University of Alberta

Post 9/11 Challenges: A Study into Conceptions of Controversy and Islam

by

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Abstract

One of the primary aims of education is assisting students in shaping their world-views through the presentation of multiple perspectives on many topics. Teachers have the responsibility to foster thought-provoking questions, insights and dialogue amongst their students. Within the context of post 9/11 education, it is rather challenging for many teachers to address controversial topics that they believe may be distastefully welcomed and invoke much discomfort amongst some students, parents and administrators. This study explores how two Religious Studies professors conceptualized controversy and the discussion of controversial topics in their religion courses. Further, notions gathered from participants were utilized to facilitate how secondary Social Studies teachers approach controversial topics, especially about religion and Islam specifically, with their students. Using a qualitative post modernist approach, participants were asked to share their perceptions of controversy and reflect on factors that perhaps influenced what they chose to address with their students.

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Chapter One

Introduction

One's teaching experiences are often shaped by interactions with pre-service teacher courses, theoretical foundations, school curricula and personal interests. Educators are influenced by particular worldviews, that both actively and subconsciously influence their behavior, the manner in which they vocalize ideas and their relationships with colleagues and students. Quite often, however, there is a tendency to undermine the role of one's subjectivity in interpreting and presenting curricula. Further, curriculum implementation often differs amongst educators. Consequently, I believe that it is important that educators reflect on how their subjectivities determine the manner in which they understand curricula and why they elucidate particular topics in the classroom while de-emphasizing or avoiding other matters. Therefore, because schools are sites of knowledge construction and identity formation, it is important for educators to deeply reflect on how their subjectivities influence the selection of content emphasized in the classroom and guide the construction of students' worldviews.

Defining Instructional Decisions:

Within the context of teaching practice, 'instructional decisions' refer to the amalgamation of teacher thought, judgment, action and behaviors that shape procedural decisions regarding the manner in which classrooms are structured, discussions are conducted, the degree to which particular topics are either avoided or addressed, assessment practices and classroom management.

Instructional Decisions and the discussion of Divisive Topics in the

Secondary Social Studies Classroom

Although there are broad factors that determine teachers' 'instructional decisions', the elucidation of divisive issues within the context of social studies and, in particular, current events illustrates the practice of specific circumstances that influence 'instructional decisions'. Regarding instructional decisions that were reached when teaching about the Gulf War and various aspects of Islam, Merry M. Merryfield (1993) provides several salient themes that arise under such circumstances. Firstly, student interest, regarding topics addressed, appear to heavily influence teachers' planned instruction. Merryfield emphasizes that teachers spend increased time on topics in which students reveal greater interest and engagement with. For this reason, students may encourage the discussion of religion, for example, even when their teacher may not be in agreement initially. Secondly, teacher choice regarding the perceived importance of particular issues in current events influences their discussion with students. Merryfield underscores that some teachers will address such events if they are not directly related to the curriculum's learning objectives. Thirdly, many teachers believe they lack the time to cover such topics with their students due to pressures to strictly adhere to curriculum outcomes.

Merryfield (1993) emphasizes that teachers avoided teaching about the Gulf War in response to "the overcrowded curricula and time pressures, concern over a lack of knowledge or materials, and a belief that mandated curricula are more important" (40). Further, the notion that following prescribed curricula is

most important to one's instructional decisions appears to limit the potential to discuss divisive issues. Fourthly, Merryfield's study revealed that many teachers felt they lacked the expertise and resources to discuss the Gulf War in depth. Further, these teachers felt uncomfortable discussing a topic in which they did not possess a thorough basic understanding of (1993). Fifthly, some teachers also suggested that they were unable to answer many of their students' questions regarding the Gulf War. Merryfield's study revealed that again, "some teachers explained that they did not know enough about the current events in the Gulf to teach about them. Some teachers noted that they did not want to take extensive class time for the students to share opinions instead of attending to mandated content." (40). Merryfield's study clearly indicates that many teachers feel pressure to focus much of their time covering curricular contents. As a result, many do not believe that it is feasible to address matters that are not directly related to mandated curriculum.

Diana E. Hess (2002), Richard J. Shavelson (1981) and Paula Stern (1981) corroborate many of the themes acquired from Merryfield's analysis. Hess et al assert that current events are largely avoided in response to teachers' perceptions of what current events are and what the most important and relevant events to cover are, concerns that classroom management will be affected by discussions of divisive topics, perceptions that instructional time is best spent on attaining standardized outcomes, teachers' fear of creating controversy, underlying attitudes of one's school environment, lack of pedagogical confidence and due to the challenges of carrying out discussions that showcase 'troubling

knowledge'(1981, 2002). As well, Hess emphasizes that certain current events issues are blatantly avoided due to the community in which one's school is located (2002).

Hess's study revealed that some teacher feared discussing gay rights in their classrooms because their schools were situated in rather conservative communities and would have disapproved of such conversations (2002). Gay rights were also avoided in some classrooms due to concern that certain students would be unable to discuss such issues with sensitivity and as a result offend gay students in the classroom (Hess, 2002). One can infer from Merryfield (1993) Hess (2002), Shavelson (1981) and Stern's (1981) analyses that many topics related to current events are avoided in response to the production of fear from various factors. Chapter four of this thesis, 'Interviews and Analysis', under the findings 'blatant avoidance of specific controversial issues', will illustrate how one Religious Studies professor refrains from discussing homosexuality in his Islamic Studies classes because he is concerned that many Muslim students will disagree with such discussions.

Why Should Teachers Address Religion and Islam Specifically in their Social Studies Classrooms?

The growing tendency for numerous nations to conflate religion and politics and the local and international media portrayals of such occurrences underscores the need for Edmonton schools to teach about world religions. Teaching about religion requires a critical examination of numerous faith traditions including their unique religious practices, commonalities and historical

development. Further, teaching about religion requires incorporating the voices of numerous scholars who are dedicated to the field. In response to rising Islamophobia in Western nations, and due to the media's authoritative and influential presence as an outlet that shapes numerous individuals' worldviews, it is imperative that secondary school educators utilize the current Social Studies Program of Studies as a means to work towards achieving greater social equity. Because it is rather easy to reinforce negative and often distorted images of particular groups of individuals via various media outlets, educators should embrace teaching 'troubling knowledge' as a means to challenge the status quo. Chapter two of this thesis, 'Literature Reviewed', explains why it is important to teach about faith traditions and their related media portrayals under the findings 'post 9/11 incidents of Islamophobia in Toronto Schools'.

Defining Key Terms

Before moving further into this study, it is necessary to define my key terms. I have selected 'comforting knowledge', 'troubling knowledge' and 'social stocks of knowledge' as terms that best describe teachers' knowledge constructs that shape their instructional decisions with regards to teaching about controversial topics.

The manner in which educators conceptualize knowledge and contemplate the limitations and political ramifications of their knowledge quite obviously determines the degree to which marginalized matters are explored in the classroom. There is often a sense that merely bombarding youth with increased knowledge is an effective means to correct misconceptions regarding various

forms of oppression. While it is important to teach topics outlined in one's program of study, it is also necessary to ensure that learning is not limited to this domain. Borrowing from Kumashiro (2004) I refer to 'comforting knowledge' as that which reflects and relies on predetermined outcomes and reaffirms commonsensical understandings. Kumashiro (2004) underscores that 'comforting knowledge' subconsciously reflects a repetition of familiar practices and understandings and avoids disruptions of any kind.

The desire to reaffirm what is already known creates a façade that suggests that what is taught is both desirable and reflects good teaching. 'Comforting knowledge' illustrates its concern with maintaining order through suggesting that it is possible to attain mastery of particular knowledge. Emphasizing mastery of knowledge builds a sense of comfort and safety for both teachers and learners; once learning outcomes are attained, teachers will perceive themselves as 'good' and many youth will likely feel a sense of finality regarding their knowledge acquisition.

In contrast to comforting knowledge, 'troubling knowledge' describes knowledge that is disruptive, discomforting and problematizing (Kumashiro, 2004). Within this context, one's goal is to complicate knowledge by "simultaneously us[ing] knowledge to see what different insights, identities, practices, and changes it makes possible while critically examining the knowledge (and how it came to be known) to see what insights and the like it closes off" (Kumashiro, 2004, p. 9). Further, with 'troubling knowledge' individuals deconstruct the ways in which their knowledge and subjectivity both results and

contributes to the social structuring of advantage and disadvantage. Consequently, the goal of 'troubling knowledge' is to study various uses and the consequences of different bodies of knowledge and to apply this study to the exploration of anti-oppressive pursuits.

Social Stocks of Knowledge: Is the way in which we think often oppressive?

The manner in which some individuals perceive and approach learning is often oppressive. Mainstream socialization often dictates what forms of knowledge are important to teach and what behaviors and values are deemed worthy and good. Schools are often sites where mainstream views are passed as the norm. Schools thus set in place particular expectations of how a model Canadian student ought to behave and perceive. Encouraging mainstream values appears to reinforce the ideas that students enter schools as 'blank slates', which cannot be the case:

> [t]he student could not have entered school as a blank slate. The student entered school filled with knowledge that the student already learned from the family, the community, the media, and life experiences, including prior schooling. The student might have learned that people who lived "over there" were dirty and people who looked "like that" could not be trusted, or that some activities were appropriate for girls and others were appropriate for boys, or that certain beliefs, values, and feelings were proper or natural" (Kumashiro, 2004, p. 25).

For Kumashiro, all students arrive at school with their social stocks of knowledge or preconceived ideas.

These social stocks of knowledge are a culmination of one's upbringing, personal experiences, interactions, worldviews, heritage, values, beliefs and exposure or lack of exposure to particular ideas and peoples. Regarding the

construction of social stocks of knowledge, one's use of language determines the finality apparent in one's perception of his or her reality. Uncritically reflecting on language's role in shaping one's perceptions and reality often produces fixed ideas. These fixed ideas have helped students make sense of themselves and the world around them (Kumashiro, 2004). Kumashiro (2004) underscores that "[t]he student already learned things that helped the student to feel comfortable with what got repeated in daily life, and thus already learned to feel comfortable with uncritical assumptions that supported the status quo"(25). As a result, it is imperative that teachers' instructional practices allocate much time for helping students recognize the role of social stocks of knowledge in perpetuating particular forms of oppression. Chapter four of this thesis, Interviews and Analysis' under the findings 'popular images and the creation of final ideas' will explore how educators can address assumptions with their students.

Coming to the Question: Implications on the Local Level:

According to a poll conducted by Leger Marketing in September 2010, fifty-five percent of Canadians do not believe that Muslims share Canadian values (Thompson, 2010). The poll also revealed that 57.9% of Albertans believe Muslims residing in Canada do not share Canadian values (Thompson, 2010). Such statistics are indicative of increasing Islamophobic sentiments following the tragic events of September 11, 2001. One can infer from Leger Marketing's poll that many Albertans view Muslims within an extremely narrow lens. As a result, it is not overly assumptive to gather that these perceptions may both subconsciously and consciously surface in schools.

The Question:

What factors inform teachers' instructional decisions regarding the teaching of potentially controversial topics, especially about religion in general and the contemporary racialization of Islam and Muslims specifically?

Teachers are largely responsible for shaping students' values and perceptions of numerous matters. Since one of the goals of social studies is to produce thoughtful and empathetic individuals who practice responsible citizenship and respect and value Canada's diversity, it is imperative that teachers teach about religion in the classroom. Further, religion is integral to the identities of many students and significantly informs students' worldviews, value systems, understandings and interactions with others. For this reason, it is important to examine how fears of pedagogical inadequacy and pressures to meet the requirements of standardized curricula influence teachers' likelihood of teaching about religion in general and Islam in their classrooms.

Currently, there is an absence of systems and structures in place in Edmonton Public Schools that can adequately address and combat the perpetuation of racisms such as Islamophobia. As a result, I am exceedingly interested in the data gathered from participant- Religious Studies professors and look forward to demonstrating how their experiences and insights can help secondary school teachers create frameworks and opportunities within the secondary social studies curricula to address rising levels of Islamophobia.

This research question and surrounding review of literature provides the opportunity to acquire insight into factors that elicit fear, anxiety and discomfort for teachers regarding their pedagogical choices about addressing divisive issues such as religion and politics in their classrooms.

The study reveals insight from two university Religious Studies professors. Each professor participated in an hour long, semi-structured, one-on-one interview during the first two weeks of May 2011. The insights and reflections they shared conveys an amalgamation of their perceptions of the importance of addressing contentious matters in a post 9/11 global climate and how their pedagogies have also been impacted by fears of student resistance.

Locating Space for this Study:

Much literature produced within a post 9/11 context highlights the need to teach about Islam and political events associated with Islam in order to challenge and reduce the presence of neo-Orientalism[1]. Failure to address such matters in the secondary classroom will inevitably reinforce particular social stocks of knowledge. Literature currently reviewed suggests that the majority of Canadian educators are willing to address the intersection of faith and politics in the classroom and events such as 9/11, but fear receiving unfavorable responses from school administrators and parents. Moreover, the majority of educators interviewed in the reviewed literature fear that addressing 'troubling knowledge' in their classrooms will invite disapproval from parents and perhaps threaten their job security.

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[1] Neo-Orientalism refers to the shaping of Orientalism, or, the West and Islam's dualism within the context of increased globalization (Mohammad, 2010)

In response to these fears, scholars suggest the application of particular intellectual tools that are less likely to generate controversy. For example, the introduction of 'anti-Islamophobia workshops' in one's classroom and the teaching of 'multiplicity' in regards to teaching about world religions, will likely teach students to reflect on how unchallenged assumptions can often produce damaging consequences.

Situating Myself in the Study:

My reasons for undertaking this exploration are largely shaped and guided by experiences with anti-Islamic and anti-Muslim sentiment growing up in Edmonton prior to and following the tragic events of September 11, 2001. One particular incident that took place when I was in grade five has remained with me until the present. During a Social Studies lesson on the crusades, Muslims were depicted in a rather negative and unfavorable manner. Immediately following the lesson, a student stated that I was bad because I was Muslim. The teacher heard this comment but chose to ignore it. I was disappointed that my teacher did not address the situation. Following that incident, I felt rather guarded while in class.

While in junior high I experienced Islam's racialization. Many peers assumed that I was Arab simply because I was Muslim, although only thirteen percent of all Muslims are Arab. Other South Asian students who were not Muslim were shocked to find out that I could speak and understand Urdu and Hindi because they assumed that I would only be able to speak Arabic since I was Muslim. In June 2006 on transit to New York City, I experienced a critical incident that has greatly reshaped my view of Canada as an equitable society.

During immigration procedures in Vancouver International Airport I was summoned for extra questioning due to the two Pakistani visas that were in my passport. I emphasized that I had visited Pakistan to visit my sick grandmother in 2001 and 2003, but those explanations were ignored. The immigration official accused me of hiding my identity. She was referring to an obvious mark on my nose that had been imprinted from wearing a nose ring for many years. The official accused me of removing my nose ring as an attempt to hide my 'identity'. This incident left me feeling rather invalidated, disgusted and more aware of Islam's increasing racialization following 9/11.

In response to my experiences and hearing and reading the stories of others who experienced similar circumstances, I am convinced that it is necessary for secular secondary schools in Edmonton to teach about religion within the context of Social Studies classes. Due to the increasing ethno-racial, linguistic and religious plurality in our classrooms and in response to frequent media representations of religion, it is imperative that youth are educated about religion.

I am cognizant of the fact that my experiences with being racialized as a Muslim woman and a visible minority plays a profound role in influencing the scope of my study, the questions asked of participant-Religious Studies professors and the manner in which I will approach the analysis and coding of my data. I am also aware that my belief that it is an ethical responsibility as a teacher to expose our students to troubling perspectives, regardless of the how disconcerting these perspectives may be, largely has guided the development and my commitment to this study.

In response to Alberta's increasingly ethno-racial and religious diversity, it is imperative that public education policy makers, administrative bodies, parents, teachers and students take seriously the relevance of teaching about religion via social studies classes. It is both unsurprising and expected that some teachers will rather avoid teaching about religion because it elicits numerous challenges and requires that teachers are willing to take risks and delve into unfamiliar territory that will inevitably produce emotional and passionate responses.

There are clearly many complexities and factors to consider when formulating ways in which teachers can teach about religion in their classrooms in a thoughtful manner. I sincerely feel that the greatest obstacle teachers will face if they choose to teach about religion in their classrooms is to overcome very legitimate fears, including thoughts of how teaching about divisive topics may impact their job stability, their interactions and relations with some colleagues and students and fulfilling the numerous obligations that all teachers have within a limited time period. Help is required however: Policies that support teaching about religion within the context of mandated curricula, development of necessary resources and training to teach about religion and a shared commitment for teaching 'troubling knowledge'. With such support, teachers will likely find it less burdensome and daunting to address religion with their students. Further, if we desire as educators to prepare our students for living in post-modern world, a world of uncertainty and instability, it is absolutely necessary to teach about matters that illustrate circumstances in which disharmony and tenuous global relations are produced.

Chapter 2

Reviewing the Literature

Contrasting Perceptions of Controversy and Controversial Topics

The amount of literature elucidating social studies teachers' willingness to approach controversial topics with their students is quite vast. Much of the literature related to controversial topics, however, does not specifically address factors that influence teachers' perceptions with regards to teaching about world religions. Available literature pertaining to teachers' perceptions regarding teaching about Islam is even scarcer. Within the context of secondary education, notions of controversy are rather vague in relation to how teachers can best approach controversy with their students given the constraints of standardized curricula and limited time and mixed messages from administrators who suggest that teaching about controversy is important, but that discussing such matters should reflect 'neutrality' and 'safe' stances that do not evoke emotional responses. Because 'controversy' and 'controversial topics' are defined in a vague manner, there is much ambiguity with regards to how controversy ought to be approached in relation to public education policy and the Alberta Learning Program of Studies. This vagueness appears to be in response to individualized perceptions of what controversy implies and how it ought to be approached or avoided with students.

<u>Theoretical Foundations helpful in Elucidating Controversial Topics</u>

What is Anti-Racist Education?

In order to better understand the perpetuation of racisms and specifically, the process of racialization, anti-racist education offers individuals the ability to identify rigid power structures that are beneficial to some while disadvantageous to many. Anti-racist education aims to identify the ways in which racism legitimizes and functions to reproduce injustices and establishes inequitable power relations amongst various groups of individuals (Troyna, 1987). Most significantly, anti-racist education ensures that race and racism are not excluded from discourses that elucidate social, historical and political processes that have established unequal power relations (Troyna. 1987). Due to its emphasis of race as socially and historically constructed, anti-racist education provides a sound framework in which the development of racisms can be understood as contextual. Understanding Islamophobia's genesis as a neologism perpetuated by the crusades is feasible in an ideology that recognizes how racisms are deeply embedded in particular discourses and institutions.

How is Islam becoming an Increasingly Racialized Faith?

Central to identifying how Islam is increasingly racialized, especially following 9/11, is firstly analyzing the role of master narratives that attempt to justify unjust perceptions and conduct towards Islam and Muslims. Giroux (1992) emphasizes that one must deeply understand how the academic canon serves to entrench specific cultural and political voices. Giroux (1992) asserts:

> "[a]dding particular texts or authors to the canon is not the same as
> analyzing how the structure of the canon in both form and content

> promotes rather than displaces the effects of the colonial gaze. What is essential here is raising questions regarding how the canon emerged as part of a larger crisis in European history to secure how dominant and oppositional histories are written, produced and legitimized within the logic of colonization, privilege, and resistance" (14)

Giroux's assertion reminds one that it is not only important, but also necessary to reflect on the language in which particular histories are constructed and to contemplate what information is perhaps missing from these narratives. Further, anti-racist education encourages both educators and students to engage texts in a manner that explicitly deconstructs its content and eventually problematizes the ideas presented.

How can Anti-Racist Education assist Controversial Topics Discussions?

Anti-racist education underscores that it is first essential to identify how individuals' social positioning influences their readings of texts, interactions, interpretations of events and engagement with particular experiences. Individuals will be better equipped to reflect on how their subjectivities often marginalize others through indentifying their social positionings. Such reflection will likely help both teachers and students to understand why particular individuals are absent from master narratives. Such contemplation should help one to identify what potential intellectual tools are needed to silence specific voices in the context of master narratives (Giroux, 1992). Once teachers and students identify how and why master narratives are often accepted as legitimate and complete texts, they will experience greater ease with engaging in a continual process of questioning their assumptions. Thus, anti-racist education fundamentally helps both teachers and students to come to terms with their social positioning and

recognize how worldviews at times simultaneously benefit themselves while severely disadvantaging others.

In addition to problematizing grand narratives of history is transcending the stories of silenced 'Others'. Transcending silenced stories requires that teachers help students to recognize how Western knowledge is entrenched in particular institutions that emphasize specific perceptions and individuals, while blatantly excluding other voices. Giroux (1992) asserts it is imperative that educators convey:

> "how Western knowledge is encased in historical and institutional structures that both privilege and exclude particular readings, specific voices, certain aesthetics, forms of authority, specific representations, and forms of sociality" (20).

Once students realize the extent to which particular forms of knowledge are embedded they are better equipped to critically analyze and reflect on their interaction with various texts. Recognizing that specific perspectives become institutionally embedded overtime will help students question media representations that are often guilty of providing surface level explanations to complex matters.

In order to help students recognize how Western knowledge is institutionalized, teachers must provide students with opportunities to analyze how they understand themselves in relation to the texts that they are reading. Teachers will need to develop pedagogical practices that not only help students to address texts containing preconceived notions of certain cultural identities, but also provide texts that drastically contrast each other and consequently invite opportunities for resistance and support (Giroux, 1992). Through interacting with

contradictory texts students will realize how one's values and stores of knowledge are constantly in flux. Students will perhaps also realize that it is impossible to attain definite answers to questions and abandon the notion that knowledge is finite. One can infer that if students forgo notions that imply definite boundaries, they will more likely question the validity of texts that produce rigid and fixed assumptions about particular ideologies and individuals.

The Consequences of Educators' Pedagogical Practices

To ensure that the potential fruits of anti-racist pedagogy are attained, it is imperative that teachers reflect on how their pedagogical practices at times perhaps disadvantage their students. Giroux (1992) emphasizes that "teachers are often silenced through a refusal or inability to problematize for students the values that inform how they teach and engage the multifaceted relationship between knowledge and power" (31). Consequently, it is important that teachers contemplate what factors inform their pedagogical practices and share with their students how their values significantly influence their pedagogies. Most importantly, teachers should aim to determine whether or not their pedagogies are saturated with the desire to attain a learning environment of certainty and extreme control (Giroux, 1992). Fixation with attaining a controlled environment is not only an unattainable feat, but will also inevitably suppress the sharing of important ideas and questions. Moreover, dominant pedagogy's desire for stringent control through the production of fixed ideas and expectations is inappropriate regarding the study of racialization and the perpetuation of Islamophobia. Consequently, dominant pedagogy will likely undermine the fact

that race is relational and Islamophobia evolves in its magnitude according to the current socio-political context due to its infatuation with finitude.

Encountering Resistance from Students

Besides reflecting on how teachers' pedagogy may negatively impact their students, is accepting that many students will resist the challenges and questions that anti-racist education produces. In lessons that ask difficult questions such as whether or not Islam is inherently a violent faith, teachers will undeniably receive strong emotional responses from many students. For this reason, teachers must realize that it is impossible to avoid conflict in the classroom. If teachers are adamant to play it safe in their classrooms and rely on the dissemination of 'comforting knowledge', students will likely not experience truth processes. Wagner (2005) underscores:

> "rather than fearing expressions of such strong emotions, we must anticipate anger, resistance, conflict and fear, affirming, rather than denying these realities for our students. In this way, teachers may avoid one of the most damaging outcomes that I have repeatedly witnessed- the adamant avoidance of conflict. Such practices circumvent discussions just at the point that real learning is potentially about to take place. The desire to facilitate a polite settled class, in such instances, takes precedence over deep, potentially unsettling learning" (263).

Wagner's (2005) assertion conveys that avoiding conflict reduces the presence of learning opportunities. Teachers should openly address fear to ensure that their students are well-equipped to address their fears. Stating initially that particular topics will create feelings of discomfort and strong emotions may arise, will help students prepare for coping with potentially challenging insights that question their most deeply held values and assumptions.

Fear and the Recognition of Islamophobia Through the Application of Anti-

Racist Education

It is important that teachers emphasize how fear is responsible for producing much social inequity and ideologies that quite often villainize specific individuals. Students must realize how fear functions in a manner that perpetuates contempt for the unknown, resentment and hatred for the so-called 'Other'. Through understanding the cyclical production of fear and its implications, students will better understand how racisms, including Islamophobia are utilized to legitimate social inequities (Wagner, 2005). The notion that racisms are often used to justify inequities towards specific groups can be applied to understanding Islamophobia's rise in Western nations. Wagner (2005) suggests:

> "racism also provides a means of legitimating those social inequities deemed problematic but unavoidable. Not only can racist assumptions and arguments supply handy explanations of poverty or for school failure, but they can be used to explain away such phenomena as misogyny and urban violence" (13).

Wagner's explanation can be applied to Islamophobia because racist assumptions produced in response to binaries such as 'East' and 'West' and catch-all phrases including the 'clash of civilizations' make it easy for many individuals to arrive at final ideas. As well, in an attempt to understand how fear perpetuates, it is important that teachers help their students realize the extent to which language both positively and negatively informs one's perceptions of others. Thus, teachers must encourage their students to reflect on how language is deliberately selected or avoided as a means to propagate specific images and orientations towards others.

Criticisms of Anti-Racist Education:

Though anti-racist education is regarded as reliable pedagogy, it is also heavily criticized. Firstly, many critics suggest that anti-racist education is purely propagandist in nature. This view regards anti-racist education's discontent with Eurocentric notions and Western canons of knowledge as equivalent to anti-male, anti-straight and anti-white sentiments (Thompson, 1997). These criticisms indicate discomfort with questioning dominant ideologies. Branding anti-racist education as propagandist simply because it challenges the status quo is inaccurate since challenging particular discourses does not produce such implications. Secondly, anti-racist education is quite often accused of reinforcing the status quo in a similar manner to traditional liberal education (Thompson, 1997). This view suggests that anti-racist education may exacerbate or alter discrepancies that racism produces for the construction of knowledge (Thompson, 1997). Such a view underscores that anti-racist education is unnecessarily fixated on 'race' as the ultimate creator of preconceived notions. Most significantly, critics disagree with anti-racist education's focus on race and racialization and believe that this focus forsakes the security and goodwill of the collective over that of the individual. Consequently, emphasizing the collective over the individual ensures that attaining a colour- blind society is not only possible, but also necessary (Thompson, 1997). Such a criticism is inadequate as it does not explain how focusing on the collective quite often undermines the equity and voices of many individuals. Thirdly, the use of 'anti' in anti-racist education is regarded as producing a negative approach towards social justice pedagogy. The

seemingly negative connotations that anti-racist education produces is associated with identifying what is wrong with education, rather than focusing on what is good. This criticism perhaps fails to take into consideration that education is neither all good nor all bad. Stating problems that ought to be resolved does not necessarily imply a lack of appreciation for systems in place that award greater opportunities for all. Thirdly, anti-racist education is also associated with placing politics first and thus answers beforehand the questions that education ought to help one ponder (Thompson, 1997). Such interpretations suggest that anti-racist education limits individuals' autonomy to question, inquire and reflect on particular matters. This criticism is rather baseless because it is nonsensical to suggest that the framing of particular questions that education ought to answer in advance impinges on individuals' ability to reflect for themselves. Moreover, such a view contrasts anti-racist education's commitment to post-modernist notions of deconstructing ideas, questioning and re-questioning. Fourthly, proponents of anti-racist education are regarded as offering rather vague and overly-ambitious strategies regarding school improvement (Troyna, 1987). Anti-racist education critics underscore that many policymakers were often susceptible to poor understandings of the nature of racisms and the term 'institutional racism' was applied as an umbrella term to describe the reasons underlying a school's experiences with racism (Troyna, 1987). This criticism is perhaps valid in circumstances where schools do not transcend the label of 'institutional racism' and fail to take the initiative to understand the complexities and patterns that perpetuate racialization. Lastly, anti-racist education is accused of lacking a

standardized framework (Troyna, 1987). One can infer that this criticism ignores anti-racist education's post-modernist orientation. It is impossible to expect that predetermined strategies will adequately address the presence of racisms in unique contexts and environments. Therefore, commonly held criticisms of anti-racist education are shallow in nature and do not undermine the ideological credibility of its pedagogy.

What is Multicultural Education?

Unlike anti-racist education, multicultural education conveys the need to expand the academy's canon through including marginalized voices and emphasizing the notion of a common culture while simultaneously embracing cultural differences. Although multiculturalism challenges conservatives' essentializing views, the views espoused by multiculturalism often reflect the discourses that advantage the dominant groups. Within the context of the academic canon, Giroux (1992) suggests:

> "the academic canon fails to question how the very concept of the canon serves to secure particular forms of cultural and political authority. Adding particular texts or authors to the canon is not the same as analyzing how the structure of the canon in both form and content promotes rather than displaces the effects of the colonial gaze" (14).

Giroux's assertion emphasizes that merely adding to the academic canon is insufficient. Multiculturalism does not promote the importance of analyzing how the academic canon emerged in order to secure and legitimize dominant histories post-enlightenment. Further, multiculturalism ignores how power hierarchies, political strife and cultural identity often are embedded in numerous texts, contexts and structures (Giroux, 1992). Failure to address power hierarchies and

political struggles that are entrenched in structures limits possibilities to question the universality associated with 'Whiteness' as a racial category that enforces its domination through presenting itself as invisible (Giroux, 1992). As a result, multicultural approaches to education often call for the process of assimilation and call for the correction of negative portrayals of visible minorities (Giroux, 1992). Simply replacing negative images of visible minorities with positive images is not only troublesome, but is also dangerous because it does not address the reasons and processes underlying the genesis of negative images. Consequently, multiculturalism's focus on the collective reinforces the invisibility of 'Whiteness' and thus undermines political and historical constructions of racisms.

Because multiculturalism does not call into question the invisibility of 'whiteness', it inevitably does not showcase how colonialism continues to privilege some, while disadvantaging many individuals. Failure to deconstruct how particular discourses have become purposefully entrenched due to colonialism will ensure that harmful binaries remain intact. For example, unquestioning attitudes towards Orientalist assumptions and narratives that depict Muslims and Arabs as infantile, intellectually inferior, morally depraved and culturally backward, will help to perpetuate the 'West' as superior and the "East' as subordinate.

Multicultural Education and the Perpetuation of Colour Blindness

Through the failure to acknowledge the invisibility of 'whiteness', multicultural education reinforces racial privilege and promotes colour- blindness. Racial privilege and colour -blindness are often cemented in schools during the events that 'celebrate diversity' and master narratives (Schick & St. Denis, 2005). Diversity events that solely showcase the food, dress and cultural dances of various cultures only function to romanticize and objectify cultures that one is perhaps unfamiliar with. Repetition of events that supposedly celebrate diversity inevitably reinforce the effects of colonization because these events do not acknowledge the presence of racism and racial privilege (Schick & St. Denis, 2005). Thus, teachers must carefully reflect on how particular school practices and events indirectly continue to racialize particular groups.

Reliance on multicultural education also serves to reinforce the indoctrinating power of the hidden curriculum on its teachers and students. It is imperative that teachers reflect on how curriculum produces racial identifications because schools are sites where identities are created and reshaped (Schick & St. Denis, 2005). Schick and St. Denis (2005) assert:

> "[t]o varying degrees, students and teachers learn to dis/identify with the history, images, and language of schooling. These discourses inform them of the extent to which they do or do not belong in this particular public institution" (297/298).

Consequently, it is imperative that teachers continually reflect upon the extent to which their school curricula may reflect Eurocentric, Western and White interests. Further, both pre-service and practicing teachers should thoroughly understand how their racial positioning impacts their students. Through scrutinizing their

racial positioning, teachers will be better equipped to help their students understand that addressing racism not only requires addressing racism regarding those who experience racism, but also examining how racisms impact those who perpetuate it (Schick & St. Denis, 2005). Further, if racism is not approached in a way that addresses the involvement of all individuals it will be rather difficult to reduce its presence.

<u>Racialization as the new Orientalism</u>

Defining Racialization

Racialization is the process by which "ethnic and group boundaries are defined in terms of race, understood as colour or biological difference**"** (Murji & Solomos, 2005, p. 2). Murji and Solomos'(2005) underscore that racialization can be applied to entire institutions "such as the police, educational or legal systems, or entire religions, nations, and countries such as the idea of the racialization of Islam, or of America…" (1). Although the term 'racialization' at times lacks clarity, it is useful when describing processes by which meanings are attached to specific issues. For example, the description of men accused of designing a plot to bomb various buildings near the CN tower in Toronto in 2006 as 'brown', also racializes Muslims by suggesting that all Muslims are either 'Arab' or 'South Asian', when in reality Muslims are an ethno-culturally diverse group of individuals.

Integral to conceptualizing racialization is understanding the distinction between practical racialization and ideological racialization. Practical racialization refers to "changes in the real world, in conscious or non-conscious social behavior

and physical and cultural characteristics" (Murji & Solomos, 2005, p. 17), whereas ideological racialization reflects "changes in the symbolic world in the way human beings choose to account for what they perceive and how they act" (Murji & Solomos, 2005, p. 17). For example, the local and international media's description of acts of terrorism committed by Muslims as "Islamic terrorism" clearly illustrates the process of racialization. Consequently, terms such as "Islamic terrorism" racialize Islam because they suggest that Islam is an inherently violent faith. The concepts of practical and ideological racialization are useful to reveal how many people subconsciously racialize and fail to reflect on how their own knowledge constructs essentialize particular individuals to surface characteristics of groups who are themselves reduced to stereotypes.

Important to understanding how many individuals learn to racialize is recognizing that race and religion have become increasingly conflated terms. Joshi (2006) asserts that North America, through multiple forms of cultural production (textbooks, movies, museums etc), has created a society where Christianity and 'Whiteness' are intimately connected which often produces standards against other religions and races (p. 2). Consequently, individuals who are not coded as 'White' and are not Christian are at times racially and theologically invalidated and devalued (Joshi, 2006). Joshi asserts that social injustices associated with the racialization of religion are often ignored because of the permeable boundaries between ethnicity and religion. Joshi (2006) suggests that the combination of phenotypical similarities that exist between South Asians and Arabs and the dominance of Orientalism as an embedded discourse that

continues to vilify the presumed 'other' results in a monolithic portrayal of Islam and its adherents. Because terms such as 'Islamic terrorist' and 'Islamic extremist' are heavily used in television, radio and Internet news stories, it is unsurprising that numerous individuals view Islam disapprovingly. This inevitably results in Islam's racialization and at times, other faiths such as Sikhism and Hinduism due to phenotypical similarities amongst adherents from these religious traditions.

The Currency of Islamophobia Post 9/11

Defining Islamophobia and Its History

Although the term 'Islamophobia' became popularized following September 11, 2001, notions that characterize Islamophobia were prevalent even prior to the coinage of the term. Islamophobia refers to "a fear or hatred of Islam and its adherents that translates into individuals, ideological, and systematic forms of oppression and discrimination" (Zine, 2003, p. 2). According to the Runnymede Trust[2] Islamophobia corresponds to xenophobia since the term indicates a distaste for anything that is 'foreign' (Abbas, 2004). Islamophobia is best understood through the identification of several prominent features. Firstly, Islam and its adherents are regarded as monolithic in nature (Abbas, 2004). Secondly, Muslim cultures drastically contrast other cultures (Abbas, 2004). Thirdly, Islam is regarded as an inherently hostile and threatening faith (Abbas, 2004). Fourthly, all Muslims use Islam as a tool to further their political and military interests (Abbas, 2004). Lastly, Islamophobia is regarded as innate and

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[2] Runnymede Trust: Intelligence for a multi-ethnic Britain: Leading UK race equality think tank. Intelligence is generated through conducting research, fostering networks and facilitating debates (http://www.runnymedetrust.org/about.html).

uncomplicated (Abbas, 2004). These primary themes indicate that Islamophobia results in response to fixed and unchallenged perceptions of Islam and Muslims that inevitably perpetuate fear, mistrust, hate and eventual violence.

Islamophobia's genesis prior to 9/11 is undeniably rooted in Orientalism's institutionalization as a prominent mode of scholarly thought globally. Orientalism "refers to many scholarly, artistic, and literary works which focus on that part of the world understood to be "the Orient" (Hamdon, 2010, p. 29). Edward Said (1979) asserts that "neither the term Orient nor the concept of the West has any ontological stability (xvii). Consequently, the terms 'East' and 'West' are categories that individuals have mentally constructed in order to make sense of the perceived 'Other' (Said, 1979). In response to the creation of this binary, the "Orient comes to be known by the scholar of Orientalism and, by extension, the peoples of "the Orient"; the West comes to know the Orient and Orientals through the Orientalist's idea about it" (Said, 1979, p. 6). Such understandings are troubling because they invalidate and nearly erase the realities of 'the Oriental' (Said, 1979).

Within the context of contemporary perceptions of Islam and Muslims, Orientalism serves to conflate contrasting, ethnic, geographic, religious and linguistic groups into a singular entity. The conflation of such diverse groups results in perceiving Muslims as a homogenous group, lacking difference and the capacity to alter over time (Said, 1979). As a result, Muslims become essentialized through this process. Most significantly, the embeddedness of Orientalism as an ideology via many years of scholarship has resulted in

establishing the framework upon which 'the Orient's' relationship with 'the West' has been created (Said, 1979). In order to understand Islam and Muslims, one must rely on the prevalence of Western scholarship. Therefore, it is not overly assumptive to suggest that the essentialist frameworks established via the dominance of Orientalist discourse over centuries is made evident in rising Islamophobia in numerous Western nations and Islam's racialization.

Largely in response to Orientalist discourse, contact between European nations and Muslim territories have resulted in imbalanced and strained relationships. These continued strained relationships are also in response to the historical competition between Christianity and Islam. Amber Haque (2004) asserts :

> [t]he rapid growth of Islam as a religion and creed became a major threat to the Christian West early in Islam's history. Following Muhammad's death in 632, Islam established itself in many Christian lands including Syria, Palestine, Egypt, Armenia, Cyprus and even Spain. From that time onwards, Islam came to be viewed as the religion of fire and sword. What constituted a threat to the West in earlier times is still viewed by many as the case today-theological, political, and cultural differences get in the way of the 'civilised' Christian- West (7).

Due to this historical conflict, one reinforced through a scholarly imaginary, many non-Muslims regard Islam as a religion characterized by violent creeds and unethical political pursuits.

Islamophobia in Canadian Schools: Case Studies of Toronto Secondary Schools

Jasmin Zine (2001) underscores that anti-Islamic sentiment in many Toronto secondary public schools existed even prior to 9/11. Her ethnographic study of two high schools in Toronto and narratives of 8 students and 5 parents reveal how religious identification is undeniably related to markers of oppression including race and gender (Zine, 2001).   Zine (2001) reveals how some teachers' and students' responses to particular "sets of postulates and images about Islam lead to specific, discriminating institutional and social practices that inform the experiences of Muslim students in the educational system" (409). According to Zine, such discrimination is perpetuated in response to stereotypes of particular colonial eras. An example of such discrimination is equating the hijab with intellectual inferiority and limited liberty. A student, Amal, commented that many of her teachers were simply unfamiliar with the purpose of the hijab and that their ignorance resulted in perceptions of discrimination towards certain Muslim students. Amal asserts:

> With public school in elementary, I found that a lot of teachers were just very ignorant. It wasn't outright discrimination but you'd get remarks like, 'Oh, do you have some of kind of head injury? Or are you bald? 'Do you have some kind of disease? (412).

These narratives indicate that negative perceptions associated with the hijab coupled with narrow understandings of the purpose of hijab at times results in unfavorable images of Islam and Muslims. Thus, negative perceptions regarding Islam and Muslims were also present prior to 9/11.

Post 9/11 incidents of Islamophobia in Toronto Schools

In addition to some teachers' unfavorable perceptions of female students wearing hijab prior to 9/11, Zine (2003) reveals that schools, parents and students in local Toronto schools reported frequent incidents of Islamophobia following 9/11. One parent asserted that her "son, whose name is "Usama", was routinely referred to as "Bin Laden" at school, and was called a "terrorist" and told that his house should be blown up" (112). Many female students wearing hijabs had stones thrown at them while walking to and from school (Zine, 2003).

The association of the hijab with patriarchal and social difference is largely in response to the resurgence of neo-Orientalist constructions regarding veiling and Muslim women. Zine (2001) underscores that Muslim women are negatively essentialized in response to Orientalist representations of the veil. As a result, the veil has become synonymous with oppression, undermining the various interpretations in Islam that suggest wearing the Hijab is an act of free will and modesty (Zine, 2006). Zine's (2006) study of female high school students who wear hijab indicates that the hijab was treated as a marker of foreignness and thus, a signifier of non-Canadian values. Perceptions of foreignness coupled with negative Orientalist portrayals that Muslim women are oppressed at home and that Islam undermines education for women, were often communicated via the hidden curriculum through obvious low teacher expectations, academic streaming of Muslim women, notions that Muslim women that wear the hijab are rather timid and soft-spoken and perceptions that wearing the hijab places particular women on the periphery of conceptions of 'Canadian Culture and Values' (Zine, 2006).

Thus, many young Muslim women reported that they felt othered by some of their teachers in response to wearing hijab.

'Hijabophobia' in Canada

Important to understanding how negative essentialist portrayals of Islam and Muslims become part of the hidden curriculum and some teachers' social stocks of knowledge is identifying the Canadian media's role in perpetuating stories and images that often silence narratives of Muslims. Zine (2006) elucidates 'hijabophobia' as a prominent marker in perpetuating anti-Muslim sentiments and the eventual racialization of Muslims, especially Muslim women.

According to Zine (2006), hijabophobia occurs when the "hijab [is] viewed as an assault on dominant civic values of female liberty and a denial of the dominant national identity" (240). Hijabophobia was evident during "L'affair du foulard"[3] or "the affair of the scarf" and Emilie Ouimet's case which both took place in Quebec. These incidents clearly indicate that the hijab is often portrayed as a threat towards social cohesion and the maintenance of particular civic values. It is not overly assumptive to suggest that such portrayals in media stories quite often become part of many Canadians' social stocks of knowledge if approached uncritically.

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[3] L'affair du foulard refers to an incident which took place in Quebec in 1989. Three Muslim adolescent girls were prohibited from entering public school because they defied a 1937 French law that prohibits wearing 'conspicuous religious symbols' in government schools. A conservative newspaper, Le Point, equated permitting Muslim students to wear the hijab in Quebec public schools as allowing Islam to colonize schools. Emilie Ouimet's case in 1994 resulted in her expulsion from her junior high because she refused to remove her hijab. In this case, the hijab was associated with a threat to French nationalism (Zine, 2006).

Calgary MP Jason Kenney's recent banning of an orthodox Muslim woman who wears a niqab[4] from taking the oath of Canadian citizenship (Simons 2011) mirrors similarities to hijaphobia. Such a ban exacerbates post 9/11 fears of Islam and Muslims and upholds the narrative that controlling Muslim men force Muslim women to wear the niqab. Because the Harper government is refusing to grant citizenship to women who refuse to remove the niqab during citizenship oath proceedings and is unwilling to provide accommodations, this suggests that the niqab is completely contrary to Canadian values (Simons, 2011). One can infer that if such 'conflict in values' drive Federal policy (including legislation), that some Canadians, including teachers and students, likewise view the niqab and other forms of Islamic dress as oppressive and conflicting with 'Canadian values'. Therefore, negative Orientalist depictions of Muslim women and veiling continue to perpetuate the notion that Muslim values and practices are irreconcilable with Canadian values.

Victimizing the Victim

Related to understanding how teachers' assumptions about their Muslim students can indirectly result in 'othering' is also examining how discrimination towards Muslim students in schools is approached**.** Zine (2001) reports a narrative involving Muslim and non-Muslim students in a high school in Toronto where some non-Muslim students uttered a derogatory statement about Allah which resulted in a fight between a few Muslim and non-Muslim students. A Muslim

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[4] Niqab refers to "a veil for covering the hair and face except for the eyes that is worn by some Muslim women" (http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/niqab)

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student interviewed regarding this incident emphasized that he felt victimized by his school principal after the incident was reported:

> After the fight, some brothers and I went looking for a white student but he ran to the office and claimed that we were harassing him. The principal called me into her office and told me that unless we Muslims can't behave like Christians and turn the other cheek, she would kick us out of school if this kind of thing ever happened again (Zine, 2001, p. 412).

The Muslim students' report of this incident reveals that his concerns were invalidated. This incident conveys how anti-Islamic sentiment and notions that Islam is the anti-thesis of Western values are slowly perpetuated over time. Consequently, it is important for all educators to reflect on how their perceptions of religion and interpretations of 'Canadian values' shape their relations with non-White and non-Christian students.

Challenges to Approaching neo-Orientalism and Islamophobic Sentiment in Canadian Schools

Sarfaroz Niyozov's (2010) interviews with six Toronto public high school teachers who teach English, History and Science courses, reveals that most teachers believe that Muslim cultures and histories should be included in the curricula. Some teachers, however, feared that inclusion of Muslim cultures and histories in the curricula would perhaps undermine other religious and ethnic minorities in their classrooms and Canada's presentation as a secularist nation (Nioyoz, 2010). Most teachers voiced the concern that they lacked the necessary training and resources to thoroughly and accurately teach about Islamic topics (Nioyoz, 2010). Many teachers also reported that while they desire to teach about Islam in their classrooms, they encounter pressures to avoid engaging with such

controversy from their administration (Niyozov, 2010). One teacher emphasized that a colleague received complaints from parents and administrative reprimands because he elucidated political topics in his classroom related to Afghanistan (Niyozov, 2010). One can infer that the lack of support from administration, educational training with regards to Canada's ethno-cultural and religious diversity, and requests from administration to avoid addressing seemingly controversial matters with students will deter teachers from addressing Islam and other faith traditions in their classrooms.

<u>Can we teach about a religion that we do not prescribe to? Can we address religion if we are atheist or agnostic?</u>

Also significant in determining the degree to which teachers are willing to teach about religion in their classrooms is their comfort elucidating faith traditions that are rather unfamiliar to them or that to which they do not belong. Teachers who are not Muslim, for example, may potentially fear causing offense to some students who are Muslim when providing explanations of Muslim value systems, practice and Qur'anic interpretation. As well, such teachers may feel disadvantaged approaching Islam as an 'outsider' and may assume that they lack legitimacy to address political matters related to Islam such as 9/11 or whether or not Islam is an inherently violent faith. Such apprehensions are valid and should be reflected upon in a serious manner.

Challenges Encountered When Teaching as an 'Outsider' to Islam

To facilitate teaching about faith traditions that teachers do not belong to, teachers must first accept that they will no doubt experience challenges addressing particular traditions as 'outsiders'. Such challenges can be reduced, however, through familiarizing oneself with the concept of the multiplicity of religious identities. Recognizing and accepting the presence of a multiplicity of religious identities in one's classroom is similar to pluralism, but relies on the role of one's imagination in transcending perceived religious boundaries.

Bur (2005) reveals the benefits of building on the voices of Muslim students in the classroom as a way to spark appreciation for the persecution many Muslims continue to face post 9/11. Burr (2005) asserts:

> [t]he multiplicity that I have sought takes pluralism one step further, as an imaginative and selective internalization of several religious identities, specifically in this context those of the three monotheisms, based on beliefs and practices that are held in common (158).

Multiplicity is built on producing empathy for the experiences of others. Moreover, when individuals place themselves within the perspectives and circumstances of others they are better equipped to foster empathy for those who are unfamiliar.

One activity Burr used to promote multiplicity consisted of a panel discussion of an ethnically, culturally and textually diverse representation of Muslims in the United States. Following these sessions, non-Muslim students produced much empathy for their peers' experiences with racial and religious

discrimination and were saddened that their peers continue to experience similar treatment (Burr, 2005).

Through internalizing plural religious identities and identifying the most salient commonalities, multiplicity helps those who are non-Muslim to approach Islam in a way that avoids reliance on binary presentations of the faith. For this reason, multiplicity also addresses the resurgence of neo-Orientalism and ensures that teaching about Islam is not limited to master narratives of 'Islam and Christianity' and 'Islam and the West' (Burr, 2005). Burr's work indicates that multiplicity is a successful tool in challenging institutionalized discourses including neo-Orientalism.

Burr's application of the phrase 'become an expert of another tradition', however, is troublesome because teachers should forgo the notion that it is both possible and imperative that they become 'experts' regarding all knowledge that they wish to share. Further, expecting that one can become an 'expert' not only places unnecessary burdens on teachers, but also indicates a false sense of finality regarding one's journey as an educator. Relying on the title of 'expert' to receive credibility with one's students undermines that teachers are also engaging in continual learning alongside their students. Thus, teachers who teach about Islam from the position of an 'outsider' should try to avoid becoming fixated with the notion that they must become experts about Islam or other faith traditions in order to teach about them in a meaningful way.

Advantages of Teaching as an 'Outsider' to a Particular Religious Tradition:

In order to engage with a religious tradition as an outsider, both students and teachers should make use of their imaginative capacities. Berkson (2005) suggests that "together with our students, we make the journey toward an "imaginative insider's perspective" on the tradition" (91) by engaging with voices, ideas and lived experiences of Muslims, such as scholars and Imams of mosques who come from ethno-culturally diverse backgrounds. These encounters help students to familiarize themselves with peoples and perspectives that they may have previously avoided. Berkson (2005) underscores that providing opportunities for such encounters is "profoundly important, and students always talk about how significant these components of the course were for them" (91). Consequently, attaining an 'imaginative insider's perspective' is possible through allotting the time and space for meaningful encounters.

Can We Avoid Judging Other Faith Traditions?

It is natural that teachers will experience instances where they disagree with or are uncomfortable with some of the value systems and practices of Islam. One cannot expect to successfully withhold his or her personal beliefs and opinions regarding a particular faith tradition. Teachers should accept that their personal opinions shape the manner in which they approach various faith traditions. Berkson (2005) emphasizes "one could argue what we cannot avoid judging; we can simply try to keep it out of the classroom, which may not be entirely possible" (94). Further, as human beings we are inclined to pass judgments of others.

When teachers are faced with instances where their ethical and moral compasses are challenged by a faith's particular system, this unsurprisingly presents discomfort and confusion. If it is the case that one ethically disagrees with certain interpretations in Islam that do not condone homosexuality, one can expect to face challenges when elucidating this topic especially with students who are Muslim and who believe that homosexuality and Islam are conflicting in nature. In such instances, teachers should not feel that they must refrain from showcasing their perspectives. What must be avoided is having an uncritical eye towards one's own belief system and other traditions and singling out a specific tradition (Berkson, 2005). Consequently, teachers and students should aim to practice criticism with humility (Berkson, 2005). Practicing informed criticism while remaining humble, for example regarding homosexuality in Islam, requires that one show contrasting perspectives and Qur'anic passages that both support and do not support homosexuality. Thus, it is possible to convey one's perspectives in a critical manner.

Controversial Topics in the Social Studies Classroom: Avoidance in Response to Sanctions?

Most literature regarding the place of controversial topics in secondary social studies classrooms reveals that teachers' readings of controversy and their assumptions of students' perceptions of controversial topics determines what they regard as most worthy of discussion. According to Hass (2000), current events selected for discussion is largely guided by teachers' personal choices. Hass (2000) also emphasizes that many teachers associated the discussion of

controversial topics with helping students develop "empathy, reducing ethnocentric thought, building global awareness, recognizing interdependence, appreciating others and their views, encouraging tolerance, and the need and importance of being an informed citizen" (17). Despite teachers' recognition of the integral values and attitudes that are fostered in response to discussing controversial topics, many teachers emphasize their discomfort and reluctance to approach such matters with their students.

Hess (2002) also suggests that readings of what constitutes 'controversy' differ amongst teachers. As a result, there is often disagreement about what topics represent the most politically relevant issues. Differing perceptions result in an aversion towards controversial issues and serves as a barrier to implementing issue-based curricula (Hess, 2002). Hess suggests that teachers desire public consensus regarding controversial topics discussion especially in response to challenges triggered by 9/11. Hess (2002) asserts:

> It is far easier to teach about an issue when there is widespread agreement in the general public than when there is conflict about whether an issue is really an issue. But there is often disagreement about what constitutes a legitimate issue for discussion. This conflict shows up in the various ways that teachers define and approach issues in the classroom (258).

Hess's assertion indicates that it is impossible to expect that all teachers will attain a consensus regarding what constitutes meaningful controversial topics. Thus, it is inevitable that teachers' readings of controversy will define which controversial topics are selected and how these topics are approached in their classrooms.

The political nature of controversial topics and current events discussion represents a conflict in ideals for educators who are taught to present 'neutral' and

'objective' perspectives in classrooms. Concern with maintaining neutrality invites fears and apprehension amongst teachers with regards to what they believe is appropriate and most palatable to discuss with their students. According to Hass (2000), the most common constraints related to controversial topics discussion include:

1) the fear of complaints from parents,

2) lack of familiarity with their school board's policies surrounding permissible controversial topics,

3) perceived lack of time to include controversial topics in one's lessons,

4) pressure to meet the objectives of standardized curricula and

5) the complexity entwined within particular controversial topics and concerns that some students were not yet mature enough to engage in such discussions.

Of particular concern amongst these deterrents was high school teachers' lack of time to address controversial topics in the midst of overloaded curriculum demands (Hass, 2000).

Religious Instructions in Schools: Is Religious Instruction Legally Possible in Secular Schools?

According to the Guide to Education, religious education can be provided to students with school board consent. The Alberta Guide to Education under section 50 of the School Act states:

> [r]eligious instruction may be offered at the discretion of the school board under section 50 of the School Act. Religious studies courses may contain up to 80% content based on particular faith or belief value system and shall include 20% content in each course (Religion 15, 25, 35) that addresses a comparative study of other

major world religions such as Judaism, Buddhism, Islam or Christianity" (Government of Alberta, 2011, p. 53).

From the above assertion, it is plausible to suggest that teachers can teach about faith traditions in social studies. Following the model outlined in section 50 of the School Act, teachers can emphasize the value systems of various faith traditions, address the cultural plurality within various religions, scriptural plurality within religions and provide a comparative study of world religions besides Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Although an obvious space does not currently exist for 'religion' in the Social Studies Program of Studies, it is perhaps suitable to approach religion within the context of 'Citizenship and Identity'.

The Social Studies Program of Studies underscores that the goal of social studies is to provide students with opportunities to "understand the principles underlying a democratic society":

> [and] demonstrate a critical understanding of individual and collective rights, understand the commitment required to ensure the vitality and sustainability of their changing communities at the local, provincial, national and global levels, validate and accept differences that contribute to the pluralistic nature of Canada, respect the dignity and support the equality of all human beings" (Alberta Learning, 2005, p. 3)

Opportunities to help students acquire a better understanding of human and collective rights, validating and accepting differences and respecting equality for all human beings are all areas to which a study of religion contributes.

The Impact of Bill 44 on Classroom Practice: False Deterrent or Legitimate Threat?

The institution of Bill 44's[1] amendments on September 1, 2010 have produced mixed feelings amongst students, parents and teachers. Prior to the Bill's passing, numerous members of the Alberta School Boards Association, the Alberta Teachers' Association and the College of Alberta School Superintendents voiced much criticism and opposition (Audette, 2009).

The most salient concern Bill 44 invokes is its potential to limit teacher autonomy regarding the discussion of controversial matters and the potential for teachers to encounter parental interference and perhaps legal action with regards to their instructional choices. In response to these fears, The Alberta Teacher's Association underscores that they have "issued guidelines to teachers and administrators that promote a narrow interpretation and application of the legislation" (ATA, 2010, p. 1). Further, Bill 44 requires notification to parents regarding courses such as World Religions 30, Aboriginal Studies 10 and specific CTS modules that reflect matters of religion, spirituality and sexuality (ATA, 2010). Interestingly, Bill 44 only directly applies to specific courses that specialize in religion and human sexuality. As a result, the discussion of these matters can take place indirectly in the context of other courses which do not have

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[5] Bill 44 is an amendment to Alberta's Human Rights Act to "impose upon school boards and obligations to notify parents in advance when "courses of study, educational programs or instructional materials, or instruction or exercises, prescribed under [the School Act] include subject matter that deals primarily and explicitly with religion, human sexuality or sexual orientation" (1, ATA, <http://www.teachers.ab.ca/Publications/ATA%20News/Volume-45-2010-11/Number1Pages/Government-puts-fences>.

specific learning outcomes in religion or human sexuality. The ATA emphasizes

that "discussions of gender identity or religion in a historical, current events or

legal context, as might happen in a social studies class, would be unlikely to

trigger the provisions of the act" (ATA, 2010, p. 2). Consequently, Bill 44's

actual tenants do not reflect policies that will severely limit the discussion of

controversial matters.

Hypocrisy Inherent in Bill 44:

Though Bill 44's provisions are not theoretically designed to completely

curtail potentially controversial discussions, the Bill's underlying sentiments

indicate otherwise. Bill 44's emphasis that parents must be notified when

classroom discussions specifically deal with learning outcomes related to religion,

sexuality and sexual orientation while asserting that teachers should not fear nor

avoid incidental references to religion and sexuality is rather contradictory.

Emphasizing that matters of religion, sexuality and sexual orientation remain

solely under the authority of parents may suggest to many teachers that even

indirectly referring to these matters during class discussions and is inappropriate.

It appears as though the Bill is indirectly aiming to reduce the presence of

particular viewpoints from being discussed in the classroom in an attempt to avoid

challenging the status quo. Simply asserting that parental consent is needed

especially for courses such as World Religions produces a climate of

apprehension and fear for many teachers. One can infer that Bill 44 is perhaps

setting a precedent, which suggests that it is more permissible and 'safer' to

convey and encourage understandings that avoid producing discomfort or unfavorable situations and responses.

<u>Implications for Educators</u>

The vastness of perceptions surrounding 'controversy' and seemingly 'controversial topics implies that each teacher will approach controversy in a unique manner with his or her students. Ambiguity with regards to public education policies shapes which controversial topics ought to be discussed and topics that teachers should approach with great caution. The lack of clarity and consistency regarding public education policies elucidating how controversial topics should be framed in teachers' classrooms, emphasis that topics including sex education, sexual orientation and religion are most inflammatory in nature, the absence of religion from the Alberta Learning Social Studies Program of Study's definition of diversity, inadequate teacher training with regards to matters of Canadian diversity and the lack of administrative support to engage with 'troubling knowledge' produces numerous obstacles for teachers who truly desire to expose their students to controversial topics. In light of these obstacles, are teachers succeeding in addressing matters with their students that challenge the status quo?

Much of the research on addressing religion in general and Islam specifically in social studies, in particular in Canada, is quite limited in scope. In response to Canada's increasing religious plurality and due to the increasing presence global political tensions and wars shaped by religion, it is necessary that the notion of diversity within the Alberta Learning Program of Studies is modified

to include religion. Such a reconceptualization of diversity will perhaps provide teachers with a more sound foundation to approach the complexities underlying politically motivated wars that are conflated with religious ideologies.

Evidently, education regarding controversial topics, in particular religion, reflects complexities and challenges that teachers must address. While teachers are faced with administrative obstacles and the vagueness of public education policy's stance on teaching about controversial topics, teachers also have the opportunity to utilize the vagueness inherent in policy documents and curriculum objectives to address controversial topics, including religion, with their students.

Chapter 3

Methodology

Focus of the Study

Central to this study is identifying what circumstances and situations have influenced and continue to influence two participant-religious studies professors' pedagogical choices with regards to teaching about various faith traditions, especially Islam, and their related political matters. The purpose of this exploration is to decipher how participants' understanding of controversy shapes their pedagogical choices. As a pertinent example of controversy, this study also aims to identify whether or not participant-religious studies professors believe that Islam is becoming an increasingly racialized faith in Canada.

Selected participant religious studies professors from a post secondary institution reflect a diversity of specializations including Old Testament Studies, Contemporary Judaism, Contemporary Christianity and Contemporary Islam and comparative religious perspectives. Inclusion of religious studies professors' voices assumes that the university setting is one in which courses are specialized in particular topics which thereby allows for more intimate engagement with the study of contemporary Islamic issues. Questions asked perhaps will expose the challenges and setbacks that take place while one is designing lessons geared towards teaching about faith traditions.

Interviews with Religious Studies professors reveal the challenges that educators face when deconstructing assumptions in their classrooms. Interviews may also convey how educators can discuss divisive topics such as 'whether or

not Islam is an inherently violent faith' in the classroom. As well, interviews may also illustrate why individuals are often uncomfortable with 'discomfort' and that it is possible to thoroughly elucidate faith traditions that one does not belong to. Interviews indicate that it may be fruitful for university and secondary school educators to engage in dialogue and work together to identify strategies that can be used to deconstruct assumptions in classrooms.

The Research Question:

What factors inform teachers' instructional decisions regarding the teaching of potentially controversial topics especially about religion in general and the contemporary racialization of Islam and Muslims specifically?

The literature review indicates that teachers' instructional decisions around controversial issues are largely influenced by fears of receiving disapproval from administrators, parents and students regarding the discussion of divisive matters in the classrooms, the unclear demands of particular public education policies, concern with jeopardizing one's job security, the oversimplification of diversity in schools through partaking in narrow intellectual pursuits, the dominance of standardized curricula and teaching methods, time constraints that educators are faced with, and the reluctance of schools to address racisms. Although there are numerous factors that appear to deter teachers from addressing Islam in their classrooms, the literature suggests that it is both necessary and possible to overcome these obstacles. For example, the practice of critical pedagogy, implementation of anti-Islamophobia workshops and teaching

of multiplicity in classrooms provide educators with practical and non-threatening means to teach about religion and Islam specifically in their classrooms.

Selecting a Research Approach:

Because my exploration aims to identify how teachers' perceptions of 'controversy' shape their pedagogical decisions, qualitative methodology is the best approach. Unlike quantitative research, which removes the subjective perceptions of the researcher and study participants, qualitative methodology exposes the researcher and participants' subjectivities (Flick, 2002). Flick (2002) asserts:

> Qualitative methods take the researchers' communication with the field and its members as an explicit part of knowledge production instead of excluding it as far as possible as an intervening variable. The subjectivities of the researcher and those being studied are part of the research process (6).

This aspect of qualitative methodology is extremely important given my former relationship with the participant-Religious Studies professors. Further, qualitative research's emphasis of including the participants' subjectivities will help to ensure that I am able to recognize the reasons underlying the participant- religious studies professors' pedagogical choices.

Qualitative research is also selected as the appropriate strategy to conduct my study because of the nature of my central question. My central question is not a hypothesis but rather is structured as an exploration of the factors and conditions that impact how teachers address religion and Islam specifically in their classrooms. Creswell (1998) asserts:

> [i]n a qualitative study, the research question often starts with a how or a what so that initial forays into the topic describe what is

going on. This is in contrast to quantitative questions that ask why
and look for a comparison of groups (p.17).

Consequently, situating my study within qualitative research will perhaps ensure that I will be able to thoroughly identify circumstances that limit teaching about Islam in classrooms.

I also selected a qualitative study because the topic requires exploration. Moreover, variables for this study cannot be identified easily and succinct theories that explain teachers' instructional decisions are unavailable (Creswell, 1998).

Qualitative approaches are also better suited for this study because they are concerned with exploring complex matters through the production of multiple questions. The underlying goal of qualitative research is not to produce a succinct theory to elucidate one's findings, but rather desires to expose the relevance of particular narratives within their current socio-cultural context (Flick, 2002). As well, qualitative approaches do not regard methodology as objective or neutral in nature:

> analyses of research practice have demonstrated that a large part of
> the ideals of objectivity formulated in advance cannot be fulfilled.
> Despite all the methodological controls, the research and its
> findings are unavoidably influenced by the interests and the social
> and cultural backgrounds of those involved (2).

Since my study aims to reveal the extent to which teachers' social stocks of knowledge, worldviews and personal experiences shape their pedagogical choices, qualitative approaches offer the best route to help discover how individuals' subjectivities shape their interactions and perceptions of others.

Research Method:

I selected a qualitative post modernist model as the mode of exploration because it best engages my research question given the rapidly changing nature of post 9/11 geo-political relations, rising levels of Islamophobia in North America and due to time constraints. Initially, my study was designed to incorporate the voices of five participants: two Religious Studies professors from a post-secondary institution and 3 secondary denominational school- teachers. Due to delayed responses from particular school boards and the rejection of two school boards from participating in this study, I was required to re-route my initial investigation and consequently focus on the experiences of participant-religious studies professors.

My revised study incorporates the voices of two religious studies professors from a post secondary institute. Each professor participated in an hour long, semi-structured, one-on-one interview with me. The interviews took place in the offices of both professors at their post secondary institutions between May 17, 2011 and May 27, 2011. One participant- religious studies professor specializes in Old Testament studies and Contemporary Judaism, while the other professor specialized in comparative Religious Studies, Contemporary Islam and Christian perspectives.

Selecting a qualitative postmodernist approach was based on the need to meet the unpredictable and changing nature of my study that largely occurred in response to the frequent presentation of new, fast-paced geo-political situations related to Islamic politics and Islamophobia in Canada and the United States, the

wavering presence of recent studies conducted in post 9/11 Canadian educational context and due to the unanticipated challenges with regards to locating secondary school teachers who were willing to participate in this study.

The fluctuating boundaries and positioning of my study also called for approaching my study through a postmodernist lens. According to Flick (2002) postmodernism has emphasized a visible shift "towards theories and narratives that fit specific, delimited, local, historical situations and problems" (10). Postmodernism's emphasis of returning to the local as a means to understand the complexities surrounding events that have profound global implications, for example, is evidently well suited for my study.

Choosing a postmodernist qualitative approach was also based on my study's desire to challenge the notions of objective and neutral knowledge and perceptions. Within the context of social science's discontent with objectivist values and pursuits Flick (2002) asserts:

> [w]hat remains is the possibility of statements which are related to subjects and situations, and which a sociologically articulated concept of knowledge would have to establish'. The empirically well-founded formulation of such subject-and situation-related statements is a goal which can be attained with qualitative research" (Flick, 2002, p.4).

According to Flick, it is impossible to acquire research findings in which participants' assertions are not directly informed by their cultural backgrounds, upbringing, worldviews, assumptions, and their surrounding socio-political contexts. Consequently, approaching my study in a postmodernist qualitative approach complements my desire to reveal how individuals' subjectivities sharply challenge notions of attaining an idea of neutrality in any given context.

Drawing the Sample:

The initial size and composition of my sample conveys the desire to showcase a variety of perspectives and backgrounds that reflectively and actively engage the idea of the pedagogical implications of one's practice with regards to contentious matters related to Islam and other faiths. I aimed to acquire a sample that would attract participants who were willing without hesitation to participate in this study and offer unfettered responses to difficult questions. Further, qualitative research does not emphasize much attachment towards attaining generalizability (Flick, 2002). For this reason, one can infer that absence of a dense sample size is not a deterrent when conducting qualitative research:

> [t]he problem of generalizibilty in qualitative research is that its statements are often made for a certain context or specific cases and based on analyses of relations, conditions, processes, etc. in them. This attachment to context often allows qualitative research a specific expressiveness" (230).

Thus, qualitative research emphasizes the transferability of findings to different contexts rather than placing merit solely on sample size.

Though the sample size in this study was quite small in response to unforeseen circumstances, the inclusion of two participant- Religious Studies professors still reveals much insight in light of the fact they are both tenured professors and have much experience teaching in contrasting socio-cultural and political environments. My selected sample reflects the purposeful sampling approach. I selected purposeful sampling as my approach, rather than random sampling for two reasons. First, random sampling is better suited for studies that include the voices of many individuals. Second, finding participants for studies is

quite a challenging process. Due to time constraints, I thought it was wise to approach individuals that I had a pre-established relationship with and who I knew would be willing to and had the potential to contribute thoughtful insights regarding my research question.

Recruitment of participants commenced in April 2011, once I had received ethical approval to conduct my interviews. Both teachers received an information letter, stating the goals of the studies and sample of the types of questions that would be asked during the hour long, semi-structured interview and a consent form via email (Appendix A).

Interview Protocol:

When pondering how I sought to carry out my study, I initially thought it would be both interesting and insightful to include observations of participant-religious studies professors in my study. However, time limitations in response to approaching my study within a new department and due to unexpected delays regarding my initial plans for data collection, I realized that it was best to focus on administering two interviews.

According to Creswell (2009), it is best to conduct interviews when it is not possible to directly observe participants. Creswell (2009) asserts that interviews are important because they "can provide historical information [and] allows [the] researcher control over the line of questioning" (180). Moreover, because I had a prior relationship with the selected participant-Religious Studies professors, I anticipated that they would provide me with thorough and rich descriptions about their teaching experiences and instructional choices. Each

participant- religious studies professor was to participate in an hour-long interview. The first interview was completed within thirty minutes, while the second interview took fifty minutes. At the commencement of each interview, participants signed a consent form (Appendix B) and were reminded of the confidentiality and anonymity of their participation. As well, participant-Religious Studies professors were asked for a verbal confirmation that they understood that they were being recorded.

During the second interview, I felt much more confident with my interviewing abilities. For example, I found myself inquiring more into my participant's comments and asking more questions to acquire greater clarity.

Both interviews were digitally recorded and saved on my password protected digital recording device. The interviews took place in each participant-Religious Studies professor's office, at their academic institutions.

Data Analysis Procedures:

It is important to note that my interpretation of the two interviews was largely informed by my former relationships with both interviewees. I have known Ben and David for nearly four years. Much of my interaction with Ben and David took place as a student in their Religious Studies courses both inside and outside of the classroom. My conversations especially outside of the classroom with Ben and David enabled me to get better acquainted with them on a personal level.

Data was read once, and then re-read for more detail. General themes were identified, common responses noted for frequency and what was perhaps missing

from interviews and observations. The process of formal coding proceeded by taking text data, segmenting sentences (or paragraphs) into categories and labeling those categories with a term. In vivo terms were developed meaning I used terms based on the actual language of the participants. Following formal coding procedures, I identified the underlying meanings of each topic and then clustered them into similar topics. I identified five themes including 'pedagogical choices', 'controversy maintenance, 'teacher perceptions', 'racialization' and 'surprising insights'. I produced connections between these themes and then interpreted and created meaning out of the data.

Data analysis was guided through the application of critical theory and its emphasis on how it is possible for the researcher to become receptive to newfound insights through critically analyzing the role of language and knowledge acquisition in revealing whose choices and voices embody the status quo. Hinchey (2010) emphasizes that critical incidents or events that alter and invite individuals to question how they think and are integral to the process of creating ruptures within the knowledge constructs of teachers and students:

> When some experience causes us to question our firmest beliefs about the world, there is a domino-like effect which can change our entire perspective both on who and where we are. (122)

Hinchey's emphasis of the importance of reflecting on how one's firmest beliefs are produced is directly related to educators' practice of reflexivity on their pedagogical choices.

Hinchey also recognizes the extent to which educators' identifying themselves as 'experts' of particular subject matters and perceptions that their

students expect them to be 'experts' in all matters discussed in the classroom either encourages or limits their instructional choices:

> the prevalent model of teaching is of "teacher as expert", transmitting expert information. Schooling is about students acquiring heaps of facts, figures, dates, and data. When teachers do anything other than lecture or assign standardized seat work, they suffer nagging guilt, suggesting that if they are [not] talking, or if all students are sile4ntly working, then learning is [not] happening and they are [not] doing their jobs (133).

Consequently, if educators believe that it is imperative to teach 'expert' information and possess very specific definitions of what knowledge is and what constitutes important and relevant knowledge, they will likely teach in a very specific way that will be beneficial to some, but perhaps disadvantageous to other students. Since educators' definitions of knowledge shape their actions, they will "teach one way or another, depending at least in part on how they define the "knowledge" they want their students to have, on what they mean when they say what they want their students "to know" something" (Hinchey, 2010, p. 37). Through interviews, I hope to examine the relationship between educators' perceptions of worthy knowledge and instructional choices.

Ethical Considerations:

Interviews were conducted shortly after receiving ethical approval from the Faculties of Education and Extension Research Ethics Board. In this study, participants responded to questions in which a few sample questions were provided in advance to the interview. Prior to each interview, participant-Religious Studies professors read and signed a consent form (Appendix A) and were reminded that they had the option of withdrawing from the study at any

moment. As well, participants were reminded that confidentiality and anonymity would be maintained throughout and following the course of the study. Both participants were assigned pseudonyms, which reflects their gender, but does not indicate their ethno-racial or religious heritage.

The faith traditions of participant-Religious Studies professors were not directly related to or inquired about during the interviews. None of the questions asked were particularly controversial, nor was it expected that a response would incite emotional outbursts or pose threats to participants' employment at their academic institutions. The questions asked, however, did invite the potential perhaps to upset some participants if they felt that their views were being challenged. As well, participants who potentially reflect views that challenge the status quo, may ear sharing such ideas due to matters of reputation, social status and job security.

Qualitative Reliability

Creswell (2009) suggests that qualitative reliability reveals if the researcher's approach is consistent. In order to ensure that my research is consistent and reliable, I will check my transcripts to ensure that they do not contain apparent mistakes during transcribing and frequently compare my data with the codes and writing notes about the codes' meanings (Creswell, 2009).

Qualitative Validity

Creswell(1998) asserts that validity should be regarded as a unique strength of qualitative research. This is because qualitative research often reflects "extensive time spent in the field, the [presence of] detailed thick description, and the closeness to the participants in the study…" (Creswell, 1998, p. 201). Although I was unable to spend extensive time in the field and in response to unanticipated changes to my participant sample, I was deeply familiar with context of the participant- Religious Studies professors' courses and classrooms due to my pre-established relationship with them.

In order to ensure that my research is valid, I will check for the accuracy of findings by carrying out specific procedures. Firstly, I will carry out the process of member checking in order to ascertain if my interpretations of the interviews reasonably represent my participants' voices. Secondly, I clarified the bias I brought to the study by identifying how my narrative has impacted the direction and interpretation of my findings. Thirdly, I will present negative or discrepant information meaning that I will emphasize findings that illustrate the contradiction of perspectives.

The Interview Questions:

I created six questions that were designed to reveal how participants understand and conceive and instruct about controversial matters. These questions were initially intended to compliment proposed questions for two secondary social studies teachers from a denominational school and an Islamic Studies teacher from a denominational school in Alberta. Although I was unable to

interview secondary school teachers for this study, religious studies professors' reflections can still be applied to practices that teachers may be able to utilize in their secondary social studies classrooms.

1a) Have you experienced any challenges or tensions in the classroom regarding the discussion of seemingly controversial topics related to religion as a religious studies professor? If so, please elaborate.

b) In what ways do you challenge social stocks of knowledge in the classroom?

Asking this question was intended to reveal whether or not Religious Studies professors experience resistance, unwarranted behaviors or apathetic responses from students when elucidating controversial topics related to religion. In asking this question, I also wanted to identify whether or not there was a correlation between responses from university students in the context of religion courses in a secular academic institute from tenured professors and social studies teachers from secular secondary schools in Alberta. As well, I aimed to identify how participant- Religious Studies professors conceive of controversy and how their personal definitions of controversy influence their engagement with particular topics. Regarding the question addressing social stocks of knowledge, I desired to discover whether or not the participant-Religious Studies professors engage in exercises, such as discussions with their students, that help students recognize how their assumptions directly shape their perceptions. I also wanted to decipher whether or not interviewed participants also engage in this process and reflect on how their assumptions guide their pedagogical decisions.

2) *Do you feel comfortable discussing controversial topics in your classroom? For example, if you were discussing the intersection between faith and politics, would you address the question that Islam is often regarded as an inherently violent faith in your classroom? If yes, please indicate what techniques you would use to create on this topic? If no, please explain why you would prefer to refrain from engaging in such a discussion.*

This particular question was written to reveal how educators' comfort levels with regards to their perceptions of controversy influence their willingness to address discomforting topics. As well, this question was asked in order to shed light on how teachers can discuss difficult matters in response to 'who' is in their classrooms. For example, discussing with students whether or not Islam is an inherently violent faith may invite complex emotions, including anger, resentment and fear especially from Muslim students in one's classroom. Consequently, I aimed to assess whether or not anticipating such reactions from some students represented a deterrent for participants' choices to pose such questions in their classrooms.

3) *When you deliver information related to a particular faith that you do not belong to, have you experienced feelings of intimidation, empowerment or a combination of both? Please elaborate.*

This particular question was designed to reveal whether or not participants ever experienced simultaneous feelings of agency and intimidation while addressing faith traditions that they do not belong to. Further, I wanted to assess whether or not participants ever experienced moments in which they refused to and or had

strong feelings against approaching faiths with their students as 'outsiders' and the reasons behind these feelings. Also I wanted to identify from this question whether or not participant-Religious Studies professors ever felt empowered while teaching as outsiders of particular traditions and what factors resulted in such emotions. Most significantly, I desired to understand whether or not university Religious Studies professors' conceptions of teaching as an 'outsider' of particular faith traditions mirrored similar sentiments elucidated in the literature review and also if these conceptions were similar to those of secondary school teachers.

4) When delivering information related to a particular faith that you do not belong to, have you ever experienced opposition or condescending remarks by students of that particular tradition? If yes, please indicate the events that transpired and share how such experiences impacted your proceeding classroom experiences.

This particular question required much reflection from participant–Religious Studies professors with regards to the culmination of their teaching experiences to date. I wrote this question in response to particular situations I witnessed as a student in certain undergraduate and graduate religious studies courses. Some students were critical of the topics professors chose to elucidate about Islam within their position as 'outsiders' to the faith. Such criticisms included verbal remarks that were uttered in the context of classroom discussion in front of other students. As a result, I wanted to identify whether such experiences had either decreased participant-Religious Studies professors' comfort with teaching about

faith traditions that they did not belong to and what pedagogical techniques and strategies were used to handle such incidents in a manner that maintained their dignity and respect.

5) Have you ever avoided discussing a particularly controversial topic in the classroom that you believed would benefit your students, perhaps jeopardize your career? If yes, please elucidate your experience.

With this question, I desired to assess whether or not perceptions conveyed in the literature review with regards to teachers avoiding the discussion of particular topics in fears of receiving disapproval from parents, community, students and administration, could be corroborated. As well, I aimed to reveal how educators' personalities largely shape their willingness to take particular pedagogical risks and how their personalities determine what they believe they should address with their students. As well, I wanted to assess whether or not participant-Religious Studies professors experienced inner tensions. By inner-tensions I am referring to their potential desire to teach about certain matters and feeling an ethical responsibility to do so, while fearing that engaging with particular ideas would threaten attaining and maintaining their tenure.

6) Do you believe that it is possible for faiths to undergo the process of racialization? If yes, please explain. Within the context of Islam, do you feel that Islamophobic tendencies have resulted in the racializaton of Islam? If yes, please elaborate.

This final question was posed in order to identify whether or not participant-Religious Studies professors recognized the process of racialization as plausible

with regards to the historical and contemporary development of Islamophobia. The question required much reflection from participants as it called for much reflection with regards to identifying how preconceived notions of Muslims and Islam have perhaps become institutionally embedded within secondary schools as well as post secondary institutions in Canada and the United States especially in response to 9/11. In asking this question, I wanted to identify whether or not participants have explored the notion of racialization with their students in situations where historical persecution of particular faith groups were addressed. As well, I sought to reveal the consequences of how failing to address Islam's racialization will likely result in greater Islamophobic episodes in Canada.

Chapter 4

<u>Interviews and Analysis</u>

Have you experienced any challenges or tensions in the classroom regarding the discussion of seemingly controversial topics related to religion as a religious studies professor? If so, please elaborate. In what ways do you challenge social stocks of knowledge in the classroom?

I asked these questions to commence my conversations with the two Religious Studies professors I interviewed about the factors that guide their instructional choices regarding teaching about controversial issues. The responses given to this underscore the degree to which personal values and readings of controversy and controversial topics inherently shape professors' instructional choices in the classroom. The professors conveyed shared and divergent understandings about what defines controversy and topics that fit into that category within the context of religious studies. This is also the case in regards to how they understand their teaching, but more significantly what they are willing to address with their students.

The Religious Studies professors in this study have been given pseudonyms reflecting their gender and sex. As elucidated in the methodologies chapter, participation in this study was voluntary. Ben is a tenured Religious Studies professor who specializes in literary studies of the Hebrew Bible, Midrash and Kabbalah. David is also a Religious Studies professor who specializes in Christian-Muslim relations, interfaith dialogue between Islamic and Christian traditions and contemporary Islamic issues.

Identifying and Addressing Social Stocks of Knowledge

Both professors emphasized that their classes are challenging and quite often address divisive issues, especially political issues related to Islam and Judaism. My attempts to ascertain the ways in which interviewees challenge their students' assumptions did not immediately pinpoint specific pedagogical techniques used. Both professors, however, acknowledge that of course all students enter their classes with preconceived ideas and notions. Interviewees' responses to this question underscore the role they believe played by students' upbringing and value systems. Students' backgrounds in these regards significantly impact their interaction with other faith traditions within the context of Religious Studies courses.

> David: So most [students] want to know about Islam and Muslims. Of course they have pre-conceived ideas about Islam and Muslims. Some of them do at least. Others do not you know. Others come mostly from a Christian background, so their knowledge about Islam or their information about Islam is very sketchy and thin.
>
> Ben: When I first came, I would get people who had come from fundamentalist perspectives. There would be the sort of conflicts of the fundamentalist perspectives- it hasn't happened in years. Maybe I'm so skilled at evading it or maybe it just doesn't come up anymore. With classes in Judaism I do occasionally have conflicts on Israel and Palestine. So, for example, I did have one student, this was not this year, but the year before, who came from a very not so much, as a naïve Zionist perspective. So, he thought I was an extreme anti-Zionist and in the same class, there was a student who came from the Palestinian Solidarity Network (PSN). So, I have had quite a lot of conflict especially on the Internet. So I do have those occasions. I had a student who dropped out and who reacted saying that the textbook is, does not know anything about Judaism…that the textbook
> was not good; I get that, not very often. My experience is that there is very little conflict in the classroom.

The former statement reflects the notion that individuals' religious positioning significantly influences their interpretations of religious traditions that they do not belong to. David's statement appears to suggest that those who prescribe to a particular religious tradition are much better informed about that particular faith than outsiders of the faith. Though this statement reflects some truth at times, it undermines how many individuals can attain an 'imaginative insider's perspective' with regards to approaching faith traditions they do not belong to and perhaps articulate that particular faith just as well as an adherent. Further, Ben's experiences, although uncomfortable, did not deter him from discussing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in future classes, nor did particular students' distaste with his choice of textbook compel him to select a new book.

Although Ben suggests that "there is very little conflict in [his] classroom", his experiences indicate otherwise. Ben's assertion " I have had quite a lot of conflict especially on the Internet (on his eClass)" contradicts his former statement. Ben appears to make a distinction between discussions that take place in his university classroom and on eClass forums. This distinction is surprising because it indicates he clearly divides what or where counts as in 'class'. Ben's choice to distance eClass discussions from his in-class discussions perhaps reveals that he does not desire to take responsibility for conflicts that arise in eClass forums. Consequently, I am left to ponder why conflict over class topics in one forum is not taken as a learning opportunity in another.

Popular Media Images and the Creation of 'Final Ideas'

In response to the opening question's emphasis on social stocks of knowledge, David emphasizes that it is possible for professors to assist students in avoiding the production of 'final ideas'. David asserts:

> [Students] have certain images that are related to violence, terrorism, radicalism, fundamentalism and all of that. But once they know the Islamic position they will say oh this is what Islam says so they become a bit surprised you know when they understand Islam's position.

When elaborating upon his response to why he believes some but not all of his students enter his classroom with preconceived ideas about Islam and Muslims, David identifies several factors: "the influence of culture on Islam and Muslims. The influence of culture and the mass media. That they have certain images that are related to violence, terrorism, radicalism, fundamentalism and all of that". David suggests that images such as terrorism and radicalism are largely the product of media presentations of Muslims and Islam. He later conveyed that though some students acquire such ideas from the mass media, they become surprised and rethink their preconceived ideas once they are presented with various Islamic positions and presentations of history. David's comment reflects Moore's (2006) assertion that teachers should analyze with the students the values of mainstream media and political leaders who present skewed portrayals of others for a host of self-interested or simply uninformed reasons:

> Teachers can use this controversy to help students understand that the writing of history is a social and political construction and involves competing interpretations, value judgments, partial truths, omission and distortions (Douglas & Dunn 2003) (140).

Consequently, educators can use preconceived ideas or social stocks of knowledge as a means to help students understand that ideas are constantly in flux and that it is rather impossible to arrive at 'final ideas'.

David also underscores that within the context of Islamic Studies courses Muslim students will also enter classrooms with preconceived ideas. David's assertion is important because some educators will assume that preconceived ideas are only reflective of 'outsider' perspectives. David emphasizes that he witnesses many Muslim students, especially those who attended Islamic schools in junior high and high school, as coming to his classes with preconceived notions about Islam.

> David: And you know what I discovered in my courses is that some Muslim students especially who study at [Islamic schools] also they come with preconceived ideas about Islam- that Islam is a religion of peace and this and that. And that some of them go on the defensive in the class when they try to prove their point.

David's assertion is corroborated by Memon's (2010) findings that many Islamic school avoid discussing controversial issues related to Islam and Muslims.

Readings of Controversial Topics

How interviewees' thought about controversy became immediately apparent when asked to describe whether or not they feel comfortable discussing controversial topics and how they do so. Participants emphasize that they are not uncomfortable with discussing controversial matters. In fact, they see such topics as offering students fresh approaches to ideas. They differed, however, about which controversial issues ought to be addressed in one's classroom within the context of Islamic studies classes. David suggests that there is the potential for

controversy to enter conversations regarding some Muslim women's practice of veiling. Ben's response, in particular to the second part of this question, 'if you were addressing the intersection between faith and politics, would you address the question that Islam is often regarded as an inherently violent faith in your classroom?' best reveals the extent to which educators' personal perceptions influences what is identified as controversial. Ben asserts:

> It has never occurred to me that Islam is an inherently violent faith. If someone were to say, well isn't it true that Islam is an inherently violent faith?...no one ever has, and I don't think any students ever would.

In response to Ben's comment I asked whether or not he believed that some students would regard Islam as an inherently violent faith in response to popular media presentations that often associate Islam and Muslims with violence:

> I haven't really watched the news to say whether it is saturated with Islamophobic terms…you know the only news services I know really are the BBC which is certainly not and the CBC. So, I mean this might be true of things like Fox news, which I don't watch. But I think media like BBC does a very good job of representing issues fairly.

From the above assertions it is not overly assumptive to suggest that Ben will not actively discuss whether or not Islam is inherently a violent faith. He does not believe that Islam is an inherently violent faith and thus assumes that his students do not associate Islam with violence. Ben's perception that the BBC and CBC do not perpetuate Islamophobic sentiments and his assumption that his students do not regard Islam as a violent faith indicate that future conversations about Islamophobia and racialization will likely not take place. Ben's instructional choice not to address the notion of Islam as an inherently violent faith is

consistent with Shavelson and Stern's (1981) findings that "[t]eachers' conceptions of a subject matter also are expected to influence their judgments, decisions and behavior" (468).

Pedagogical Techniques used to Address Controversial Matters

Ben conveys the importance of thoughtful contemplation when asked to reflect on pedagogical techniques used in the classroom to elucidate controversial topics. Prior to discussing controversial matters and answering questions related to controversy, Ben purposely makes long pauses before answering questions in his classes. He uses long pauses as a means to ensure that the complexities underlying various controversial matters are addressed. Moreover, he feels that it is both detrimental and unnecessary to quickly answer questions that are fraught with numerous complexities.

Ben suggests that if he were extrapolating the notion of Islam as inextricably violent, he would explore how there are many traditions within Islam that are pacifist. He would also explain the Islamic world's history of colonialism and post-colonialism to unravel the intricacies covered when people claim that Judaism is a purely violent faith. Ben's use of reflection and thoughtful dialogue with his students recognizes the importance of taking the time to identify the complexity of particular issues and thus ensures that simplistic generalizations are not associated with the faith in question (Berkson, 2005). His use of reflection and engaging classroom discussions were apparent while I was a student in his classes.

David employs a 'comparative approach' when extrapolating political complexities that result in response to the combined forces of religion, cultural beliefs and practices, economics, and misunderstood and silenced historical trajectories. David lectures about the shared historical relationship between Christians and Muslims in class discussions to help students first recognize the historical and religious commonalities between Christianity and Islam and then discuss historical political tensions related to Christianity and Islam. David asserts:

> I use this technique in my classrooms especially in the context of a compatible relationship between let's say Islamic history and classical Christian history. And I think that students benefit from that.

He also emphasizes the theological similarities between the three Abrahamic traditions. David regards the 'comparative' approach as an entry point into discussing topics that he expects will unsurprisingly invite passionate responses from students and as a means to assure that students avoid conflating religion with political violence in a definitive manner. David's employment of the 'comparative approach' is consistent with Burr's (2005) use of the commonalities between Judaism, Christianity and Islam as a starting point in her Islamic Studies courses.

Empowerment and, or Intimidation as an 'Outsider'

'When you deliver information related to a particular faith that you do not belong to, have you experienced feelings of intimidation, empowerment, or a combination of both? Please elaborate'.

This question led to interesting insights that were often corroborated by literature reviewed.

Professors' response to this question revealed insights that may challenge the notion that one merely needs to become an 'expert' on a topic in order to avoid resistance from students. David has not experienced tension in his current university when addressing faith traditions to which he does not belong. David underscores that, because he was raised in a predominantly Christian environment and studied at Christian schools, he grew up being well aware of Christianity and had numerous opportunities to interact with practicing Christians.

> David: Now, in the West, if you are a Muslim or a Jew, and you're not a Christian, then Christianity is foreign to you. But this has not been the case for me in particular. So I remember once I went to the Philippines. I was invited by a Catholic University and gave a talk about the first 400 years of the history of Christianity and they were shocked because to them Muslims do not know much about Christianity."

David's experience at the University in the Philippines for example, mirrors Burr's (2005) assertion that it does not matter if one is a non-Muslim teaching about Islam or a Muslim teaching about Christianity. One can ascertain from David's experiences that when teaching about a faith tradition as an 'outsider', educators should:

> orient [themselves] toward the other tradition(s) with which [they] engage pedagogically, so that [the traditions] become real (as well

as known) and therefore communicable, teachable and worth teaching" (Burr, 2005, p. 160).

Consequently, David's experience with teaching about Christianity as a non-Christian reveals that awareness and engagement of traditions with which one does not identify, is essential when teaching about religion.

Ben's response to the question also reveals similar sentiments. He did not recall feeling intimidated addressing particular faiths as an'outsider' and emphasized that he experiences few pedagogical constraints teaching about religion in a secular university.

> The answer is no. Well it is entirely different if one is [teaching] in a secular university. We don't have any constraints at all…or very few. I suppose if I were to…to preach racism in my class, I would have a problem. But, anyway, we certainly do not have any of those issues. I think that the only reason why I would feel intimidated in talking about Islam or anything else is that I don't know that much. So I would say I know more about Judaism than I know about Islam and you know, in every area, one is aware…I'm aware of the huge areas of my ignorance…so I might know a bit more about Judaism, but not that much more.

Ben's reflection is interesting because his concern with possessing substantial understandings regarding certain religious studies topics is more of a concern to him rather than students' perceptions of him as an 'expert'.

Ben emphasizes that he does not avoid discussing particular topics merely because he does not know enough. Rather, he shares what he does know and will further explore this for himself and his students. Evidently, both interviewees do not fixate on being a Religious Studies 'expert' in their classrooms. Thus, one's alleged expertise or absence of is not a deterrent when discussing controversial topics.

Encountering Resistance as an 'Outsider'

'When delivering information related to a particular faith tradition that you do not belong to, have you experienced opposition or condescending remarks by students of that particular tradition?"

Both participants shared situations in which their viewpoints were either unappreciated or regarded as irrelevant due to their students positioning them as religious 'outsiders'. David emphasized that although he has not experienced such situations at his current university, he has encountered such incidents in the past.

> I had a priest who was my student once, and I was talking about Christianity and in a sense he was trying to put you know my discussion down because he's a priest, he knows much better than I do. But it happens with everybody, not only with priests. But you know it's only under rare cases that this has happened.

This particular response reveals that while it is possible to teach about faith traditions as an 'outsider', educators will encounter moments of opposition in the form of condescending remarks from students who 'know better' than their educators the only credible way to view their faiths.

Ben's experiences reflect similar sentiments, but underscore how students who interpret their faith in a strictly 'monolithic' manner may resist their professor's attempts to present their faith in a pluralistic way.

> Ben: Well the only problem I had is that when I used to teach Religion 101, An Introduction to World Religions, invariably when it came to teaching Islam, especially when it came to teaching Sufism, I would get a cohort of MSA (Muslim Students Association) people who would be there to observe what I taught that day in class- the truth. And I remember one day in which three people got up and denounced Sufism as being not Islamic.

Ben's experience illustrates that some students' perception of religious truth influences how they respond to their teachers' perspectives. In particular, Ben's example reminds educators that they cannot control how their students respond to topics in the classroom and that minimal disagreement at they very least should be expected.

Though situations such as Ben's are rather uncomfortable and have the potential to be intimidating, there are ways in which educators can swiftly address such outbursts and perhaps limit them in the future. Ben suggests that educators should remind students that all faiths are multiplex in nature. Such a statement is important in situations where some students may ignore a faith's plurality of interpretations. He also suggests that students who are defaming others' interpretations do not have the authority to speak in the classroom. Ben also stresses that it takes experience to handle such situations in a confident and swift manner. One cannot expect to have an immediate grasp on how to approach such situations as they often take one by surprise. Consequently, Ben's experience suggests that educators should expect passionate responses from students during particular discussions about religion and that it is perhaps best for educators to accept that they will inevitably face similar situations at times.

Blatant Avoidance of Specific Controversial Issues

The sixth question, which asked interviewees whether or not they have ever avoided a particular topic in their classroom because they believed it may jeopardize their career emphasizes how educators' instructional decisions are related to their readings of controversy and controversial topics. David's response

to the question was consistent with findings stated in the literature that finds discussions about homosexuality in Islam is a contentious matter that requires a thoughtful approach and the inclusion of numerous perspectives (Berkson, 2005). In his Islamic Studies classes, David emphasizes that he has never and nor would he in the future address the notion of homosexuality in Islam.

> David: The only topic I have not talked about in any open way or directly or indirectly is the topic of Islam or religion and homosexuality. That's big for some students here. But no one has ever raised that in my class to say the least. And I've never talked about it. This is very controversial. Very Controversial. And you know there are some Muslim students here who defined themselves as being gay and Muslim at the same time. Now I believe that they would not be accepted by the majority of the Muslim students.

David's discussion appears to convey his own personal discomfort with addressing homosexuality. David's assertion "[a]nd you know there are some Muslim students here who defined themselves as being gay and Muslim at the same time" perhaps reflects his personal stance towards homosexuality in Islam. In particular, the phrase, "being gay and Muslim at the same time" indicates that Ben may not believe it is possible to be both gay and Muslim.

It is important to note that my personal relationship and interactions with David shape my interpretation and analysis of his statements. Moreover, in response to my conversations with David, I strongly believe that his personal disposition towards homosexuality impacts his decision to avoid discussing homosexuality in his Islamic studies courses. As a former student in eight Islamic studies courses, I recognize that non-Muslim professors of Islamic studies elucidated homosexuality in Islam, whereas Muslim professors of Islamic studies

did not approach this topic. This occurrence is perhaps a coincidence, but it may indicate that Muslim professors of Islamic Studies are reluctant to address homosexuality not only in response to their personal beliefs about homosexuality, but also due to fears that many of their Muslim students will not regard them as respectful scholars of Islam if they discuss homosexuality. Thus, David's perception of homosexuality in the context of Islam as an exceedingly controversial matter deterred him from engaging in potential fruitful dialogue about this issue with his students.

Ben's response, however, reflected contrary understandings. He stressed that he has never avoided addressing a particularly controversial topic in his classroom because he does not believe that secular universities represent an environment that would quash attempts to discuss uncomfortable topics:

> Ben: The answer is no. You know this might be an issue in theological colleges. It won't be an issue in a secular university as far as I can tell.

His comment conveys that being reprimanded for addressing controversial topics is instead a more realistic and pressing concern for professors who teach at theological colleges. Ben's perception of secular universities as institutions that allow for and respect freedom of expression in multiple contexts compels him to believe that addressing divisive issues in his classroom will in no way jeopardize his career. For this reason he is perhaps unable to think of a circumstance in which exploring particular controversial issues will jeopardize his well-established career.

Ben's assertions that "[w]e don't have any constraints at all…or very few" at secular universities with regards to addressing controversial topics and that

"this might be an issue in theological colleges" are surprising. His assertions are overly assumptive because they suggest that secular universities are 'safer' environments to discuss particular topics than theological colleges. Further, educators are not always free to openly state their true perceptions at times because they are concerned with appearing 'fair' or because they fear having their perceived authority challenged (Hess, 2002). Thus, Ben's perceptions of secular universities as more encouraging of controversial issues discussions undermines the fact that, regardless of one's university environment, students will enter the classroom with contrasting perceptions regarding notions of acceptable controversial topics.

Interestingly, Ben also emphasizes that there are certain controversial topics that educators cannot avoid depending on what areas they are teaching about:

> Ben: I think it would depend on the course. If the course was on contemporary Middle Eastern Politics, it would be rather impossible not to talk about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. If it's say a course on the history of the Holocaust and Judaism, it's an element in the history in Judaism…but it's only one element.

Ben's assertion is corroborated by Shavelson and Stern's (1981) findings that educators' conceptions of their subject matter also influences their judgment and decisions about what they believe ought to be addressed with their students. Further, educators' conception of which controversial issues to address with their students depends to some extent on how they define their course and its topics. Thus, Ben's comments illustrate that educators' subject matter understanding also influences their selection of controversial topics to discuss with students.

The Racialization of Faith

Responses to the final question regarding the racialization of faiths, in particular Islam, yielded the most unexpected insights. Both interviewees were unfamiliar with the term racialization. As a result, before they could answer the question, I had to explain the various connotations of the term and provide concrete examples of what is meant by Islam's racialization. I initially assumed that perhaps both participants used the specific term 'racialization' as a term that informs their perceptions of rising Islamophobic sentiment post 9/11. As each interview progressed, I surprisingly realized that this was not the case. Though David did not answer this question directly, one particular experience while giving a public lecture reveals the process of racialization.

> David: There was a meeting at this university and I gave a talk. So there were some people in the audience of a Zionist background who opposed that [I was giving such a talk]. So you know, it's a matter of passion you know especially when they listen to a different perspectives about the Arab-Israeli conflict…basically saying you know that you Muslims are terrorists…Palestinians, Arabs…all of you are terrorists (these words were spoken by a disgruntled and pro-Zionist man in the audience). But people did not take him seriously. And this particular man got a hold of my address and he began to send me nasty emails until I stopped him.

The dominance of Orientalism as an embedded discourse that continues to vilify the presumed 'other' results in a monolithic portrayal of Islam and its adherents; a form of which is Islam's racialization (Joshi, 2006). This is evident in David's experience giving a public lecture on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Thus, although David did not suggest that Islam is undergoing racialization, his comments recognize that there is an obvious controversy that is taking place. Ben's response also did not directly address whether or not it is possible for faiths

to undergo the process of racialization. His comments, however, indicate an awareness of the invisible nature of phobia. Ben asserts:

> It's actually complex because one of the features of any kind of phobia is that it's invisible. So Islam is quote, unquote terrifying because a Muslim can be White or can be Black or Brown and you never know. So you know having phenomena like Chechniya really means that you don't know who a Muslim is.

While Ben indicates that Muslims are not an ethnically monolithic group and illustrates how at times it is difficult to visibly identify who is a Muslim, his comments do not explain why many individuals assume that Muslims are usually Arab or South Asian (Joshi, 2006). Moreover, his comments contradict Zine's (2004) findings from an activity in which elementary students were asked to select Muslim individuals from a photograph. Most students assumed that the 'coloured' individuals in the photograph were the only Muslims. Everyone in the photograph however, including Caucasian individuals, were Muslims. The notion that phobia is 'invisible' contradicts the fact that Islamophobia is quite visible. Further, Ben's comment does not explain why students who participated in Zine's study associated visible minorities with Islam. Thus, Ben's insights insufficiently address how Islamophobia originates in part out of othering specific racial groups.

The professors I interviewed both acknowledge that while students enter classrooms with preconceived ideas about Islam and other faiths, students were not yet susceptible to producing 'final ideas' of other peoples and their belief systems largely due to their young age and the fact that their perceptions are continuing to develop. In particular, David emphasizes that many students enter his classroom with thin understandings of Islam and Muslims. Both professors

recognized that it is imperative for them to expose students to different ways of knowing that address the complexities that often result in the production of negative stereotypes. Their experiences also indicate that presenting perspectives that many of their students are unfamiliar with helps students to address misconceptions.

Most significantly, the interviews strongly captured how teachers' instructional decisions are largely shaped by their personal definitions of what constitutes controversy, the degree to which they regard academic institutions as representing structures that value freedom of thought and expression and how they perceive student engagement with their ideas and courses. The interviewee's unique conceptions especially of controversy and the discussion of controversial issues related to religion underscores how educators' readings of controversy, controversial topics, assumptions about their students and confidence either encourages the discussion of particular issues or completely impedes specific discussions from taking place.

These findings suggest that there is a great need and space to explore the extent to which teachers' readings of controversy not only influence their instructional choices, but also their curriculum decisions. Engaging in such a study in the future will perhaps also emphasize that available curricula not only determines what concepts and ideas teachers address with their students, but also how there are specific factors related to teachers' thought processes that guide their selection of topics to elaborate in their classrooms.

Chapter Five

Insights and Possibilities

As I begin the final chapter of my MEd thesis, I have only started to understand the extent to which teachers' readings of the subject matter they teach, their religious traditions, religious traditions they do not prescribe to and conceptualization of what constitutes politically relevant matters informs their instructional decisions with regards to addressing controversial topics that are related to religion and especially the racialization of Islam and Muslims. What is both interesting and unsettling is how profoundly our personal readings strongly dictate what we are comfortable with and willing to address with our students. From a social justice standpoint, it is disconcerting that as educators we may at times refrain from discussing specific 'controversial' issues because we do not perceive them to be so although they may be integral matters to many given global and local media representations of politicized interpretations of various religions. If some educators remain either aloof or resistant to reflecting upon how their readings of controversial topics and particular media images, for example, impinge on certain discussions from taking place in their classrooms, it will be incredibly challenging for students to recognize the implications of reiterated negative stereotypes about specific groups and religious traditions.

The role played by media in creating negative stereotypes requires a shift in what we consider controversial. We should perhaps focus on aiming for greater reflexivity with regards to how 'our' readings of the subject areas we teach, various historical trajectories, identification or non-identification with religion and

media texts inform what we truly regard as important and worthy of teaching. Related to this, we must also strive to unravel how our discomfort with familiarizing ourselves with perspectives that are unfamiliar and difficult to digest also informs our pedagogical choices. Such notions indicate that there is space and great need to continually re-question how our personal perceptions guide our thought processes and actions in and outside the classroom.

Examining these questions will perhaps have the potential to help shape public education policy and secondary social studies curriculum creation in a manner that helps students, parents and teachers gain greater comfort when addressing potentially troubling issues. Further, seriously reflecting on such questions will likely also help address the need for educators to address the entwined nature of thoughts, feelings and emotions.

At the end of chapter one of my thesis, I asked the question: 'What factors inform teachers' instructional decisions regarding the teaching of potentially controversial topics, especially about religion in general and the contemporary racialization of Islam and Muslims specifically?' Based on my work with these two professors, I am surprised by the degree to which personal readings greatly influence their pedagogical approaches in relation to taking up controversial topics.

Interview responses suggest that notions of what constitutes controversy is both impossible to define in a monolithic sense and largely reflects the interviewee's personal understandings of several factors:

a) what is permissible to discuss with their students,

b) what will be accepted by their students as appropriate to discuss,

c) what is appropriate to discuss in the context of the faith tradition or traditions that that particular course is designed around,

d) how past experiences with unfavorable student responses to interviewee's instructional choices have impacted their preceding elucidations of various scriptural interpretations within a faith tradition and teaching as an 'outsider', e)their predetermination of whether some of their students will accept the discussion of marginalized topics related to religio-political and cultural matters .

My participants conveyed that elucidating controversial topics in one's classrooms will at times inevitably result in student tension related to exposure to unfamiliar ideas or criticisms of deeply held values and perceptions.   The narratives that both professors shared underscored that instances in which a few students that approached particular aspects and interpretations of Islam and Judaism from an extremely narrow framework happened in circumstances where the professors were not anticipating such incidents. Further, during these situations, the professors were not prepared with a systematic approach to swiftly handle these outbursts. Ben emphasized that he was "taken by surprise" when one of his students accused him of being anti-Zionist during a class discussion on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. When I asked Ben how he responded to his student's comment, he admitted that he did not handle the situation very well. Because of this incident, however, Ben emphasized that he now has a greater comfort handling similar comments. Ben's comments suggest that it is beneficial for

teachers to accept that they do not have control over many situations in their classrooms and that they will inevitably face situations in which they are initially unsure of how to best address the situation. In circumstances where students voice perspectives that disrespect and invalidate the beliefs of other students and are situated within extremist paradigms, Ben emphasizes that the best thing teachers can do in these situations is to first reflect on what is taking place. Following reflection, Ben suggests that teachers should intervene and explain the complexities of the issue or topic that was addressed via presentation of various historical perspectives if applicable.

David and Ben emphasized that they are both comfortable discussing controversial topics with their students and are not hesitant to do so. Further discussions of comfort levels related to teaching about controversial topics revealed that the professors' individual readings of controversy and what they regarded as appropriate, acceptable and permissible within their universities indicated contrasting perceptions of what contemporary religio-political issues of controversy are, what topics constitute the most important topics to discuss, and what perhaps ought to be avoided.

Ben and David's contrasting perceptions of controversial topics was made especially evident when they were asked to provide examples of topics that they would perhaps avoid discussing with their students and why. David noted that he has never in the past nor will he in the future discuss homosexuality within the context of his Islamic Studies courses because he believes that such discussions are too controversial. He believes that a majority of his Muslim students reject

any legitimacy for homosexuality. As a result, David's instructional choices are perhaps shaped by his perceptions of not receiving a shared consensus amongst his students regarding homosexuality in Islam (Hess, 2002).

Ben, however, does not regard the discussion of homosexuality as controversial in his Judaism classes. He realizes that the narratives of gay Jewish men and women he shares in class will cause some discomfort for some students. These differences reveal how the professors' personal perceptions of homosexuality influence their willingness to address homosexuality with their students. What Ben and David believe their students will interpret as appropriate and relevant topics for discussion significantly determines their decisions either to avoid or engage specific controversial topics (Merryfield, 1993; Shavelson & Stern, 1981; Hess, 2002). Such claims, however, perhaps indicate that avoiding topics that students may find inappropriate is a guise for what the professors themselves regard as unpalatable and unworthy of discussion. In light of such responses, it is necessary to ask, do teachers' readings of controversy limit the potential of fruitful discussions to emerge?

Do some teachers reinforce certain unfavorable perceptions of specific groups of people and related faith traditions when they avoid 'controversial issues'?

Ben noted that he has not watched the news to demonstrate whether or not it is saturated with Islamophobic terms and sentiments. Ben and David both believe that their students would not voice in the classroom a belief that Islam is an inherently violent faith and that all Muslims are terrorists for example. These

comments appear to suggest that because Ben and David assume that their students will not voice such opinions in their classes or that there is no need to foster such discussions, they will likely not encourage discussions that speak to prevalent global media images that quite often present monolithic portrayals of Islam and Muslims and fail to elucidate the geo-political, historical and economic complexities that enshrine acts of violence committed in the name of Islam (Boswell, 2011). Based on our interviews, I gather that these professors do not address certain controversial topics such as the racialization of Islam and Muslims because they do not believe them to be controversial.

Differences and Reconciliation

While both professors underscored that all students enter their classrooms with preconceived ideas, they both interpreted the idea of assumptions in contrasting ways. Ben, for example, spoke of scriptural assumptions regarding the Bible as 'code of truth rather than being a human document. David situated the production of assumptions within the context of his Islamic Studies classes as arising from his perception that the majority of his students are situated in Christian backgrounds, and thus, have limited understandings and exposure to Islam. Both professors, however, emphasized that students' youth, and naivety led them to have unfavorable perceptions or politicized interpretations of other faith traditions. Their assumptions that individuals' young ages produce narrow perceptions is rather surprising because it does not explain why extremist readings of various world faiths are often produced by seemingly 'mature' individuals. The literature reviewed, however, does not indicate that students' age and maturity

levels makes them more susceptible to accepting simplistic representations of particular controversial topics. Further, the literature emphasized how the failure to address with students how media presentations of Islam and Muslims as fixed in nature quite often results in the perpetuation of unchallenged Islamophobic perceptions (Abbas, 2004; Berkson, 2005; Burr, 2005; Hamdon, 2010; Kilroy, 2004; Niyozov, 2010; Perry & Poynting, 2006; Watt, 2008; Zine (2004); Zine (2006)

Professors' responses indicate the importance of providing ample opportunities for educators to re-examine how their instructional choices impact students' perceptions of religion. Reflecting in such a manner is not in any way intended to accuse educators of their pedagogical short comings, but instead is geared towards creating dialogue amongst teachers, policy creators, curriculum developers, scholars and teacher educators in order to better recognize how stakeholder's personal readings of curricula, policy and many other texts considerably inform what topics speak to meaningful student learning. How can teachers help students become media literate for example, if some teachers are unfamiliar with or fail to recognize particular politically motivated representations of religio- political others. If some teachers, for example, do not read the media in particular ways and are cognizant of particular happenings while perhaps ignoring or diminishing the importance of others, how will we be able to adequately prepare our students for the complexities of living in a post-modern world that is fraught with numerous economic and political tensions produced out of religion?

Encountering Resistance

Although both professors recognized the role of popular media presentations in perpetuating negative stereotypes with regards to presentations of particular faith groups, especially Islam and Muslims, they both suggest that Canadians are protected from such because of Canada's multicultural nature. Further, both professors seem to believe that Islam is not becoming an increasingly racialized faith. They both however do recognize that it is plausible to suggest that religions can undergo the process of racialization. During my conversations with professors regarding Islam's racialization, I found it both interesting and surprising that their comments did not refer to global media portrayals of Islam especially following 9/11 and how these images have triggered much anti-Islamic and anti-Muslim sentiment in Canada. Their assertions that their students do not view Muslims in Canada as the 'alien other' and that people's interactions is at odds with scholarly literature conducted in a Canadian context and recent studies conducted regarding Canadian perceptions of Muslims and Islam (Berkson, 2005; Burr, 2005; Boswell, 2011; Niyozov, 2010; Watt, 2008; Zine, 2001; Zine, 2003; Zine, 2006). As well, these conversations again referred to how their students' young age does not allow for the production of lasting and unfavorable perceptions of Islam and Muslims. Thus, while interviewees recognized the popular media's role in shaping their students' perceptions, they did not view the media's role as detrimental to students' perceptions given their understanding of Canada as a truly multicultural nation.

Recognizing Potential

While interviewees held contrasting perspectives of controversial topics within their Religious Studies classrooms, both professors recognized the importance of exposing their students to controversial topics and underscored the need for frequent class explorations of controversial topics as a means to challenge preconceived ideas and to provide opportunities to address and challenge students' deeply held beliefs and values. Both professors believed that their courses challenge their students to grasp the complexities surrounding geo-political tensions and global relations in a post 9/11 context. While they perceived controversial topics in contrasting ways, they both were committed to providing continued opportunities for their students to engage with 'difficult knowledge'.

Reconciling Findings with Expectations

I am very thankful for the time participants found for our interviews, for the interest and enthusiasm they voiced with regards to my research question and implications for their own practice and for secondary classrooms. Interviewees offered helpful insight pertaining to how perceptions of their religion in general, their religious background, other faiths, assumptions about their students' understanding of religion as 'insiders' and 'outsiders' and their understanding of controversy shapes their instructional decisions. Their conceptions of controversy and controversial topics produced interesting insights regarding what educators regard as both acceptable and appropriate to discuss in their classrooms.

What Next

At the commencement of my research for my MEd thesis, I initially sought to specifically identify whether or not it is possible and feasible to teach about religion in general and Islam specifically within the context of secular public schools in Edmonton. I had no intention of identifying how educators, in response to their personal perceptions, conceptualize controversy and controversial topics. Further, I was not initially exploring how teachers' pedagogical choices either enhance or hinder their abilities to address topics that quite often are met with discomfort and passionate sentiments.

With regards to future research, there are numerous entry points for further investigation. Such avenues for investigation include: incorporating the voices of a large sample of secondary social studies teachers, including a larger sample of religious studies professors, engaging in a critical analysis of pre-service teacher programs, with a special focus on the language used in these courses and accompanying course material and how the language of these courses at times may produce specific ideas regarding how teachers ought to teach, what teachers should be teaching and how these courses may limit the teachers' individuality with regards to how they wish to formulate their pedagogies. Future research will possibly include the perspective of students and how they conceive of religion and whether they believe that discussing religion is actually controversial and perhaps undesirable from their perspectives.

Is there perhaps a remarkable difference in perceptions amongst secondary teachers and students about their conceptions about whether or not learning about

and discussing religion within the context of salient political events invites unwanted controversy and an abundance of conflicting values? Is there a difference in these perceptions amongst secular and denominational schools?

Does the lack of acceptance for teacher and students' emotions and feelings within our schools limit the potential for fruitful and promising discussions to take place with regards to religion and addressing the complexities surrounding the tragic events of September 11, 2001? Is it possible for public education policy makers and curriculum developers to fashion their policies and curricula in a more humanistic manner that places greater emphasis on the uniqueness of each individual, rather than focusing primarily on the collective?

How do educators' worldviews and pedagogical practices that are solely shaped by Enlightenment philosophies at times impinge on their abilities to explore and address contentious issues, including religion, with their students?

One of the areas I have been interested in exploring in my MEd thesis since the commencement of my research is whether or not it is possible from a policy and curricular standpoint to include religion within the context of diversity in Alberta Learning's Program of Studies for Social Studies and create a section that specifically addresses teaching about world religions and the unceasing intersection between faith and politics. I continue to contemplate what such an addition to the social studies program of studies will look like. Could such an addition to the program of studies be palatable to most but not all teachers, parents and students? Is addressing such ideas in the program of studies too daunting and

anxiety provoking for both teachers and students? What is perhaps at stake if religion remains absent from the program of studies?

I have discovered through the process of researching and writing for my thesis that areas of investigation regarding the role and place of religion in secular social studies classrooms and how teachers' readings of the subjects they teach and their students' abilities are infinite. My understanding of the ways in which public schools choose and choose not to engage the religious identities of their students and incorporate teaching about religion via social studies has significantly deepened and as a result, I am even more convinced of the importance and need for our public schools to become sites that welcome teaching about religion. I am cognizant of the fact that my contribution and commitment to carrying out such research has been largely framed my personal narrative and experiences residing in a turbulent geo-political post 9/11 landscape. I sincerely endeavor to help shape and contribute to such discourse in the near future.

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<u>**Appendix A**</u>

<u>**Information Letter**</u>

March 26, 2011

Dear Professors:

I am a graduate student in the department of Secondary Education and am interested in exploring how particular factors and situations impact the manner in which secondary school teachers address faith traditions, in particular, Islam in their classrooms. You are invited to participate in a study about the factors and conditions that impact educators' instructional decisions in regards to teaching religion in general and Islam specifically. In order to determine your views, you are invited to volunteer to participate in an in person, one-on-one, semi-structured interview. This study, entitled "Addressing Religion and other Contentious Issues in Edmonton Secondary Schools", will acquire feedback from Religious Studies professors in three primary areas: 1) how you have challenged the perpetuation of social stocks of knowledge in your classrooms, 2) how you are able to elucidate seemingly controversial matters in your classrooms and 3) whether or not it is possible for faiths to undergo the process of racialization.

The study has one component – an in person, semi-structured interview. The interview will take approximately one hour to complete. The interview will be scheduled at a time and place of your convenience. After the interview, I will write a summary of what you said and send it to you by email for verification. You are welcome to make any changes desired to the summary and return it to me within two weeks following the scheduled interview.

The interview questions are designed to ascertain how you have approached the discussion of controversial topics related to religion in your classrooms.

Examples of interview questions include: 1a) Have you experienced any challenges or tensions in the classroom regarding the discussion of seemingly controversial topics related to religion as a religious studies professor? If so, please elaborate. b) In what ways do you challenge social stocks of knowledge in the classroom? 2) Do you feel comfortable discussing controversial topics in your classroom? For example, if you were discussing the intersection between faith and politics, would you address the question that Islam is often regarded as an inherently violent faith in your classroom? If yes, please indicate what techniques you would use to create discussions on this topic? If no, please explain why you would prefer to refrain from engaging in such a discussion.

Participation in this study is voluntary and you are free to opt out or withdraw from the study at any time. Withdrawal of participation from this study should take place no later than two weeks following the completion of the scheduled

interview.

Participating or not participating in this study is a personal matter. No other participant will know your decision. In the analysis of the data and future research and papers your identities will remain completely anonymous. Pseudonyms will be used to guarantee anonymity and any means of identifying you (i.e. name, years of experience, participation in which program, courses taught, specializations) will not be used in reporting the findings All documents will be handled completely by the researcher and supervisor and stored in a secure location only accessible to the researcher. Interviews will be recorded to facilitate writing summary transcripts. Summaries will be sent to participants via email to ensure member checks take place. You will be free to delete, add or clarify. The tapes will be part of the data that will be kept on file for five years. Thus, tape recorded voices will not be heard by anyone except for the researcher and supervisor.

The data from this project will be used in my Master's thesis, and perhaps for presentations, publications, or as an accompaniment to future doctoral research. Benefits of this study include having the opportunity to discuss, debate and discover plausible solutions to decreasing Islamophobia and the process of racialization in a post 9/11 climate.

Thank you,

Zahra Kasamali
B.Ed, University of Alberta

Consent Form

Factors that Impact Teaching about Islam in Edmonton Schools

Consent Form

I, _____, consent to be a participant in the study entitled ""Factors that impact teaching about Islam in Edmonton Schools". This project is led by Zahra Kasamali, under the supervision of Dr. Kent den Heyer, at the University of Alberta, and involves participating in an interview based on how assumptions regarding faith and specifically Islam are addressed in the classroom. I understand the primary task I will be asked to do is participate in an interview.

The interview will be recorded and a summary will be sent to me via email. I will have the opportunity to respond to or suggest revisions for the summary and return it to the researcher no later than two weeks following the scheduled interview..(i.e. Data will be validated by me as a participant and kept on file for a period of five years.). I may be contacted by e-mail for further clarification. I may withdraw from the project at any time without repercussions. All information gathered will be treated in a confidential manner. Any references to my words will appear under a pseudonym and my identity will be protected (no mention of my name, department, etc.). Data will be used for Zahra Kasamali's Master's thesis research. Data may also be used with my permission to strengthen and facilitate future doctoral research, or for conferences and publications.

The researcher will provide two copies of the letter and consent form, one to be signed and returned and one for me to keep for my own records.

Contact person in case of concerns, complaints or consequences.

Researcher: Zahra Kasamali (student) Department of Secondary Education, University of Alberta, Tel. 780-235-1251, Email: zahrak@ualberta.ca

Supervisor: Dr. Kent den Heyer (professor) Department of Secondary Education, 447 Education South, University of Alberta, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada, Tel. 780-492-4270, Email: kdenheye@ualberta.ca

Graduate Coordinator: Dr. Ingrid Johnston (professor) Department of Secondary Education, 845 Education South, University of Alberta, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada, Tel. 780-492-3751 Email: ingrid.johnston@ualberta.ca

_____   _____
Signature of participant   Date signed

The plan for this study has been reviewed for its adherence to ethical guidelines and approved by the Faculties of Education, Extension, Augustana and Campus Saint Jean Research Ethics Board (EEASJ REB) at the University of Alberta. For questions regarding participant rights and ethical conduct of research, contact the Chair of the EEASJ REB c/o (780) 492-2614.

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Appendix C

Interview Questions

1a) Have you experienced any challenges or tensions in the classroom regarding the discussion of seemingly controversial topics related to religion as a Religious Studies professor? If so, please elaborate

 b) In what ways do you challenge social stocks of knowledge in the classroom?

2) Do you feel comfortable discussing controversial topics in your classroom? For example, if you were discussing the intersection between faith and politics, would you address the question that Islam is often regarded as an inherently violent faith in your classroom? If yes, please indicate what techniques you would use to create discussions on this topic? If no, please explain why you would prefer to refrain from engaging in such a discussion.

3) When you deliver information related to a particular faith that you do not belong to, have you experienced feelings of intimidation, empowerment or a combination of both? Please elaborate.

4) When delivering information related to a particular faith that you do not belong to, have you ever experienced opposition or condescending remarks by students of that particular tradition? If yes, please indicate the events that transpired and share how such experiences impacted your proceeding classroom experiences.

5) Have you ever avoided discussing a particularly controversial topic in the classroom that you believed would benefit your students, perhaps jeopardize your career? If yes, please elucidate your experience.

6) Do you believe it is possible for faiths to undergo the process of racialization? If yes, please explain. Within the context of Islam, do you feel that Islamophobic tendencies have resulted in the racialization of Islam? If yes, please elaborate.