaching of religion are as follows:

- The approach and objectives are *academic, not devotional*.
- The programming strives to build student *awareness* of the diversity of religions, but does not encourage or expect student personal acceptance of any religion.
- The focus of the programming is to study *about* religion, not to *practice* the religion.
- The programming *exposes* students to a diversity of religious views, but does not *impose* any particular view.
- The programming focuses on *educating* about religious diversity/all religions; it does *not promote or disparage* any religion.
- The programming may *inform* the student about religious beliefs, but should not seek to *have students conform* to any particular belief.

Educational, Cultural, and Individual Benefits

The primary impetus behind including religious diversity in educational dialogues is that it can, when implemented carefully and from a good pedagogical foundation, help provide students with a more comprehensive educational experience. At a wider social level, well-educated, well-rounded students promote increased social integration and the development of genuine democratic processes.

At the broad educational level, discussions of religious diversity allow students to develop a better understanding of human history and societies, of literary developments and movements, and of philosophy and life-practice. Ignoring religion unnecessarily restricts students' ability to participate meaningfully in local and national cultural dialogues and to interact positively and respectfully with each other. Religion continues to influence contemporary peoples, cultures, and societies, whether directly or indirectly. A basic fluency in terms of religious diversity allows individuals to more fully appreciate the nature of these influences.

While Canada is widely viewed as a pluralistic and welcoming society, it would be willfully ignorant to suppose that discrimination does not still exist. While the causes of discrimination are complex and multi-faceted, we must recognize that a lack of knowledge and experience dealing with other cultures and belief systems is an important contributing factor. Exposing students to world religions and religious diversity is therefore a direct way to challenge discrimination and to equip students to better understand and appreciate the world in which they live now and in which they will live in the future. Whether it is in the playground, the community, the classroom, or the workplace, a basic understanding of the diversity of religious traditions can help defuse fear and suspicion based upon ignorance or stereotypes.

Preparing educators to engage meaningfully in discussions about religion and religious diversity will assist both teachers and students in responding more actively to current local, national, and international events. It is worth noting that there are many links between religious diversity and many of the most important contemporary issues and international developments. Recognizing the religious dimensions of these issues will more ably equip students to understand not only the world around them, but to make sense of their place within it.

Canada is an ethnically, religiously, culturally, and linguistically diverse country and that diversity continues to grow as Canada moves into the 21st century. The influence and extent of non-Christian religions will become of increasing significance. Manitoba, in particular, is home to individuals with ties to a wide variety of groups and beliefs.

Hiren Bhana Mistry (2003), in a review and critique of the World Religion courses offered in Ontario since 1971, argues for a “transformative model” for the study of world religions in schools.

A transformative model of inclusion, wherein the pluralistic themes, practices, concepts, and mystical traditions of the world’s religions are taught and appreciated on their own terms, requires a carefully thought out organization of the world religions curriculum, that does not ignore, or misrepresent, the often contradictory priorities of the world’s religious traditions.

In order to achieve this, the curriculum must be designed using the broadest conceptual base possible, while drawing on the specific cultural context, religious ideas, practices, and experiences are manifest. Self-reflection must also be in-built into the design of the course, as the discussion and study of religion is a deeply subjective experience, intimately tied to people’s cultural, existential, and metaphysical identities. (Mistry, p. 16)

“While the contribution of religious studies to the attainment of religious literacy and tolerance of others has been important during the past fifty years, it will be even more crucial in the twenty-first century. In the future, religious literacy will be an important part of the knowledge-and-ethics toolbox of the educated man or woman, and thus religious studies needs to be present in an integrated fashion within every school, college, or university curriculum. “
(Coward)

Education and Religion

Religious literacy is important for both teachers and students. The “study about religions should be an essential part of the social studies curriculum. Knowledge about religions is not only a characteristic of an educated person but is necessary for effective and engaged citizenship in a diverse nation and world. Religious literacy dispels stereotypes, promotes cross-cultural understanding, and encourages respect for the rights of others to religious liberty.” (National Council for the Social Studies)

Assumptions

The development of this document has been guided by this vision and based upon the following important theoretical and normative presuppositions:

- Religious and spiritual diversity has been and continues to be an important aspect of humanity.
- Religious beliefs and practices are reflected in the cultures of different peoples and impacts upon their worldview and daily lives.
- Religious diversity is increasing in Canada and will continue to do so in the future.
- Issues related to religious diversity and expression, as well as to religious oppression and intolerance, have had a significant impact, both historically and in the contemporary world.

- Research suggests that students and the public in general are relatively 'illiterate' with respect to world religions and religious diversity.
- Studying religious diversity increases appreciation and opportunity for pluralism as well as intercultural understanding, and reduces bias, prejudice, and discrimination.
- Investigation and discovery can help to dispel biases and misinformation surrounding religion/religions. Exploring religious diversity can help foster the skills to interact respectfully with people of diverse religious and cultural backgrounds.
- By studying about world religions, students will enhance their self-understanding of their beliefs, attitudes, and predispositions about religions.
- Opportunities to explore religious diversity in public school settings are limited and hampered by a number of factors (e.g., educator discomfort or lack of familiarity, concerns over its ostensibly controversial nature, lack of appropriate resources, lack of pedagogical approaches, unclear goals and outcomes, and/or fear of parental or student resistance).
- Classroom composition will reflect a variety of different experiences, perspectives, practices, and cultures. By the very nature of this course, students will be encouraged to look at these experiences, biases, and values with both an appreciative and critical eye and, in the process, students should not feel diminished or chastised for the views that they and their families may hold.
- Bias and other obstacles to understanding, tolerance, and appreciation of world religions and religious diversity will be reduced or overcome by adopting a non-sensationalist, non-reductive presentation and by providing a wide range of resources and tools to ensure educator and student comfort.