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Conversations: Yulia Nesterova and W. Y. Alice Chan discuss religious literacy

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W. Y. Alice Chan, Ph.D., is the executive director and co-founder of the Centre for Civic Religious Literacy, a non-profit based in Canada that promotes understanding about religious, spiritual, and non-religious peoples. In 2023, she was invited by the US Department of Education's Center for Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships to present her work with educators, community members, and organizations. That conversation was informed by her work and ongoing interests about religious literacy in rural and urban settings, religious bullying, and violent extremism. *Equipping Educators to Teach Religious Literacy: Lessons from a Teacher Education Program in the American South* (Lester & Chan, 2022) and "Religious-based bullying: International perspectives on what it is and how to address it" (Chan & Stapleton, 2021) provide more details on her work.

I had the privilege of interviewing Dr. Chan for this Conversations entry. Our conversation included the themes of the proliferation of dangerous simplistic narratives that lead to prejudices, biases, hate, and violence; the role of religion and spirituality in minority, Indigenous and diasporic communities; and the powerful role religious literacy can play and has played in mending divisions between groups. All Conversations entries are checked with the interviewee for accuracy.

Dangerous biased narratives as a major concern for diaspora, indigenous and minority communities

Yulia Nesterova: What are the major issues facing the education of diaspora, indigenous and/or minority communities today?

W. Y. Alice Chan: There are various issues related to education about diaspora, indigenous, and minority communities today, but a common underlying barrier to learning about them are the prejudices and biases that are based on simple narratives. Rather than taking the time to understand the complex and nuanced realities and situations of these communities, which may require an individual to sit with a great degree of discomfort (about where they are located, their own prejudices and biases, or the hardship that another group has faced), quick and generalized narratives are adopted that skew one's engagement and understanding about these communities. Understanding the role and influence of religion and spirituality among these communities is a major aspect that has been omitted in education about diaspora, indigenous, and minority communities today. Religious literacy is one way to address this gap.

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Yulia Nesterova: This is a great place to start. Can you tell me about what these simple and quick narratives look like in the context where you work and what their dangers are?

W. Y. Alice Chan: Absolutely. In Canada, we have a pronounced history of settlement and immigration, like many other countries around the world. As our federal government promotes further immigration, simple narratives arise. Those who have lived locally for decades or generations say: “Immigrants are taking all our jobs.” In contrast, some newcomers to the country say: “I worked hard to move to this country and get a job. There are many resources available. How could locals become homeless? They must be lazy.” The first statement disregards the economic, political, or social incentives that support immigrants in obtaining jobs. It simplifies the discussion by blaming individual groups without considering the institutions and systems that have created these conditions. In Canada, immigration is highly based on one’s level of education, economic status, and existing or potential employment opportunities prior to arrival. Locals who are not familiar with these requirements do not understand that the governments have created these parameters. The second statement is common among diaspora communities that indeed worked hard to immigrate. However, the narrative disregards the local systemic conditions and individual circumstances that may have forced a person into homelessness. In Canada, this was, and in some places, continues to be a statement among the diaspora community toward Indigenous people who are homeless due to intergenerational trauma from Canada’s colonial history.

Globally, we see simple narratives when discussing countries with a religious majority, which minimize or omit the existence of minority groups that co-exist locally. For example, in the war between Israel and Hamas that began on October 7, 2023, simple narratives describe Israel as a Jewish state without recognition of local Muslims, among other religious and non-religious groups. Gaza is described as a Muslim region, omitting the voices and perspectives of the local Jewish people there, among others. For many, this narrative suggests that this is a Jewish-Muslim conflict, when in reality, there is no singular perspective or consensus in either group on how they approach the complexity of the situation and its history. Furthermore, it simplifies the conflict into a religious one that dismisses the political and ideological aspects of the situation. As a result, we see that rates of antisemitism and Islamophobia have increased dramatically since attacks began.

Sorry to go on so much, but I think it’s really important to challenge these narratives, and religious literacy is a key tool that can help us probe further – whether a link to religion, spirituality, or non-religion is obvious or not.

Religious literacy as a critical approach to reduce prejudices and hatred

Yulia Nesterova: It is very important, you’re right. Such oversimplifications can only add more fire to a conflict, and we unfortunately can see it now with intense hatred and violence directed at Jewish and Muslim people. Can you tell the readers more about what religious literacy means and its importance in the context of multi-ethnic and multi-religious societies?

W. Y. Alice Chan: Religious literacy is not reading and writing about religion. Like “literacy” in media literacy, digital literacy, and financial literacy, religious literacy is a framework to engage with a complex aspect of individual and social life. It includes knowledge about a topic, but also skills to understand how to navigate it.

In Canada, our team at the Centre for Civic Religious Literacy outlines religious literacy in five principles:

- (1) Understanding the internal diversity within religious, spiritual, and non-religious worldview groups, which includes the racial, ethnic, gender, sexuality, linguistic, (dis)ability, and class differences that exist within worldview groups, in addition to the different ways that people express a commitment to their worldview;
- (2) Understanding the external diversity across worldview groups, that worldviews are unique despite their similarities;
- (3) Recognizing the influence that socio-cultural, political, and economic aspects of society have on worldview groups, and vice versa, in the past and present;
- (4) Recognizing the need to include religious, spiritual, and non-religious worldviews in the full conversation;
- (5) Recognizing that worldviews hold a significant personal meaning to the religious, spiritual, and non-religiously affiliated individuals. This leads us to discuss these worldviews from an individual or community’s distinct lens and not from the worldview of another person/group, and know that individuals who share the same worldview may have diverse beliefs, expressions, interpretations, and terminology to describe it based on a number of factors (such as personal circumstance, place, political context, etc.).

These principles are unique to our Canadian history, demography, political, economic, cultural, and social reality, though other countries have similar context-specific principles and approaches to also help individuals engage with their local multi-ethnic and multi-religious societies.

In countries like Canada, where there is an increasing population of individuals who self-affiliate as having no religion or holding secular perspectives (34.6% per 2021 Census data) and the percentage of Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs have more than doubled in the past 20 years (from 2001–2021) (Statistics Canada, 2022), it is important to learn about the role and influence of religion as it still holds relevance for many people locally, and globally, despite the views of the majority. Skills like religious literacy enable one to perceive how one’s ethnic and religious identity may be tightly linked for some groups, and how this aspect of identity informs their lives, actions, and attitudes. As a deeply personal aspect of identity for some people, religious literacy in schools can help students understand each other better, which could prevent incidents, like religious bullying. As well, teaching religious literacy offers students the ability to approach, engage with, and analyze local or global affairs, which can provide the opportunity and knowledge to respond as a local or global citizen.

In countries with a significant Indigenous population, and a desire to reconcile relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Peoples, religious literacy is a vital skill to approach the complexities of a colonial history (past and present) that often includes missionaries, the Church, and harm to children for political and religious gain.

Yulia Nesterova: There is a lot here, thank you for sharing. It looks like religious literacy can support us in addressing a great variety of pressing issues, from violence in schools such as bullying to potentially large-scale violent and armed conflicts. I wonder if there is research or examples from practice that show how religious literacy has helped in tackling such issues?

W. Y. Alice Chan: Yes, there are studies that show the impact of religious literacy programs. In Modesto, California, Dr. Emile Lester, Professor of Political Science and International Affairs at the University of Mary Washington, learned that students changed their perceptions to their “least-liked group” after completing the local religious literacy course. Specifically, Lester asked students about their thoughts on permitting First Amendment rights to their “least-liked group” if they were to run for public office, teach in public schools, make a public speech, or hold public rallies. The willingness to permit their “least-liked group” increased in all categories after taking the course.

In my own research in both Modesto, California and Montreal, Canada, students who completed the local religious literacy programs also shared positive responses.

Among five Modesto alumni I spoke with, three alumni recognized that the course changed the way they perceive others and two alumni had positive things to say about the course. Five current students at the time of my study explicitly stated a positive attitudinal transformation toward people of different beliefs as a result of the course too. Though my participants were not a representative sample of the local student population, I think it is important to recognize this change. Even one change is significant depending on what they do. For example, a local teacher explained that an alumni became a doctor and found the course beneficial for his work. What an incredible difference that one person has and can continue to make!

Having said that, some participants also shared negative perspectives of the course because of the teachers they had. This also recognizes the importance of one person. In this case, it is the teacher.

Changing policies and practices to incorporate religious literacy

Yulia Nesterova: Those are important examples, and even if it’s small scale, positive change can start with one person. But one person can also make it worse, as you said. So then, how do we teach religious literacy, especially outside schools, and to teachers? What needs to change at policy and practice level?

W. Y. Alice Chan: Unlike the other forms of literacies mentioned above, religious literacy (at least at the Centre for Civic Religious Literacy) is for the purpose of relationship building – we promote understanding about others because we see that relationships need to be built or repaired. Teaching religious literacy requires a careful, thoughtful, and informed individual, as a conversation about religion, spirituality, and non-religion can raise many emotional, personal and deeply held beliefs.

In schools, having a religious literacy course itself does not necessarily result in relationship building, informed, or skilled individuals. Teaching religious literacy requires an educator who has access to a sound curriculum, has adequate teacher training in the topic of religious literacy, and administrative support to provide this form of education. The educator also needs to be a passionate teacher who aims to teach about religion as neutrally as possible, and can model and foster the respectful attitude, understanding, and knowledge about other beliefs and practices. This is a high calling, but my research has shown these aspects are needed, even when a religious literacy program already exists.

Outside of schools, a facilitator or instructor would need to embody the same traits and training as an in-school educator; however, teaching religious literacy outside of schools requires the facilitator to find other forms of relevancy. While citizenship is important for all age groups, adult learners, youth, and young adults engaging with religious literacy outside of schools are interested in other questions

like: How does religious literacy relate to my role as a professional? How does religious literacy help me understand X and Y issues in the world today? Can religious literacy provide the space to talk about intersecting identities that other conversations shy away from, e.g. the intersection of being LGBTQ+ and religious?

In our experience teaching religious literacy in schools, and addressing these specific questions outside of schools, we have come to see that people are hungry to learn and discuss religious literacy because there has been a vacuum of discussion for decades. Most people are surprised (and excited) to begin discussing religions, spiritualities, and non-religious perspectives that intersect or engage with other aspects of identity and social life. The traditional approach to teaching religion in a silo is outdated and no longer of interest as people begin to see the connections that worldviews have with other aspects of life. For this reason, policy and practice need to change its approach to religion as a topic overall. As discussed at a recent ISREV (International Seminar on Religious Education and Values) seminar, many scholars on this topic clearly see that religious literacy can further open up the conversation and engagement with climate change, reconciliation, and other global topics. It is time for policy makers to see it too so that we can open up the conversation together.

Yulia Nesterova: What do you envision as essential actions by policymakers? Is it incorporating this nuanced and locally-sensitive type of religious literacy into formal education, whether it is in schools, colleges/universities, or professional development programmes?

W. Y. Alice Chan: This is a hard question, because it depends on the context. In Quebec, Bill 21 prohibits teachers, lawyers, judges, and police officers from wearing any religious symbol in order to promote the Quebec conception of secularism. For policy makers in Quebec to understand that religious literacy is a tool that can help them engage on these large, national, and global topics, there needs to be an explicit recognition and engagement with religious, spiritual, and non-religious matters. A physical and/or public forum is needed for this to occur. However, the existence of Bill 21 prohibits the degree of discussion that is possible in the many implications it poses to those who choose to wear a religious symbol as an expression of their religious identity and commitment. Overall, this is a complicated discussion and it will differ for each place, but I would generally propose: create a space for dialogue and recognition of diversity in order to begin engaging with large topics; review current funding and proposed funding allocation, in an effort to offer resources for all significant parties to be able to contribute as needed; and, provide training (especially in religious literacy) so that people have the knowledge and skills to take the necessary steps in an informed manner.

Opposition to religious literacy

Yulia Nesterova: Those sound like very sensible and crucial steps, but I imagine that it's not so easy in reality to implement them. Is there any opposition to religious literacy, and how do we overcome it?

W. Y. Alice Chan: Absolutely. The word "religion" continues to be a conversation stopper for many people. However, once a conversation on religious literacy begins, and individuals see that it is knowledge, lens, and skills to engage with people who are religious,

spiritual, or non-religious, as well as their intersecting identities, skeptics quickly begin to ask questions or ponder in curiosity.

Like the growing awareness of mental health globally, a conversation about one's spiritual health (whether it is religious or not) will also take time to grow. Thankfully, the conversation about spiritual health and awareness of religious literacy has begun. We just need to continue the conversation and help people see that religious literacy is more than just head knowledge.

Yulia Nesterova: It's encouraging to know this awareness is growing. It's also incredible to think that religious literacy goes so much beyond just knowing how to engage with people of other religions/spiritualities, and it's also about our spiritual health. An interesting issue you mentioned at the start of the interview is the importance of sitting with a degree of discomfort and just now you talked about skeptical people. We see a lot of pushback against it – people refuse to engage with so-called “difficult” topics such as racism, colonialism and colonial legacies, and other similar injustices. Reactions tend to be very emotional and negative. We also now have empirical research that teachers don't want to bring in such topics to the classroom to avoid upsetting students who come from white, privileged backgrounds. I wonder if you can share examples of how your work has helped to overcome this and engage very reluctant people to consider and reflect on their positionality and privilege, for example?

W. Y. Alice Chan: There will always be reluctant people, and we never force our work onto them. For those who are slightly curious, they will ask questions. For example, I met a teacher at a conference. She looked at the name of our organization and said: “That doesn't make sense. How can something be civic and religious at the same time?” So, that offered the opportunity for me to respond and clarify. In all circumstances, including this one, we try to meet people where they are and begin the conversation from there. For those who are uncomfortable in reflecting on their positionality and privilege – which absolutely happens because we discuss intersectionality and positionality in almost all our training engagements – we sit and talk. Because we never start the conversation with a focus on positionality and privilege, we have typically built rapport with individuals beforehand. We hear their concerns, ask questions to probe thinking, and share various examples to illustrate how positionality and privilege vary around the world, but look a certain way in Canada, which relates to their identity. Essentially, we treat each conversation on a case by case basis and use teaching skills of listening and informing to acknowledge discomfort and encourage deeper reflection. Overall, we aim to:

- (1) Acknowledge an individuals' perspectives and feelings
- (2) Address concerns they may have about statements regarding their privilege or positionality
- (3) Offer other examples to illustrate the key concepts of positionality and privilege
- (4) Offer additional resources and support from a source that they may trust and respect

Religious literacy as a necessary element of reconciliation and inter-group relationships

Yulia Nesterova: It sounds like a very kind and respectful approach to engage people. In one of your articles (Chan et al., 2019) you and your colleagues note that religious literacy as pedagogy is a potential response to the concerns that Canada's Truth and

Reconciliation Commission raised. Can you please tell us more about what exactly religious literacy brings to the work of the TRC?

W. Y. Alice Chan: This is a complex and nuanced conversation because Canada’s colonial history is complex and differs across the country. I would encourage any one who is interested in this to read the article for the full details and explanation, as well as reading well beyond what I have shared.

For brevity, and to avoid simplifying or generalizing the conversation myself, I will focus on how religious literacy can help individuals understand the diversity that exists among the Indigenous Peoples of Turtle Island/Canada and to support them toward building and reconciling relationships.

Among the five principles of religious literacy, the first one may be the best way to begin. It can help address many of the 94 calls-to-action in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

The first principle reminds us all to perceive the internal diversity that exists within every group. Among Indigenous Peoples in Canada, there are the First Nations, Metis, and Inuit. Each one has a different history, culture, and religious/spiritual worldview, though similarities exist. Among the First Nations, there are over 600 tribes alone. Spread across the country, they have common teachings and knowledge, but may be described and expressed differently. In order to understand the colonial past for each group, we must begin by engaging and seeing the individuals in front of us. This first principle challenges any assumptions we may have, including the relationship Indigenous Peoples have with the Church; though many abhor the Church, some are Christian. Generalising the beliefs of a whole community due to the hardships they faced in the past and present negates the choice and reality that each individual person and community can or has made. Through religious literacy, we can approach the nuances of the past and present more clearly through our eyes and ears. By recognizing that diversity exists within a group, we can be more cautious with our emotions and assumptions – an important part of any relationship, whether we are building it or reconciling differences.

Yulia Nesterova: The point you’re making about diversity within a group and dangers of generalizations is really important. I think we see how easy it is to put a particular group in a “box” - as in, what they should be like, behave like, believe in, and so on. I think, unfortunately, with minority groups it’s particularly prevalent to assign some characteristics to them, often negative. From everything you shared about religious literacy, it seems like a very appropriate and effective method to make people see the world in a more nuanced and reflexive way. Before we conclude, I want to ask if there is anything else that we have not talked about yet that you think would be very important to include in our conversation piece?

W. Y. Alice Chan: I would just highlight the power of listening and how religious literacy is a framework of five principles (at least in Canada) that can guide one to pause, step back, and listen more with our ears, mind, and heart. In such a fast paced world, we have constant updates on our phone from news outlets or social media. Both lead us to make quick interpretations about what we are reading so that we can be ready to “digest” the next update. Slowing down to think is almost counter-intuitive, so frameworks like religious literacy can guide us to question our learned biases, prejudices, or assumptions, and listen more.

Yulia Nesterova: This is a beautiful way to conclude our conversation. Thank you very much for your time and valuable contribution, Alice.

W. Y. Alice Chan: Thank you, Yulia. It was such a pleasure to discuss this with you.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes on contributors

W. Y. Alice Chan, Ph.D., is the executive director and co-founder of the Centre for Civic Religious Literacy, a non-profit based in Canada that promotes understanding about religious, spiritual, and non-religious peoples. In 2023, she was invited by the US Department of Education's Center for Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships to present her work with educators, community members, and organizations. That conversation was informed by her work and ongoing interests about religious literacy in rural and urban settings, religious bullying, and violent extremism. *Equipping Educators to Teach Religious Literacy: Lessons from a Teacher Education Program in the American South* (Lester & Chan, 2022) and "Religious-based bullying: International perspectives on what it is and how to address it" (Chan & Jafralie, 2021) provide more details on her work.

Yulia Nesterova, Ph.D., is Associate Editor of the *Diaspora, Indigenous, and Minority Education* journal. She is a Lecturer in International and Comparative Education and a member of the leadership team of Justice, Insecurities and Fair Decision Making Interdisciplinary Research Group at the University of Glasgow in Scotland.

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