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Imagine being in a wilderness, in an alien place, life all around you, life going on unhindered. Despite the abundance around you, you still can't find something to feed on, cheer you or relate to. It is like the unlikely situation where all over sudden, your friends quit speaking in a language you understand. You can no longer understand what they say, nor can they you. The world can become a very lonely place in such circumstances; when you fail to fit, not of your own doing, but a cruel mix of fate and circumstances. This is the predicament that most Muslims living in places alien to Islam find themselves in. all the more sudden, and aggravated on a certain fateful September eleven. Their language would become complicated to the ears of the non Muslims. They would find themselves alienated not of their own doing, but for being Muslims plain. Schools mirror the condition of the society in many ways, and the bulk of this discrimination finds its home there. It is unimaginable what hurt children can inflict upon each other, all generating from a reckless comment picked up from an adult. And that's how stereotypes develop; culpability by association.

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Muslim families in Winnipeg want children excused from certain classes

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Post

WINNIPEG— A dozen Muslim families who recently arrived in Canada have told Winnipeg's Louis Riel School Division that they want their children excused from compulsory elementary school music and coed physical education programs for religious and cultural reasons.

“ This is one of our realities in Manitoba now, as a result of immigration,” said superintendent Terry Borys. “ We were faced with some families who were really adamant about this. Music was not part of the cultural reality.” Borys said the school division has alerted Education Minister Nancy Allan about the situation since music and phys-ed are compulsory in the province's elementary schools.

There have been no issues so far with children of middle-school or high-school age, he said.

The families accept physical education, as long as the boys and girls have separate classes, but do not want their children exposed to singing or the playing musical instruments, Borys said. The division has suggested they could instead do a writing project to satisfy the music requirements of the arts curriculum. However, a local Muslim leader says there is no reason for young kids to be held out of music or phys-ed classes based on religious and cultural grounds.

“ Who is advising them? My first concern would be who are these new immigrants talking to?” said Shahina Siddiqui, executive director of the Islamic Social Services. “ This is the first time I am hearing this; I'm not very happy about it.”

Siddiqui said there is no problem with elementary-school children taking coed phys-ed, at least “ not with little kids under the age of puberty.”

She said when some middle-school and high-school students have asked not to mix genders, they have been accommodated by schools.

Siddiqui acknowledged that music can be an issue — but only for a few people.

“ Music is controversial in our community; this is a North American phenomenon,” she said. “ There is a minority view that music is forbidden. (That view) is not accepted by the majority.”

Borys said that there had been one or two requests for kids to be excused previously, but this year a dozen families came forward at six schools.

Borys said that school division contacted a member of the Islamic community whom the parents suggested, consulted the Manitoba Human Rights Commission and looked at what other jurisdictions are doing about accommodation, particularly Ontario.

The division is trying to figure out what issues might arise when the children enter junior high or high school, he said. Music is optional beyond Grade 6, but phys-ed is coed right through Grade 12.

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RACE, ETHNICITY, AND EDUCATION

Principles and Practices of Multicultural Education Valerie Ooka Pang,

Religious Identities and Religious Stereotypes: Their Roles in School

Binaya Subedi

Introduction

In the aftermath of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, many communities in the United States organized rallies calling for the end of racial profiling and discrimination based on religious beliefs. People of various ethnic, racial, and religious backgrounds converged in places such as the Central Park in New York City holding signs that stated: " Our Grief Is Not a Cry for War," " Islam Is for Peace," and " Don't Give into Hate." Teachers, students, and community members participated in candlelight vigils across the nation showing their support for diversity in the country. However,

people—who were physically different and members of diverse religious communities—were attacked. Close to where I live, an Islamic education center was damaged when vandals smashed water pipes and flooded the floors of the building. These intruders also entered the building and desecrated copies of the Koran. ¹

Incidents like the one described demonstrate that a number of political and cultural factors have contributed to the increased discussion of the role of religion in schools and society. Debates have exploded across the country from the teaching of evolution in science classes to the legitimacy of legally sanctioned marriages of gay and lesbian couples. ² Though the United States has espoused a policy of separation between church and state, I believe that there needs to be more dialogue on what the separation means in today's political climate. What role should religion play in our schools and society? If the goal of schools is to produce a citizen who values equality and liberty, what does that mean in terms of religious diversity?

I believe that students who are atheists or agnostics and those who practice religions other than Christianity, such as Islam, Buddhism, Judaism, and Hinduism, are often marginalized in schools because school culture neither respects their beliefs nor makes efforts to include diverse religious perspectives in the curriculum. ³ Along with the need to include issues of gender, race, ethnicity, language, homophobia, and social class, I argue for the need to incorporate discussions about religious diversity in multicultural education and teacher education. These fields should present information regarding the prevalence of religious stereotypes and the importance of religious identity to many students in schools. As Noddings argues, teaching

about religions helps students' intellectual growth and makes them open-minded. 4 Our lack of knowledge about religions can hinder our capacity as educators to work with students who may consider religious identity as a critical component of their life. 5 In this chapter, I begin by exploring how the mainstream perspective on religion influences which religious issues are talked about in schools. Second, I address how religious stereotypes create barriers to our understanding of diverse religious beliefs. Third, I describe the importance of recognizing students' religious identities. Last, I reflect on students' learning about religious differences through field trips taken as part of a multicultural education course.

The Complexities of Viewing Religion and Religious Identity in Schools and Society

Issues of religion are important to me not only as an educator but also as a citizen. As an immigrant, I believe that it is important for educators to understand not only the religious beliefs of students but also how religion may play a major role in how students express their identities. I was brought up in a community that practiced both Hinduism and Buddhism. I have lived roughly an equal amount of time in Nepal, where I was born and raised, and in the United States, where I completed most of my formal education. For close to a decade, I attended a Catholic school that was run by Jesuit priests. I came to the United States in my teens and encountered similar challenges that many immigrant students face, such as language difficulties and a deeply Eurocentric school curriculum.

Through interactions with my peers, I realized that most of my friends held stereotypes about Hindu and Buddhist practices. My friends assumed that I

would be a vegetarian, meditate and worship a cow daily, and that I was already arranged to be married to someone I did not know. I find it important to incorporate discussions on how religious bias creates stereotypes about Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, Christian, and other communities in the United States. I have also learned to respect and admire students who do not profess religious affiliations, but who are very eager to learn about religious histories and practices. I also encourage teachers in my courses to gain more knowledge about various religions so that they can be better prepared to teach about diversity.

I have come to recognize that for many people, religious identity is an important way of expressing personal and communal aspect of experiences, histories, and cultures. ⁶ For example, similar to Jewish experiences, there is a long history in the United States pertaining to how people of color have relied on religion to cultivate hope and freedom in their communities. From my own experiences, I have found it useful to recognize that students' religious identities are also connected to gender, ethnic, or linguistic identities. ⁷ For instance, a Muslim Pakistani American girl in a high school may emphasize racial, gender, and religious identities. Religious and cultural aspects of identities may often overlap, particularly if the student or the student's family or community places emphasis on spirituality in everyday life. This may mean cultural practices (language, history, customs, food, etc.) may be connected to spiritual identities, such as being a Muslim American. The student may also identify as a Pakistani American, which is an ethnic and cultural form of identity. In other words, the student's identity is complex

because identity is connected to religious, national, ethnic, and family components.

Mainstream Understanding of Religion in Schools

Political and cultural events in society influence how schools promote and work with diversity issues. For example, the post-1960s immigration from Africa, Asia, the Americas, and the Middle East has changed the racial and ethnic makeup of U. S. society and schools. ⁸ Many immigrants and their children practice religious faiths such as Islam, Buddhism, Judaism, Hinduism, and so on, and may also practice various dimensions of Christianity. Since the terrorist events of September 11, 2001, and the passing of the Patriot Act, people who are of Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, and other faiths and people of Arab American and South Asian American ancestry have faced increased scrutiny because of their racial and religious appearances and beliefs. ⁹ Dominant interest in interpreting the events of September 11 in religious terms makes religiously underrepresented people vulnerable to verbal and physical violence both in schools and in society.

One way to begin to examine the role of religion in society and schools is to think about the nature of knowledge and what knowledge is presented in schools. In my classes, I ask educators to consider why certain perspectives are emphasized in the curriculum but others are discounted. To reflect about knowledge issues further, I ask educators to look at the relationship between knowledge and power, particularly how schools may interpret certain religious identities as being more appropriate for students. This is because discussions over what is real knowledge influences interpretation over what

counts as legitimate history, experience, literature, and, in our case, religion as discussed in the school curriculum. ¹⁰ This is particularly relevant in teaching courses in language arts and social studies that have significant content references to religions. Unfortunately, those who call for the need to return to the core values of the past, a dominant viewpoint, may perceive discussions about religious diversity as being detrimental to national unity. This narrow viewpoint suggests that ethnic, racial, and religious diversity leads to disunity within the country. ¹¹ And this perspective also glosses over the need to reduce prejudice and discriminations faced by religiously marginalized communities.

I have come to believe that perspectives that do not recognize the diversity of religious traditions in the United States create an us versus them approach to looking at religions and formulate insider/outsider versions of religious identities. Insiders are seen as those who follow traditional religions (specific interpretations of Christianity, and so on) and are viewed as “domestic” and “loyal” to the country. Outsiders are perceived to be foreign or those who follow a less important religion even when, for example, religions such as Judaism or Hinduism have long histories in the United States. I would argue that the dominant perspective opposes the plurality of religions and cultures coexisting, and this belief goes against our founding national values, such as tolerance and respect. Thus, in many schools, it is common to see how spiritualities expressed by Jewish, Amish, Native American, Arab American, Asian American, Latino, and African American students are often discussed as being different to mainstream ideas of religious identity. In other words, nonmainstream religious traditions and

experiences are not fully respected as being an authentic religion. They are often presented as being in conflict with Christianity. This perspective can undermine religious beliefs that students learn at home and in their religious communities. Similarly, I also believe that there is a national contradiction about religion. Despite the constitutional prohibition against state-sponsored teaching of religion in schools, religious practices can be found in many daily school practices. For example, school officials may unofficially endorse a single religion by actively promoting selective songs, plays, or events of a particular religion in everyday school activities. And such activities and practices are often assumed to be a normal function in a school and are seen as an integral part of the school routine. This conscious or unconscious inclusion of a single religion may take place in the following cases in schools:

- Only celebrate or teach about selective holidays (for example, Christmas) and not emphasize non-Christian holidays or events.
- Only organize field trips to religious sites that are mainstream Christian in origin, such as St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York City or local Catholic or Protestant churches. Educators should organize field trips to Jewish synagogues, Hindu temples, and African American churches.
- Only invite speakers of religious faiths that a majority of students can relate to.
- Not recognize the religious significance of the clothes worn by students such as a head scarf or hijab or turban. For example, the idea of requiring dress codes in a physical education class does not affirm students' religious identities because students may prefer to wear clothes that are less

revealing.

- Not recognizing that food is a cultural, value-laden commodity. Not accommodating the needs of religiously underrepresented students devalues their identities. Muslim students avoid pork, and Hindu students may not eat beef. When students are fasting, they should not be required to sit at a table where food is being served. Similarly, when students bring ethnic food to school, teachers can make this an educational opportunity by explaining how communities value certain kinds of food. This may help students understand how ideas of taste and smell of food are learned over time through being part of a specific community.

- Not taking discriminations such as name calling and various forms of verbal abuse seriously when raised by students in reference to religious bias.

Indeed, assumptions about what is a more legitimate religion may also be pervasive in curriculum context because curriculum knowledge reflects the values and beliefs of the people in power. School curriculum follows what Banks terms the “add-on approach,” which describes viewpoints of people of color and other marginalized communities as being a less important topic of study. Eurocentric approaches to curriculum, as McCarthy and Merryfield have argued, give priority to the perspectives of people of European ancestry and does not acknowledge the viewpoints of people of African, Asian, Latin America, and other descent. Because of bias in the curriculum, students of marginalized racial, linguistic, and religious background often do not see their histories and experiences being included in textbooks. This can cause them to feel marginalized in schools. For example, a lesson or a unit on Christmas in the United States is limiting if it

does not equally emphasize the diversity of religions practiced in the country. Likewise, the lesson or unit assumes that everyone in the classroom is of a single religious faith or that Christmas is the most important religious holiday or function that should be talked about in the classroom. Similarly, a food and festival approach to religious diversity neither promotes underrepresented religions or cultures in a positive way nor does it address issues of power and discrimination. I would suggest that educators talk about food and festivals, yet be aware that the emphasis on the fun aspect reinforces religions and cultures as being exotic and different and not as a serious topic of discussion. As Pang argues, teachers should provide historical and cultural contexts in which aspects of culture such as food and dress are included or displayed in festivals. The food prepared, performances given, and symbols used represent the cultural values and beliefs of a community. 14

Stereotypes Based on Religion

Stereotyping is a method by which an individual or a group of people dehumanize marginalized individuals or groups in society, particularly those who are seen as “inferior.” 15 Stereotyping is tied to issues of prejudice, domination, and racism, and is often used by people in power to describe superior or inferior intellectual abilities among people. Religious stereotypes describe people belonging to a different religion in pejorative terms. For example, stereotypes of Hinduism include images of cows, Hare Krishna, caste system, elephants, snake charmers, and arranged marriages. Similarly, visual representations of Islam can be reduced to portraits of veiled women,

men with turbans, and camels in the desert. Buddhism is often described in relation to monks, meditation, and caricatures of a “ Buddha belly.” Such portrayals create a biased view about people and places and fall far short of providing sufficient or accurate philosophical information needed to understand the complexities within religions. Similarly, such depictions neither provide the context in which certain religious practices take place nor do they help students understand how people in everyday life practice spirituality. Dominant perspectives may focus on stereotypical aspects of people's practices such as women wearing headscarves, men wearing turbans, or people engaging in arranged marriages. The emphasis is often placed on the seemingly bizarre customs, which are shown as being in opposition to Euro American values and beliefs.

- People of a religious group (Muslim, Hindus, etc.) have identical history and experiences. Just like followers of Buddhism and Christianity, followers of Islam include people of various races and ethnicities. Although, for example, Muslims in the United States may collectively identify themselves as Muslim Americans, there are also linguistic and cultural differences within the group. For example, Somalis who have recently settled in a Midwestern city from East Africa may offer a different perspective on being a follower of Islam compared to Jordanian Americans who have been living in the United States for decades. Similarly, the African American context of Islam has its own history within the United States. In other words, Islam is practiced in various ways. Because there is a diversity of ethnic, linguistic, and racial communities in the United States, Christianity is also practiced in diverse ways.

- Women are oppressed by their religion because they wear headscarves. Wearing a headscarf is not a form of oppression but a way in which people connect to their religious or cultural practices. 16 The wearing of a headscarf reflects the beliefs of many women of non-Western descent who feel the need to be discreet about revealing body parts. Depending on the practices of a specific community, a scarf may cover parts of a head or portions of the body. In schools, students may wear various kinds of scarves and some may wear it at school but not necessarily at home or vice versa. Students who wear headscarves face enormous pressure to conform to a school culture that does not value the religious meanings related to covering hair or portions of the body.

- Men are similarly oppressed by their religion because they wear turbans. Sikh students wear turbans as a way to affiliate with their spiritual beliefs. Boys have long hair and hair is left to grow because they believe that hair should not be cut. Similarly, Sikh boys are often ridiculed for wearing turbans and ostracized in schools and face pressure to act like mainstream students.

- Their religion sanctions violence. This is a harmful misperception that is often disseminated by media. Too often images of people of color, whether they are Somalis, Indians, or Egyptians, show them as fanatical or overemotional and dangerous. The media rarely shows positive and everyday lives of people of various religious faiths. People of underrepresented religious backgrounds are often shown as taking part in seemingly bizarre rituals such as bathing in the river, burying or burning the dead, or worshipping beside a cow in a temple without describing the context of such events.

- Their religion is old and primitive. All religions have long histories and terms such as primitive or premodern imply superior or inferior, good or bad relationships, or hierarchies within religions. Concepts such as “ old” or “ primitive” suggest that certain religions are oppressive (Islam, Hinduism, and so on) although others are progressive and developed.

Recognizing Religious Identities of Students

In multicultural education courses, I ask teachers to consider if and how their religious beliefs may influence their teaching. I also ask teachers to reflect on how their teaching approaches may validate students who come from marginalized religious communities. For example, Jewish and Hindu students may speak of religious beliefs and customs being important aspects of their identities. Some students may also feel the need to assimilate into the mainstream society so that they are not seen as being different. For example, explaining their research with Sikh students, Gibson and Hall explained how Sikh students often displayed and articulated the values desired by the culture of the schools (certain ways of speaking and behaving, and so on) without giving up their religious and cultural beliefs. 17 They lived a bicultural life. Zine argues that Muslim Canadian students relied on religion as a source of comfort when they faced prejudice and felt isolated because of societal misconception of their Muslim identity. 18 Research on, for example, Asian American and African American students' identities similarly suggested ways in which students avoided assimilation by building communities within peer groups and which helped students feel culturally more comfortable in schools. 19

If we disregard religious or secular viewpoints of students, we are wittingly or unwittingly not recognizing students' belief systems. Our willingness to recognize students' identities implies that we value the knowledge students bring into the classrooms and that we are willing to help students academically succeed. It is also useful to consider that students may exhibit religious beliefs, values, and ways of being in explicit as well as in implicit forms. 20 For example, explicit may mean a Muslim student wearing a headscarf or a Sikh student wearing a turban. Implicit implies attributes that one may not be able to see or observe and this requires a deeper knowledge of students' religious identities.

Balancing the constant pressure to act mainstream and the desire to remain culturally and religiously grounded hinders students' academic as well as psychological well-being. Following are some issues relevant to understanding students' identities that educators may find useful. It is essential to recognize that students' identities are connected to students' home or community values.

- Religion and student/parent involvement. Some parents may not send their children to events or functions in which one religion (for example, Christianity) is being emphasized and other religions are not being talked about. For example, most schools place emphasis on the Christian aspect of holidays, particularly activities in schools such as holiday songs or plays. And when only one religion is emphasized, parents may also feel that the school is not being supportive of their children's religious identities. Educators ought to find ways to infuse diverse religious functions in schools. Similarly, we learn more about students' identities when we develop meaningful

relationship with students' families and the larger communities students affiliate with.

- Assumptions about how communities raise children. There are similarities as well as differences across religions and cultures on how children ought to be raised and the values children should learn. Some families may use religious beliefs as a way to instill discipline and how children should interact in everyday life (interactions with elders, and so on). In my classes, I have emphasized the need to question stereotypes, which are often embedded in statements such as “ their children are neglected” because of religious beliefs. And we should also be aware of assumptions in statements such as “ students' parents don't care about learning because their religion does not emphasize education.”

- Assumptions about students being too religious. This is a common misconception if one's culture or religion is deeply aligned with the culture or religion of the school. The idea of, for example, students who are of Sikh, Jewish, or Muslim faith being too religious implies that the students' religious practices are an inappropriate way of expressing spirituality and culture. Similarly, the statement of “ being too religious” implies students' possibly having unfounded emotional or behavioral problems.

- About names being strange and hard to pronounce. Students who have names such as Osama, Mohamed, or Jihad are seen as “ different” and become easy targets of name calling. Similar to how a majority of European American names are taken from the Bible, many Muslim or Hindu names are affiliated with religious texts such as the Koran or Mahabharata. And educators should also consider how the practice of shortening a student's

name or giving a European-based name can be deeply offensive to students and their communities. The methods of sounding out letters and words are culturally based and European ways of pronouncing names significantly differ from non-European traditions. Instead of assuming how a name is pronounced, we need to seek the student's assistance in pronouncing the name and also in understanding the meanings the name may convey.

Learning about Religious Identities Through Field Trips

A vast majority of the students that I work with are of European descent and have limited knowledge of religions outside of their Christian upbringings. Although the extent to which religion influences their lives varies, most students point out that religion has or continues to shape their lives. On occasion, I have asked students to share how they have come to see religions that they are not part of. And I similarly ask students to consider the origins of terms such as “ holy cow” because the usage of the term in everyday life is an effect of how the dominant society stereotypes people who are seen as religiously different. For example, the term “ holy cow” developed when European travelers discovered, to their amazement, that people in South Asia believed cows were symbols of spirituality. Then, to describe the difference between Hinduism—a religion that is widely practiced in South Asia—and Christianity, the term “ holy cow” was coined and became slang to describe astonishment or a sense of surprise in the English language. Needless to say, the term does not have much meaning for people who affiliate with Hinduism and is not used by people of Hindu faith in the United States.

Because most educators in my courses note having limited knowledge about religions such as Islam, Judaism, Buddhism, and Hinduism, I have come to recognize that their understanding of what constitutes other religions is learned in relationship to their knowledge of Christianity. And I have also learned that teachers' viewpoints about Buddhism, Native American religions, and Hinduism influences the ways in which they perceive students who may express nontraditional religious identities. Similarly, most educators that I work with have limited understanding of the diversity within Christianity (for example, within an African American, Latino, or Asian American context), and this lack of knowledge hinders how teachers interpret the identities of students of color. Often in my classes, African American and Jewish students have provided alternative perspectives on what it means to be a person of Christian or Jewish faith. Jewish students point out the long history of discrimination against Jewish people in Europe as well as in North America. Students have explained how Jewish schools served as a safe place because Jewish students often faced discriminations in non-Jewish schools. African American students have described how Christianity was reinterpreted by slaves as a way to highlight issues of freedom, equality, and compassion, and how Black churches served as a place to reaffirm one's heritage and identity.

I have found field trips to various religious sites to be a useful way of teaching and learning about religion because most students have not visited places such as an Islamic mosque or a Hindu temple. This experiential aspect of learning helps students understand cultural differences and ways in which people interpret spirituality. And the experiences provide more knowledge

on religions and help students better connect with individuals who express diverse religious identities in schools. Next, I explore three different places that students have visited as part of a graduate-level multicultural education course and note its implications to teaching about diversity.

Home of a Tibetan Family

In one of the class trips, students visited the home of a Tibetan American family to understand how immigrant communities interpret and practice their religious beliefs. After the Chinese occupation of Tibet in the mid-1950s, thousands of Tibetans fled the country and since then have lived in exile in India and Nepal. 22 Tibetans arrived in the United States in the 1960s and 1970s as refugees because they were not allowed to return to Tibet to practice their cultural or religious ways of being. Tibetans, who follow the Tibetan interpretation of Buddhism, have historically distanced themselves from Western forms of lifestyles or religions to protect their indigenous values and beliefs. Tibetans consider the Dalai Lama to be the spiritual as well as the political leader of Tibet. Nonviolence has been a guiding principle of Tibetan culture, and the Chinese government, which sees Tibetan ways of life as backward, has institutionalized its economic and cultural practices in Tibet. Although many Tibetans are U. S. citizens and consider the places they live in the United States their home, they have deep connections with communities and cultures in Tibet.

Prior to visiting the Tibetan family's home, as a class, we discussed the historical and cultural issues pertinent to Tibet. And during the students' visit, the family made information available for students to utilize in class

and spoke about the spiritual aspect of life in Tibet. Many of the students had assumed that the information (brochures, etc.) would be tourist knowledge promoting the landscape of the country. Students were surprised to discover that several of the brochures and pamphlets had social justice components. Along with Tibetan food, the family provided written information on the history and culture of Tibet and spoke about peace and justice and ways in which students could be an ally in the efforts to preserve Tibetan belief systems. This included suggestions on writing letters or contacting public officials in the United States for the Tibetan people's right to return to their ancestral homeland to be closely connected with their faith. The talk helped students understand the ways in which a specific immigrant community considered religion a critical part of everyday life and how spirituality was connected to a community's well-being. The visit also clarified what being in exile meant and how many people are unable to return to places where they were born, particularly places where they have religious and cultural affiliations. For the students, the idea of a family seeking political support from a private place, a home, was truly unexpected. Dominant belief systems often attempt to create a rigid separation between what is private and what is public. The idea of being political from home was new because students had initially assumed that one is or ought to be political in public places. Overall, the experience helped students understand the linkages between spirituality and people's identity, particularly in relation to how spiritual identity becomes a powerful source of hope and comfort.

Native American Spirituality and Land Formations

Near our university sits a culturally and spiritually significant site that was built by Native people between 200 B. C. and A. D. 500. The Adena and Hopewell people, who lived as farmers and traders in the Ohio region, built numerous networks of mounds in the shapes of birds, snakes, and bears. The mounds, which rise between four and six feet from the ground, are considered sacred by Native Americans because they were initially used as burial grounds. In the past twenty years, despite heavy opposition from Native people, areas considered to be within the mound region were zoned for commercial purposes, which included a plan to build a golf course. Eventually the golf course was built, and currently the clubhouse of the course sits approximately six feet from the mounds. Segments of the mounds have been made into paths for pedestrians.

Native people and their supporters consider the land formations to be a spiritual place needing to be respected and preserved and not to be associated with recreation. A majority of nonnative people who live in the community as well as those who own the course do not see the cultural and spiritual significance of the mounds. In other words, the dominant interpretation simply views the mounds as land to be used for commercial purposes. Needless to say, this sentiment devalues people's spiritual connections to specific places and is based on perceptions of racial and religious superiority. Moreover, this viewpoint disregards ways in which marginalized people negotiate their faith because indigenous conception of religion does not conform to dominant interpretations of what religion is and how spirituality ought to be performed.

Although only separated by a few miles, a majority of the educators in my class do not understand the significance of the mounds. For many, the area is only a land or park-like area without cultural or spiritual worth. Field experience to the mounds and talks by Native American community members on the topic has helped teachers understand the cultural/spiritual context of the land formations. And this has raised the teachers' awareness about how and why dominant society values certain places and disregards others. What factors contribute to the disrespect of marginalized people's beliefs? What can educators individually or collectively do to preserve what a community deems a sacred location? Discussion of such questions has helped teachers understand how Native people express spiritualities and the need to respect Native people's belief and values, and also the need to work for social change.

Unlearning Stereotypes about Hinduism

For many, places such as temples or mosques represent mystery, intrigue, and exoticness, and are often depicted as being downright dangerous. For example, in Hollywood films such as *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* and *The Jungle Book*, temples are presented as places of evil. In the Western belief systems, as Prasad argued, Hindu temples are often shown as being primitive and backward. ²³ Prior to the field experience to a Hindu temple, I asked teachers to list the purposes a temple may serve in a community. Just like churches and synagogues, a Hindu temple is a place where people of various ethnic and racial backgrounds come to feel part of a larger community and to worship. It is quite common to see weddings,

birthdays, or other celebrations being held at a temple to meet individual or community needs. Moreover, temples are places where people express their identities without being scrutinized by mainstream society. For this reason, it is not uncommon to see people wearing various ethnic clothes in a temple because they consider the location to be a safe area where one can express his or her identity without being perceived as different or bizarre. The temple is also a place where people of various national or ethnic backgrounds (Nepali, Indian, Filipino, etc.) and immigrants from various generations meet as a community.

When teachers visit the temple as part of the class, they express not being accustomed to seeing spirituality being associated with nonhuman beings or seeing statues as serving symbols of religious identification. For example, both inside and outside of the temple, various statues of human and nonhuman deities such as turtles, elephants, and others are present. I have asked educators to reflect and to critique their own stereotypes about Hinduism because some teachers in the past had associated Hindu communities linking their faith to statues as being a form of idolatry. Similar to Native American traditions, in Hinduism nonhuman beings serve as symbols of hope, love, and justice, thereby illustrating the interconnectedness of life on the planet between humans and nonhumans. During the visit, teachers are similarly intrigued by the idea of people praying to multiple gods because the temple has statues of several deities in a large indoor area. Another item of interest for educators in my class is the deities being men, women, and children who are light-skinned as well as dark-skinned. In Hinduism, a specific deity, whether light-skinned or dark-

skinned, whether an adult or a child, stands for a specific purpose (peace, justice, love, etc.), and people worship to a specific deity depending on their interests, needs, or desires. Educators have also noted seeing the informal ways in which people move around in the temple to perform their spiritual needs. For example, unless there is a formal ceremony, a vast majority of people express or mediate religious beliefs on their own by standing or sitting and praying in front of a deity. Overall, the experience has helped teachers understand the different ways people interpret their spirituality and the significance of a temple as a place to express spiritual beliefs and culture.

In sum, all three experiences have helped teachers critique their prior beliefs and expand on their knowledge about religious faiths. And because of the interactions, many teachers have revised their ideas about community, particularly in regard to the racial, ethnic, and religious diversity that exists in their communities. Although the field trips allowed educators to critique their knowledge about religions and religious identities, such experiences ought to be closely linked with classroom readings about religious diversity in the United States. Teachers should organize field trips, often multiple times, to temples, mosques, synagogues, and various types of churches to help their students better understand the diversity of religious beliefs in their communities. This will help young people gain more knowledge about religions and will assist them in better understanding the religious identities of their classmates or neighbors. If parents express ambivalence or show limited interest on the idea of their children taking field trips to mosques or temples, teachers can play a key role in explaining the lifelong learning

benefits such experiences provide for students. 24 Teachers should clarify that the purpose of the visits is not to convert students but to learn about histories, experiences, and cultures that are integral parts of life in the United States. Similarly, if students note hearing of a certain religious faith being a lie or false, teachers can make that conversation a learning moment and explain how stereotypes produce bias and devalue people of all races and religious backgrounds. 25

Conclusion

Similar to racial, ethnic, or linguistic prejudice, religious dimensions of prejudice are deeply hurtful. For this reason, to overcome racism and various forms of discrimination, discussions about religion and religious identities should be incorporated when discussing diversity issues. To promote discussions about religion and religious identities, educators can do the following:

- Reflect on one's own religious beliefs and practices, and examine how one's religious viewpoints may influence teaching about a specific subject area.
- Examine how one's religious perspective may influence everyday interaction with students, parents, and students' larger communities.
- Expand knowledge about various religions.
- Respect students who identify as agnostic or as atheist.
- Critically examine and change the culture of your school if it does not validate the identities of students who come from religiously underrepresented groups.
- Develop culturally relevant curriculum that validates students' religious

identities in school.

The relationship between diversity and religion is often not discussed in educational contexts. I argue that teaching about religious diversity helps reduce bias in classrooms and creates opportunities for educators to better connect with students who express nontraditional religious identities. We have an obligation as educators to help students understand cultural differences, and by learning about religious or secular beliefs, students participate in building a more respectful community.

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