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Can I Keep My Religious Identity and Be a Professional? Evaluating the Presence of Religious Literacy in Education, Nursing, and Social Work Professional Programs across Canada

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Abstract: In much of the world, education, nursing, and social work are human-centred professions that aim to engage with individuals holistically. Yet, how much of their training prepares them for this manifold reality? In this article, we provide an overview of three Canadian societal contexts, examine the literature on religious literacy in higher education and in the Canadian context, and study the professional programs of education, nursing, and social work offered in the top-ranked universities in the three largest English-speaking provinces in Canada. We describe the incorporation of the *Calls to Action* issued by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada and the limited evidence of religious literacy evident in the online information provided about the chosen programs and then argue that religious literacy is a necessary component of the university preparation programs for those entering these human-centred professions. Student requests for religious literacy workshops provided by the Centre for Civic Religious Literacy (CCRL), a non-religious and non-profit organization that works with partners in communities across Canada, demonstrate a demand for such education.

Keywords: religious literacy; higher education; education; nursing; social work; Canada



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1. Introduction

We believe a form of education about religion called religious literacy is publicly relevant and essential in the preparation programs of the three human-centred professions of education, nursing, and social work. Teachers shape and guide students by instilling civic values and attitudes as well as developing the skills needed for social and economic flourishing. Nurses care for people during illness, when lives and livelihoods are changing, especially for patients who are at the end of their lives. Social workers care for the most vulnerable and often those who are marginalized. In Canada, these professionals are required to teach, care for, and support the individual in a holistic manner. For example, Alberta's social studies curriculum acknowledges religion and spirituality as factors of identity [1]. These professionals also operate within complex and sometimes competing social contexts, including those that are highly secularized, religiously diverse, and where religious discrimination occurs. Such contexts highlight the importance of how professionals interact with and respect their student/patient/client identities, including the religious and spiritual aspects of those identities. Thus it is important to investigate how university programs prepare professionals to engage with religion, spirituality, beliefs, and practices. Universities must be attuned to this aspect of human identity and continue to critically evaluate how their programs respect and include both those who self-identify as religious and those who are unaffiliated with organized religion. Such an evaluation is vital at this moment as religious literacy is lacking at the same time as the Canadian population is increasingly religiously diverse.

In this article, we first discuss the coinciding contexts of secularization, increasing religious diversity, and religious discrimination that exist in Canada. Then we introduce

the theories and frameworks related to religious literacy in different settings, including post-secondary education and Canada more generally. Through these lenses, we document the current (lack of) instruction about religious, spiritual, and non-religious Canadians in Canada's top teacher, nursing, and social work programs in British Columbia, Alberta, and Ontario. To conclude, we discuss our analysis in relation to pilot programs offered by the Centre for Civic Religious Literacy.

When discussing religion, it is important to note that religion is not an independent category; rather, it iteratively interacts with ethnicity [2] and culture [3] (p. 54). However, given the dominance of Christianity in Canadian history and the relatively recent religious diversity resulting from migration, it is important to heed religious studies (RS) and legal scholar Lori Beaman's warning that,

If what was previously known as religion is recast as culture, then a majority "religion" becomes invisible in the public sphere, transformed into a matter of culture, heritage, and values. This has the effect of making minority religions' claims to public space even more visible-for, while "ours" is culture, part of our heritage and values, theirs is "religion" and foreign. [4] (pp. 54–55)

It is the barriers facing members of non-Christian religious groups and the importance of religion to many newcomers that prompt us to focus on religion. This is not to dismiss the equally important identity components of race, culture, and gender, but to highlight an aspect of identity that is too often oversimplified in some instances and overlooked in others.

2. Canadian Contexts

2.1. Secularization

Those unfamiliar with the history of post-secondary institutions in Canada might be surprised to learn that Christian denominations established several of the oldest universities dotting the English-speaking Canadian academic landscape. (We focus on English-speaking provinces of Canada because the contexts of French-speaking Quebec differ substantially regarding encounters with religion and both the historical and current response to religion in public education.) The oldest were founded in Nova Scotia, where the Church of England (the Anglican Church) established King's College in 1789, followed in 1802 with the creation of Saint Mary's University by Catholics. Dalhousie University followed in 1818, intended for students outside of the Church of England, but as it soon aligned with the Presbyterian Church of Scotland, Baptists founded Acadia University in 1838, and Catholics opened Saint Francis Xavier University in 1866. Outside of Nova Scotia, Methodists established Mount Allison University in New Brunswick in 1839 and Victoria College in Ontario in 1841. In the same year, Presbyterians founded Queen's University and seven years later Catholics established the University of Ottawa, both in Ontario [5,6]. Christianity significantly influenced all levels of education until 1960, so that "the vast majority of schools in Canada, whether public, separate, private, elementary, secondary, or post-secondary, were confessional schools" [5] (pp. 291–292). The deep entanglement of Christianity with education and the Canadian nation-building project made the mainstream Christian denominations an obvious partner with the Canadian state in the operation of Indian Residential Schools that systematically segregated, discriminated, and harmed Indigenous peoples across Canada for generations [7].

Today Canadian public universities are secular, having secularized in different periods prior to 1960. Although the University of Toronto secularized in 1849 [8], historian Michael Gauvreau argued that Methodist and Presbyterian colleges remained culturally relevant and engaged with those in the pews until the 1920s, even as they encountered modern scientific thought [9]. Recently, RS Professor David Seljak wrote that among Canadian universities throughout the 20th century, "entire departments in the humanities and social sciences did their work not only as if God did not exist but also *as if religion did not exist*. If studied at all, religion was most frequently reduced to other social forces . . ." [10] (p. 141, italics in original). The concomitant "virtual exclusion of religion from public discourse" re-

sulted in a form of religious illiteracy that continues to find many Canadians ignorant about all religions [11] (p. 5). Members of the non-Christian religions pay the steepest price for such religious illiteracy, claimed Bramadat, as they experience stereotypes, discrimination, and misguided public policies [11].

Despite the history of secularization in Canada, which is similar to other western countries, each of the three professions studied in this article have their own historical relationship with religion, particularly Christianity. Kindergarten to grade 12 public education began decoupling its structure from overt Christian practices in the early 1990s in most provinces except BC, where public education was always secular [12]. However, secularization and de-Christianization did not solve the thorny issue of religion in public education. In the late 1990s, journalist Lois Sweet travelled across the country visiting all types of schools to discern the nature and scope of education about religion. In *God in the classroom*, Sweet documented the fear with which most teachers approached teaching about religion, a fear Sweet lamented [13]. Later, Seljak noted that the de-Christianization of schools has led to the removal of religion from school curriculum, which yielded high rates of religious illiteracy and provided few opportunities for those belonging to non-Christian religions who wished to educate their children into particular religious identities. Indeed, argued Seljak, “Many groups found the secular, public school culture no less inhospitable to their values and identities than its Christian predecessor” [14] (p. 179).

The creation of prayer rooms helped ameliorate the situation, although the vocal resistance to Friday Muslim prayers in the Peel District School Board in southern Ontario during the 2016–2017 school year revealed significant discontent among some parents towards religious accommodations, specifically accommodations for Muslim students [15]. Momina Khan, “a minority mother of four Muslim Canadian children” recounted a conversation that occurred in her son’s grade 12 psychology class about the 2015 attack on Charlie Hebdo in Paris [16] (p. 46). When a female Muslim student problematized simplistic student understandings about the event, the teacher became uncomfortable with the resulting heated discussion and quickly ended the conversation. Khan was left wondering whether educators have “reflected upon how minority children negotiate religious identities in the public-school context” (p. 45). Clearly, contestations over the role of religion in public education remain.

Nursing in Canada has similar religious roots, many of them in religious orders, and it was not until 1982 that the Canadian Nurses Association (est. 1908) professionalized nursing education by convincing provinces to institute the university baccalaureate as the minimum education necessary to become a nurse [17]. Similarly to education, the de-Christianization of nursing led some nurses to experience the situation as a complete removal of all religion from nursing practices. In 1995, a nurse and senior instructor of nursing at Vancouver General Hospital was concerned about the paucity of information on religious diversity available for nurses. Kristine Griffith then wrote *The religious aspects of nursing care*, which has been updated four times and digitized in 2009 [18]. Griffith’s work is supported in *The ethic of care: A moral compass for Canadian nursing practice* which includes a chapter on religion and spirituality [19]. Religious practices are as important as ever, claimed the text’s author, and nurses are encouraged to adopt a “transcultural” approach that recognizes religious and spiritual diversity, including atheism. Parish nursing is validated and the importance of religion and spirituality during times of illness and impending death is highlighted. Other chapters include the subjects of gender and sexual orientation and nursing in trauma situations, especially with Indigenous peoples living with the implications of residential schools. (Nurses can also refer to Elizabeth Johnston Taylor’s edited volume titled *Religion: A clinical guide for Nurses*, Springer, 2012).

As for social work, Graham et al. traced the relationship between spirituality and social work in Canada, from the “overwhelming significance” of spirituality in the early development of social work to the absence of religion in the 1970s and 1980s, and to what Graham et al. referred to as a renaissance of religion in the 1990s, especially evident in the study of ecological movements and Aboriginal spirituality [20]. The renaissance

spawned the creation of the Canadian Society for Spirituality and Social Work. Graham and colleagues argued that “Personal and professional values are integral to social work teaching and practice . . . perhaps more than many other professions” (para 1, Introduction). The degree to which it actually does so in social work, as well as education and nursing, is the subject of the provincial case studies that follow. (There are also international Social Work principles and standards which recognize religion and spirituality as an aspect of human dignity and can be both a resource and obstacle in development: the IASSW Global Social Work Statement of Ethical Principles (2018), the IASSW and the International Federation of Social Workers’ (IFSW) Global Standards for Social Work Education and Training (2020)).

This section highlights the deep historical links between religion, particularly Christianity, and the professions of education, nursing, and social work. It also documents the secularization trends within these professions and subsequent academic concerns about the lack of religious knowledge among the Canadian public, including those in the professions under discussion. However, changes to immigration patterns and the resultant religious diversity throughout Canada, along with an increasing number of Canadians who are unaffiliated with organized religion, led to a renewed interest in religion and non-religion. Academics in Canada joined others from around the world in establishing institutes of religion, such as the Centre for Studies in Religion and Society at the University of Victoria in British Columbia (which studies religion, spirituality, and secularity) and the publicly funded research projects led by Lori Beaman: Religion and Diversity Project (2010–2017) and the current Nonreligion in a Complex Future Project. Such centres outside of Canada include the Religion and Public Life at Harvard Divinity School, which created the Religious Literacy Project in 2015 and in 2016 launched a symposium on Religious Literacy and the Professions, the Oxford Centre for Religion and Culture, and so many more.

2.2. Increased Religious Diversity

Since the 1960s, institutions and professions have dissociated from their religious foundations, and there has been a marked decline in religious affiliation among Canadians. The number of Canadians self-identifying as religious “nones” has steadily risen [21]. Yet there remains a substantial number of Canadians for whom religious and spiritual beliefs and practices are important. According to national data released by the Angus Reid Institute and Cardus, 80 percent of Canadians express “some openness to God and spirituality” with just under 50 percent identified as “spiritually uncertain”. Sixteen percent are “Religiously Committed”, nineteen percent are “Privately Faithful” and almost twenty percent are classified as “Non-Believers” [22]. In 2019, 54 percent of Canadians reported that their religious or spiritual beliefs were somewhat or very important in their lives [23]. Furthermore, the 2016 Census found that 21.9 percent of Canadians were foreign-born and that the five top places of birth for immigrants and recent immigrants arriving between 2011 and 2016 were India, China, the Philippines, the United Kingdom, and the United States—countries home to highly religious Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, Christian, and non-religious populations, among others [24]. Religion as a component of identity is especially true for newcomers [25]. As such, academic preparation for professions involving human relationships requires a significant understanding of individuals and community groups, including their religious, spiritual, or non-religious engagement with the world.

These changing demographics are matched by the dramatic growth in the Indigenous population, which coincided with the implementation of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and its subsequent report and *Calls to Action* [26]. The Indigenous population grew 19.5 percent from 2011 to 2016, compared to a 4.2 percent increase in the non-Indigenous population [27]. In 2016, the Indigenous population comprised 5 percent of the Canadian population, but it is projected to be 5.4 to 6.8 percent of the national population by 2041 [28]. These changes, especially in light of the *Calls to Action* to many of the human-oriented professions such as health, education, and social work, require the understanding of Indigenous spirituality in its many forms, be they religious or non-religious.

Despite these reasons for teaching about religion in educational systems, the problem according to Adam Dinham, Professor of Faith and Public Policy at Goldsmiths, University of London, is that “the period in which we didn’t talk well—or much—about religion—the 20th century, the period of secular dominance—leaves us precarious on the subject now, in practically every walk of life” [29] (p. 110). Thus, the co-existing reality of secularization amidst an increasingly diverse population has led to incidents of discrimination, which teachers, nurses, and social workers must face due to the nature of their profession.

2.3. Religious Discrimination

Beaman identifies several scholarly, media, and even personal responses to religious diversity: that it is problematic; that religious identities are essentialized; that conflict and harm are perceived as the inevitable result of difference; that the ongoing privileges of Christianity in western democracies are often ignored [30]. Once again, those who bear the brunt of such responses are members of non-Christian religions. For example, from December 2020 through early 2022, Edmonton police recorded 15 attacks against mostly Black Muslim women [31], prompting the Edmonton chapter of the Canadian Council of Muslim Women to call for action against Islamophobia.

Nationally, police-reported hate crimes based on religion are the second most common type of crime motivated by hate, following those based on race or ethnicity (Figure 1) [32]. In August 2022, Statistics Canada released the data for 2021 and noted the 72 percent increase of incidents since 2019, the year prior to the pandemic. Incidents of hate crime based on race or ethnicity topped 1700. The number of hate crimes based on religion was higher than the previous peak in 2017, increasing by 354 incidents, or 67 percent, from 2020. Based on reported data, the Jewish population is the religious group that consistently experiences the most hate crimes nationally, though they comprise only one percent of the population, followed by the Muslim population comprising three percent of the population, per the last Census that gathered data on religious demographics in 2011 [33,34]. The biggest change in 2022 compared to the previous year was the 260 percent increase of incidents against Catholics, likely connected to the discovery of unmarked graves at various sites of former residential schools, many run by the Roman Catholic Church. Crimes against Indigenous peoples, churches, and religious institutions following the discovery of these graves and deemed to be motivated by hate are included in the religion category.

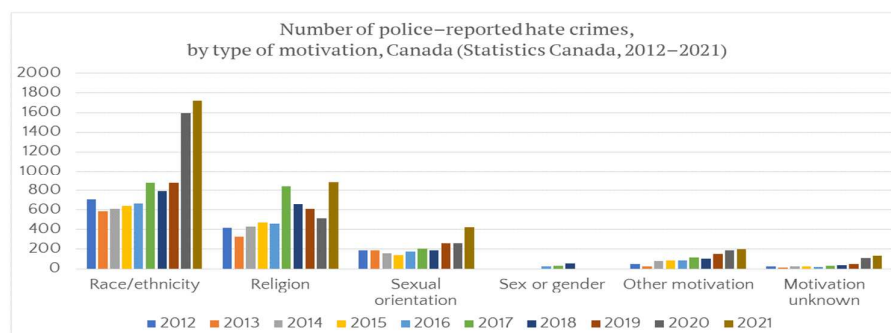


Figure 1. Statistics Canada hate crime data (2012–2020), compiled and depicted by the Centre for Civic Religious Literacy.

The intersectionality within Indigenous communities also creates layers of complexity in cases of religious discrimination. In recent years, this is clear as some Indigenous peoples self-identify as Christians and a number of churches on First Nation reserves have been burned down [35].

Among youth, with whom teachers and social workers may engage, an added reality is religious bullying—bullying that occurs between and among religious and non-religious individuals [36]. In the Peel District School Board, one of the largest public school boards in Canada, the World Sikh Organization (WSO) of Canada conducted two surveys about

religious bullying experienced by Sikh students, one in 2011 and one in 2016. In 2016, 27 percent of students surveyed said that they were bullied for their Sikh identity [37]. Among these students, 57 percent reported these incidents to school officials. While 51 percent felt that their concerns were addressed, 40 percent of the students did not.

It is within these contexts of the evolving nature and role of religion in Canadian history and the Canadian population that we examine how universities prepare students for religious diversity and literacy within the three professions of education, nursing, and social work. Our purpose is to determine the degree to which religion and/or spirituality, practices, and beliefs are overtly included in online program descriptions, required courses, and electives. Recent research reveals that discussions about the role of religion are already underway in the professions of business, law, social media, and journalism in some contexts [38].

To situate our study, we review the literature on religious literacy in post-secondary education, the level of education which prepares new professionals. The subsequent section highlights the intergroup contact theory, which speaks to the value of interacting with those who are different from oneself and going beyond content knowledge of religious literacy into skills and application in professional and daily life.

3. Literature Review

3.1. Religious Literacy and Higher Education

The concept of “religious literacy” was popularized by Stephen Prothero in 2007 with the publication of *Religious literacy: What every American needs to know—and doesn’t*. As an RS professor, Prothero noticed religious, mostly biblical, illiteracy among university students. Prothero believed religious illiteracy limited the students’ ability to understand and fully engage with literature, culture, civics, and international events and peoples. Thus the aim of Prothero’s call to religious literacy was one of civic engagement, in which citizens have “the ability to understand and use in one’s day-to-day life the basic building blocks of religious traditions—their key terms, symbols, doctrines, practices, sayings, characters, metaphors, and narratives” [39] (p. 15).

Although Prothero popularized the term, many others also promoted religious literacy. Harvard RS scholar Diane Moore published *Overcoming religious illiteracy: A cultural studies approach to the study of religion in secondary education*, which defined religious literacy as “the ability to discern and analyze the fundamental intersections of religion and social/political/cultural life through multiple lenses” [3] (p. 56). Later, Moore chaired a task force established by the American Academy of Religion (AAR) to create guidelines for American K–12 public schools to teach about religion [40]. Published in 2010 by the AAR, the guidelines promoted a religious studies approach based on religious literacy and are featured on the site of the Religious Freedom Centre. Moore then contributed to the *Religious Studies Companion Document for the C3 Framework* of the National Council for the Social Studies. Added to the C3 Framework in 2017, the *Companion Document* affirmed how a non-devotional religious studies program develops students’ “ability to understand religions as diverse and dynamic, to explain how religions change over time, and to analyze how culture affects religion and religion affects culture” [41] (p. 93).

Harvard’s Religion and Public Life program continues to support teachers with resources. Additionally, Moore recently worked with the AAR once again to establish the AAR Religious Literacy Guidelines for two- and four-year colleges [42]. The Guidelines outlined the basic abilities, or religious literacy, that all college graduates need to have about religion, regardless of their discipline of study. As the document stated, “**it is important for everyone to develop a capacity to understand how religious perspectives of others shape behaviors**. For example, students training in healthcare careers need to learn how religious beliefs affect a person’s willingness to seek care or accept certain treatments” [42] (Appendix A, FAQ. 4, bold in original).

Outside of the US, British sociologist Grace Davie stressed the importance of religious literacy. Davie wrote that “I am deeply committed to the notion of religious literacy as

such . . . Religious literacy must be engaged in context: getting it right can make all the difference; getting it wrong can make a tricky situation even worse" [43] (p. vii). In Britain, which shares similar contexts to Canada, Davie noted that many Britons are poorly equipped to respond to their new religious pluralism. Decades of secularism have left them without the knowledge and imagination to assess the strongly held religious identities evident in the Rushdie affair or the events of 9/11. What is needed, Davie intoned, is more religious literacy, and universities are a key location to start developing such knowledge. From there it needs to expand to the media, various professions, and government agencies.

A strong proponent of religious literacy in post-secondary education is Dinham, who noted an "urgent need [for the public sphere] to re-skill its public professionals and citizens for the daily encounter with the full range of religious plurality" [29] (p. 110). Through their work with the Religious Literacy Leadership in Higher Education Programme and the desire to prepare students to engage with religious pluralism, Dinham and Jones summarized the aim of RS "as seeking to inform intelligent, thoughtful and rooted approaches to religious faith that countervail unhelpful knee-jerk reactions based on fear and stereotype" [44] (p. 6). To address the varying purposes and definitions of religious literacy, Dinham and others developed a framework that portrayed religious literacy as a journey involving four phases that they subsequently applied to professional education programs, especially social work [44–47]. Phase 1 is called "categorization" in which professionals are invited to think about how they and the individuals and communities with whom they work conceptualize religion and beliefs. The term "religion" in this instance must be understood very broadly to incorporate all manner of lived realities, from Buddhism to Christianity to Zoroastrianism to secularism to non-religion to veganism and environmentalism.

Phase 2 is "disposition", which asks professionals to explore their own understandings and assumptions about religion and beliefs. Being aware of one's own beliefs, attitudes, and emotions about religion is central to thoughtfully engaging with diverse religions. Phase 3 is "knowledge", for which professionals must be open to learning about religion. Crisp and Dinham note that knowledge "recognises that the lived experiences of any religion or belief are fluid and permeable and can vary considerably, so that religiously literate professionals are those who are able to understand religion and belief as identity rather than tradition" [45] (p. 1548). Phase 4 is the development of "skills" or practice as informed by the preceding phases and research.

Dinham is concerned that those working in the human-centred professions are unprepared to interact with the religious pluralism that they will undoubtedly encounter. "Challenging the post-religious and secular assumptions which characterise universities in general, and health and social care training in particular, will be key to unlocking the conversation" [46] (para. 1, conclusion). In writing about a project that evaluated social work preparation programs in 11 different jurisdictions, including Canada, and using the religious literacy framework described above as an evaluative framework, Crisp and Dinham began by claiming that the social work profession largely ignores religion and belief and that new graduates feel ill-equipped to engage with the religious diversity they encounter in their work [45]. After describing the incoherent manner in which religion is taught in preparation programs internationally, Crisp and Dinham noted several common themes: (1) religion and belief are prioritized in places where they are believed to be problematic, which reifies "them as risky and difficult" [45] (p. 1557); (2) religion, spirituality, and belief are often elided when they are in fact highly differentiated categories, harming service users, "many of whom might object to the minimisation of their religion as spirituality, or vice versa" [45] (p. 1557); (3) the inclusion or exclusion of religion and spirituality is subject to decisions made by policymakers who create guidelines, but the religious literacy of the policy-makers is unknown; (4) although the inclusion of religion and spirituality under the categories of "anti-oppression" or "anti-discrimination" policies may make religion more palatable, it does not increase religious literacy and in a full curriculum it is the among the first items to be dropped.

Although Dinham, Crisp, and others are strong advocates for religious literacy, the concept has its critics. Education programs about religion in both K-12 and some postsecondary institutions have adopted the concept of religious literacy [40,44,48], although its role in education continues to be contested, in part due to secularization [49,50]. Some of the contestation is due to the varying purposes and definitions of religious literacy, raising such questions as whether it can be applied to various contexts, countries, and circumstances [51]; whether knowledge of religious truth claims is too easily reduced to lists of key concepts per Prothero, and how much religious literacy is needed to thoughtfully participate in society [48].

Additionally, learning about religious literacy is daunting, not least of all because there is extensive religious and spiritual diversity and a great variety of beliefs about meaning and purpose. No individual can be expected to be an expert on all or even one religion, belief system, or set of practices. Being open to learning is an important first step. A second step is to recognize that religious literacy exists within national contexts with particular histories.

3.2. Religious Literacy in Canada

Clearly, religious literacy does not pertain to reading and writing about religion. Rather, literacy in this sense—such as media literacy, science literacy, and sport literacy—goes beyond content knowledge see [52] and other new literacy scholars for more detail to encompass knowledge and skills to understand a complex topic. Research and the conversation in Canada indicate the need for a made-in-Canada framework that includes religious, spiritual, and non-religious identities. Team members from the Canada-based Centre for Civic Religious Literacy (CCRL) articulated four principles of religious literacy in Canada [53], which are now outlined on their website in five principles for greater clarity:

Religious literacy in Canada refers to:

1. Understanding the internal diversity within worldview groups;
2. Understanding the external diversity across worldview groups;
3. Recognizing the influence that socio-cultural, political, and economic aspects of society have on worldview groups, and vice versa, in the past and present;
4. Recognizing the need to include religious, spiritual, and non-religious worldviews in the full conversation;
5. Recognizing that worldviews hold a significant personal meaning to the religious, spiritual, and non-religiously affiliated individuals. This leads us to discuss these worldviews from an individual or community's distinct lens and not from the worldview of another person/group, and know that individuals who share the same worldview may have diverse beliefs, expressions, interpretations, and terminology to describe it based on a number of factors (such as personal circumstance, place, political context, etc.).

This conception builds on the works of Robert Jackson, Eleanor Nesbitt, Adam Dinham and Matthew Francis, and Beth Crisp, among others [54–59]. The Canadian approach is a response to the growing non-religious and Indigenous populations in the country, and a means to respond to the TRC's *Calls to Action* towards reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples in Canada.

Organizations like the CCRL believe that religious literacy can be a means to reduce or prevent discrimination experienced by students, patients, and clients, in large part because it views religion, spirituality, and non-religion as essential aspects of human identity. The desire to prevent discrimination is equally evident in the intergroup contact theory, which brings together individuals from in-groups and out-groups. It is the encounters of individuals from the opposite group, getting to know them in their differences, that offers the possibility of moving beyond discrimination. It is a theory that supports and extends the dispositions and abilities developed by religious literacy.

3.3. Intergroup Contact Theory

Gordon W. Allport, formerly Professor of Psychology at Harvard University, introduced the intergroup contact theory to address prejudice [60,61]. He stipulated that an encounter between in-groups and out-groups could dismantle prejudice if four criteria were followed: (1) equal status was maintained between groups, (2) common goals were set between groups, (3) cooperation was established between groups, and (4) institutional support was established for the contact being made. In a meta-analysis of the intergroup contact theory, Pettigrew and Tropp found that 94 percent of the 515 studies they reviewed showed that prejudice was lowered between interacting groups when contact is close and intimate in nature, and when contact is designed under Allport's criteria [62]. For example, one four-year study among 2000 undergraduates found that students at the University of California, Los Angeles reported a reduction in prejudice after they were randomly assigned to reside in dormitories with students of diverse ethnicities [63–65]. Another six-month study among secondary students in Germany, Belgium, and England found similar conclusions [66].

However, Allport recognized limitations to his theory. He found that the out-group/in-group boundaries were maintained when two common instances persisted—"re-fencing" and social norms. First, re-fencing occurs when in-group/out-group boundaries are re-drawn so that an individual can distinguish a member of a group they have interacted with from the rest of the group. As the member is singled out, they are associated with the negative views that pertain to the group, rather than the positive views about the group they belong to. Second, social norms can maintain boundaries in certain contexts when they are strong enough to lead individuals to act in conflicting ways in different situations towards certain out-groups. This occurred between Black and White coal miners in West Virginia pre-1960s when miners worked together in the mines but separated into their own racially segregated communities after work [67].

In a similar fashion, Religious Education Professor John Hull emphasized the need for contact in religious education in the UK, describing religious education as an encounter that introduced children and teachers to another world, one where they learn about the religion of other people [68] (p. 21). For Hull, an encounter could help students recognize the other and respect their own and others' differing worldviews in society.

Thus, religious literacy connects very well with the intergroup contact theory because, as a knowledge base and skill set, it requires an individual to consistently engage intellectually and ideally socially with others who are different from themselves. In this way, the out-group is consistently aware of and learning about the in-group, and vice versa. In order to engage fully, one needs to break beyond their preconceived notions and stereotypes—a goal that the intergroup contact theory can help achieve beyond head knowledge. Although Allport did not consider the intergroup contact theory specifically for religious education or religious literacy, he wrote that "there is something about religion that makes for prejudice and something about it that unmakes prejudice" [69] (p. 447), pointing to the two functions that religion can serve.

4. Methodology

Our purpose in this article is to assess the degree to which university professional programs equip their graduates to interact with religious plurality by providing them with some level of religious literacy. We chose the three professions of education, nursing, and social work, all of which fall under provincial jurisdiction, and all are highly relational. Teachers work with students all day long, nurses interact with myriad patients throughout a shift, and social workers embody an ethic of care as they work with diverse individuals and communities. Each profession has its own provincial or territorial governing bodies that connect with national organizations.

We study the three professional programs in the three most populous English-speaking provinces: British Columbia (BC), Alberta, and Ontario. For each profession we note the provincial standards of practice and code of ethics, paying particular attention to implicit

and explicit mentions of religion. Then we turn our attention to the universities preparing the new professionals, seeking one university baccalaureate program for each profession in each province. Although programs offer multiple pathways (for example, after-degree options), we focus on first-degree programs intended for students entering university with a high school diploma.

To select the universities, we used the Maclean's 2021 national ratings of universities and programs, or in the case of social work, EduRank's 2022 national ranking (which collapses undergraduate and graduate programs) [70,71]. Using Maclean's ratings has its own limitations as ranking was determined by academics identifying what they believed to be the top ten programs in their discipline based on what "they felt offered the best programs and conducted the best research in their discipline." (For more on the survey's methodology, see <https://www.macleans.ca/education/canadas-best-university-programs-2022-methodology/> accessed on 25 July 2022) Although we initially thought we would study the top-rated provincial programs in each of the three areas, we quickly discovered that doing so would narrow the scope of institutions examined as the programs receiving the highest ranking were dominated by the largest institutions in each province: the University of British Columbia (UBC), the University of Alberta (UofA), the University of Calgary (UofC), and the University of Toronto (UofT). To include a variety of institutions, we studied each institution only once, meaning that in some provinces we studied a second-ranked program. The order of the provinces we study reflects a movement from west to east across the country, and the order of programs is established alphabetically: education, nursing, and then social work.

We recognize the limitations of looking at online course programs and condensed course descriptions rather than studying course syllabi, as online information does not indicate what students learn in a course and program. A foundational course can, for example, include a one-week focus on religion and/or spirituality that does not appear in an online course description. We also recognize that courses may have an independent aspect in which students study a specific topic of their choosing, such as religion and spirituality. However, if religion and spirituality are indeed important to many Canadians and Indigenous peoples, if the TRC's *Calls to Action* are to be implemented, and if professional programs are to equip graduates with some level of religious literacy, then it is important for course programs to overtly reference religion and/or spirituality in some sense, given their significance to human identity and relationships. It is a matter of inclusion. When religion, spirituality, beliefs, practices, and non-religion are explicitly referenced in public documents, all students are valued and know that their identities are being respected.

5. Results

5.1. British Columbia

In education, Maclean's ranked UBC's program first in the province and tied for first place nationally; Simon Fraser University's (SFU) program ranked second in the province. UBC's nursing program was ranked in a three-way tie for first place nationally. EduRank listed UBC as having the third-ranked social work program nationally and the highest-ranking institution in BC, followed by the University of Victoria (UVic) in 12th place nationally. We chose to study the education program of SFU, the nursing program of UBC, and the social work program at UVic. As a reminder, only baccalaureate degrees are included in this study.

5.1.1. Bachelor of Education (BEd) at SFU

Education in British Columbia is governed by the *School Act* [72]) and teachers are certified by the Teacher Certification Branch of the BC Ministry of Education, with certification standards developed by the BC Teachers' Council. The latter also develops the professional standards for both teachers and teacher education programs [73]. The TRC's *Calls to Action* are reflected throughout the teacher standards by requiring teachers to value and respect

the worldview, cultures, and histories of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples, teach from First Nations, Inuit, and Métis perspectives, and contribute towards reconciliation.

Official documents within the BEd degree at SFU reflect the importance placed on the TRC *Calls to Action* and reconciliation. For example, the message from the Dean in the Preservice Professional Studies Student Handbook lists the program's three core values as "Equity, Indigeneity and Culture of Inquiry" along with a social justice orientation [74]. The Dean goes on to say,

We are grateful to Indigenous Elders and Knowledge Holders for their stewardship of the lands on which our three campuses stand. By acknowledging the traditional owners of these lands, we remind ourselves of Canada's longstanding colonial structures and systems and the need to take up our individual and collective responsibilities, humbly and respectfully, to an ongoing learning process of understanding Indigenous knowledge, histories, pedagogies, and ways of knowing and being. We also recognize the importance of attending to community through the Indigenous lens of the 4Rs (Respect, Relationships, Reciprocity, and Relevance). We do this by working together and using each opportunity we meet to gain and build trust through caring and respectful interactions. We also do this by creating inclusive learning environments that are free from racism, injustice and systems of oppression and that promote flourishing and dignity for all. [74] (p. 2)

This detailed message speaks to the complex reality and multi-layered need for understanding and recognition between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples in Canada today.

Undergraduate students may apply to the BEd at SFU after taking 60 credits in their undergrad but can obtain their BEd and be certified to teach only through the successful application to, and completion of, the Professional Development Program (PDP) in their final year. (Those admitted to the PDP with a prior degree can obtain a BEd as a second degree within the PDP. If they choose not to do so, they can still receive a teaching certificate. SFU also offers a Professional Linking Program, geared towards paraprofessionals already working in schools who are able to continue working while taking the program.) Several of the education minors (a requirement for the PDP) include the Multicultural and Anti-racist Education course, with the Social Justice in Education minor focusing on "patterns of social and educational injustice with an emphasis on the Canadian context, including responses to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action" [75].

The four-semester PDP portion of the BEd has no overt references to religion or spirituality on the webpage or in its program goals [76]. There is significant acknowledgement of the need for reconciliation with Indigenous peoples, but the social vectors impacting all students, including religion, spirituality, and non-religion, are not foregrounded. Thus, it is not clear that graduates have even a limited understanding of religious literacy as they enter classrooms. Although BC generally has a high number of residents who are religiously unaffiliated (40 per cent as of 2021), a variety of spiritualities are present in the province [77,78]. Additionally, BC receives a high number of immigrants where 28.3 percent of the population has immigrant status, and where the majority from 2011 to 2016 immigrated from China, India, the Philippines, Iran, and South Korea, all countries with high religious or non-religious populations [79]. The Government of British Columbia refers to itself as "the most ethnically diverse province in Canada" and with ethnic diversity comes religious diversity as well [80].

5.1.2. Bachelor of Science in Nursing (BSN) at UBC

Nursing is governed by the *Health Professions Act*, which establishes professional colleges, in this case, the British Columbia College of Nurses and Midwives (BCCNM) [81]. The College created entry-level competencies and Standards of Practice (grouped in three sets), both of which are consistent with national entry-level competencies adopted by the Canadian Council of Registered Nurse Regulators (CCRN) in 2018 and then approved by the BCCNM in 2021 [82].

The CCRNR created indicators for each of what were determined to be nine roles enacted by registered nurses (RNs). As a clinician, an RN “Adapts practice in response to the spiritual beliefs and cultural practices of clients” [82] (p. 7) and in their professional capacity, they “[Identify] the influence of personal values, beliefs, and positional power on clients and the health care team and [act] to reduce bias and influences” (p. 8). As leaders, RNs “[Acquire] knowledge of the Calls to Action of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada” (p. 10). The BCCNM further elaborated the importance of beliefs in its relational inquiry approach, in part described as:

Reflection on practice to gain deeper understandings and question assumptions are essential to the art of nursing Examining one’s own knowledge, assumptions and “blind spots” can address negative discriminatory values and beliefs in society associated with certain cultures and groups of people Such relational practices shed light on stigma and other prevalent barriers to health care for people and hold potential for their correction. [82] (p. 18)

Spiritual needs are mentioned in one additional reference. Indicator 1.2 states that a clinician “Conducts a holistic nursing assessment to collect comprehensive information on client health status” [82] (p. 6), where holistic is defined as:

A system of comprehensive or total patient care that considers the physical, emotional, social, economic, and spiritual needs of the person; his or her response to illness; and the effect of the illness on the ability to meet selfcare needs. [82] (p. 35)

Provincially, various agreements and commitments build on the TRC’s *Calls to Actions*. Health care regulators “signed a Declaration of Commitment with the First Nations Health Authority of BC to support cultural safety and humility towards making the health system more culturally safe for Indigenous people” [82] (p. 27). The BCCNM incorporated the commitment in its vision of person-centred care and developed provincial interpretive considerations that necessitated the approaches of cultural safety, humility, and acknowledgement of systemic racism. Indigenous cultural safety can occur, claims the BCCNM, when nurses learn about the colonialism, racism, and power imbalances experienced by Indigenous peoples in Canada and within the healthcare system. “Cultural humility requires nurses to be reflective in their practice to understand personal and systemic biases and acknowledge oneself as a learner to understand another’s experience” [82] (p. 27).

Although the guiding documents contain several references to spirituality and Indigenous perspectives and experiences, UBC’s BSN programmatic elements reflect few such references. The BSN is an accelerated program which students enter for their third and fourth years (20 consecutive months). (Students wanting a direct entry 4-year nursing program are encouraged to apply to UBC-Okanagan or another institution.) The program is highly structured with little indication of any study of religion, spirituality, or beliefs within the brief online course descriptions. However, three courses offer some possibilities: NURS 180 (“Stress and Strategies to Promote Well Being”, an elective), NURS 280 (“Human Sexual Health”, an elective), and NURS 353 (“Promoting the Health of Indigenous People”).

5.1.3. Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) at UVic

BC social workers are regulated by the College of Social Workers, as mandated by the *Social Workers Act* [83]. The College established the Bylaws, Code of Ethics, and Standards of Practice for social workers [84]. Relationships with clients is covered in the first principle of the Standards of Practice, and interpretations 1.5 and 1.6 stipulate that social workers must be aware of how their values, attitudes and needs may impact their relationships with clients and that the needs of the clients must always remain paramount [84] (p. 9). Additionally, social workers may not discriminate on various grounds, including religion, per the *British Columbia Human Rights Code* and the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms* [84,85] (p. 14). Two of the College’s Strategic Priorities 2021–2023

are Indigenous Cultural Safety and Humility (including Indigenous representation and education regarding “TRC and decolonization processes”) and Anti-racism [86] (slide 10).

On its home page, the BSW at UVic describes itself as committed to social justice, de-colonization, and liberation struggles. Students wanting to apply to the BSW first complete 2 years of taking humanities, liberal arts, or social sciences courses, including the introductory courses of SOCW200A (taught “through the lens of decolonial equity and social justice”) and SOCW200B (“Introduction to the Critical Analysis of Social Welfare in Canada”). The BSW takes two years to complete. Within the program, students may choose to specialize in the areas of child welfare, Indigenous, and Indigenous child welfare, with the last two open only to those of Indigenous ancestry.

As with other professional programs, the standard BSW schedule is quite structured. Ten courses are required, with an additional four SOCW electives. Depending on the credits a student brings in, there may be an additional two general electives needed. Two of the ten required courses focus on Indigenous perspectives: “Introduction to Indigenous Perspectives on Social Work Practice” and “Indigenous Policy Analysis in Social Work”. These two courses may include learning about Indigenous religion and spirituality, although there is no overt reference to religion, spirituality, or belief systems in the online course descriptions. The course titled “Global Approaches to Human Development and Social Justice” includes the spiritual as one of several experiences that shape human understandings about development. Religion and spirituality may possibly occur in the elective course “Indigenous Approaches to Healing and Helping”.

Two of the required courses are field experiences, both with several objectives, one of which is “To strengthen understanding of, and ability to engage with, Indigenous communities and concerns” [87] (p. 13). Such inclusions of Indigenous experiences and communities reflect the program’s commitment to a social justice, anti-racist framework.

From this review, we see evidence of BC’s history of secular education in the dearth of explicit references to religion in any of its higher education programming for education, nursing, and social work professionals. Another element of its history is also clear; much of the province was not covered under historic treaties between non-Indigenous and Indigenous peoples, meaning the land was forcefully taken from Indigenous peoples. The province has thus been in a process of negotiating modern treaties. This history has pushed issues of reconciliation, land, and Indigenous perspectives and culture to the forefront in all levels of education. Intergroup contact is implied in this focus on engagement between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. However, the current focus on reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples has omitted a discussion on different spiritualities (religious or non-religious) that is a co-existing reality in the province. The history is somewhat different in Alberta, as it was mostly covered by Treaties 6, 7, and 8.

5.2. Alberta

In 2021, the UofA achieved the top provincial spot for its education program (ranked 3rd nationally), followed by the UofC (ranked sixth nationally). The UofA also ranked highest provincially for its nursing program and was in a three-way tie for the top spot nationally, with the UofC similarly placed in the second spot provincially and sixth nationally. In social work, the UofC was first in the province and captured the second spot nationally. Given the depth of Alberta’s two large post-secondary institutions, we decided to study the education program of the University of Lethbridge (UofL), which is lauded within the province, the nursing program at the UofA, and the social work program at the UofC.

5.2.1. BEd at UofL

Teachers in Alberta are to meet six competencies elaborated in the *Teaching Quality Standard* [88]. Although religion is not explicitly included in any of the competencies, it is included in several indicators in both explicit and implicit ways. Religion is an aspect of culture and competency 1, titled “Fostering Effective Relationships”, includes the indicator of “honouring cultural diversity and promoting intercultural understanding” [88] (p. 3).

Competency 3 concerns “Demonstrating a Professional Body of Knowledge”, and its extensive indicators call for a recognition of student variables such as “age, gender, ethnicity, religion” during the planning process and “an understanding of students’ backgrounds, prior knowledge and experiences” when using instructional strategies [88] (p. 4). Competency 4 is about “Establishing Inclusive Learning Environments” with indicators that include recognition of the rights guaranteed in the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* (which includes religious freedom) and “incorporating students’ personal and cultural strengths into teaching and learning” [85,88] (p. 4). The competency in which religion and spirituality are most evident is competency 5, “Applying Foundational Knowledge about First Nations, Métis and Inuit”, including the indicator of “[providing] opportunities for all students to develop a knowledge and understanding of, and respect for, the histories, cultures, languages . . . of First Nations, Métis and Inuit” [88] (p. 5).

Alberta is in the midst of implementing a new curriculum, beginning with English language arts and literature (grades K–3), math (grades K–3), and physical education and wellness (grades K–6). Education about religion is explicitly included in the proposed draft curriculum for social studies but public outcry against the curriculum load, the age-inappropriateness of some content, including about religion, and the absence of crucial content in some grades, such as education about residential schools in age-appropriate ways in *all* grades as called for in the TRC’s *Calls to Action*, has led to a pause in the implementation of the social studies curriculum as Alberta Education re-works some aspects of its Draft K-6 Social Studies Design Blueprint [89]. The program vision for the *current* social studies curriculum highlights diversity and pluralism, recognizing that “citizenship and identity are shaped by multiple factors such as culture, language, environment, gender, ideology, religion, spirituality and philosophy” [1] (p. 1). The Alberta Teachers Association has a Religious and Moral Education Council, established in 1974, and in 2009 it published a booklet on religious diversity in its Safe and Caring Schools series [90].

The UofL website highlights the embedded 27 weeks of classroom experience in its B.Ed. degree. The five-year combined degree requires students to take 30–32 courses in undergraduate disciplinary programs and their teachable major in addition to 20 courses in education. Students apply to the combined program after completing 14 university courses and taking an introductory practicum. Upon successful acceptance into the program, the B.Ed. consists of three professional semesters (not taken consecutively), an education foundations course, and three education electives [91].

Several foundation courses could include religion and spirituality, such as “Social Issues in Education”, “Foundations of Multicultural Education in Canada”, and “History of Canadian Education” (students choose one). According to the Calendar, RS is not a related degree for the teachable major of social studies but RS courses are acceptable for a General Major in the Humanities, which is recognized as a major in English language arts. Religious Studies Education [92] (p. 164) may be a minor, consisting of “Introduction to World Religions” and four RS courses.

Reference to the education-related *Calls to Action* are not apparent on the website and the Indigenous Studies/Indigenous Education major does not include a specific Indigenous worldview or spirituality course, although it could be included in some of the more generally titled introductory courses such as the “Native American Philosophy” course included in the Indigenous Education minor.

5.2.2. BScN at UofA

The *Health Professions Act* governing registered nurses describes the first of eight applications of nursing practice as “[assisting] individuals, families, groups and communities to achieve their optimal physical, emotional, mental and spiritual health and well-being” [93] (Schedule 24, 3(a)(i)). The College and Association of Registered Nurses of Alberta (CRNA) regulates the Registered Nursing profession. It develops the requisite skills including such behavioural skills as the ability to:

- reflect on one’s own cultural beliefs and practices and their impacts on others;

- identify the influence of personal values, and beliefs;
- recognize diversity and cultural differences in others [94] (p. 7).

At the UofA, the Faculty of Nursing's Strategic Plan 2018–2023 includes a direction to “advance the process of Canadian reconciliation with Indigenous peoples by acting on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) of Canada Calls to Action (#18–24)” [95] (p. 9). The direction is reiterated and elaborated in the Faculty of Nursing's 2020 Strategic Plan for Equity, Diversity, and Inclusivity as direction 7. The first direction of the EDI Strategic Plan is to “prepare undergraduate (UG) nurse leaders who have expertise in relationship development, clinical practice, knowledge use, research application, and interdisciplinary teams” [96] (p. 6). The third indicator is “Integrating an intersectionality (gender, culture, religion, power, age, sexuality, race, ethnicity, ability) informed approach to prepare nurses to work in complex and diverse settings” [96] (p. 6). Direction 5 outlines the “[promotion of] a culture of accountability, collaboration, diversity, integrity, recognition, resilience, and philanthropy” [96] (p. 8) which includes the development of EDI resources and a “calendar that covers yearly religious holidays and social events relating to EDI” [96] (p. 8).

Though the program can be completed in five ways, we focus on the four-year BScN intended for those entering nursing from high school. The program is highly structured with the course sequence updated in spring 2022. Several of the non-anatomy and physiology first-year foundation courses suggest an opportunity to include religion given their descriptions, such as “Foundations for Success in Nursing” and especially “Foundations of Nursing I”, which is described as: “[exploring] the meanings of health and healing. It highlights the diversity of beliefs, values, and perceptions of health. . . .” [97]. The course titled “Innovation, Systems Thinking and Leadership in Healthcare” also has potential with its focus on relationship leadership.

5.2.3. BSW at UofC

Social workers in Alberta are governed by several regulations, including the Standards of Practice established by the Alberta College of Social Workers [98]. The only reference to religion is within the professional relationships section, which requires social workers to protect the dignity of their clients by avoiding stereotypes based on race, religion, ethnicity, and more [98] (p. 27). The term “spirituality” is not found in the document. Under the standard of Cultural Competence, social workers are to acknowledge their own heritage, values, and beliefs and the impact of these aspects on clients. Further, they are to “obtain a working knowledge and understanding of their clients’ racial and cultural affiliations, identities, values, beliefs and customs and will be able to apply this knowledge in the provision of services” [98] (p. 24).

As the social work homepage of the UofC states, the human services focus of social work means social workers are in demand within many organizations and systems, from institutional health care to settlement support to education. Consequently, it is a fast-growing profession. The program is intended to,

address systemic inequities and compounded disadvantages due to intersectionality of social locations, particularly for those who are members of racialized communities, Indigenous peoples, Black peoples, persons with disabilities, migrant groups (including refugees and immigrants), 2SLGBTQ+ communities, linguistic minorities as well as those who have experienced socioeconomic, caregiving, religious, political, and/or cultural barriers to their education and employment. [99] (p. 3)

These sentences are a part of the Faculty of Social Work's “Equity, Diversity, Inclusion, Decolonization, and Anti-Oppression Statement” which can be found on the program's website, the field education manual, and in shortened form on each available course syllabi [100].

Students apply to the BSW (location Calgary) after two years of university courses that include an introductory course to social work. Once in the program, students take a prescriptive list of 15 courses, including two practicum experiences with corequisite

seminars, as well as nine credits of social work electives. Five course descriptions as listed in the calendar contain the word “Indigenous”, although these are not required programmatic courses, and none contain the words “religious” or “spirituality” [101]. The field education manual begins with a land acknowledgement and affirms the commitment of both the program and the UofC to the *United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act* and the TRC’s *Calls to Action* as well as other human rights legislation [99]. An objective for the BSW practica is demonstrated in the “Competence with Diversity”, which highlights working with the social diversity vectors of religion, culture, and race among others [102] (p. 41).

One presumes that students are taught about religion in the coursework to support this competency, despite the dearth of overt references to religion and spirituality in the course descriptions. Although several online course syllabi reference religion in the form of a reading or a question for consideration on an assignment, it is not highlighted in any significant manner. Programmatic commitment to equity, diversity, inclusion, reconciliation and anti-racism is more prominent, and references to learning how to work with Indigenous members and communities are more numerous. For example, the course titled “Practice & Evaluation with Organizations” has a focus on “applying TRC to organizations” [103].

This overview indicates that, like British Columbia, professional bodies in Alberta are taking the TRC’s *Calls to Action* seriously and incorporating them into provincial standards. There are references to Indigenous perspectives, knowledge, and cultures. It is not surprising that spirituality is not included, as Indigenous peoples are incredibly diverse; some are Catholic, others Anglican, Baptist, or Pentecostal, and still others are non-religious [104]. While there are more references to religion than in the documents and courses found in British Columbian professional program documents, and more opportunities to have a religious studies minor in education, actual programmatic differences are marginal.

5.3. Ontario

In Ontario, UofT’s Ontario Institute for the Studies in Education (with only graduate programs) is provincially ranked the highest by Maclean’s for its education program (and tied for first nationally as well), followed by Queen’s University, second in Ontario and fifth nationally. For nursing, UofT was once again rated the highest provincially, and in a three-way tie for the top spot nationally, followed by McMaster, which placed fifth nationally. EduRank listed UofT as the best in the province and nationally for its social work program (although it only offers graduate programs), followed by McMaster in the fourth spot nationally. We decided to focus on Queen’s for its BEd, UofT for its BSc in Nursing, and McMaster for its BSW, which offers an Honours BSW.

5.3.1. BEd at Queen’s University

The Ontario curriculum and Ministry of Education recognize that students must be taught holistically. The Ministry’s *Equity and Inclusive Education in Ontario Schools* document outlines its expectations to include all aspects of multiculturalism in ministry policies and programs [105]. In tandem, almost every elementary and secondary curriculum document begins with a reminder from *Stepping Stones* that student development includes consideration of their individual environment, cognitive, emotional, social, and physical self [106]. Each has an “enduring (yet changing) core” that is unique to their self/spirit that connects to each aspect of their development and developing self.

Despite these details, the Ontario College of Teachers, the provincial governing body of teachers, does not mention “religion” or “spirituality” in its Standards of Practice, Ethical Standards, or Professional Learning Framework [107]. Where the first two documents do not even mention “diversity” or “culture”, the Framework references “the rich diversity and complexity of Ontario’s educational system” and “culture” in relation to school culture [108] (p. 12).

In Ontario, students begin a B.Ed after completing an undergraduate degree in a topic of study and receive the B.Ed. as a second degree. Queen’s program is completed in a

12-month duration, which includes 21 weeks of practicum placements. Students choose between several available concentrations. Though religious literacy can fall into many of these concentrations and parts of the teaching subjects, there is no clear focus on religious literacy or world religions.

The only K–12 curriculum electives that focus on religious literacy in the Ontario education system exist in the secondary program: *World Religions and Belief Traditions in Daily Life* and *World Religions and Belief Traditions: Perspectives, Issues, and Challenges*. Both courses are mutually exclusive. Two electives in equity studies and one in family studies briefly discuss religion and spirituality. Yet, the course or topic of world religions is not listed in the Queen’s University BEd subject offerings. Social justice as a concentration and the subject of First Nations, Métis and Inuit Studies are the only areas that suggest a conversation on spirituality and religion, though neither offers a comprehensive study of religious literacy or different world religions.

5.3.2. BScN at UofT

- Students apply to the BScN after completing 2 years of undergraduate studies and several pre-requisite courses. The Bachelor of Nursing at the University of Toronto is an accelerated two-year program where graduates are expected to be safe, competent, and ethical nurses when providing nursing care for sick and vulnerable persons
- promoting health of individuals, families, groups and communities
- establishing and maintaining interpersonal and therapeutic relationships and partnerships
- enacting values of equity and social justice in addressing the social determinants of health
- examining, synthesizing and incorporating multiple knowledges to provide care
- collaborating as members of an interprofessional team (<https://bloomberg.nursing.utoronto.ca/programs/bachelor/> accessed 8 August 2022)

Of the 15 courses taken in the program, the words “religion” and “spiritual” do not appear in any course description. However, “culture” appears in one year-2 course titled “Critical Reflexivity: Theory as Practice”.

This finding is not surprising given how the profession in the province may view religion. The Registered Nurses Association of Ontario’s *Embracing Cultural Diversity in Health Care*, discusses spirituality and religion under the section on “Thorny Issues”:

The most common misconception—so powerful that it has taken on an aura of “fact” in the minds of many people—is the notion that it is “illegal” to ask Canadians questions about their cultural demographics, such as race, religion, physical abilities, or sexual orientation. So pervasive is this belief that to even raise the topic arouses significant negative opinion. [109] (p. 38)

Referring to religion as a “thorny issue” may explain why “religion” and “spirituality” are omitted from online course descriptions. This speaks to the findings that a negative view of religion leads many Ontario health practitioners to defer “spiritual” matters to a local spiritual care practitioner [110]. Furthermore, the only reference to “spirituality” on the RNAO website is an e-learning course titled, “Engaging Indigenous people who use substances”, suggesting a negative lens toward spirituality and Indigenous patients overall [111].

5.3.3. BSW at McMaster University

The McMaster School of Social Work’s Statement of Philosophy reads:

As social workers, we operate in a society characterized by power imbalances that affect us all. These power imbalances are based on age, class, ethnicity, gender identity, geographic location, health, ability, race, sexual identity and income. We see personal troubles as inextricably linked to oppressive structures. We believe that social workers must be actively involved in the understanding and

transformation of injustices in social institutions and in the struggles of people to maximize control over their own lives. [112]

This philosophy excludes mention of imbalances based on religious, spiritual, or non-religious identity and reflects the Ontario College of Social Workers and Social Service Workers' *Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice Handbook*, which also omits mention of "spirituality" and "religion" except for item 3.4—Responsibility to Clients:

College members do not discriminate against anyone based on race, ethnicity, language, religion, marital status, gender, sexual orientation, age, disability, economic status, political affiliation or national origin. [113]

"Belief" is noted in a footnote only once in the full handbook.

As all graduates of an approved and accredited Social Service Work (SSW), Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) or Master of Social Work (MSW) program are eligible for registration with the OCSWSSW, its handbook becomes the guiding document for all social workers in Ontario. Yet, the practice at McMaster falls short of the global standards for the education and training of the social work profession set by the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW), the worldwide association of schools of social work, other tertiary-level social work educational programs, and social work educators.

The Honours BSW at McMaster is a three-to four-year undergraduate program that requires students to start in the Social Sciences Level 1 program and apply to the Social Work BSW Program at the end of their first year [114]. Though the school's Statement of Philosophy omits mention of religion and spirituality, Level 1 requires the completion of six sociology or social work courses, and six elective courses, one of which is "Intro Religious ST". Students are also encouraged to take "Introduction to Indigenous Studies" which is a BSW Program requirement. Along with preparing students for the profession of social work, the program homepage notes that it "is based on a search for the principles of social justice" [115]. (The program can also be taken as a two-year post-degree after an undergraduate program, which also includes a practicum.) Those who wish to specialize have two options: Preparing for Critical Practice in Child Welfare (PCPCW) Pathway or Indigenous Pathway.

In compliance with the Canadian Association for Social Work Education, the McMaster program includes an in-field experience like all other Canadian social work programs. Students complete two practicums, each 390 h long, which are paired with coinciding seminar courses to engage and reflect on the practicum learnings. Full course details are not listed on the website except for the courses related to each pathway. The course outlines for Fall 2021 for the PCPCW Pathway do not include any mention of "religious", "spiritual", or "culture". In comparison, the Indigenous Pathway courses include mention of "spirituality" alongside discussions of "environment as sacred", "ecospiritual approaches" and "culture" in the course "Indigenizing Social Work Practice" [116]. The Winter 2022 course outline for "Social Work with Indigenous Peoples" offers an option to review the film "Spiritual Roots of Restorative Justice—Documentary" to understand restorative justice [117].

The education and nursing programs examined in Ontario have virtually no online references to religion, spirituality, and beliefs. Reducing religion to a "thorny issue" in the Registered Nurses Association of Ontario's cultural diversity document is problematic for those who study religion and religious literacy as well as for nurses and patients who are religious. McMaster University stands out with its Honours BSW, as courses in its Indigenous Pathway explicitly teach about "environment as sacred" and "ecospiritual approaches". However, there is little education for religious literacy in these professional programs, which is quite remarkable given that 39 percent of recent immigrants to Canada in 2016 settled in Ontario [118]. Of the provinces studied here, the professional programs in Ontario have fewer references to religion and spirituality, and less development of Indigenous content, than the other two provinces.

6. Discussion

In this section, we make four observations and then present how one organization has contributed to discussions of religious literacy in each of the three disciplines studied in this article. The organization is the CCRL, a non-religious, non-profit organization that works with partners and in communities across Canada to develop religious literacy.

6.1. Observations

The first of our four observations is that policy and standards of practice across the professional programs are responding to the TRC's *Calls to Action*, although this work appears to be more consistently advanced in the western provinces than it is in Ontario. The *Calls to Action* are an essential component of reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples, especially the acknowledgement of, respect for, and teaching of, Indigenous perspectives and ways of being. In addition to policies and standards of practice, the *Calls to Action* are visible in coursework, meaning that graduates of the professional programs studied here have some critical awareness of how their profession has treated Indigenous peoples in the past and how Indigenous peoples are charting new structures and relationships moving forward.

Commitment to the *Calls to Action* advances the intergroup contact theory if Indigenous and non-Indigenous students are working together in the cohorts that are characteristic of these programs. The anti-racist and intersectional approaches also facilitate religious literacy and the intergroup contact theory as students are taught to examine their own beliefs, assumptions, and stereotypes, become aware of how those assumptions and emotions impact the interactions they have with others and open them up to learning more about the other.

Our second observation is that there appears to be little explicit development of religious literacy in any of these programs at either the policy or programmatic level, regardless of the province. In fact, it appears more often in the provincial and at times national documents/standards than it does in the university online documents. Religion, spirituality, beliefs and practices are not entirely absent in the university descriptions of their programs, but given that students in these programs are being prepared to engage with very diverse students, patients, and clients, religious diversity should receive more explicit attention and instruction. Students are receiving such instruction for Indigenous peoples, who have experienced systemic discrimination through their interactions with various professional agencies. Now the creation of safe spaces must be explicitly expanded to all minority and marginalized people. Students learning to become teachers, nurses, and social workers must gain some knowledge about religion and some basic religious literacy to ensure safe professional experiences for both those who are religious and those who are not.

Developing religious literacy in these programs would not be difficult as some of the frameworks already exist in policy statements and standards of practice. For example, inherent to anti-racism and social justice approaches is the promotion of equity, diversity, and inclusion policies and practices, the recognition that racism is systemic, and the acknowledgement that racism is intersectional in that it interacts with such other social factors as religion, income, gender, ethnicity, and more [119,120]. It is not a stretch to recognize how anti-racism education supports religious literacy as developed by the CCRL, with its development of awareness that different groups of people live, worship, and at times think differently based on such social vectors as geography, ethnicity, and gender.

Religious literacy as found in the stage model developed by Dinham and others can also be incorporated into existing policies and approaches relatively easily. Though Stage 1 of categorization, determining how religion is defined, appears to be missing and would need to be added. Typically, Canadians, including educators, resort to liberal Protestant interpretations of religion that promote some forms of religion and limit others [121]. The term "spirituality" requires the same elaboration. Although there was evidence that pro-

grams like the Honours BSW at McMaster recognize “eco-spirituality”, the term spirituality, like religion, was used generically in the available documentation.

Stage 2 involves disposition, and professionals are already being asked through their standards of practice to examine their beliefs, assess the impacts of those beliefs on their interactions with others, and to some degree learn about the beliefs of others. We ask how and when this learning about beliefs and practices of others occurs, as it was not readily apparent. Stage 3 involves gaining “knowledge”, which may be included in several elective courses as identified above. Our argument is that all graduates require some form of knowledge, and we are suggesting that knowledge be in the form of religious literacy. Crisp and Dinham note that knowledge “recognises that the lived experiences of any religion or belief are fluid and permeable and can vary considerably, so that religiously literate professionals are those who are able to understand religion and belief as identity rather than tradition” [45] (para. 18, Introduction). Stage 4 is the development of skills or practice as informed by the proceeding stages and research and would be a new addition to the programs. It is important to note that, just as religion, spirituality, and practices are integrated into daily life for many practitioners, these stages would be integrated into the material already taught rather than taught separately.

The third observation we offer is that there appears to be more openness to spirituality than religion among the programs. We applaud the attention paid to reconciliation and Indigenous perspectives, which have been marginalized for too long. We also recognize that for many Canadians and policy-makers, the term spirituality is more acceptable than that of religion, given the involvement of mainstream Christian churches in the operation of residential schools. However, the reality is that there are billions of people in the world who belong to an organized religion [122]. Knowledge and understanding about them is connected to all of the stages of the model developed by Dinham and others, with its fulsome understanding regarding the nature of religion.

Our final observation notes the importance of non-religion when teaching about religious literacy. Those who self-identify as non-religious also ascribe to beliefs and enact practices. Just as those who are non-religious must examine their beliefs and how they may impact interactions with others, so those who are religious must examine how their beliefs and practices may impact their interactions with students, patients, and clients who are non-religious. Equally important is the notion that no one group or ideology owns the social justice framework which informs many of the programs studied in this article as outlined in their policy documents. People may ascribe to a social justice framework from religious, spiritual, or secular commitments. Learning about religious literacy would help all students understand the multiple avenues through which people arrive at, understand, or even misunderstand social justice.

We recognize the difficulties of adding another element to already full programs, but we argue that it is not impossible to incorporate given existing structures. We also recognize that our observations are based on information that is publicly available and that detailed syllabi might address religion, spirituality, beliefs, and non-religion more fulsomely. What is clear, however, is that students want more knowledge about religious literacy. Below we describe conversations the CCRL has had with students in each of the three professions. The fact that professional students and organizations are asking to engage with the CCRL demonstrates the degree to which they are recognizing the need for increased religious literacy.

6.2. CCRL Programs

6.2.1. In Education

In November 2019, the CCRL hosted a workshop for graduate students at the McGill University Faculty of Education, titled “Bill 21 and Teaching in Quebec”, to address the newly established law that prohibits teachers, among other public servants, from wearing a religious symbol. As an introductory workshop, where consecutive workshops in the winter term were cancelled due to the COVID-19 pandemic, it aimed to help students

“understand the legal and policy implications of Bill 21 and how a teacher should respond” and “understand how to discuss religious, spiritual, and non-religious beliefs and communities in a professional and academic way”. This interactive workshop included recent statistical data, a discussion of social dynamics, and guidance on self-reflection, as many had a foundational understanding of religious literacy already and needed to understand how to balance the self, professional requirements, and realities for students, parents, and colleagues in Montreal since the announcement of the law in June 2019.

With an opportunity to delve deeper beyond an introduction of religious literacy as a framework and concept, students were asked in the post-workshop survey: “After this workshop, do you feel more informed to discuss religious, spiritual, and non-religious beliefs and communities in a professional and academic way?” Forty percent “strongly agree[d]” and 50 percent “agree[d]”, among 10 participants. All students wanted more workshops on “how to discuss controversial issues, like Bill 21”. One student also shared that “(1) I am thankful for workshops like these that help me to situate myself and experience in a local and global scale. How can one help or try to maintain the conversation in hopes to find ways to overcome such oppression; (2) I would like to know when the other workshops would be available. (3) I know what it’s like to subdue religion to be a part of something but within that personal choice. I find I lost my identity of self that disrupt [sic] my professional and communal identity. Hope to find ways to get active community wise”.

6.2.2. In Nursing

The CCRL aimed to host a workshop specifically for nurses in February 2019, but it coincided with school closures in Toronto that week, which followed a number of teacher strikes the weeks before. Hence, the CCRL cancelled the workshop because enrollment and effectiveness of advertising through existing nurse networks was very limited. CCRL has yet to offer it again due to the pandemic. However, data leading to the development of the workshop found that 93 percent of the 43 nurses surveyed said that having religious literacy would help them in their work as a nurse.

6.2.3. In Social Work

In November 2020, the CCRL hosted a workshop for graduate students at the University of Toronto Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work. “Spirituality, Religious Literacy, and Social Work” was a 75 min lunch and learn online workshop—the best suitable time slot based on the demanding scheduling of students and the fact that many work as social workers outside of class hours. As an introductory workshop, religious literacy was introduced in relation to the social work profession guidelines and social dynamics in Canadian society, especially related to spirituality and the many conceptions of Indigenous spirituality.

When asked “Do you think religious literacy can be beneficial for your profession overall?” in the post-workshop survey, 87.5 percent (7 of 8) attendees said “a great deal”. When asked which additional information or activity would help them feel more equipped, they wanted more knowledge, opportunities to learn, and practical profession-related guidance, evident in responses such as “As the speaker mentioned, this workshop scratches the surface. I think going through the recommended resources will be helpful next step for me” and “How to address spirituality/religion when it comes to assessments, more on appropriate and language that is sensitive to people’s worldviews”. This workshop was first offered because a social work student attended a prior workshop in April 2020 and asked us to offer more for their faculty.

In April 2020, the CCRL hosted two workshops for the University of Toronto’s Centre for Interprofessional Education (IPE), since named the Centre for Advancing Collaborative Healthcare & Education (CACHE). Then and now, it gathers students from 11 health sciences programs to receive training from representatives across 15 hospitals, among other researchers and practitioners. Thirty-seven students gathered from the 11 healthcare disciplines/professions to learn how to collaborate and begin to foster teamwork across the

approaches in each discipline/profession. As such, the CCRL workshops included students from dentistry, medicine, physical therapy, occupational therapy, social work, pharmacy, speech-language pathology, physician assistant, and medical radiation science. They were generalists or specialized in care for specific age groups or areas, e.g., musculoskeletal conditions. (Note: the nursing program is excluded from the IPE training.) Regardless of the discipline, all students who self-selected for the workshop expressed interest to learn more and saw that religious literacy was a component of their profession too.

7. Conclusions

In this article, we identified three contexts of the Canadian reality: secularization, religious diversity, and religious discrimination. Professional expectations of teachers, nurses, and social workers are that they engage with the Canadian contexts in which they work, thus requiring them to gain some working knowledge of religious literacy. However, an examination of the top-ranked education, nursing, and social work bachelor programs in three provinces revealed very low levels of religious literacy instruction. Universities are incorporating the TRC's *Calls to Action* in their policies and frameworks and in their programming, and the term spirituality occurs more often than religion. As noted above, absence in online documentation does not indicate absence in the classroom experience, but the dearth of public references to religion reflects its lack of importance. Such a dearth is important given the immense religious diversity graduates in education, nursing, and social work will encounter in their regular work. The bright news is that the incorporation of religious literacy does not need to require new directions or frameworks. Rather, we argue that it would fit well within existing frameworks. Indeed, students in professional programs are reaching out to organizations like the CCRL to learn more about religious literacy. That desire can and should be met within all professional human-centred programs.

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