NON-CHRISTIAN TEACHERS AND CHRISTIAN PRIVILEGE IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS

by

VICKI SCULLION

(Under the Direction of Todd Dinkelman)

ABSTRACT

Despite the fact that American public schools are subject to First Amendment restrictions that prohibit government establishment of a national religion and interference in individuals' worship practices, there is evidence that Christianity may be privileged over other faith traditions and non-belief in some public school environments (Blumenfeld, 2006; Blumenfeld, Joshi, & Fairchild, 2009; Nelson, 2009). While there are research studies conducted from a Christian perspective, there are few research studies that focus on how non-Christian teachers feel and react to situations in which they encounter Christian privilege in their public school workplaces. Relying on the theory of social constructionism, this research study interviewed sixteen non-Christian teachers about their experiences with Christian privilege in public schools. These interviews explored the experiences and how those experiences affected the non-Christian teachers as they worked in public schools in north Georgia. Interviews suggest that all sixteen participants observed and noted Christian privilege that affected how they felt and behaved in their public school workspaces. This research study adds the previously unheard voices of non-Christian teachers to the academic discussion about how Christian privilege is present in public education and how that Christian privilege affects non-Christian teachers.

INDEX WORDS: Christian Privilege, Religion in Public Schools, Non-Christian Teachers, Religious Diversity, Teaching in Public Schools

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A Dissertation Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of The University of Georgia in Partial

Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

ATHENS, GEORGIA

2022

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May 2022

DEDICATION

To my family, with love

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Going back to school for a Ph.D. is crazy, right? For all of you who told me “You got this” and then went on to help me do it, I couldn’t have gotten to the finish line without your support. Thank you, my faithful cheerleaders!

To John Unger, who pushed me out of my comfortable nest and told me to just go do it already. Thank you for showing me how cool research can be and for publishing and presenting with me. Your confidence in me means the world.

To Todd Dinkleman, my committee chair, who took me in when I was lost and looking for a university home. Your support for me, my goals, my research project, and my writing made the difference between my dropping out of the program and graduating. You are one of the kindest people I have ever met. Thank you.

Thank you to Kevin Burke and Elizabeth St. Pierre, my committee members, who stuck with me for six years, taught me, supported me, guided me, and made me feel worthy.

My research participants deserve an extra helping of gratitude. Public school teachers are incredibly busy. Thank you for taking the time to talk with me and tell me your personal stories and feelings about Christian privilege at your schools. I learned so much from you.

To Dr. Jessica Ewalt, my writing partner and idea guru throughout our UGA journey. I’m so proud that you graduated and extremely grateful that you continued to help me as I procrastinated for another year (or two.) I know I would never have finished my prospectus, my research, and writing all those papers without your help. You’re the best!

To April Coleman, who helped with my research, offered care when I most needed it (in China, Korea, and the U.S.), and introduced me to the sisters of the Georgia Beta Kappa chapter of Alpha Delta Kappa. Many thanks to my Beta Kappa sisters for the academic scholarships, listening patiently to me practice my dissertation defense, and showing me that teachers who support each other are invaluable.

Thanks also to Kate Soules and the Religion and Education Collaborative who listened to my research and offered wisdom and support. I learned so much from your monthly programs and finally understood that I was not the only academic on the planet interested in religion and education. What a relief! Special thanks to Brian Blackmore who kept me on track with my writing this past summer. I totally appreciate your help and your friendship.

I am the luckiest person in the world to have a family that loves me and supports me unconditionally. To my father, Eric Persson, who read every word of this dissertation and helped me edit it. Bless your heart, dad. To my biggest cheerleaders, my mom, Patricia Persson, my sister and niece, Beth and Nica McKinny, and my sons and daughter-in-law, Peter, Alex and Kayla.

To Marcia Grady, my closest friend, who has kept me more-or-less sane for years now. Thank you for Friday playtime. There were weeks when the thought of spending Friday with you, shopping, going to the movies, or having our hands painted with henna was what kept me going. I hope there’s a road trip in our near future!

And to Chris Scullion, my husband for 38 years now. I would be lost without you. I love you more than I can say. Thank you for sharing this world with me.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

But Public Schools are Secular, right?

I had planned on showing up late for the mandatory monthly faculty meeting, but unfortunately, I wasn't late enough. I signed in, slunk to a seat in the back row of the cafeteria, and sighed. The meeting began, and it began the way it always did. One of my colleagues led a Christian prayer, and I knew that, for him, the prayer was indeed heartfelt. He was animated and genuine, a true believer, extending the promise of the salvation of Jesus Christ to each and every one of the faculty members at the public middle school in Bible-belt Georgia. I hoped he taught his seventh-grade mathematics class with as much enthusiasm, but I rather doubted it.

Because bowing my head to pray is not my thing, I surveyed the room and noticed that, again this month, the couple of Muslim teachers wearing hijabs appeared to be squirming uncomfortably in their blue plastic chairs. Rachel, as far as I knew the lone Jewish teacher at the school, looked disgusted, and my friend Kelly, a Buddhist, was grading papers without any pretense of paying attention to the Christian prayer. The Hindu teacher's lips were drawn together tightly; I imagined that she was stoically enduring what had to be, for her, a potentially offensive performance and, at the least, a waste of time. I could see Josie, the Wiccan teacher, waiting out the prayer in the hall outside the cafeteria doorway. I struggled to keep my atheist backside in the chair, knowing that leaving during the

> *prayer would be considered rude by the majority Christian faculty. Finally, with an impressive chorus of "Amen" from the Christian members of the congregation, it was over.*

"Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof" (U. S. Const. amend. I). The initial clause of the First Amendment to the Constitution of the United States contains the "Establishment Clause," which prohibits government from specifying a national religion, and the "Free Exercise Clause," which disallows government from interfering in the people's right to practice religion as they see fit (Cornell Law School, 2020). This "wall of separation between Church and State," as Thomas Jefferson (1802) famously termed it, was built to protect the rights of the people from a government that would otherwise have the entitlement and the power, backed by physical force, to require all Americans to pledge allegiance to one designated religious worldview. Church and state were to remain separate. Period.

This sounds fine in theory. Citizens built places where they could congregate to observe their own religious practices – churches, temples, mosques, synagogues – but none were required by law to attend. Government-financed offices, courthouses, and parliamentary houses would be secular places in which the business of the government could ostensibly be conducted without preference for specific religious or non-religious worldviews. However, in practice, keeping the wall of separation between church and state from crumbling has been a challenge; simply compartmentalizing them by assigning them separate physical spaces has not been successful. Even the expression itself, "wall of separation between Church and State," indicates a Christian bias. Public schools, in particular, are battlefields in which the intermingling of religion and state are regularly contested (DelFattore, 2004).

The First Amendment proved to be rather vague when it came to how public schools should handle religion, especially "for resolving the problem of when allowing too much free exercise becomes a form of establishment" (Justice and Macleod, 2016, p. 127). The educators and politicians who were the architects of the American public education system suggested that one of the most important purposes of public education was to prepare students to be good citizens. Teaching ethics and morality was a must if students were to become upstanding American citizens. This was especially vital if students came from lower socioeconomic backgrounds; poor and working-class parents were summarily judged incompetent at instilling the proper values in their children (Kaestle, 1983). Kunzman (2006) explained that, in the early 19th century, "the ethical training deemed essential in staving off social fragmentation required a general religious foundation" ("Common Schools in Search of Common Ethics" section). So despite the First Amendment, religion entered the first public schools as a "necessary" component of the curriculum. Since the dominant religion in American society at the time was Protestant Christianity or the "common faith" (Carper and Ray, 2002, p. 227), it became the default religious foundation of "secular" public schools.

When the government mandated compulsory education for all children, public schools became social institutions that "reproduced the cultural and religious norms, often with the attendant range of inequities and privileges found within the larger society" (Blumenfeld, 2006, p. 204). It may be argued that Protestant Christianity continues to be deeply embedded in the social constructs of public schools where it is simply considered "normal."

My interpretation of the experience I related above of my (not) participating in a Christian prayer at a mandatory faculty meeting offers a glimpse into how religion can enter the supposedly secular space of a public school in the southeastern United States. My experience also illuminates the privilege afforded Christianity within the school and the subsequent “othering” of non-Christian teachers. The performance of a Christian prayer in the “secular” setting of a mandatory public school faculty meeting may have made non-Christian teachers feel uncomfortable, subordinate to, or even inferior to Christian teachers (Jensen, 2011). I was certainly uncomfortable. However, because the vignette was completely from my point of view, I attributed negative emotions toward the prayer to non-Christian teachers based on my personal interpretations of their body language and actions; my interpretations were formed without discussing this issue with any of the teachers at the meeting and are simply conjecture. In this qualitative interview study, I seek to understand how other non-Christian teachers identify and make meaning of experiences in which Christian privilege manifests in the public schools in which they work.

Need for the Study

Despite the fact that American public schools are subject to First Amendment restrictions that prohibit government establishment of a national religion and interference in individuals’ worship practices, there is evidence that Christianity is privileged over other faith traditions and non-belief in some public school environments (Blumenfeld, 2006; Blumenfeld, Joshi, & Fairchild, 2009; Nelson, 2009). One reason for this may be that Christianity remains the dominant religion in the United States. The Pew Religious Landscape Study (2014) found that 70.6% of Americans across all 50 states identify as Christian. In north Georgia, where this study took place, 76% of adults identify as Christian. Additional survey research data suggests that public school teachers in the United States may identify as Christian at an even higher rate than the national average among American adults (Hartwick, 2014; Slater, 2008).

Existing research studies on religion in education have focused mainly on non-Christian students or on Christian teachers, preservice teachers, and students. For example, Forrest-Bank & Dupper's (2016) research examined the effects of Christian privilege on adolescent public school students who identified as non-Christian or non-mainstream Christian. Subedi's (2006) and James' (2010) studies explored Christian preservice teachers' attitudes about Christian privilege. Kimball et al. (2009) used survey data to investigate the connection between high school and undergraduate college students' religiosity and the decision to enter the education field. Logan (2014) took a close look at how four Christian preservice teachers' faith influenced their experiences in teacher education courses and student teaching. Hadley (2019) added to this discussion by exploring how beginning evangelical Christian teachers tied their religious identities to their developing professional teacher identities. These studies offer a glimpse into how Christian privilege manifests in our public schools.

However, the experiences of non-Christian teachers working in public schools have been largely unexplored in religion in public education research. As my experience with Christian prayer opening a mandatory faculty meeting indicates, there are non-Christian teachers whose voices and religious viewpoints appear to be unconsidered in policies adopted by public schools. There is a need for research to understand the experiences of these teachers and how they make meaning of issues they face as non-Christian teachers in majority Christian public school environments.

Purpose of the Study

The intent of this study is to add to the body of the research literature on Christian privilege by collecting and interpreting interview data from non-Christian teachers to understand how they may be affected by Christian privilege while working in public schools. My interview participants represent a broad array of non-Christian faiths and non-faith, including teachers who self-identify as Muslim, Hindu, Jewish, Buddhist, agnostic, and atheist. At the time of the interviews, they lived and worked in three different county public school systems in north Georgia and in seven different schools ranging from elementary to high school. In all, I interviewed sixteen participants.

This study will prove practical by making visible the experiences non-Christian teachers relate about dealing with Christian privilege in public schools. Christian privilege is often difficult for Christian educators and students to identify (Nelson, 2009), and its invisibility may allow Christians to ignore the wide range of religious beliefs and non-beliefs held by non-Christians in public schools. Empirical evidence is needed if our public schools are to understand and equitably treat teachers who identify as non-Christian.

Understanding how non-Christian teachers experience Christian privilege in public schools can help all teachers better understand how their non-Christian students may feel about and react to Christian privilege in the classroom and overall school setting. Research about non-Christian teachers' experiences with Christian privilege in public schools may encourage a deeper awareness of the viewpoints of non-Christian students and teachers. Informing Christian teachers, students, and other school workers of the issues faced by non-Christians may illuminate the normative Christian privilege that seems to exist in the public schools.

The literature on teacher education suggests that Christian preservice teachers are largely unaware of Christian privilege in public schools, and indeed, may believe that minority religious students should simply accept the majority worldview (Subedi, 2006). Often, religious diversity is not discussed at all in teacher education classes (James, 2015). By adding non-Christian teachers' accounts to the available literature on Christian privilege, it will be possible for teacher educators to initiate a more in-depth discussion with their preservice teacher students about what it means to be marginalized for religious reasons.

Finally, this research has the potential to influence school policies that maintain Christian privilege as the norm. Despite First Amendment restrictions on government interference in personal religious practices, teachers and students will continue to bring their religious beliefs into public schools. This has to be expected; religious beliefs or non-belief offer lenses through which we view the world. However, when one religion is emphasized over other worldviews in daily contexts, marginalization follows. It would be helpful for non-Christian teachers to have space to tell their experiences to promote discussion about religious diversity and encourage new policies for religious equity in public education.

It must be noted that it is not the intent of this study to examine the legal requirements and possible legal remedies surrounding Christian privilege in public schools. The First Amendment and Supreme Court cases concerning religion in public schools provide a historical and contemporary context that help to explain the expectations and reactions of non-Christian teachers to their experiences with Christian privilege in the public schools.

Research questions

Personal worldviews about religion, whether non-belief or faith-based, influence professional decisions made by all teachers (Danielewicz, 2001). There is some research examining how Christian teachers' religious identities may be present in public schools and public school classrooms (e.g., Hadley, 2019; Juzwik & McKenzie, 2015; White, 2009), but little is known about the experiences of non-Christian teachers and how they make meaning of issues they may face as non-Christian teachers in a majority Christian environment. In order to explore this area, the questions steering this research are:

1. What experiences do non-Christian teachers have in public schools with respect to Christian privilege?
2. How do non-Christian teachers believe their experiences affect them personally and professionally?
3. How do non-Christian teachers resist Christian privilege?

Methodological Framework

Maxwell (2012) suggested that qualitative research studies are an appropriate design when researchers seek to “understand the meaning, for participants in the study, of the events, situations, experiences, and actions they are involved with or engage in” (“What Goals can Qualitative” section). The purpose of this study was to understand how non-Christian teachers communicate and make sense of experiences in which they perceive that Christian privilege may be present within the nominally secular environments of the public schools in which they work. Therefore, I designed a qualitative interview study to gain insight into how non-Christian teachers express their experiences with Christian privilege and the meaning they make of those experiences.

Merriam and Tisdell (2015) advised that interviewing is an appropriate method of data collection when “we cannot observe behavior, feelings, or how people interpret the world around them” (p. 108). While there is evidence that schools may privilege Christianity as “normal” (Blumenfeld, Joshi, & Fairchild, 2009), we are left to wonder what non-Christian teachers think and feel about working in these schools. Interviewing offered the opportunity to ask questions about participants’ feelings and interpretations of their experiences with Christian privilege in public schools.

I used semi-structured interviews to ask non-Christian teacher participants about their experiences as teachers in majority-Christian public schools. By using flexibly worded questions and ordering them as necessary during the interview, I was able to respond to interview situations and explore new ideas that my participants introduced (Roulston, 2012). This allowed me to gain insight into my participants' feelings and perspectives. Using the same flexible questions in each interview offered me the opportunity to note patterns, themes, and outliers across participants' interviews during data analysis.

Theoretical Framework

In order to understand my participants' experiences, I used social constructionism as a theoretical framework. As opposed to positivist research in which reality is considered to be objective and measurable, social constructionist research adopts the perspective that reality is constructed by individuals as they interact with the world (Merriam, 2007). Specifically, social constructionism is the view that humans use their social interactions, historical and cultural backgrounds, and personal experiences to construct understandings and make meaning of the world around them (Burr, 2015). Qualitative research based on a social constructionist framework seeks to understand the meaning individuals make of their experiences.

Religious Identity

Danielewicz (2001) defined identity as "how individuals know and name themselves and how they are recognized and regarded by others" (p. 3). This definition suggests that identity is both individually and collectively constructed. As a social construction, therefore, there are numerous discursive factors affecting individual identity as it is fluidly constructed and reconstructed during social interactions (Davies & Harré, 1999). One of the stronger influences on individuals may be their experiences with religion; in many cases, religious identity is inherited along with other ethnic, cultural, and linguistic practices of the family and community into which they are born (Gross, 2014; Nord 2002). Religious identity is not "left at the door" when people enter public schools (Kollar, 2009; Nord & Haynes, 1998; Waggoner, 2013).

In his book *Religion: What it is, how it works, and why it matters*, Christian Smith (2017) defined religion as "a complex of culturally prescribed practices, based on premises about the existence and nature of superhuman powers, whether personal or impersonal, which seek to help practitioners gain access to and communicate or align themselves with these powers, in hopes of realizing human goods and avoiding things bad" (p. 22). The cultural practices that have been constructed to achieve the goals of religion vary widely. For example, viewing the world from a Christian point of view that accepting Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior is the only way to attain eternal salvation is quite different from viewing the world from a Buddhist point of view that does not contain the concept or understanding of "eternal salvation" at all (Gross, 2014).

Since a Christian religious identity is based on the concept that Jesus is exclusively "the way, the truth, and the life" (KJV, John 14:6), it can be difficult for Christians to accept that any other religion or non-belief are valid methods of viewing the world. Christianity insists that it is the one true religion. Gross (2014) suggests that exclusive truth claims are incompatible with religious diversity and, indeed, "they *cannot* survive together in any harmonious, peaceful, and respectful way" (p. 82).

Burke & Segall (2016) noted that "while the courts can take theology out of the curriculum, expunge religious manifestations explicitly identified as such in schools, they cannot take religiosity out of people or decouple culture from its religious roots" (p. 28). If the majority of teachers in public schools identify as Christian and together, purposefully or not, construct a school climate in which Christianity is privileged, what are the experiences of teachers who do not identify as Christian?

CHAPTER 2: THEORETICAL FRAMES AND LITERATURE REVIEW

On April 3, 2018, *The College Fix,* a conservative student-run website, indignantly reported that the Multicultural Student Services Center at George Washington University would be conducting a free 90-minute diversity awareness seminar titled "Christian Privilege: But our Founding Fathers were all Christian, Right?" In his article "University event aims to combat 'Christian Privilege,'" Michael Jones (2018), an Auburn University senior, wrote that, according to the online syllabus, the workshop would "teach" that Christians are afforded unearned privileges in American society that non-Christians do not receive, and that these privileges make their lives easier. By holding this seminar, the university was attempting to "fix the problem" of Christian privilege. Further angering some Christians, the seminar was to be held on April 5th, only four days after Easter. That this timing was significant may be debated. As Graham (2018) ironically observed, "Persecuted American believers [were] forced to celebrate [Easter] in secrecy with large parades, an annual party on the White House lawn, and live network TV musicals about Jesus Christ" (p. 4). However, Jones' (2018) article was linked in the *Drudge Report*, a conservative news aggregation website that receives about 27 million visits per day (Drudge & Hurt, 2019). It went viral. Many comments posted on the website by readers were strong denials that Christian privilege existed and that the seminar itself was proof that Christians in the United States are oppressed.

Theoretical Framework

The epistemological framework of social constructionism offers us possibilities for interpreting events such as this one. Employees of the university, Christian students, the media, and other community members clearly viewed the concept of Christian privilege from different perspectives. Social constructionists would argue that individuals' knowledge of what Christian privilege might entail is shaped by their cultural, historical, and linguistic backgrounds and their lived experiences (Burr, 2015; Koro-Ljungberg, 2008). Christian religious beliefs are deeply embedded in the lives of many Americans, and as Haraway (1988) explained, "struggles over what will count as rational accounts of the world are struggles over *how* to see" (p. 587). Social constructionism allows us to question the construction of this social interaction to better understand it. For example, why did university officials feel the need to present a workshop about Christian privilege? At the same time, why did some Christians feel an extreme negative reaction to simply introducing the concept of Christian privilege at the university?

Social Constructionism

Social constructionism originated from a variety of disciplines, including psychology, social psychology, sociology, philosophy, and linguistics. While terminology differs among the disciplines, Burr (2015) suggested that some common features, outlined below, are helpful in identifying a social constructionist approach to knowing.

First, social constructionists argue that the historical and cultural contexts in which humans live must be considered when we attempt to understand how humans make meaning of the world (Burr, 2015). One example of how historical and cultural contexts have become embedded in the education system in the United States is that students are placed into school classes based on their common ages. Categorizing students in this fashion reflects a psychological and medical assumption that children of the same age have similar abilities and develop in stages that can be predetermined (e.g., Erikson's stages of emotional development and Piaget's cognitive development theory). This method of categorizing students also harkens back to an industrial era organizational structure that prized efficiency over other qualities. These assumptions about children and how they should grow and be educated have become discourses. Burr (2015) defined a discourse as “a systematic, coherent set of images, metaphors and so on that construct an object in a particular way” (p. 235). These factors that construct the meaning of an object (or a person) in a certain way draw heavily from the historical and cultural contexts in which they originated and evolved over time.

Second, social constructionists are typically critical of taken-for-granted knowledge or discourses that “can upon inspection be found to be socially derived and socially maintained” (Burr, 2015, p. 50). Davies and Harré (1999) explained that discourses are institutionalized language systems that pervade all levels of society, from small groups to major political, governmental, and religious organizations. They noted that these discourses may conflict or compete with each other, but that ultimately, “to know anything is to know in terms of one or more discourses” (p. 34). For example, common societal discourses that support male/female gender conformity, heteronormativity, white privilege, and middle-class values are issues that many social constructionist researchers seek to expose.

Third, social constructionists picture meaning as constructed by people using a common language to understand the experiences and feelings that arise in the course of social interactions (Burr, 2015). Linguistic meaning is based on the cultural, historical, and political understandings of the community, which suggests that language is meaningful only within a mutually understood context. Language includes not only a system of symbols, but also institutionalized rules of how, when, and why those symbols are to be used. As a discursive structure, language shapes and limits what can be said and understood by the shared society (Harré, 2012). However, language is not fixed and unchanging, but may be used as a tool of resistance to social conventions. For example, the grammatical rule of using a gender-specific pronoun (he or she) when referring to a person is currently viewed by many in American society as oppressive to those who are not gender-normative. Using "they," a non-gendered pronoun, to refer to a single person has recently become an accepted alternative to address this issue. Socially constructed contextual meanings become shared knowledge.

Fourth, shared knowledge, or currently accepted ways of understanding the world, is always in flux as humans revise how they view the world based on their social interactions. As opposed to positivist epistemological frameworks, social constructionism does not envision the individual as possessing an identity of unchanging core traits. Instead, Danielewicz (2001) defined the term "identity" as "how individuals know and name themselves and how they are recognized and regarded by others," and suggested that "all identity categories, even those that seem biologically designated like gender or race, are processes under construction" (p.3). Burr (2015) argued that seemingly permanent personality traits are, in fact, affected by the various contexts in which humans interact. Within these contexts, individuals have agency or "the capacity to make choices and to act upon them" (p. 235). Individuals interact with each other in the ongoing process of becoming, constructing shared knowledge that is always changeable.

Finally, not only does social interaction construct knowledge, but constructed knowledge influences social interaction as well (Burr, 2015). For example, a common discourse is that America is, and always has been, a Christian nation. In December, therefore, it is unimaginable to many Christians that wishing someone a Merry Christmas might be inappropriate. Public and private businesses "deck the halls," and even secular government spaces might be decorated with Christian images. When we look beyond the everyone-is-Christian discourse to acknowledge that

Americans are religiously diverse, many of these accepted social interactions may discomfit persons of non-Christian faiths and non-believers.

Social constructionism, an epistemological framework, focuses on how human beings "know" something and how that knowledge is constructed within social interaction. It takes into account the historical, cultural, and linguistic contexts of social interaction as vital aspects of meaning-making. Human knowledge gained through social interaction is constantly in flux. However, discourses become embedded within social structures, and these taken-for-granted understandings work to limit how human beings may make sense of the world.

Subject positions and resistance

Cultural rules, customs, and conventions are part of the socially constructed discursive system of shared knowledge. Taken-for-granted rights and duties are based on these societal discourses and operate to locate people in subject positions where they have or do not have the power to speak and act in certain ways (Davis & Harré, 1990). For example, a person who takes up the subject position of "student in a traditional classroom" does not have the power to speak until they have raised their hand to indicate that they wish to speak and are subsequently given permission to do so by the teacher. Harré and van Langenhove (1999) argued that "not only what we do but also what we *can* do is restricted by the rights, duties and obligations we acquire, assume or which are imposed upon us in the concrete social contexts of everyday life" (p. 4). On the surface, this statement sounds as if individuals are locked into subject positions, helpless to effect change. However, this is far from true.

St. Pierre (2016) used the term *subjectivity* to describe the way in which human beings are always in the process of being socially constructed, "at every moment being disciplined, regulated, normalized, produced, and, at the same time, resisting, shifting, changing, producing"

(p. 49). The process of becoming normalizes and disciplines the subject *and* allows space for resistance and change. Individuals subject to a discourse can acquire or assume those rights, duties, and obligations, but if they choose not to acquire or assume them, resistance or change to the discourse is possible (Davies & Harré, 1990). As individuals adopt subject positions such as teacher, parent, Muslim, teenager, they can accept, resist, or adapt what it means to be subject to (or a subject in) that position (St. Pierre, 2016).

In his book *Living in the shadow of the cross: Understanding and resisting the power and privilege of Christian hegemony*, Kivel (2013) defined resistance "as the many ways people oppose the dominance of those in authority and undermine their ability to carry out their agenda" (p. 175). He noted that resistance often goes unnoticed, and in fact, pointed out that those resisting often do not want to draw attention to an action that may result in negative consequences. Some forms of subtle resistance, such as enduring in silence, adapting to a situation, being quietly insubordinate, making covert critical comments, purposely slowing down movements, and other such actions may not be recognized as resistance even when that is exactly what they are. Other forms of resistance are less subtle. Taking direct action to bring attention to an oppression, causing a disruption, or escaping from a hostile situation are forms of resistance liable to be noticed by the dominant authority. Non-Christian teachers are likely to resist the Christian privilege that manifests in supposedly secular public schools. How they resist is a component of this research study.

Identifying Christian Privilege

Peggy McIntosh's (1988) groundbreaking studies identifying White and male privilege in American society suggest that the normalized structure of privilege bestowed on members of the White race and the male gender may relate to religion as well. Blumenfeld (2006) constructed a connecting analogy to McIntosh's work by defining Christian privilege as "a seemingly invisible, unearned, and largely unacknowledged array of benefits accorded to Christians, with which they often unconsciously walk through life as if they effortlessly carry a knapsack tossed over their shoulders" (p.195). The knapsack of benefits American Christians carry makes it possible for them to feel comfortable and safe espousing their religious beliefs publicly in situations where members of other faiths and non-believers might not feel safe doing the same. In fact, Blumenfeld (2006) suggested that Christian privilege can be more accurately described as hegemony. He defined Christian hegemony as "the institutionalization of a Christian norm or standard, which establishes and perpetuates the notion that all people are or should be Christian, thereby privileging Christians and Christianity, and excluding the needs, concerns, religious cultural practices, and life experiences of people who are not Christian" (p. 196). An inaccurate hegemonic discourse that the country's founding fathers (mothers?) were Christian has become perceived by many as an absolute truth, frequently used to explain (without needing to justify) the historical supremacy of Christianity in the United States (Blumenfeld, 2009).

Nelson (2009) suggested that one way to understand the complex and differing forms Christian privilege may take in American society is to think of privilege as consisting of active and passive components. Active privilege includes the "things that a person does as well as things that accrue to them through group membership" (p. 136). An individual member of a Christian community is entitled to the privileges that are accorded to that community. Passive privilege, on the other hand, arises from "the historical and societal power relationships between groups that have little to do with individual intention and action" (p. 136). The normative discourse that the United States is a Christian nation affords Christians passive privilege that can marginalize non-Christians. These privileges are the unseen, unacknowledged benefits that many

Christians, such as those who responded angrily to having a workshop about Christian privilege on a college campus, deny exist. While dividing privilege into an "active and passive" binary can admittedly limit how we understand such a complex concept, the model is useful here for exploring how Christian privilege sometimes can be easily visible and at other times obscured, embedded into taken-for-granted normative discourses.

In a list of "30+ Examples of Christian Privilege," social justice advocate Sam Killermann (2012) included active privileges such as having easy access to music and television programs referencing Christianity and feeling secure that your car will not be vandalized because your bumper sticker announces that Jesus is your co-pilot. Time off from work for the celebration of Christian holidays is expected and is often automatically accommodated in the yearly calendars of schools, businesses, and even government offices. For example, Christmas, an irrefutably Christian religious celebration, is designated a federal holiday, which means that federal government offices are closed and employees are automatically paid for the day off whether they wish to observe Christmas or not (United States Office of Personnel Management, 2019). To date, no religious holiday of any non-Christian faith has been designated a federal holiday. Christian holidays are celebrated openly and ostentatiously; religious displays such as Christmas nativity scenes, frequently paid for by taxpayers and regularly argued for and against in courts of law, continue to decorate the public areas of towns across the United States (Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, 2007).

Killermann's (2012) list also includes passive privileges that constitute significant, mostly unacknowledged, benefits of being Christian in the United States. The privilege of having a jury of your peers and a judge likely to share your Christian faith might make a difference in how your criminal or civil court case is decided. Political representatives often make it a point to advertise that they are Christian to attract Christian voters; the decisions they make about voting for or against bills in Congress are frequently (reasonably?) explained by referring to a shared Christian faith. Christians, unlike Muslims, can fundraise to support their congregations without fear of being investigated as possible terrorists. Adoption agencies will not see Christian faith as a reason to prevent someone from adopting a child, but "confess" to being an atheist and it may be a different story.

Finally, Killerman's (2012) examples of Christian privilege extend to how American children are educated in public schools. Teachers who identify as Christian comprise a majority of the population of American teachers, making it likely that children of Christian parents will be taught mainly by Christian teachers at their local public schools. Does having a teacher of the same religion privilege Christian students even if the school is secular? Perhaps the question that needs to be answered before this one can be addressed is "Are public schools secular?" This question is highly disputed; the rather heated debates are an aspect of a long-lived "culture war" being fought on many fronts (Eck, 2009; Haynes & Thomas, 2007; Marsden, 2018).

In 1991, Hunter defined culture war as political disagreement on a range of issues that "can be traced ultimately and finally to the matter of moral authority" (New Lines of Conflict section). In other words, what criteria do people use to determine what is right and wrong? On one side, Hunter explained, is liberalism or progressivism in which "moral authority tends to be defined by the spirit of the modern age, a spirit of rationalism." On the other side is conservatism, "the commitment on the part of adherents to an external, definable, and transcendent authority." In the long run, Hunter noted: "On political matters one can compromise; on matters of ultimate moral truth, one cannot."

However, the culture war cannot be considered merely ideological. Currently, the sides disagree on topics such as abortion, LGBTQ rights, tax allocation, and education, including the curriculum, textbooks, and policies adopted by public schools. These issues are deeply embedded in American politics, with each side using the political system to try to gain an advantage. Elected representatives propose and pass bills for their states and for the country based ostensibly on their ideological stances. These laws often give power to the government to restrict the actions of American citizens, and in doing so, increase the overall power of the state or national governments (e.g., Texas SB8/Texas Heartbeat Act, passed May 19, 2021, restricting abortion). It may be argued that increasing political power is a purpose and a tangible result of the culture war.

Culture war on a public school battleground

According to the First Amendment of the Constitution as interpreted by the American judicial system, schools funded by government taxpayer money may not establish a religion or show a preference for one religion over another or over non-belief (e.g., *Abington v. Schempp*, 374 U.S. 203, [1963]). Public schools in the United States are ostensibly neutral regarding religious diversity and non-belief. However, court cases involving such issues as high school graduation prayers (e.g., *Weisman v. Lee*, 728 F. Supp. 68 [1990]) and student-led Christian prayer over loud-speaker systems at school functions (e.g., *Doe v. Santa Fe*, I68 F.3d 806 [1999]) suggest that how religion should be/is present in public schools is an area of contention (DelFattore, 2004). The daily recitation of the 1954-revised Pledge of Allegiance in public schools, an act legislated by a majority of states, regularly comes under fire but has yet to be heard by the Supreme Court. It has been argued in lower courts that including the phrase “under God” in the Pledge of Allegiance endorses the monotheistic aspect of the Christian faith and specifically excludes members of other belief systems, such as nontheistic Buddhists and polytheistic Hindus, as well as non-believers (*Newdow v. U.S. Congress*, 292 F.3d 597, 2002). Christian teachers and students are likely to feel comfortable and safe reciting these words, but individuals who are not Christian may feel marginalized by the practice. Schlosser (2003) observed that "Christian religious dogmatism contributes to persons from minority religious groups feeling that their religious identity is not valued, and subsequently, they feel discrimination and oppression because of their religious group membership" (p. 47). The issues in these court cases and others like them, brought to public awareness by members of minority religious groups (including non-mainstream Christians such as Jehovah's Witnesses and Latter Day Saints) and non-believers (DelFattore, 2004), suggest that mainstream Christianity is privileged in public schools and that religious others are marginalized.

On the other side of the culture war, supporters argue that religious ways of making sense of the world have been forcibly dismissed from the public school classroom in an effort to make public schools religiously "neutral" (Nord, 2002). In their book *Taking Religion Seriously across the Curriculum*, Nord & Haynes (1998) acknowledged that the early Protestant roots of public education, which included tangible religious aspects such as devotional Bible reading and school prayers, were unjust because the public schools did not seriously consider other faiths and non-belief. However, they contend that in modern times, the exclusion of religion in favor of secularism means that *all* religious beliefs are not taken seriously in public schools. Hufford (2010) submitted that this exclusion eliminates positive aspects of religious thought that may "encourage, enlighten, liberate, motivate, raise questions of purpose and meaning, and seek justice and peace – all valid educational goals" (p. 16). By excising religious worldviews from public school classrooms, the educational system may be limiting the scope of the education it offers students.

Nord (2002) maintained that “it can be plausibly argued that we *indoctrinate* students when we uncritically initiate them into one way of thinking and systematically ignore the alternatives, marginalizing them, making them seem irrational” (p. 14). Christian perspectives on evolution and creationism, for example, are not included in most current science curricula. If religion is consistently suppressed when such topics are introduced, public schools may be teaching students that a secular viewpoint is the only correct view. Members of the majority religion may begin to feel that their religion is “under attack and excluded by forced secularism” (Marks, Binkley, & Daly, 2014, p. 248).

However, current Supreme Court case decisions may soon allow for a stronger connection between religion and state in public education. A 2020 Supreme Court decision in Espinoza v. Montana Department of Revenue 591 U.S.__ [2020] found that a state law providing tax credits for only non-religious educational funding violated the Free Exercise Clause. This may be an opening for religious private schools to receive taxpayer money. Another case, Kennedy v. Bremerton School District in which a high school football coach is suing the school district for which he worked for suspending him for praying with students during and after school games, was granted a hearing by the Supreme Court on January 14, 2022, but it has yet to be argued. It is possible that this challenge may result in a change in how teachers are permitted to express their religious beliefs in the public schools.

As evidenced by this ongoing debate, religion is a volatile issue in public education. Ideally, public schools should follow both the Establishment Clause and the Free Exercise Clause of the First Amendment because they are government institutions supported by taxpayer dollars. Public schools should not promote one religion over any other or non-belief, *and* public schools should not interfere in people's right to worship or not as they see fit. However, this is no small task, and public schools have not achieved a balance that satisfies the proponents on either side.

One reason for this imbalance may be that the role that teachers are expected to fulfill as neutral government employees is difficult for them to enact because they also identify as persons who hold religious or non-religious worldviews that guide their daily lives (White, 2009). Teacher education programs, for the most part, do not adequately train preservice teachers to construct professional identities based on First Amendment precepts (Marks, Binkley, and Daly, 2014; Stonebanks and Stonebanks, 2009). Therefore, even those teachers just entering the profession may openly bring their religious convictions into a public school without understanding First Amendment constraints. Christianity, the dominant religion among public school teachers, may be privileged in school spaces as teachers consciously or unconsciously meld their Christian worldviews with their professional lives (Hadley, 2019; Hartwick, 2014; Miller, 2020; Olshefski, 2020). How this Christian privilege affects non-Christian and non-believing public school teachers is the focus of this study.

Religion and Education Research

In order to understand how religion is present in secular public schools, I reviewed religion and education research studies from the year 2000 to the present. It must be noted that research studies on this topic appear to be limited overall. It is inherently difficult to identify "religion and public schools" literature in part because the normative nature of Christian privilege can allow embedded Christian discourses to pass unnoticed by researchers. To demonstrate, Weber and Allen (2016) examined the School of Education dissertations written from 2005 to 2014 by doctoral students at their home university, Florida Atlantic. Using dissertation titles, abstracts, and keywords, the researchers categorized the dissertations into critical issue themes. Of the 231 dissertations they reviewed, they found that not a single one addressed issues involving religion and public schools. Since their research suggested that the topic of religion and public schools is deemed to be of critical importance in education today, the authors found it problematic that doctoral students and their advisors had excluded it from their educational research studies. This finding suggests that none of these dissertations explored my intended topics related to religion and public education, but it is a mistake to assume that religion, especially taken-for-granted Christian discourses, was not incorporated in some form within at least some of the dissertations.

I also noticed that many of the research studies that are available on the topic of religion and education were conducted with Christian participants. This appears to be indicative of the discursive privilege that Christianity holds in education in the United States. While it is helpful to understand how a Christian worldview may influence preservice and inservice teachers' professional lives, these studies do not offer direct insights into the experiences of non-Christian teachers. However, they do allow us a glimpse of the scope of normative Christian privilege in public schools that Christian teachers are afforded and non-Christian teachers are not.

I divided the available body of literature into two sections. The first section focuses on how teachers' religious beliefs affect their professional relationships with others. Existing societal discourses about religion and education offer a position for teachers to take up as they interact with students and other adults (Davis & Harré, 1999). Normative Christian privilege allows Christian teachers to openly bring their religious beliefs into the ostensibly secular public school space where such beliefs are taken for granted. Subsections of section one include: self-positioning of atheist teachers; othering of religious minority students; becoming a (Christian) teacher; and self-positioning of Christian teachers.

The second section explores how teachers' religious identities influence the pedagogical choices they make as teachers. Teachers' personal religious worldviews matter in how they construct themselves as educators, and therefore, the connection between religious viewpoints and pedagogy matters (White, 2010). Section two is divided into three main aspects of pedagogy: use of classroom materials; teaching curriculum; and instructional approaches.

Teachers' religious identities and relationships in public schools

According to the 2014 Religious Landscape Study compiled by the Pew Research Center, 70.6% of American adults self-identify as Christian. Hartwick's (2014) survey of 317 randomly sampled Wisconsin teachers found that 88.3% of the teachers in the study self-identified as Christian, a result that suggests that teachers may identify as Christian at a higher rate than the national average among American adults. A majority-Christian environment, even in supposedly secular public schools, strongly encourages both Christian and non-Christian teachers and students to position themselves within the discourse of Christian privilege. The following studies show a pattern of self and other positioning that affects relationships between teachers, students, and administrators. Whether individuals accept or reject these discursive positions, religious identity appears to make a difference in how relationships are constructed in the public school space.

Self-positioning of atheist teachers.

Howley, Howley, and Dudek (2016), whose main research interest is understanding rural schools and communities, conducted a cross-case comparison interview study of twenty-four atheist inservice teachers who lived in various rural communities in the United States. In this study, the researchers defined atheists as those teachers who openly revealed that they did not believe in a supernatural deity. All participants agreed that nonbelievers, especially atheists, are "an extremely disparaged group in the United States" (p. 16). This perception influenced how they chose to live and work within the communities in which they taught. The study results indicated that a majority of the teachers interviewed chose to remain in the closet about their beliefs, sharing that personal information only with select people who they were confident would accept them. Most felt that their need to keep their beliefs safely protected caused them to position themselves as community outsiders.

Interestingly, the fact that participants lived in rural areas, stereotypically viewed as highly intolerant of non-believers, was only weakly associated with the choices they made about exposing their personal convictions. This suggests that atheist teachers living and working in rural, urban, and suburban majority-Christian communities throughout the United States may routinely have to make difficult choices about whether to disclose or conceal their personal worldviews. Religion and the stigma against non-believers play a role in how atheist teachers position themselves in their working relationships.

Othering of religious minority students.

Dupper, Forrest-Bank, and Lowry-Carusillo (2015) designed semi-structured focus groups to research the experiences of religious minority students in a high school and middle school located in a community that was predominantly Evangelical Christian. The study included participants from Muslim and Jewish traditions, Unitarian Universalists, and non-mainstream Catholic Christians. In all, 50 adolescents participated. Focus group meetings were held at the specific religious centers for each group and were limited to students who were already active in these youth organizations. Each focus group was religiously homogeneous.

In this disturbing study, student participants were forced to adopt the position of other by the majority Evangelical Christian students and teachers at their schools. They reported incidents in which they were verbally or even physically assaulted at their public schools because of their religious beliefs. These accounts ranged from serious hate crimes, such as when a female Muslim student's religious attire was ripped from her body and stomped on by other students, to microaggressions, which the authors defined as "subtle insults toward people of minority groups that are automatic, nonverbal, and at times unintended in nature" (p. 38). Microaggressions were frequent and encompassed experiences such as being made to feel uncomfortable by other students for not participating in popular Christian-based organizations like the Fellowship of Christian Athletes or for choosing not to attend a Christian-based rally at the Protestant church across the street during school hours. A clear example of Christian privilege, the rally reinforced students' perception that Evangelical Christianity was the only true religion and effectively undermined relationships that may otherwise have formed between religiously diverse students.

Even more unsettling, the student participants in this study identified that some teachers and school administrators themselves instigated marginalizing incidents. They recounted experiences in which teachers refused to allow students to take a test early or late so that they could participate in a non-Christian religious observance. They also noted being singled out by teachers to explain what Catholicism, Islam, or Judaism was to a class, being routinely referred to as "Catholic girl" (p. 41), "terrorist" (p. 41), or "little Jew boy" (p. 42) by a teacher and students, and having a school administrator refuse to allow a Muslim student to take a break during a hot weather outdoor sports practice because "she was 'choosing to suffer' by fasting during her religious holiday" (p. 42). Presumably Evangelical Christian, teachers and administrators at these schools blamed the separation of Church and State as a reason for why the needs of religious-minority students could not be accommodated. Apparently, some of them even believed that this meant they were not allowed to intervene when a religious-minority student was being bullied. The relationship fostered between some teachers and administrators of the majority religion and minority religious students seems to be largely adversarial as the adults in charge actively enforced the positioning of the minority religious students as unwelcome others.

Forrest-Bank and Dupper (2016) further analyzed their focus group data to examine how the othered minority religious students coped with the marginalization they encountered in their majority-Evangelical Christian public schools. In these schools, it was common for minority religious students to be expected to attend and even participate in Christian-based activities. The students in the study also had to deal with negative comments from peers and teachers about their minority religion. For the most part, the students coped with these difficulties by forming support relationships with their parents, community religious leaders and organizations, and friends of the same religion. They also deliberately decided whether they would position themselves as friends with students of other religions, including those who identified as the majority religion. This was an important decision because having a support group of friends at school might help to alleviate some of the negative effects of religious marginalization. However, Muslim students especially tended to avoid non-Muslim peers, purposefully placing themselves outside of uncomfortable situations or situations that might cause them to compromise their Muslim principles. While religious community relationships, parents, and peers of the same religion helped students deal with the oppression they experienced at school, there is little evidence that religious minority students were positioned in such a way that they could form supportive relationships within the school.

The studies in the subsections above highlighted some of the difficulties atheist teachers and non-mainstream Christian and non-Christian students experienced in majority-Christian public school environments. These difficulties ranged from feeling uncomfortable expressing personal worldviews to being physically or verbally harmed for identifying as something other than the majority-Christian school population. Additional studies, such as the current study of non-Christian teachers' experiences working in public schools, are needed if we are to understand more about the effects of Christian privilege on professional relationships in American public schools.

The research studies referenced in the next subsection involved Christian participants. First, I explore how Christian privilege in the United States plays a part in socially constructing the very idea of what it means to be a teacher and who chooses to teach in our public schools. Then I will consider studies that focused on how Christian religious beliefs influenced preservice teachers' involvement in course content relating to religious diversity and their relationships with professors and fellow students.

Becoming a (Christian) teacher.

Burke and Segall (2015) suggested that "Christian understandings" (p. 2) have socially constructed a compelling model of the American teacher as both martyr and savior. Underpinning the taken-for-granted qualities of a modern teacher is a foundation based on Jesus as teacher, martyr, and savior. American teachers are constructed as willing martyrs, accepting low pay compared to other occupations that require a university degree and sacrificing time, money, and other modes of personal fulfillment in their deep commitment to serving the needs of children (Bullough & Hall-Kenyon, 2012). Modern teachers also accept that their job (vocation?) is to save their students from ignorance and lead them into a bright economic and moral future

(Roebben, 2016). If children are society's future, then teachers are responsible for saving the world, one child at a time (Allen, 2013). These Christian ideals are firmly embedded in what it means to be a teacher in America and appear to be understood, although perhaps not openly identified as Christian, by those who decide to become public school teachers (Burke & Segall, 2015).

"Highly religious people enter Education majors, stay in them and become more religious" (Kimball, Mitchell, Thornton & Young-Demarco, 2009, p. 22). Kimball et. al researched how undergraduate students chose a college major using survey data from the University of Michigan's "Monitoring the Future" Study. Their findings indicated that there was a correlation between the choice of college major and student religiosity due in part to the variety of world views associated with individual college major programs. Of students majoring in humanities, social sciences, business, and education, it is notable that education majors surveyed in the study were the only group in which signs of religiosity, such as stating that religion was very important to them and frequency of attendance at religious services, increased throughout their college experience. The researchers concluded that religious undergraduates tended to gravitate toward, and remain in, education majors. This study did not disaggregate the data by the religion of the participants, so it is possible that these "highly religious people" entering the education field came from a variety of faith traditions. However, given that the majority of adults in the United States identify as Christian and that the socially constructed definition of "teacher" is based on a Christian foundation, it is likely that most of the religious students going into the education field identify as Christian.

The decision to become a teacher is frequently referred to as "a calling," a term undoubtedly imbued with religious significance. Hartwick's (2014) survey study explored teacher participants' beliefs about God and having a religious calling to teach. The majority of participating public school teachers seemingly connected their belief that God exists with a belief that God had called them to teach. Further, Hartwick found that the teachers who felt called by God to teach perceived that their relationships with students was closer than other teachers' perceptions. Whether religious teachers' relationships with students were actually closer than the relationships fostered by teachers who did not believe that God had called them to teach was not the focus of this study and thus cannot be determined. What we can infer, though, is that teachers who believe they were called by God to teach may also believe that forming close relationships with students is an important aspect of their calling. Their religious beliefs influenced how they perceived themselves as teachers in relation to their students.

The following studies explored the religious positioning of Christian preservice teacher participants. These studies are relevant because preservice teachers bring their attitudes about religion and their understanding of religious diversity with them into teacher education programs and then into public school classrooms as they begin teaching.

Teacher educators have researched how Christian beliefs can influence preservice teachers and preservice teacher education. Logan (2014) studied the influence of religion on how four Christian preservice elementary teachers navigated their student teaching semester at a public university. In interviews, the preservice teachers noted that they felt called by God to teach, although what they meant when they used the word "called" was both complex and individual. Throughout the study, the preservice teachers stated that they relied on their Christian faith to guide them (e.g., in forming loving relationships with their elementary school students) as they constructed their own teacher identities. Because they identified as Christian, it was not considered problematic for them to openly position themselves as public school teachers who brought their faith into the workplace.

Blumenfeld & Jaekal (2012) conducted a qualitative survey study that investigated how twenty-seven White, Christian preservice teachers at a public university in the Midwest thought about Christian privilege. Their findings indicated that the majority of the surveyed students either did not know that societal Christian privilege existed because they had never seen or felt it, or they expressed resistance to the idea that Christian privilege might exist. The hegemonic nature of Christian privilege allowed these preservice Christian teachers to remain comfortably blind to the idea that non-Christians and non-believers are marginalized in American society. The researchers suggested that teacher educators must somehow find a way to differentiate between the concept of normative Christian privilege and attacks on the Christian religion itself when introducing religious diversity into teacher education classes. Not understanding that normative Christian privilege is present in public schools has the potential to limit or even damage the relationships Christian preservice teachers form with colleagues and students who are automatically positioned as religious others.

Other teacher educator studies suggest that some Christian preservice teachers refuse to engage in class activities that require them to think critically about their own religious beliefs. James (2010) reflected on some of her Christian preservice teacher students' negative responses to the central foundation of her elementary social studies methods course that a democracy must allow for an open exchange of perspectives on issues that are relevant to all citizens if they are to discuss and implement mutually agreeable actions. As an example, she reported that introducing the controversial subject of whether the Pledge of Allegiance should continue to include the words "under God" resulted in a teacher education student's refusal to participate in the class discussion. The preservice teacher proclaimed: “My faith in God means that, for me, there is one right answer to the question you’re asking” (p. 619). Her religious certainty in her Christian beliefs limited her willingness to listen open-mindedly (or at all) to others’ points of view, and so she positioned herself as outside of and not involved in the classroom community. Creating a working relationship even with other Christians who were willing to consider that there might be more than one answer to the question, let alone religious others and non-believers who attended the class, was impossible for her. James worried that preservice teachers who evidenced certainty in their religious worldviews might continue to refuse to consider diverse ideas when they became teachers in their own public school classrooms. As religious diversity grows in the student populations of public schools, an intolerance to democratic principles and to critically discussing differing worldviews may result in some Christian teachers positioning themselves as intolerant of all religious differences.

Subedi (2006) noted similar reactions by the preservice education students in his qualitative study of early childhood preservice teachers’ beliefs and knowledge about religion. All but two of the fifty students in the study identified as White, Christian females; the other two identified as Jewish. Using interview, observation, and preservice teachers’ writings, Subedi discovered that participants believed that religious identity was a personal topic and, as such, felt that discussion of religious diversity should not be critically discussed in the teacher education program. He noted a decided silence from his students whenever he introduced the topic of religious discrimination in society and in public schools. Students also demonstrated an unwillingness to critically examine their own religious interpretations of controversial topics such as same-sex marriage and teaching evolution.

It may be argued that the preservice teachers' refusal to engage critically on the issue of religious diversity in their university education courses is indicative of a Christian privilege that assumes both that everyone is Christian and that religious others are insignificant (Blumenfeld, 2006). There is little need to discuss religion and religious discrimination if America is a Christian nation. In fact, Subedi's (2006) preservice teacher students believed that it was acceptable for "schools [to] privilege the teaching of a single religion (e.g., Christianity) if the numerical majority desired to do so" (p. 234). Further, many were surprised to learn that teaching about world religions would be part of the social studies curriculum they would cover as early childhood teachers. These results suggest that Subedi's preservice teachers will not only have difficulty understanding the importance of other worldviews to non-Christian students in their classrooms, but also that they will lack the content knowledge they need to teach the curriculum.

The studies outlined above indicate that many Christian preservice teachers rely on their faith as a guide to becoming what they envision a good teacher should be. Unfortunately, those who are certain of their religious beliefs appear to be unwilling to engage in critical thinking about topics related to religious diversity or even to consider that Christianity may be normatively privileged over other faiths and non-belief. These preservice teachers have the potential to strengthen the harmful effects of Christian privilege in public schools as they enter the work force.

The next subsection reviews studies that considered ways in which Christian in-service teachers' religious beliefs affected their relationships with students and colleagues.

Self-positioning of Christian teachers.

Hartwick's (2015) survey study included asking the 88.3% of Christian respondents to quantify how often they pray about or for the students they teach. 78.8% of teachers in the study reported that they pray for their students at least once or twice a year, while 50.8% noted that they pray for their students once a month or more. Evangelical, Charismatic, Fundamentalist, and traditional Christians were the most likely to pray for students at least monthly. This group of teachers believed that prayer was vital in their professional lives and that prayer made them better teachers. Hartwick suggests that this statistic is relevant because “a teacher’s prayers for or about students may very well influence how the teacher sees, interacts with, and behaves toward students” (p. 58). It is unclear from this study, though, how Christian teachers who pray for their students regularly relate to students who are non-Christian or non-believers. Because they have so clearly defined themselves as Christian within an environment that privileges Christianity, teachers who pray for their students may tend to marginalize religious others, perhaps without even realizing it.

Hadley (2019) used a portraiture methodology to explore how three teachers’ evangelical Christian beliefs intersected with their professional identities as early career teachers. This study found that the participants actively connected their teacher identities to their religious beliefs, especially when it came to “their purpose for teaching, their concept of what it means to be a teacher, their concept of students, and the way they approached classroom discipline” (p. 170). For these three evangelical Christians, their religious beliefs played a vital role in how they perceived themselves as teachers.

Oldendorf and Green (2005) conducted a survey and interview study of Pre-K through 8th grade Christian teachers living in rural North Carolina about the place of religion in the public schools in which they taught. They discovered that the Christian teachers were often conflicted between strictly following the separation between religion and state and their strong conviction that Christians should witness their faith regardless of the laws. This conflict was worsened by the fact that many of the teachers did not know what the First Amendment indicated that they could or could not do as public school employees, and that they also lacked basic knowledge about religions, including their own. The teachers reacted to this tension in a variety of ways: openly sharing their Christian faith with students; ignoring the religious diversity of their students; removing all references to any religion from the classroom; and resenting having to make accommodations for children of different faiths. The participants all positioned themselves as Christian within an environment strongly steeped in Christian privilege. Relationships with students who were religious others were likely to be superficial at best if the teacher disregarded the students' non-Christian beliefs or refused to allow religion, even that mandated by the curriculum, to enter the classroom. That many of the teachers felt that their dedication to sharing their Christian beliefs outweighed their duties as teachers in public schools may be problematic. Proselytizing by Christian teachers may automatically position non-Christian students as unworthy religious others and may also draw on the power imbalance between teachers and students to make the religious message more authoritative than it might otherwise be.

The studies in this first section suggested that religious others, such as atheist teachers and non-Christian students, experience religious marginalization that keeps them from forming strong relationships in public schools that are majority Christian. Studies involving Christian preservice and inservice teachers indicated that one possible reason for this marginalization may be that many Christian teachers openly connect their religious beliefs to their work in the public schools. Their actions may reify the normative Christian privilege that is already present in American public school environments, limiting and defining the relationships Christian teachers form with religious others.

The second section shifts from a focus on teachers' relationships with others to a focus on how religious worldviews may affect teachers' pedagogy.

Teachers' religious identity and pedagogy in public schools

Teachers' religious identities and beliefs may affect how they approach and enact pedagogy in their classrooms. When I analyzed the patterns that emerged in the research literature, three distinct pedagogical areas emerged. Teachers' use of classroom materials, their willingness and ability to teach certain curricular content, and how they approach instruction in general appear to be influenced by their religious worldviews.

Use of classroom materials.

What should our students learn? The power associated with having a particular series of textbooks adopted by school districts should not be underestimated. The content and the manner in which it is presented in any given textbook may be biased or even incorrect. For example, literature texts may include only the writing of "dead white guys," leaving students with the impression that the writing of women and people of color are irrelevant. Social studies texts may focus entirely on a Eurocentric history that excludes historical accomplishments and significant events in Asia and Africa. Again, students may come away from reading these texts with the idea that only Eurocentric history is worth learning.

The conservative Christian organization Educational Research Analysts (E.R.A.), started by Mel and Norma Gabler in Texas in 1961, continues to influence textbook publishers to eliminate material that is contrary to their particularized understanding of conservative Christian values in the public school textbooks adopted in Texas. For example, the 2020 E.R.A. guidelines approve only high school literature textbooks with reading selections that do not legitimize "LGBTQ deviance" in any way (Educational Research Analysts, 2020, n.p.). Conservative

Christian values are privileged in textbooks published by publishers adhering to these guidelines. Furthermore, DelFattore (1992) observed that textbooks are “designed for a national market that includes heavily populated states where textbook activists are very influential” (p. 10). Textbooks approved by the conservative Christian organization for use in the large market state of Texas are likely to be adopted by school districts across the country.

In public schools, teachers may have the freedom to choose the materials they use to teach the state-mandated curriculum. One of the options teachers have is to teach entirely from the adopted textbooks. Hartwick’s (2014) survey study revealed that teachers who believed in God with or without doubts were nearly twice as likely to rely solely on school-sanctioned textbooks for instruction as those teachers who indicated that they believed in an impersonal higher power (e.g., “The Force” in *Star Wars*) or identified as atheist or agnostic. The study was not designed to analyze the implications of religious teachers’ choice of materials. However, social constructionists will argue that teaching only from a sanctioned textbook that is specifically designed to privilege Christian values can marginalize non-Christian students as well as those beyond the pale, such as individuals identifying as LGBTQ.

Further, it has been suggested that how religious Christians are taught to read and interpret the Bible may affect their overall literacy habits. Rackley (2014) conducted an interview study of 16 middle and high school students who identified as either Latter-Day Saints or Methodists. Results indicated that the students raised in the Latter-Day Saint tradition were accustomed to reading and memorizing long pieces of scripture with the purpose of believing them without question. Discussion of the scripture was limited to students responding with the correct memorized words and answering questions that had only one expected answer. The Methodist students, on the other hand, were encouraged to interpret and discuss scripture with each other and their religious community. The purpose was not simply to believe, but to make sense of the world through the religious lens of the scriptures. Rackley suggested that these literacy practices may carry over into the students' approach to reading other texts in the course of their schooling.

While this study did not include Christian teachers' literacy habits, it is possible that Biblical literacy patterns formed in childhood might influence which materials teachers choose to use in the classroom, and potentially even how they are used. In public schools, some teachers and students may view textbooks as seemingly authorless founts of absolute truth, much like the Bible (Segall & Burke, 2013). A teacher's unquestioning acceptance and presentation of Christian-biased textbook contents as fact can marginalize non-Christian students.

Teaching curriculum

There are religiously-sensitive areas of the mandated public school curricula that must be approached delicately. In particular, specific viewpoints of science and social studies curricula are disputed by the stakeholders who must make and apply such decisions. These controversial issues often pose difficulty for public school teachers who must attempt to reconcile the relationship between their religious beliefs and what the curriculum requires them to teach.

Evolution and creationism.

Trani (2004) conducted a quantitative survey study of public high school biology teachers in Oregon. Participants were surveyed about their religious convictions, their willingness to teach evolution, and their knowledge of science in general and the theory of evolution in particular. 16% of Oregon biology teachers reported that they reject evolution based on their religious convictions and refused to present the theory of evolution in their biology classes even though evolution was included in the state biology curriculum. However, these biology teachers also received low scores on their knowledge of science and evolution. Trani suggests that their refusal to teach evolution may be based not only on religious convictions, but also on a lack of knowledge of evolutionary theory and the nature of science. It is unclear from this study whether these teachers refused to learn the curricular content because they believed their religious convictions forbade it, or if they were simply poorly prepared to teach high school biology. It is clear, though, that these teachers' Christian religious beliefs played a substantial role in decisions they made in their professional lives.

In a 2010 quantitative survey study of 375 female preservice and inservice teachers enrolled in K-12 teacher preparation courses at a California university, Levesque and Guillaume noted that participants who rejected evolution had a variety of reasons for doing so. Biblical literalists, for example, accepted creationism as described in the Genesis chapter of the Bible as the only truth. In addition, 64% of participants who indicated that they had no doubt in the existence of God but were not Biblical literalists were also unable to accept the theory of evolution as a valid worldview. The researchers suggested that many of these participants believed that creationism and evolution were polar opposites, and so a belief in creationism by default meant that evolution had to be an invalid concept. However, when asked about how the topic should be addressed in public schools, 70% of all survey respondents indicated that both creationism *and* biological evolution should be taught. Apparently, they believed that Christian creationism and evolutionary science are of equal value to students' science learning. Non-Christians are unlikely to agree.

Teaching about religion in social studies courses.

Teaching about the beliefs of world religions is a common curriculum requirement in social studies courses (Mead, 2006). Marks, Binkley & Daley (2014) surveyed preservice teachers enrolled in social studies methods or multicultural education courses at three different universities to determine how much students knew about world religions before they began teaching. The researchers combined questions from the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life (2010) survey with questions from Prothero's (2007) survey published in his book *Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know – and Doesn't*. Some questions also concerned the First Amendment's clauses pertaining to religion and how they are generally to be applied in public schools.

Results indicated that the majority of preservice teachers who took the survey were unable to identify important aspects of diverse religions. Few knew anything about the major tenets of Islam, Judaism, Buddhism, Hinduism, and even though they largely identified as Christian, they did not demonstrate accurate knowledge about the historical background, major figures, and religious literature important in Christianity. In addition, the preservice teachers lacked knowledge of the First Amendment's religion clauses and had little idea how the First Amendment could properly be applied in a public school classroom. These results suggest that preservice social studies teachers may be underprepared to teach social studies content, and perhaps more importantly, may also be unprepared to understand and to teach religiously diverse students in public schools.

Instructional approaches

Religious identity may also influence pedagogical decision making about instructional methods. For example, Juzwik and McKenzie (2015) studied two evangelical Christian men, one a teacher and the other a student in his public high school literature class, during a two-week writing project on the topic "This I Believe." This case study, framed by rooted cosmopolitanism, shared one way that diverse religious beliefs and non-beliefs could be communicated by students in a classroom. The researchers found that the evangelical student tended to shut down diverse religious dialogue with his classmates because he believed that his purpose in life was to lead others to Christ. While the evangelical teacher had the instructional goal of promoting acceptance of diverse religious opinions and creating a safe space for everyone to share their beliefs, this did not happen. Christianity was decidedly, although unintentionally, privileged in this classroom unit.

Schweber (2006) explored how one teacher at an evangelical Christian private school used collective memory formation to explain the 9/11 terrorist attacks to her students. By using an analogy of Jesus suffering on the cross, the teacher explained that “those murdered in this attack were dying as part of a divine purpose” (p. 400). Schweber points out that this explanation, “because God is good, all events occur for a greater good that the human mind may not be able to fathom initially” (p. 399), seemed to result in the students feeling diminished agency to change or do good in the world. While these lessons took place at a private Christian school, it is not inconceivable that evangelical Christian teachers in public schools provided these same (Christian) answers to religiously diverse students to explain the horrific event.

Non-believing teachers, on the other hand, prized rational thinking over religious belief. All twenty-four of the teachers interviewed in Howley, Howley, and Dudek’s (2016) study of atheist rural teachers chose to adopt teaching methods such as project-based learning activities that engaged students in inquiry and critical thinking. The intellectual education of their students was of primary importance for the nonbelieving teachers. This had a discernable effect on their pedagogy.

The second section above reviewed research literature about the effects of religious beliefs on teachers’ pedagogy. There is evidence that the decisions teachers make about how to use state-sanctioned textbooks, whether they are prepared and willing to teach about evolution in biology classrooms or world religions in social studies classes, and how they approach instruction are influenced by their personal religious or non-religious worldviews. Christian beliefs, in particular, appear to play a role in a teacher's decision to rely on possibly Christian-biased texts and to be unwilling or unprepared to teach mandated science and social studies curricula.

Overall, the two main sections in this review of literature describe studies that connected teachers' religious worldviews with their relationships and pedagogical choices in the supposedly secular public school workplace. The few studies that focus on non-Christian teachers and students indicate that religious others and non-believers are marginalized in ways that make them feel uncomfortable or even unsafe. The remainder of the studies focused on Christian participants. These studies suggest that Christians openly bring their personal religious beliefs into their work in teacher education courses and public schools, which may reify the discourse of Christian privilege that is already present in American public education.

Why do non-Christian teachers need to be studied?

Social constructionism proposes that cultural and historical contexts influence how teachers construct their personal and professional identities (Burr, 2015; Danielewicz, 2001). Despite the First Amendment discourse that paints public schools as neutral secular spaces, it may be difficult for teachers to adopt a religiously-neutral persona in the classroom because personal religious beliefs are already always present in the cultural and historical contexts of teachers' lives. In fact, White (2010) suggests that "the individual religious orientations of teachers, whether for, against, or neutral toward religion, can impact how they enact their professional roles in the classroom" (p. 45). The idea that teachers in public schools present diverse religious orientations that affect their professional identities does not seem to be problematic in itself. Wearing a hijab or a Christian cross to work, privately practicing traditional prayer rituals during the school day, and having time off to attend religious observances are specifically allowed within the court-interpreted First Amendment guidelines for public school teachers (DelFattore, 2004). However, the normative discourse that the United States is a Christian nation is a powerful force in education. This discourse promotes the construction of the American teacher as a Jesus-like martyr and saint, which may in turn attract Christian students to enter the education field. In a comfortable majority in the public schools, Christian teachers are able to openly integrate their religious beliefs into their work lives. Together, these Christian teachers can easily construct an overall public school environment that privileges Christianity.

The truth, though, is that the United States is not an exclusively Christian nation. The non-Christian Abrahamic religions, Judaism and Islam, traditional Eastern religions such as Hindu and Buddhism, and a host of other diverse faiths including Unitarian, Wiccan, pagan, and Native American religions are embodied by teachers within the walls of public schools. Atheists and agnostics, who comprise 7.1% of the overall American population (Pew Research Center, 2015), are also active in our public schools. In public schools that privilege Christianity, it is likely that non-Christian and non-believing teachers are marginalized as religious others.

As the literature review reveals, there is a lack of research that investigates the experiences of these teachers and how Christian privilege affects them personally and professionally. The current study offers much-needed insight into how non-Christian teachers make meaning of issues they face with respect to Christian privilege while working in American public schools.

CHAPTER 3: METHOD

Dialogue, Pets, and Sweet Tea

Emma relaxed in a comfortable armchair, one leg tucked under her and the other leg swinging gently back and forth. Across from her, her two dogs and I occupied the entire sofa, and the cat sprawled across my lap, blissfully snoring. I had not met Emma before, but she had graciously invited me into her home for the interview. She is a high school teacher for students with special needs working for Western County Public Schools in north Georgia. I was there because she identifies as an atheist. [1]

"Tell me about your experiences with Christianity at work." I watched her body tense as my request hung heavily in the air between us.

She sat up straight and looked off into the distance as she answered, "I remember when I first started working in Western County and I was brand new to the town, and I remember somebody at work asked me where did I worship. I was like, 'Okay, first of all, you don't ask that.' To me, it was like, 'How much do you have sex?' It just felt dirty, like, 'We don't talk about that.' I said, 'Oh…I don't.'"

Emma turned to look at me, and I nodded that I understood. She continued emphatically, "Religion's kind of like masturbation: it's good for you, but you

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1 The names of all participants and identifying locations are pseudonyms used to protect their privacy.

> *should just do it at home alone, or you do it with people you like, but* don't *do it at work."*
>
> *I grinned and joked, "But what do you really think?"*

From July to November, I dodged traffic across six counties in north Georgia to meet sixteen remarkable teachers. Except for one interview that was conducted by telephone, we met face-to-face. Sometimes we met in coffee shops and restaurants, enjoying sweet tea and cheerfully adding to the noise going on around us. They invited me into their homes or met me at outdoor locations so they could bring their dogs. Some of them invited me into the schools where they worked, giving up precious planning time or staying late to spend time with me. These interviews showed me that I was on the right track. As a group, these non-Christian teachers had something important to say about religion in the public schools; listening to them was imperative.

So I listened. But – and this is important – as the researcher and interviewer, I actively related to my participants during all communicative activities. As Merriam and Tisdell (2016) noted, a vital aspect of social constructionism is that knowledge is "constructed by people in an ongoing fashion as they engage in and make meaning of an activity, experience, or phenomenon" (p. 22). As we engaged in constructing knowledge, we shared "small talk" about things like the weather and traffic issues, I loved on their dogs and cats, and drank gallons of iced tea and coffee with them. As I conducted semi-structured interviews, my questions and responses played a role in determining how our dialogue was constructed, as did the responses and questions of my participants (Roulston, 2012). For example, my easy acceptance of Emma's outré comparison of religion and sex set the tone for the rest of the interview. If I had reacted with embarrassment or irritation, our constructed dialogue would have been very different, and probably a lot shorter and less interesting.

Design of the Study

As detailed in Chapter 2, a social constructionist epistemology guided the design of my research questions and the qualitative interview method I chose to study them. I began by acknowledging that religious identification intersects other aspects of being a human in this society such as gender, class, race, sexual orientation, and political ideology. Interviews about Christian privilege and religious identity will contain references to these other facets. However, designing a study that specifically asked questions outside the boundary of teacher religious identity and Christian privilege in public schools would not give me the answers I was seeking, and might, in fact, make it difficult to determine which experiences reflected Christian privilege and which reflected something else. Therefore, I chose to limit the focus of this study to non-Christian teachers' experiences of Christian privilege in public schools.

Accordingly, the research questions were carefully crafted so that the focus of the study was on understanding the feelings, thoughts, and interpretations of non-Christian teachers when they identified and related experiences in which they encountered Christian privilege while working in a public school.

1. What experiences do non-Christian teachers have in public schools with respect to Christian privilege?
2. How do non-Christian teachers believe their experiences affect them personally and professionally?
3. How do non-Christian teachers resist Christian privilege?

Social Constructionist Interviews

Qualitative interview can be an effective method to employ when researchers want to understand what others think and feel about their experiences (Holstein & Gubrium, 2015; Roulston, 2012; Weiss, 2008). There are numerous qualitative interview methods, so I relied on a social constructionist epistemology to direct the decisions I made as I designed and implemented my interview study. Some key characteristics of qualitative interview studies within a social constructionist framework include: (1) highlighting the importance of the interview process itself in producing knowledge; (2) understanding that the researcher and the participant are active collaborators during (and after) an interview; and (3) acknowledging that knowing subjects construct their always-becoming identities in relation to taken-for-granted social discourses constructed from historical and cultural contexts (Koro-Ljungberg, 2008).

The interview process.

I carefully considered the role of the interview process itself from within a social constructionist framework. Since constructing meaning requires active social interaction between the researcher and the research participant (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995), I chose to conduct face-to-face interviews when possible. Fifteen interviews took place in face-to-face settings; one participant was interviewed via phone after several scheduled interviews had to be postponed. I set a time limit of 60 to 90 minutes for each participant interview, although some interviews were shorter or longer depending on how engaged the participant appeared to be during our discussion. Setting a time limit and sharing it with prospective participants indicated that I valued their time and, I believe, was helpful in recruiting participants. I used email, text, and phone calls to follow up with participants after the interview.

I asked for and received the consent of all participants to audio record the interviews and made sure that they understood that I would protect their identifying information at all stages of the research project (Appendix A). As noted previously, all participants and identifying locations referred to in this dissertation are pseudonyms. There may have been times when the fact that I was audio recording the interview made participants uncomfortable, but I felt that recording was necessary to ensure that I would be able to accurately remember participants' responses in the context in which they were said. I also received most participants' consent to use a paid transcription service to produce complete written transcripts; I manually transcribed four participants' interviews. I want to note, however, that I listened to all sixteen interviews many times during the analysis process in addition to referring to the written transcripts. This process will be detailed further in the analysis section later in this chapter.

Briggs (1986) observed that the "social situation created by the interview…shapes the form and content of what is said" (p. 22). To accommodate my participants' preferences and hopefully make them feel more comfortable discussing their personal experiences with religion in public schools, I asked my participants to choose the place and time of the interview (Appendix E). The context of the interview, including where it is held, who may be nearby to overhear or interrupt the discussion, and how comfortable the interviewer and interviewee are within the physical space during the interview, all play a role in how the interview process produces "the continuous and dynamic unfolding of participants' perspectives" (Koro-Ljungberg, 2008, p. 431).

The places that my participants chose for the interviews varied from very private to very public and appear to have influenced what participants felt comfortable sharing with me in their interviews. For example, had Emma chosen to be interviewed in the school in which she teaches instead of inviting me into her home, a place where she was completely comfortable, she might not have openly compared religion to sex, and the interview might have run along completely different lines. Had I been allergic to or feared animals, I might have asked her to remove her pets from the room. This could have made both of us less comfortable about meeting in her home. These factors would have changed how the interview proceeded. This would not have been problematic from a social constructionist view because, as Briggs (1986) suggested, "Interviewees do not draw, even ideally, on a fixed idea or feeling in answering a question, but connect questions with some element or elements of a vast and dynamic range of responses" (p. 22). It was helpful, though, to consider that the interview process itself plays a role in how knowledge is produced when I made these design decisions for my study.

Active collaboration.

As Koro-Ljungberg (2008) explained in the *Handbook of Constructionist Research*, "interviews provide an analytically fruitful social context in which to observe and investigate the production and negotiation of ideas, normative influences, commonalities, and differences" (p. 440). I chose to use a semi-structured interview method. This involved preparing and referring to an interview guide of open-ended questions and possible follow-up probes (Roulston, 2012). In general, I asked questions pertaining to the participants' teaching and religious backgrounds to begin each of the interviews, and then moved into more specific questions about their experiences with religion as they worked in public schools. The semi-structured interview method offered a general framework for exploring how participants' narrated experiences might be similar to or different from each other and how normative Christian privilege and the discourses of public schools may have affected those experiences and how the teachers understood them. However, I also opted to use a nonscheduled interview format, meaning that I asked questions in the order that made sense in the context of the interview, did not necessarily ask the questions using the exact wording on the guide, and added or omitted questions as the interviews unfolded (Briggs, 1986). The complete interview guide is available as Appendix B. Using a semi-structured, nonscheduled format allowed me to steer all the interviews toward dialogue construction that both pertained to my area of research and gave me the flexibility to move into directions suggested by my participants (Briggs, 1986; Roulston, 2012).

Because I considered myself both a researcher and a knowing subject, I made the decision to inform my participants prior to an interview that I identify as an atheist. I felt that I could forge a more solid social connection if I openly identified as a member of the non-Christian/non-believing demographic I wished to study. I will continue my explanation for this decision in the section below and, at the end of this chapter, explore potential limitations of this important decision.

I also openly identified as a former seventh-grade public school teacher. This helped to facilitate more in-depth discussions of the activities of teachers who work in public schools than might have been possible if we had not had that shared experience. My open identification as a doctoral candidate in the field of education was also relevant. Many of my participants referred to graduate programs that they had finished or were in the process of completing, which gave us another point of connection. As a matter of fact, several of the teachers told me that the difficulty they had experienced when seeking participants for their own research studies had been the reason they had chosen to participate in my study; they wanted to help me achieve my goal, and I gratefully accepted.

Considering social discourses.

Life in north Georgia appears to be cemented in taken-for-granted social, historical, and cultural discourses tied to Christianity. My participants and I live and teach in the heart of the "Bible Belt" of the United States. Historically, the non-indigenous populations of the southern states have been considered highly religious; over the past four centuries, Anglican beliefs, Baptist beliefs, and now, evangelical Protestantism have been at the center of southern culture (Rosenberg, 2020). Whether an individual chooses to attend (a Christian) church and considers the integration of (Christian) prayer necessary to daily life plays a significant role in how comfortable with and accepted by other Georgians they may perceive themselves to be. For example, the 2019 U.S. Secular Survey, a survey study of nearly 34,000 nonreligious participants undertaken by the American Atheists (2020) organization, found that individuals openly identifying as atheist or nonreligious in Georgia and other Bible Belt states perceived themselves as highly stigmatized based on personal lived experiences. Participants reported feeling rejected, isolated, or ignored because of their non-religious status and frequently were subjected to negative comments about lacking a moral compass and being a "bad" person. In a society in which (the Christian) religion is considered very or somewhat important by 84% of the population (Pew Religious Landscape Study, 2015), Georgians who do not identify as Christian must be considered a vulnerable population for research purposes.

I took this pervasive Christian social discourse into account in the study design. As I mentioned in the last section, I chose to openly identify as an atheist to my prospective participants. Specifically, I wanted to preclude creating a situation in which potential participants might wonder if I was an evangelical Christian seeking to attack or convert them. Other non-Christians and non-believers are likely to find these conversations as unpleasant and unproductive as I do and actively choose to avoid them. I continued to identify as an atheist throughout the interview process with all participants, including those who identified as members of non-Christian faith traditions (Islam, Hindu, Buddhism, and Judaism). I felt that identifying as part of the non-Christian/non-religious community would help to establish my credibility as a researcher/member of this demographic and allow my participants to feel more comfortable speaking with me. There were potential limitations inherent in disclosing my religious identification prior to the interviews, and these are unpacked in the Limitations section at the end of this chapter.

Understanding the vulnerability of my research participants to local privileged Christian discourses also led me to take specific steps to safeguard my participants' identities. First, I received approval to conduct the study from the University of Georgia's Institutional Review Board (IRB) prior to starting research. IRB protections included using pseudonyms assigned to each participant throughout the study and limiting access to the master list of direct identifiers connecting the participant and the data to the researcher. I set up a new email account specifically for this project that password-protected the participant/researcher email communications that I sent and received. All audio files were labeled with only pseudonyms and were kept in a password-protected file available only to the researcher. The master list and the audio files will be destroyed after data analysis is complete.

The remainder of this chapter presents detailed descriptions of the methods I used to conduct this study. First, I address the criteria for participant selection and how participants were recruited. Second, I describe the data collection procedures for gathering background information and then interviewing participants. Finally, I provide an in-depth explanation of the process I used to analyze the data.

Participant selection

In this qualitative interview study, the research questions focus on understanding how non-Christian teachers make meaning of experiences concerning their minority religious status while teaching in majority-Christian public schools. Therefore, I used purposeful sampling to select participants who could tell me the most about such personal experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The criteria for selecting participants were threefold: potential participants must (1) self-identify as non-Christian and (2) must work as a teacher in a public school (3) in north Georgia.

The first criterion for selecting participants was that they must self-identify as non-Christian. Since the goal of this study was specifically to understand how religious minority teachers in public schools make meaning of experiences involving Christian privilege, I needed to be sure that I was including only participants who currently self-identified as non-Christian. Teachers who came from Christian backgrounds, but who now identified as atheist, agnostic, or Buddhist, for example, were included. My participant pool included members of non-Christian faiths and those unaffiliated with any religion, including non-believers.

The second criterion specified that participants must work as public school teachers. Since public schools are subject to the constraints of the First Amendment, they are ostensibly secular environments. This implies that no specific religions or non-belief are privileged within these spaces. However, since a majority of Americans identify as Christian (Pew, 2015), there can be a propensity for public schools to create and sustain a normative Christian environment (Blumenfeld, 2006). Because the public school environment is an integral aspect of my study, I limited participants to public school teachers. I further specified that participants must be active teachers in a public school so that they could draw on both current and past experiences with

Christian privilege. For example, Bina, a high school teacher who identifies as Jewish, related experiences that were as recent as the week of the interview as well as memorable experiences that occurred some twenty years ago when she first started teaching in a public elementary school. I believe that this criterion allowed me to collect rich details across a wide range of participants' personal experiences.

The third criterion defined the geographical area from which participants were selected. As noted earlier, 84% of the adult population of Georgia indicate that (the Christian) religion is very or somewhat important to them (Pew, 2015). Because this statistic suggests that non-Christian teachers working in public schools in Georgia are likely to have encountered Christian privilege, I recruited teacher participants from Georgia. To make the study more manageable, I then limited this population to teachers living and teaching in north Georgia. I defined north Georgia as six contiguous counties, with metro Atlanta making up part of this wider area. Each of the counties operates its own public school district. This geographic area was still quite large. However, since I live in the metro Atlanta area and was able to drive considerable distances to meet my participants, my proximity enabled face-to-face interviews.

I checked to be sure that my potential participants met all three criteria by asking them to complete a short Google Form background survey (Appendix C) to be emailed to my project-specific email account. The form requested broad background information, including preferred form of communication and the name and demographic of the school in which the potential participant was employed, as well as general details about their teaching and religious backgrounds and current religious identifications.

Locating Participants

Unless someone is wearing an obvious symbol like a hijab, a Sikh turban, a yarmulke, or a Christian cross, it is difficult to guess an individual's religious affiliation. In north Georgia, it is a facet of Christian privilege that it is often simply assumed that most people are Christian. This made the task of locating and recruiting non-Christian and non-believing teachers challenging. I reached out to personal contacts for assistance.

I started by asking personal associates who teach in or recently retired from schools in north Georgia to ask their non-Christian teacher colleagues if they would be interested in participating in the study. I supplied a short recruitment email (Appendix D) explaining the purpose of the study for my contacts to pass along to their colleagues. The recruitment email also supplied a link to the Google Form background survey described above; interested teachers filled out the Google Form and then I immediately contacted them. I sent an email to prospective participants as they were identified to schedule interviews (Appendix E). I sent follow-up emails if the prospective participants had not responded within one week and again in two weeks. As participants were recruited, I used the snowball method to locate new potential participants by asking them if they might recommend someone else who might be interested in participating in the study (Merriam, 2007).

I met all participants for the first time when I interviewed them. Overall, I interviewed seven participants referred directly by public school teachers who knew me. Two new participants were referred to me by participants after their interviews. Bina (Jewish) posted my recruitment email on her FaceBook page and two participants responded from there. David Calloway, director of the Georgia 3Rs Project sponsored by the Religious Freedom Center of the Freedom Forum Institute, referred one participant who responded. Dr. Kevin Burke, a professor at UGA, also referred one participant who responded. Another teacher sent a copy of my recruitment email to individuals at several schools who then sent them out school-wide. Three participants came from these school-wide calls.

Eighteen teachers answered the background survey; one was eliminated because he identified as Catholic, and one did not respond to my original or follow-up emails requesting an interview. In addition, five teachers referred to me by participants chose not to participate and two others did not respond to my requests. In all, I contacted twenty-five teachers about participating in the research study, and sixteen actively participated.

Number of Participants

Merriam (2007) proposed that the number of qualitative participant interviews needed depends on such factors as the research questions, the data to be gathered, the on-going analysis as data is collected, and the resources available to conduct the study. I began by interviewing five non-Christian public school teachers in the north Georgia area and starting analysis of the interviews immediately.

I continued the cyclical pattern of interviewing and analyzing data with seven more participants. By the twelfth interview, I had begun to see clearly defined themes in the experiences participants related. I interviewed four more participants, and when these interviews exhibited similar themes, I felt that my research had reached a level of data saturation that would make it unproductive for me to continue to interview participants (deMarrais, 2003). I interviewed a total of sixteen non-Christian public school teachers located in north Georgia.

Overall, my participants taught in seven different schools in three counties in north Georgia during the 2019-2020 school year. Fourteen currently taught at the high school level, one taught at a middle school, and one taught Pre-K in a public elementary school. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2020), three of the schools were Title I, with 70% to 92% of students receiving free or reduced lunch. Nine of the teachers interviewed taught in these Title I schools. The total number of students attending each school ranged from 420 at the elementary school to 1240 at the middle school; the high schools had a range of 1770 to 3055 students. The participants reported that each of their schools was located in a suburban/urban area and that each had a racially diverse or a majority minority-student population.

Table 3.1 details the religious self-identification of the participants and the pseudonym of the current school in which they taught at the time of the interview. I note that five high school participants told me about experiences that had taken place in public elementary or middle schools in which they had taught. Other high school participants described experiences that had occurred while teaching at previous public high schools; these are not included on Table 3.1.

Table 3.1

Religious Self-identification of Participants and Placement at time of Interview

Muslim	Hindu	Buddhist	Jewish	Atheist/ culturally Jewish	Atheist	Agnostic	School Pseudonym
Khabir							Belen High
Nuha							Belen High
Bisma							Dale Middle
	Vidula						Belen High
		Fumiko					Dover High
			Bina				Belen High
			Matilda				Stan Elem
				Hannah			Cooper High
				Margola			Perkins High
				Aron			Perkins High
					Jason		Belen High
					Emma		Rose High
					Andrea		Dover High
					Ginny		Cooper High
						Lauren	Belen High
						Nathan	Cooper High

Data collection

I began collecting data from potential participants using a Google Form background survey that I designed for the project (Appendix C). The survey presented short-answer questions such as how long the individual had been teaching in public schools, the name and demographic of the school in which they currently taught, and whether they had self-identified as another religion prior to their present identification.

I emailed individuals on the day I received their survey responses to schedule an interview and followed up by email twice, one week and then two weeks later, if they had not contacted me by then (Appendix E). I scheduled all interviews to take place as soon as possible after the participant agreed to be in the study. I chose to conduct one sixty to ninety-minute face-to-face interview with each participant, but follow-ups and member checks took place via email or phone. While it was difficult in many cases for participants to find time to meet me even once for an interview, the follow-ups were flexible and fit easily into busy schedules.

The background data collected via this survey was a helpful starting point for the semi-structured interviews. For instance, participants had a range of years of teaching experience from two years to thirty-two years. Bisma (Muslim) and Matilda (Jewish) were new teachers who had taught in Georgia public schools for two and three years respectively. Bina (Jewish) and Andrea (atheist) had each taught in public schools in Georgia for more than twenty years. The number of years of teaching experience made a difference in how I approached a discussion about the participant's teaching background. "Why did you become a teacher?" seemed to be more relevant to beginning teachers than to experienced teachers, while "What do you like about teaching?" opened up more discussion with experienced teachers. Although I did ask all participants these two questions because I felt the answers were important to my research, years of teaching experience was a factor in which question I chose to ask first and whether I asked the second immediately following that or later in the interview.

Holstein and Gubrium (2015) noted that active interviews require that "interview schedules should be guides, at best, not scripts, for the give-and-take of the interview process" (p. 55). Therefore, I used my interview guide (Appendix B) as a living document that was flexible in terms of the questions I asked, how I worded the questions in the context of the interview, and when (and even if) they were used in the interview. My interview guide also took into account that questions about an individual's religious background needed to be tailored to their self-identification. "What do you do on a regular basis in regard to religion?" made little sense if I was interviewing an atheist, while "What does being an atheist mean to you?" was irrelevant to a person of faith.

Throughout the cyclical process of interviewing and conducting a preliminary analysis, I updated the interview guide. One addition I made is that after several of the initial participants mentioned that religion was important to them when deciding to accept a specific teaching position, I added the question, "How does your religious identity impact your decision to take a particular job?" I had not considered that religion might inform decisions about where to work prior to this except for teachers who chose to work in private religious schools. What I learned is that making the decision about where to work is a highly complex and messy process that does, in fact, include religious factors, even for non-religious teachers. Asking this question led to some in-depth discussions about how a school culture can reflect a Christian privilege that might be visible (and off-putting) to non-Christians and non-believers even during an initial job interview.

I started each interview with a clean copy of the newest interview guide and a blank notebook page. As I interviewed my participants, I jotted short reminders of ideas or questions I wanted to follow-up on or clarify. These reminders allowed me to focus my attention on what my participant was saying in the present and then return to a question I had later in the interview (Roulston, 2012). Because I chose to audio-record the interviews, I did not take extensive notes about everything said during the interview. I believe that this allowed the flow of the interview to run smoothly, limited the number of (uncomfortable) pauses that occurred, and helped me ensure that the interviews were restricted to the 60 to 90 minutes I had promised my participants.

Defining a social interaction as an "interview" can frame expectations for both the researcher and the participant. As the researcher, I was expected to ask questions and the interviewee was expected to respond; the topics addressed were related to my research interests. However, as Holstein and Gubrium (2015) observed, "the interviewer's questions and prompts are not mere stimuli, catalysts for the reflexlike production of answers" (p. 28). My questions offered a framework that interviewees could respond to, interpret in their own contexts, and consider as they constructed their answers. I did my best to be perceptive to the participants' feelings during my interviews. For example, I chose to wait for Aron (atheist/culturally Jewish) to decide whether he would tell me about a significant experience that he briefly referred to several times early in the interview. He finally made up his mind to trust me, and his story is one that is included in my interpretations. On the other hand, Matilda (Jewish) told me her experiences in a rush of words as soon as we sat down together and then had little more to say; her experiences are also included in the next chapter.

Part of my active engagement in the interviews included choosing to openly answer participants' personal questions about my own experiences as a public school teacher, a doctoral candidate in education, and an atheist. During the interviews, I found that it was helpful at times to utilize my personal experiences to introduce topics and to solicit feedback on how I was interpreting participants' responses (Holstein & Gubrium, 2015). My reactions to similar experiences might have been (and frequently were) very different from my participants' reactions, and understanding *their* experiences was the overall goal of the research study.

I used the interview jottings and my recollections to write field notes as soon as possible after each interview, usually on the day of the interview or the following day. These field notes included my observations about the participant, the interview location, and how I perceived the rapport that developed (or did not develop) between myself and the interviewee (Roulston, 2012). For example, field notes of my interview with Nathan (agnostic) included my perception that he purposefully attempted to engage me in an argument by informing me that my identification as an atheist was arrogant since the existence or non-existence of a deity could not be proven. While this is an interesting philosophical debate topic, at the time I chose not to explain or defend my identification as an atheist; I did not think moving the interview in that direction would help me answer my research questions. Later, during analysis of this interview, I wrote memos reflecting on how this interaction might have influenced the discussion and my on-going interpretations of Nathan's recounted experiences with Christian privilege in his work as a public school science teacher (Roulston, 2012). Writing the field notes and reflective memos became a vital aspect of my data collection and analysis processes.

The audio recordings and written interview transcripts comprised the bulk of the data I collected. It was the interaction between the participants and myself that took place during interviews that produced knowledge about Christian privilege in public schools, how it manifested, and how non-Christian and non-believing teachers responded to and interpreted the experiences they chose to recount in the interviews. The transcripts ranged from 4,242 words to 12,984 words, with an average interview transcript word count of 8,616. These transcripts were simple records of what was said in the interview. Common elements that take place in conversations, such as pauses, coughs, tone of voice, and emphasis, were not included in the original written transcripts, but were added later as I reviewed the recordings. The audio recordings ranged from 45 to 90 minutes each.

Finally, I collected the email data from post interview contacts. I emailed each participant to thank them for taking the time to meet with me. I also sent the written transcript of the interview to three participants who had requested them; the other participants specifically declined the interview transcripts. Three participants emailed me the names of prospective participants to contact. Two prospective participants from these contacts took part in the research study.

There were five participants whose post interview contacts were especially helpful to the study. I contacted two participants to clarify statements in their interviews; this allowed me to interpret their responses more accurately. Another participant sent me information about a podcast that dealt with Christian privilege in the judicial system. He was an activist in political matters, and we had talked about Christian privilege not only in the public schools, but in politics as well. The podcast added context to the political arena that increased my understanding of his experiences with Christian privilege in both school and politics. Two other participants referred me to stories concerning recent experiences with Christian privilege in public schools that they had read about on news media or through their social media contacts. These stories helped me understand more about how these participants saw Christian privilege in their daily lives.

Bina (Jewish) and I corresponded irregularly for more than two years after our interview. In addition to updating her experiences with Christian privilege in the schools and answering any questions I had, she gently corrected my blatant misconceptions concerning the Pledge of Allegiance and how and when it was legislated to be a daily school requirement in Georgia. Reciting the Pledge was a topic that I had initially rejected as part of my study. It seemed to me that the Pledge of Allegiance had been talked about for so long that it was no longer a current topic, and further, that my participants' answers were likely to be obvious. I assumed (bad researcher move) that these teachers would be as annoyed as I at having to hear/say "under God" every day as they led the Pledge of Allegiance in their classrooms. However, my participants set me straight about this issue. While questions about the Pledge do not appear on my interview guide, fourteen participants brought it up and each explained to me why they objected or did not object to the daily recitation of the Pledge in public schools. This was an important topic to them for a variety of reasons, including religion. Their comments will be discussed in Chapter 4. The follow up communications with my participants offered me clarity and was both helpful and enlightening.

Data analysis

Expanding the preliminary analysis I had begun at the very beginning of the data collections process, I listened to the audio files of the interviews, read and reread the written transcripts, field notes, memos, and follow-up data. This was a massive undertaking, as the written transcripts contained an average of 8616 words each and listening to all the audio files just once required a commitment of over 24 hours. I listened to them more than once and referred back to them at times throughout the analysis and interpretation processes. Since my written transcripts were simple accounts of what was said, I filled in details that I considered relevant as I listened to the audio files. In this way, I added emphasis, significant pauses, and clarified the context of any given statement or question that I found interesting or unusual. I also added details to my field notes to create more complete descriptions of the interview contexts.

In their book *Qualitative Data Analysis: A Methods Sourcebook* (2013), Miles and Huberman suggested that condensing all this data is a necessary first and ongoing step in analysis. They defined data condensation as “the process of selecting, focusing, simplifying, abstracting, and/or transforming the data” (p. 12) that has been collected. One way to do this is by coding, creating “prompts or triggers for deeper reflection” (p. 73). Coding allows the researcher to identify chunks of data that are meaningful and/or related to each other and offers a system to condense the data into more conveniently analyzable segments. I applied descriptive coding to the written transcripts and my field notes by using a word or short phrase that reflected the basic topic of a passage in the data. As I worked with the data, I initially assigned fourteen different descriptive codes (Table 3.2). Later, to further simplify the data, I combined related codes into three main codes. I highlighted passages from the data in bright colors using my official-dissertation-package of brand-new Sharpies. Blue was coded Fear, yellow indicated Being Othered, and pink was Importance of Education. When passages reflected more than one category, I added them to each pertinent category. The lovely rainbows this created within the coded data later became problematic; as I worked with these codes, I realized that I had created a jumbled mass of data that had to be unpacked and (re)analyzed before I could make sense of it.

Table 3.2

Initial fourteen descriptive codes condensed into three main codes

Descriptive Code	Fear	Being Othered	Importance of Education
Fear	X	X	
Being Othered	X	X	
Importance of Education			X
First Amendment	X	X	X
Holidays		X	
Moral Lens	X	X	
Protecting students		X	X
Having a calling			X
Being Atheist	X	X	
Spirituality	X	X	
Pledge of Allegiance		X	
Interactions with Others	X	X	X
Being an Ambassador	X	X	X
Truth Claims	X	X	X

I wrote reflective memos to help me think about why certain experiences were being reported by my participants (Roulston, 2012) and why I had placed them in one or more of the main codes I chose. I dug deeper into Fear, reflecting about how and why an experience with

Christian privilege might prompt fear as a reaction. As an example, Andrea, an atheist, had recounted an experience she had in which she was frustrated that mandatory staff developments had been held at the same Baptist church for several years in a row; it was, in fact, the church that the principal of her school attended. Since the school rented the space from the church, thereby financially supporting it, she felt that it was a direct violation of the First Amendment. I started by coding this experience as Being Atheist because her identification as an atheist prompted her to notice the hidden Christian privilege underlying this event.

In this experience, Andrea's identification as an atheist distanced her from her colleagues, none of whom had openly challenged the practice as problematic, so I decided to add it to the more general Being Othered code. Simply having to enter a Christian church to attend a mandatory staff development course had been uncomfortable for her and was certainly not something that she expected to have to do while working in a public school. She chose to keep the fact that she was an atheist to herself, but she grew angrier and felt more marginalized by the administration every year this event occurred.

As I listened again to what Andrea had said, I added her experience to the Importance of Education code. She believed that her public school administrators either did not understand or did not care that holding this mandatory meeting in the same rented Christian church every year violated First Amendment statutes separating religion and state. To be truly First Amendment compliant, she suggested this option to me (but not to her administrators): "Maybe next year you should have it at a mosque and the next year maybe you should have it at a synagogue." Andrea felt that education about how the First Amendment should be applied in a public school workplace was needed at the school.

So how did this experience end up coded as Fear? Andrea finally reached a point where she felt it necessary to protest. She sent a letter to the county school board voicing her concerns about the First Amendment violations inherent in the regular mandatory staff development at the Christian church. However, she did not sign her name. Simply put, she worried about retaliation from the (Christian) administration: “I wouldn’t want the principal to not be on my side for anything.” She suspected that during teacher observation assessments, the administration would look for “something that they could use against me in some way” if she identified herself as the protester. Here was the fear.

At this point in my analysis, I had interview transcripts, correspondence with participants, field notes and reflective memos coded into fourteen categories and then condensed into three categories with the color-coded descriptive labels of Fear, Being Othered, and Importance of Education. As the example above illustrates, much of the data was coded with psychedelic rainbows, by which I mean that the experiences recounted by the participants often fit loosely into all three codes, but not necessarily in the same way. As a matter of fact, I had similarly coded experiences analogous to Andrea’s from two other atheist/agnostic participants, but their stories, their experiences and the way they understood them, were different in ways that cried out for acknowledgement.

I began to consider why I had created rainbows instead of easy-to-work-with data neatly placed into three columns. First, the three codes I had chosen were mainly “emotion coding” and not descriptive coding about the experiences themselves (Miles & Huberman, 2013, p.75). The rainbows indicated that a wide range of experiences seemed to affect non-Christian teachers dealing with Christian privilege in the public schools in similar ways. However, I also knew that my participants had recounted many other personal and professional effects of their encounters with Christian privilege that my initial coding system had missed. Second, I had not categorized the emotions I coded by the type of experience my participants narrated. For example, Being Othered contained passages from multiple participants about Christian prayers and Christian speakers at faculty meetings, mandatory public school functions held at Christian churches, both non-Christian and Christian holidays, and choosing whether (or to whom) to publicly identify a religious or non-religious preference in the workplace.

While this initial coding was certainly not ideal, I noticed that it was helpful in analyzing experiences such as Andrea's. By considering why I had placed her experience in each of the three main categories, I was able to gain a deeper understanding of her experience. I decided to delve back into the original data to compile a list of the experiences my participants had discussed in their interviews or follow-up communications. This time, I viewed the data holistically, looking at each experience as a whole.

MacLure's (2010) description of data analysis, "Now and then, out of the wearying mass of ethnographic 'data', something would catch our attention…One way to describe its beginnings would be as a kind of glow: some detail . . . starts to glimmer, gathering our attention" (p. 282) appealed to me. While my data was not technically ethnographic, I found myself drawn into my participants' stories, into the experiences that may have appeared common to many of the teachers in a broad surface analysis but were actually quite different in how the teachers remembered, processed, and reacted to them. Wolcott (2013) suggested that: "Good qualitative research ought to confound issues, revealing them in their complexity rather than reducing them to simple explanation" (p. 31). These stories were complex, messy, infuriating, uplifting, and fascinating. They glowed.

I had already gained insight and familiarity with the data in my initial coding. I used this knowledge to inform my analysis and interpretations as I looked at participants' experiences holistically. Finally, as I looked across the corpus of experiences, I noticed three general areas in which my participants had experienced Christian privilege in the public school workplace. These themes provided the next direction for analyzing the data and it is here that I will begin in Chapter 4:

- Openly Christian speech, prayer, and proselytizing in public school settings
- Christian and non-Christian holidays
- Direct confrontations with Christians

I note here that in qualitative methodology, the term *data* can "carry an odor of positivism" that implies that it is possible to subject qualitative data to rigorous analytical processes such as triangulation and validity tests and expect to get a more accurate result (Koro-Ljungberg, MacLure, & Ulmer, 2017, p. 463). The social constructionist framework of my qualitative research study made the use of quantitative forms of triangulating or testing validity in the data constructed in my personal interviews with the participants inappropriate. I understood that the knowledge my participants constructed with me was in flux, changing as they reflected on their experiences over time and in the course of our interviews (Burr, 2015). St. Pierre (1997) also noted that qualitative data such as the interview transcripts I relied on were subject to the limitations of language.

However, I did take steps to safeguard the quality of my study. Because I had audio recorded the interviews, I had the ability to (re)listen to the narratives as often as necessary. As I (re)listened, I connected my field notes and memos to the data to jog my memory about what I was observing and thinking during the interview. In this way, I was able to take in the situational contexts of the interviews as a whole and did not rely on coded “sound bites” that may or may not have aligned with the crux of the participants’ narratives. I leaned heavily on what my participants said and the contexts in which they framed their experiences as I formed interpretations. I emailed two participants to member check passages that pertained to them and then used their feedback to think about and adjust my interpretations as needed.

Limitations

Georgia can be considered a “Bible-belt” state in which Christianity in particular and religion in general are important to a majority of the population (Pew, 2015; Rosenberg, 2020). My study was conducted in north Georgia; all participants and the researcher were therefore positioned within “Bible-belt” discourses. The experiences of non-Christian teachers and how religion may be present in public schools in north Georgia may be unlike the experiences of teachers working in other parts of the United States. Also, due to time and manageability constraints in the study design, the sample size does not allow for the generalization of interpretations to a larger population. However, the sixteen participants provided a substantial corpus of data that offered me thick, rich detail about their experiences with Christian privilege while teaching in public schools. It is unlikely that interviewing more participants within the same research constructs would have benefitted the current study.

The snowball method enabled recruitment that specifically targeted non-Christian and non-believing participants, which is a rather small and generally difficult-to-locate subset of teachers in north Georgia. This recruitment method could have limited participation to teachers who were in networks that directly included me. However, I had not met any of the participants before our interviews, and the data indicates that the participants encompassed a wide range of religious and teaching backgrounds. The limitations of the snowball method do not appear to have had a restrictive influence on the recruitment of participants for this study.

I openly identified as an atheist prior to all interviews. Admittedly, how I identify works to construct how I talk about religion and how others relate to me. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, I chose to identify myself as a member of my target demographic to encourage participants to be more comfortable speaking with me. I did this in several ways. First, my original contacts and the participants who helped me recruit other participants knew that I was an atheist, and I told them that they were free to disclose that information. Second, I openly answered questions participants had about my identification at any point in the background and interview scheduling processes. One asked me to identify my religious status on the "Do you have any questions for me?" section of the background form, and one asked me as part of their response to my request scheduling an interview. Third, I identified myself as an atheist when I met each participant for the interview while giving them background information about my study and asking them to sign the consent form (Appendix A). I also openly answered questions about my religious background if participants asked questions during the interviews.

It is possible that my open identification as an atheist might have been a determining factor in whether potential participants chose to take part in the study and in how participants chose to frame their responses to my questions. Had I kept my religious identification concealed throughout the study, I suspect that it would have been assumed that I was Christian because it is a common presumption that white, female teachers working in Bible-belt Georgia are Christian. Emma, another atheist, explained it this way: "I look the way I look, right? It's easy to just assume [I'm Christian]. If I looked like an East Indian person or something, maybe there would be another assumption." Ultimately, I felt that it was important for all interviews to be constructed by individuals who were aware of the current religious identification of the other party.

Finally, my participants included fourteen high school teachers, one middle school teacher, and one pre-K/elementary teacher. On the surface, the participant pool includes many more high school teachers than other grade level teachers. However, five of the participants had taught in elementary or middle schools prior to taking their current high school teaching positions, and they were open about experiences they had with Christian privilege while teaching at these other schools. Therefore, the data is more diverse than the participants' current teaching placements appear to indicate. It should be noted, though, that this study was not designed to compare teachers' experiences across or within grade levels.

CHAPTER 4: INTERPRETATIONS

> *“Maybe it's just the time that we live in right now, and maybe someday there will be a different religion that's behaving in that way, but it's interesting because the Christian twist definitely exists, the assumption that that is the norm, and that that is the generic go-to perspective.” Hannah (agnostic/culturally Jewish)*

All sixteen non-Christian teachers interviewed in this research study recounted experiences in which they encountered Christian privilege in their public school workplaces; some of these incidents were recent and some occurred at earlier times in their careers. They noted evidence of Christian privilege that seemed to pass unnoticed by their Christian colleagues. Aron (atheist/culturally Jewish) described this inattention as “an obvious display of insensitivity that they [Christians] don’t recognize as such.” These experiences affected the participants deeply enough that they remembered them, chose to tell me about them, reflected on them, analyzed them, wondered if they should have reacted differently, and worried that their non-Christian students might have similar experiences. The experiences narrated in these interviews allow for interpretations that address the study’s research questions:

1. What experiences do non-Christian teachers have in public schools with respect to Christian privilege?
2. How do non-Christian teachers believe their experiences affect them personally and professionally?
3. How do non-Christian teachers resist Christian privilege?

During analysis, I noted that all participants recounted some similar experiences with

Christian privilege in the public school workplace, although they reacted to and resisted these experiences differently. Table 4.1 indicates which participants mentioned having these common experiences. The first column lists those participants who observed Christian speech or the use of official school communication channels for personal Christian purposes. The second column indicates participants who directly experienced Christian proselytizing at mandatory school functions. Column three identifies participants who discussed feeling othered by the process of requesting religious leave or by needing to have Friday or Saturday off for religious observances at times when they were expected to attend school activities, such as high school football games or elementary school carnivals. The fourth column indicates the participants who had experiences in which they felt personally insulted or embarrassed by Christians' speech or actions at the public schools in which they worked. The fifth column lists the participants who had experiences in which the Christian theological certainty of their colleagues or their students led to conflicts that were seemingly unresolvable.

Table 4.1

Experience of Christian privilege by participant

Observed speech/use of official school communication systems for Christian purpose	Experienced direct Christian proselytizing at mandatory school functions	Religious observances and holidays	Religiously insulted or embarrassed by speech/actions taken by Christians	Confronted by the Christian certainty of colleagues or students
Bina (Jewish)	Bina (Jewish)	Bina (Jewish)	Bina (Jewish)	
Emma (atheist)				Emma (atheist)
Lauren (agnostic)				Lauren (agnostic)
		Matilda (Jewish)	Matilda (Jewish)	Matilda (Jewish)
Khabir (Muslim)		Khabir (Muslim)		
		Nuha (Muslim)		
Vidula (Hindu)		Vidula (Hindu)		
Andrea (atheist)	Andrea (atheist)			Andrea (atheist)
Aron (atheist/ culturally Jewish)		Aron (atheist/ culturally Jewish)		Aron (atheist/ culturally Jewish)
Margola (atheist/ culturally Jewish)	Margola (atheist/ culturally Jewish)	Margola (atheist/ culturally Jewish)		
Jason (atheist)				Jason (atheist)
Fumiko (Buddhist)	Fumiko (Buddhist)			Fumiko (Buddhist)
Ginny (atheist)	Ginny (atheist)			Ginny (atheist)
Bisma (Muslim)		Bisma (Muslim)		
Hannah (agnostic/ culturally Jewish)	Hannah (agnostic/ culturally Jewish)	Hannah (agnostic/ culturally Jewish)		Hannah (agnostic/ culturally Jewish)
Nathan (agnostic)				Nathan (agnostic)

This chapter focuses on the stories narrated by the participants and explores the personal and professional effects of these experiences, including indications of resistance to Christian privilege. Not all participants' stories are detailed here due to space constraints.

Openly Christian speech, prayer, and proselytizing in public school settings

Prasad (2015) observed that "intersubjective interpretations are central to human lives because they are so often concretized and fixed so firmly in our consciousness that they become taken-for-granted and eventually acquire a kind of 'natural' existence" (p. 14). Based on the experiences recounted in the participant interviews, Christian privilege appears to be a "natural" component of speech interactions within some north Georgia public schools.

"Everyone is Christian"

All participants except Nuha (Muslim) noted that they had been in situations where they observed Christian teachers or administrators expressing personal Christian beliefs in their public schools. Feeling comfortable and safe openly disclosing personal Christian beliefs is a taken-for-granted speech privilege in these north Georgia public schools. It was common for participants to suggest that this aspect of Christian privilege is rooted in an assumption that everyone in the society is Christian. Andrea, an atheist science teacher currently working at Dover High, succinctly pointed this out: "Sometimes they [Christians] don't realize it. They just think it's always been this way. Everybody's Baptist. No, they're not."

Emma, an atheist special needs educator, spoke about an incident that happened at Rose High when she moved to Western County, Georgia from the Midwest fifteen years earlier:

> Then I remember, too, calling somebody, and it was a work colleague, and getting her voicemail and it said, "Sorry, I'm not" blah, blah, and then it was like, "And remember, God loves you and I love you. Have a blessed day." I was like, "What the hell? No. You

> don't get to say that to me." In a way it was kind of offensive because "I'm just assuming that you believe in God, too." I remember thinking, "That's just not appropriate at work," you know?

Emma took offense at her colleague's "everyone-is-Christian" assumption that positioned her as a marginalized other. Her shock at the religious content on the public school's voicemail message was especially pronounced given her expectation that a public school should be a secular space. One of the long-term results of this experience was that Emma altered how she interacted with her colleagues; she began protecting her atheist worldview by "keeping it on the down-low" from then on.

Fumiko (Buddhist) also experienced marginalization in public school situations where it was assumed that "everyone is Christian." These experiences prompted a deep empathy for non-Christian students caught in similar situations:

> I just hate that students who don't follow the same beliefs feel kind of ostracized or like they don't fit in. I believe that teachers should have and coaches should offer a psychologically safe place for kids, whether it's your classroom or the locker room. When you're doing that, when you're singling out one group as being better than another group, that's not a psychologically safe place for anybody. And it doesn't matter to me if 99% of them are Christian. If there's even one who's not, it's not okay.

Fumiko, a Buddhist science teacher, worried that the "everyone is Christian" discourse she observed at Dover High was harmful to the psychological well-being of non-Christian students. Based on her personal experiences and interactions with non-Christian students at the school, she believed that these students did not feel safe in the school's cultural environment that strongly promoted Christianity.

Nathan, an agnostic science teacher, chose to act against the “everyone is Christian” discourse at his school to protect some of his Muslim students:

> This year at Cooper High School, for the first time ever, we have a Muslim Student Association. I am the sponsor. Because a lot of students felt…a lot of things are assumed to be Christian, and we have a growing body of diverse students. So, some of them are going to be Muslim. And that’s okay. But they don’t want to feel persecuted. They want to come together and blah, blah, blah. So I was like, “Yeah, I’ll be your sponsor.”

Christian student organizations such as the Fellowship of Christian Athletes (FCA) had been active at Cooper High for many years, but, as Nathan pointed out, this year was the first time Muslim students could gather in an officially recognized school club. Nathan believed that allowing Muslim students a safe space to gather with a faculty sponsor was a positive step forward for a school in which “a lot of things are assumed to be Christian.”

I note here that attributing the pervasiveness of individual Christian speech to the supposedly benign assumption that “everyone is Christian” is a rather charitable way of thinking about Christian privilege. It is possible that some Christians may purposefully choose to use their Christian speech privilege as an opportunity to convert or proselytize to non-Christians or even Christians who are perceived as less devout. Some Christians may also choose to polish their personal images by displaying Christian devotion publicly in a society that respects Christian piety. For example, Ginny, an atheist biology teacher at Cooper High, openly expressed her opinion about Christians at the high school who used obvious displays of prayer to enhance social standing:

> Me: In what form do you see prayer taking place?

> Ginny: Oh, you know, coaches and teachers and kids in the corner of the gym or outside praying by the flagpole, that kind of thing. And the whole Christian thing, it's like, come on. You can throw a cover over all of that, but the same kids who are in the courtyard praying are the same ones who are radicals and talking trash about people, bullying the Jewish and Muslim kids. They use it, like look at me, I'm good, I'm a Christian…it's just a cover, for covering up your problems. It almost makes things worse.

In this case, Ginny observed hypocritical behavior in some of the students who made a point of participating in the Christian prayer sessions that were prominently on display at Cooper High. The assumptions that allow these displays, "everyone is Christian" and the unspoken corollary it promotes, "Christians are better than non-Christians," are not benign and should not be used as an excuse for marginalizing non-Christians within a public school.

Individual Christian speech

Commonly expressed Christian sentiments such as "I'll pray for you" and "Have a blessed day" caused participants to react by either cringing or smiling. Emma (atheist) summed up her thoughts when a colleague offers to pray for her:

> Sometimes it feels like bullshit, right? It's like the thoughts and prayers stuff with gun violence in the schools. I don't really want to try to hide my autistic kids who can't be quiet, you know? Let's do something better than "thoughts and prayers." It's that kind of stuff that just seems a little hollow.

To Emma, "I'll pray for you" often came across as a meaningless platitude that substituted for meaningful action.

Lauren (agnostic) expressed frustration similar to Emma's:

> I don’t think people mean anything by saying I’ll pray for you. I don’t think they do! But if I were to say well don’t [pray for me], do something else for me like bring me dinner, you know, do something else, I think they would just be like *what*? And so I usually don’t say anything.

In the first part of this quote, Lauren may mean that people who say “I’ll pray for you” do not mean to disrespect her agnostic worldview. Like other participants, she recognizes that the Christian speaker may simply assume that she is also a believer. In the latter part of the quote, Lauren, like Emma, appears to feel that many people who say “I’ll pray for you” use it as a platitude; she believed that they would be taken aback if she asked them to do something other than pray.

For both Emma and Lauren, an offer to pray for them was not helpful or comforting because they do not believe in a deity that responds to prayers. These teachers believed that actions were more important than what they considered a meaningless banality. A colleague at school saying “I’ll pray for you” generally exasperated them.

On the other hand, Nathan (agnostic) appreciated the sentiment behind “I’ll pray for you” comments:

> I take it as a high compliment. They are relating my troubles to the highest entity that they could possibly think of so that he or she may help me. I think that is a very, very kind thought. I just kind of…I respect people’s religions because I understand they feel stuff that I don’t.

Nathan believed that offers to pray for him were sincere and accepted that the Christian colleagues who offered the prayers genuinely cared about him and his well-being.

Bina (Jewish) believed that religious speech was inappropriate in public schools because of First Amendment concerns. She explained her feelings about a recent experience at Belen High:

> This past May when our principal left, our athletic director presented our principal with a plaque and on that plaque was a phrase from the Bible. And I assume it was bought with school money, presented in front of everyone, and I was like, you know, that's not quite appropriate, and this happened in 2019. The one who presented it might be religious, the principal might be religious, but you're still mixing church and state, right, or religion and state, so I didn't think that was appropriate.

Bina (Jewish) believed strongly in the First Amendment separation of religion and state in public schools, and so she felt that formally presenting a gift with a Biblical quote to anyone at a school function was inappropriate. The possibility that this gift was paid for with official school funds further made her uncomfortable, but she chose not to object to this incident of Christian privilege.

> Bina: What am I supposed to say, that you're not supposed to be doing…? I guess I could've but, you know, what's done is done, you know, you can't take it back from him, but I don't know. I just don't speak up with that kind of thing.
>
> Me: Is it concern that you'll lose your job?
>
> Bina: No, just uncomfortable pointing. I mean, I guess we're just in such a Christian culture that people don't think like that, so maybe I should have. I don't know.

Nuha, a Muslim Spanish teacher who wears a hijab with modest dress that covers everything but her face and her hands, noted that Christian colleagues at Belen High did not make religious references such as "I'll pray for you" when speaking with her. She attributed this to their professionalism; she believed that teachers in public schools respect the First Amendment division between religion and state. However, given the evidence that Christian privilege is present in public schools, another interpretation might be that presenting herself as obviously non-Christian positioned her as an outsider and signaled that it would be inappropriate to use Christian speech habits when speaking with her. In other words, her religious diversity was obvious where other non-Christian teachers' was not. She said that Muslim students would often approach her with the traditional Arabic greeting, *As-Salamu Alaikum*, or "Peace be with you" in English. She explained that these communications with students were "always a positive thing to me." Christian colleagues, though, may have been afraid of saying something that might be construed as negative or offensive. While her Christian colleagues outwardly respected Nuha's Muslim faith, they may have effectively segregated her from their personal group interactions by strictly limiting their overall communication with her to professional matters.

Khabir, a Muslim social studies teacher also at Belen High, emphatically endorsed his Christian colleagues' practice of offering religious sentiments even to non-Christians:

> I love being in the south. The south is very religious. I love that "God bless you," the way people talk to each other. The way the people are concerned about each other. How the people want to pray for each other, how the people want to be there for each other. I attribute a lot of that to their religious upbringing. I found nothing but hospitality here. I mean, the people were just kind, just fantastic.

Khabir, originally from Bosnia, considers himself part of an historic Judeo-Christian-Islamic tradition and so he feels an intense connection with other people of faith who are open about praying for others. For Khabir, saying "I'll pray for you" was a significant and special moment between people of faith. Colleagues at the school approached Khabir with these sentiments. This is in stark contrast to Nuha's report that she never heard Christian speech while working at Belen, the same high school as Khabir.

Interestingly, the reactions of non-Christian and non-believing teachers to Christian colleagues saying "I'll pray for you" in a public school workspace does not appear to divide along faith lines. It might be expected that atheists and agnostics would find the practice offensive, while people of non-Christian faiths might find an offered prayer acceptable. The interviews challenge this hypothesis. Some teachers of faith appreciated being told "I'll pray for you," but others found the religious reference inappropriate in a public school because of their conviction in the separation of religion and state. Some atheist and agnostic teachers found the practice offensive or meaningless, while others appreciated the sentiment of their colleagues. Two Muslim teachers at the same school had vastly different experiences with Christians speaking to them of religion or prayer. Non-Christian teachers' reactions to Christian speech, specifically "I'll pray for you," appear to be influenced not only by their religious or non-religious identifications, but by complex political, personal, and professional factors as well.

Participants' religious speech

All but two of the non-Christians interviewed in this study mentioned that they tried not to use individual religious speech that might advertise their non-Christian religious identities in the workplace. Emma (atheist) explained:

> I think it's much easier to wear your Christian religion on your sleeve and just say things like the things I've said [e.g., "I'll pray for you" or "Merry Christmas"] than it would be for me to say atheist things, you know? Which I don't even know what those atheist things would be, but you know what I mean? I don't really talk about the fact that I don't

> believe in God versus I know there's plenty of people who say things that show that they believe in God….I certainly feel like there's a Christian subtext, you know?

Lauren (agnostic) stated that generally:

> The more I meet people, the more I get close to them, I let them know pretty quick that I don't believe. I think many people don't share their religious beliefs, but if they're not Christian, I think that's the saddest part. Not many know that [two of my colleagues are Jewish.] They're just not going to share those religious beliefs with anybody else. But people that I knew that were Christian liked it and loved it, so you knew [they were Christian] within a week.

In this statement, Lauren observes that she and other non-Christians tend not to share their religious identifications with those they do not know well. While she was close enough to her two Jewish colleagues to be aware of their religious identification, she was upset that they felt they had to keep silent while Christian colleagues felt free to openly speak about their religious identifications.

Bina believes that she needs to shelter her Jewish identity in the school for physical and emotional protection. She has compelling reasons for this. Bina has relatives who are members of the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh in which eleven people were massacred in an anti-Semitic attack in October 2018; our interview took place about nine months after this incident. Although her family members were uninjured, the hostility inherent in this senseless carnage shook her to the core. Bina's personal fear of anti-Semitic violence is deeply rooted:

> It was my brother's synagogue that got shot up in Pittsburgh. It was very disturbing, and I talked about it with a few people how wrong it is and got lots of empathy about how wrong. I've never heard anyone say, "Well, they deserved it." You know, I surround

> myself with people like that, hopefully with knowledgeable people. So [at school] I'll openly say I'm not going to be here because of the Jewish holidays. I don't hide it. But I'm not outwardly there saying, "Hey, I'm Jewish, come and get me." So, I guess I assimilate as much as I can.

Aron, an English teacher at Perkins High in Eastern County, explains why he identifies as atheist/culturally Jewish:

> So I went to Hebrew school after school on Tuesdays and Thursdays. The rabbi was an Auschwitz survivor, and he was a genuine Talmudic scholar. He was Hungarian and his tattooed serial number was only a hundred or so digits away from Elie Wiesel's….You can't simply dismiss a tradition like that, there's too much moral baggage bound up in it to say, "I have problems with metaphysics, so I'm going to reject a whole culture." That doesn't just go away, whatever your metaphysical beliefs about the existence of God might be.

He noted that he only referenced Jewish religious traditions, but not his atheist beliefs, in the classroom if it was pertinent to his teaching of high school literature. His students and close colleagues were generally aware that he identified as Jewish, although he noted that, as an atheist, he does not take time off to observe Jewish holidays. When I asked why he didn't openly identify as atheist as well as Jewish, he shrugged and replied, "If the Klan or the Neo-Nazis ever come for us, they don't give a shit what we believe." As a member of traditional Jewish culture, he felt that anti-Semites would consider him religiously Jewish even if he openly declared that he did not believe in or worship a deity. Sadly, the possibility of anti-Semitic violence is also a personal concern for Aron.

Margola also identifies as atheist/culturally Jewish. She is a very active participant in Jewish holidays and rituals despite not believing in God.

> Margola: It's all a bunch of bunk, the Torah, but I really enjoy the company. I'm a pure atheist, but I like to go to synagogue.
>
> Me: I understand that. That sense of community and interest.
>
> Margola (winking at me): Yeah. Hope my rabbi doesn't hear this.

Margola uses humor to deflect religious speech and makes little effort to hide her Jewish background at Perkins High. She regularly requests time off to attend Jewish holidays with her family and often makes jokes about being Jewish:

> So one year, one of our principals was retiring, so she was giving away a bunch of stuff from her office. One of the things she was giving away was a Christmas ornament. And so I asked for it and everybody laughed. I was like, this is my first Christmas ornament! And it was!

She also kidded about the annual Christmas decorations at the school:

> I know there were times when the halls were decorated with Christmas decorations, maybe there was just a Christmas tree, and then sometimes the media specialist would say, "Can you bring a menorah (she adopted a stereotypical Jewish accent as she rolled out the word men-OR-a) to display next to the school's Christmas tree?"

Margola chooses to keep any mention of religion at school light and does not engage in serious conversations about atheism, Judaism, or Christianity at work. She does loan her menorah to the school when asked.

Nathan (agnostic) explains his concerns about talking about religious beliefs at school:

> I do not express my beliefs at school unless I am directly asked. If students ask my belief, I say I'm agnostic. I'm legally allowed to answer that question, but I am not allowed to share my beliefs….I don't like expressing my personal thoughts to children because I know how easily persuaded kids are, especially during tumultuous years. So, I choose not to. I don't like kids to question their own beliefs because I don't want parents to get on my ass.

He noted that he did hear his colleagues freely air their Christian beliefs.

> Nathan: Oh yeah. All the time. That's not a big deal. They like to…"Oh, I'm having a hard day at work, but I know it's all part of God's plan." You know, like, "My son died but God comforts me."
>
> Me: How do you respond to something like that?
>
> Nathan: I passively agree, or I patiently listen.

Nathan purposefully refuses to discuss his agnostic religious identity in detail with anyone at school. He is concerned about violating the First Amendment, angering parents, and seeming rude to colleagues. However, he also indicates that he has been the target of conversion attempts while at school:

> I've been invited to church numerous times over the years. I always politely decline because I have no interest in going. But they understand. They're very respectful. I've never been pressured. I've never had it hung over my head. One of my coworkers is a very devout man. He's a very good man. He's invited me to church numerous times since I've been at Cooper High. I politely decline. He says, "Man, just know that it's always open." I always appreciate those offers.

Receiving invitations to attend churches may indicate that Nathan's colleagues define his agnostic identity as "one who is not committed to believing in either the existence or the nonexistence of God or a god" (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). As such, Nathan may appear to be seeking the religious meaning that his colleagues have found at their personal churches, making him an ideal candidate for conversion attempts. While he does not mind these invitations, it is interesting to note that he remains silent beyond politely declining the offers. He does not discuss his views with colleagues on any deeper level and is not open to changing his beliefs.

Ginny, atheist and strong advocate for the First Amendment, explained how she chose what to say when confronted with Christian speech at school:

> Me: Have you ever told a student that you were an atheist?
>
> Ginny: No. If kids ask me, I usually say I'm really uncomfortable with that. I don't say what I personally believe. I don't go there. Not because I'm afraid, but because it's the right thing to do. I don't actually talk to kids about religious matters because that's completely and totally inappropriate. So I avoid it.

Andrea, an atheist, continued (not) using religious speech in north Georgia the way she had while growing up:

> In Canada, it wasn't in your face. It was like, you go to church, you don't go to church, whatever. You do your own thing and you don't talk about it outside of church and you don't wear it on your sleeve everywhere you go. It was so different in Canada. It was really just do your own thing and yeah.

Vidula is deeply religious, but private. "I am a Hindu and I'm born, raised that way, and we are strict. We follow the religion really strictly." However, she publicly identifies as Hindu only when asked directly in the public school workspace, choosing not to speak about her religious identity otherwise. She explained that she is “not ashamed to come [to school] wearing my [Hindu] clothing” for the school’s annual evening International Festival. However, she chooses not to do so on a regular basis, and when I asked why, she responded:

> Vidula: That’s a great question. I don’t know, maybe something that I should have asked the administration, if I feel like wearing [Hindu attire], am I allowed to as long as it is covering properly?
>
> Me: According to the First Amendment, you have the right.
>
> Vidula: Yes. But I never thought about that.

I interpreted this exchange to mean that she just did not wish to dress in Hindu clothing every day or perhaps that she was choosing to assimilate into the (Christian) school culture, but I acknowledge that my interpretation simplifies what was most likely a complex, although seemingly unconscious, decision.

Bisma (Muslim) chooses to keep her religious identity private for safety reasons:

> Because growing up, my dad, I was born and raised in Georgia, so my dad’s not as strict as other Muslim parents would be. He doesn’t require me to wear the scarf and cover up due to being, since September 11th basically. He doesn’t want us to grow up being hated, so he tried to get us to go into growing up with the Christian majority.

As a result of her father’s decision, Bisma does not wear a hijab in public, does not perform Islamic ritual prayers while at school, and does not advertise the fact that she’s Muslim in the workplace. She spoke of her relationship with her colleagues:

> Me: So how do you interact with your colleagues about your religion?
>
> Bisma: I don’t bring that up, mostly because I know how some people would be like, “Oh,

> you're a Muslim." They would give you "that look." Some people may give you a look, some people may not. But it depends on the personality of a colleague.

As she was speaking, Bisma demonstrated "that look" for me, and it was heart-breakingly clear to me how disparaged she felt when she was positioned in that situation.

Nuha and Khabir, both Muslims, were the only two participants who openly chose to demonstrate their faith. When at school, Nuha wears a hijab with modest dress that leaves only her face and hands uncovered. Even though she stated that she does not speak of her religion unless asked direct questions, her religious attire clearly expresses her religious identity as she interacts with colleagues and students. Khabir considers himself an educator for the Islamic religion:

> I find myself in a beautiful situation to be an ambassador, if you want, for my religion and my religious background. People approaching me and asking questions. There is nothing more beautiful than that, to have opportunity to answer the people, not have them hear from the second hand or third hand but hear from the source. I know that ignorance is the foundation of fear. We don't know each other, that's why we fear each other. The more we know each other, the less we fear, and the closer we get, the more we realize how much in common we have.

Khabir sponsors the Muslim Students' Association at his high school and is also a popular lecturer in the north Georgia area, delivering presentations once or twice a month about the Islamic faith at government offices, police stations, fire stations, schools, synagogues, and churches. He openly demonstrates his faith within the public school and in the larger community.

It would be a mistake to assume that the participants, even those who reported a positive reaction to the pervasive "I'll pray for you," do not resist the Christian privilege inherent in openly personal Christian speech. Emma (atheist) observed a negative response when she first responded to a colleague's "I'll pray for you" with "Yeah, thanks, but I just don't believe in God." She quickly concluded that "maybe I shouldn't say that. I should just say thank you." Lauren (agnostic) explained that "I'm just going to let it go because I genuinely think that that makes them feel better, like that's fine, you can do what you need to do." Emma and Lauren now choose to simply respond to the statement "I'll pray for you" with "thank you" instead of explaining that they do not believe in God or asking for help other than prayer. Bina (Jewish) and Ginny (atheist) choose to respond with "thank you" instead of lecturing their colleagues about the First Amendment. Nathan, while appreciating the caring that he believed prompted a Christian to say, "I'll pray for you," also responds with a simple "thank you" instead of openly acknowledging his agnosticism. Responding with a polite "thank you" can be interpreted as a subtle form of resistance to the Christian privilege that allows Christians to openly make religious comments in the public school while discouraging non-Christians from sharing their religious or non-religious beliefs in the same way (Elshtain, 2008). This simple act of resistance allows them to protect their minority religious identities and to quickly disengage from their Christian colleagues without insulting them. It appears that a courteous "thank you" can be used as an effective, albeit subtle, form of resistance against the individual Christian speech privilege.

Nuha takes direct action in her resistance to Christian privilege. She proclaims her identity as a Muslim by choosing to wear her Muslim attire to school. This demands that her Muslim identity be respected by colleagues and students. She noted that her Christian colleagues refrained from using Christian speech habits when speaking with her.

Khabir chooses to incorporate the Christian speech privileges of his colleagues into his own identity as a Muslim. He explains:

> For too long, we defined our culture and our society as one which was established on Judeo-Christian traditions. For example, every time I hear that or read that, I feel hurt because I feel excluded. Because we believe, the Muslims, that we belong into that Judeo-Christian tradition. That hurts. I really feel like a teenager who is excluded from his peers. Like the teenager whose peers don't want to associate with him or exclude him from the group, from the gang, and so on. That is a bit upsetting. I learned to distinguish and understand ignorance. I believe it's our duty, our responsibility as Muslims, to make a first step.

Khabir adapts Christian privilege in a way that allows him to retain and share his strong Muslim identification with others.

Group Christian speech

While participants observed that individual Christians felt free to use religious speech in their public schools, they also noticed Christian privilege when they were in group situations. Like the personal experience I wrote about in Chapter 1, eleven participants sat in mandatory faculty gatherings that opened with a Christian prayer. Six spoke about openly Christian speech in official school e-mails sent to groups of teachers within the school and to parents, students, and other community stakeholders. Finally, fourteen participants chose to talk about the school-wide daily recitation of the Pledge of Allegiance, the words "under God," and how they felt about being required by Georgia law to stand and lead it.

Christian prayers at mandatory faculty meetings.

> *They would have the beginning prayer before we would go into the meeting and that's always uncomfortable…because it's not what I believe and they're saying it in front of the whole masses like everyone should believe this. Bina (Jewish)*

One of the most common group experiences with Christian privilege reported by the teacher participants was Christian prayers opening mandatory faculty gatherings. I wrote about my personal experience with this situation in Chapter 1. When asked the question, “Can you tell me a story about a time you felt that your religious identity might not fit into the dominant school culture?” eleven participants specifically commented on the Christian privilege inherent in allowing a group Christian prayer before a mandatory meeting of a religiously diverse teacher population. These participants are indicated on Table 4.2. The codes FA for First Amendment concerns, NJR for Not Job Related, and M for Marginalized indicate which teachers expressed these concerns, explained further below.

Table 4.2

Participants’ reactions to group Christian prayer at mandatory faculty gatherings

Participant	Religious Identification	Reaction to group Christian prayer	Reason for Reaction
Bina	Jewish	Frustration	FA & M
Emma	atheist	Frustration	FA & NJR
Lauren	agnostic	Frustration	M
Fumiko	Buddhist	Frustration	FA & M
Hannah	agnostic/culturally Jewish	Frustration	FA & M
Andrea	atheist	Frustration	FA & NJR
Aron	atheist/culturally Jewish	Unconcerned	The prayer is irrelevant
Jason	atheist	Unconcerned	The prayer is irrelevant
Margola	atheist/culturally Jewish	Unconcerned	The prayer is irrelevant
Vidula	Hindu	Participated	All gods may be worshipped
Khabir	Muslim	Participated	Christians & Muslims are part of the same religious tradition

The stories had a common thread, but individual participants reacted to and spoke about them in different ways. As Table 4.2 indicates, six of the participants were frustrated by the Christian prayers for a variety of reasons. They felt religion and state should remain separate (FA), their time was precious and should be devoted to doing their jobs (NJR), or the worldviews of non-Christians were being marginalized as unimportant (M). None of these teachers protested openly, although they were disturbed by the obvious display of Christian privilege. It appeared to them that no one actually cared whether they participated in the prayer as long as they did not interrupt. Not feeling forced to participate played a critical role in their decisions not to protest.

Three other participants chose to ignore Christian prayers at mandatory meetings as unimportant.

> Aron (atheist/culturally Jewish): So I just stand there and watch them do their thing and then move on with life; it doesn't hurt me.
>
> Me: Do you see it as an example of Christian privilege?
>
> Aron: Absolutely.

Jason (atheist) and Margola (atheist/culturally Jewish) agreed with Aron that it was not worth becoming emotionally disturbed by the practice, but that it did qualify as an example of Christian privilege in the public school. All three noted that if they felt pressured to actively participate in the prayer, they would formally protest.

In our interview, Vidula, an immigrant from India, spent some time explaining that, historically, each state in India created a small Hindu temple, carving their god in stone, and "molding the statue in a way that they envisioned." These various gods were worshipped by "generations after generations." As moving around India became easier with modern transportation, the difficulty of knowing which god was the "right" god was apparently settled amicably. Vidula remarked, “We tried to respect everybody. So we worship basically every god.” She had also attended a Catholic high school in India. Given both her respect for all gods and her familiarity with Christianity, she felt comfortable participating in a Christian prayer.

Khabir explained that, as a Muslim, “we belong into that Judeo-Christian tradition.” He noted that the current high school social studies textbooks he is given to teach his students “represent Islam as foreign, incompatible with this culture, with this society. That hurts.” Being included in a Christian prayer at school made him feel accepted within the Abrahamic tradition and within the family of teachers of faith at the public school. However, he told me that he had not been asked to lead a Muslim prayer at any of these meetings.

There are multiple reasons why Khabir might not have been asked to lead a Muslim prayer. Perhaps Christians at the school simply did not think to ask him to lead a Muslim prayer because it was tradition (or habit) that a Christian prayer would be said in that setting. In another interpretation, the organizers of the meetings might have had a negative perception of the Islamic religion that prevented them from asking anyone to lead a Muslim prayer. However, the schools had no official policies that only a Christian prayer could be offered in what might be considered an invocation at the start of a solemn meeting. In light of the Supreme Court’s decision in *Town of Greece v. Galloway*, 572 US 565 [2014] that found starting a legislative session with a prayer was acceptable under the First Amendment, it is possible that public schools following this tradition for faculty meetings also do not violate the First Amendment.

All eleven participants noted that no one identifying as Jewish, Hindu, Buddhist, Muslim, or atheist offered a prayer or non-religious motivational comments at any of these faculty gatherings. Alternating between these multiple options might have made these eleven participants more comfortable with the tradition. Instead, the Christian privilege in this situation appears all too obvious to non-Christian teachers.

As with the responses to individual Christian speech, the reactions of the non-Christian participants who experienced group Christian prayer at mandatory faculty meetings did not fall neatly into categories by religious identity; faith or non-faith itself was not the only factor involved in how the participants felt about the experience. However, no one who recounted experiences with group Christian prayer at mandatory meetings openly protested the practice at their schools. Several of the teachers reflected that, even though they disapproved of the Christian group prayers before meetings, it was not worth the hassle that would arise from protesting the situation. For example, Aron (atheist/culturally Jewish) explained, "It's just not a big enough deal for me to bother." Margola (atheist/culturally Jewish) noted that "maybe if it affected the children, then I would say something." Hannah (agnostic/culturally Jewish) strongly agreed with Margola, stating:

> If someone is offending me, I can take it, but if you start messing with my students, then it's like mama bear is coming out. You better be ready because I will start the fight if it comes to kids.

Nine of the teachers silently refused to participate and indicated that with their body language. For instance, Margola reported that "everybody would close their eyes and I would not." They did not bow their heads and did not close out the prayer with the traditional spoken "Amen." This did not prevent another Christian prayer from being said at the next meeting, but it does indicate resistance to the Christian privilege inherent in the school's allowance of (or insistence on) the group Christian prayer in the first place. Had the prayer taken the form of a participatory act, such as a group recitation of the Lord's Prayer, or if students had been involved in any way, resistance was likely to be stronger.

However, the influence of the group Christian prayer on these teachers cannot be dismissed as simply a temporary annoyance, even if their refusal to publicly protest the practice seems to suggest that. Although she indicated that she did not become emotionally upset when sitting through a Christian prayer at a mandatory public school faculty meeting, Margola, who was raised Jewish in a majority-Christian city in Georgia, expressed the hollow feeling of marginalization she knew all too well:

> Margola: I'm thinking I'm just used to it. You just feel inundated with everything that's Jewish that doesn't belong. You knew you did not belong. You knew there wasn't a place for you.
>
> Me: So you actually do a lot of accommodating.
>
> Margola: Yeah. (long pause) Yeah.

Starting mandatory faculty gatherings by disregarding the worldviews of non-Christian teachers is unlikely to foster the open and inclusive environment that is desired in a public school.

Christian speech in public school communications.

"While the Free Exercise Clause clearly prohibits the use of state action to deny the rights of free exercise to anyone, it has never meant that a majority could use the machinery of the State to practice its beliefs" (*Abington v. Schempp*, 374 U.S. 203; 83 S. Ct. 1560 [1963], pp. 225-26).

In public schools today, the "machinery of the State" looks rather different from when the U.S. Supreme Court wrote this opinion about using the school loudspeaker system to deliver Christian prayers in 1963. There have been technological advances that allow written, visual, and oral communications to be delivered instantly to everyone in the school as well as to parents, other stakeholders in the public education system, and the community at large. When Christian messages or prayers are communicated through public school channels, they do not pass unnoticed by non-Christian teachers. My participants explained that Christian colleagues frequently used these school-wide communication systems to promote their own personal religious agendas.

The practice of using the school intercom system in north Georgia public schools to recite a Christian prayer does seem to have nearly disappeared after the 1963 *Abington v. Schempp* Supreme Court ruling. Only Ginny, an atheist, remembered hearing a daily intercom prayer as a high school student in Georgia in the 1980s, well after the Supreme Court ruling.

> I remember when we had meetings in high school and we had a prayer in school, and it was really hateful. They used the intercom at public school, and I'm just like, come on. It could be psychologically harmful. I'm very, very anti religion-in-schools.

One of the issues with the use of the school intercom is that there is nowhere in the school where the message cannot be heard; hearing Christian prayers transmitted over the school intercom is not voluntary. As a student, Ginny had felt marginalized by the daily ritual. She now teaches at a public high school where she is relieved that no daily prayer is delivered over the intercom, although she does observe other forms of Christian privilege at her current school. None of the other participants reported hearing Christian prayers over the intercom; as noted previously, group Christian prayers said prior to mandatory faculty gatherings were performed live at the beginning of the meetings.

Official school emails, however, often contain Christian messages that some participants believe marginalize non-Christians and violate First Amendment constraints in public school communications. For example, Lauren (agnostic) observed that she received emails from school colleagues that contained Bible quotes in the signature lines, even though the principal at her school had denounced this practice as a First Amendment violation in school-wide meetings more than once. Lauren (agnostic) warned:

> [The principal] told everyone we can't do it because it was a Bible verse and I thought, "Oh dear." You don't need to be putting that on your email, especially sending it to parents. We need to be careful about that kind of stuff. We have been told you cannot include [a Bible verse] in your emails.

Bible quotes can send a message that Christianity is privileged by the school, not only in emails sent within the school, but also in emails sent outside the school. The students who attended Lauren's school were much more religiously diverse than the teachers who taught there. In Lauren's opinion, distributing personal religious messages via official school email is a practice that reflects negatively on the community perception of the entire school.

Fumiko (Buddhist) also commented that this issue was addressed by the administration several times at the school in which she worked, but that some teachers continued to use the Bible quotes in their emails anyway.

Emma (atheist) commented on the difficulties involved for administrators trying to enforce First Amendment restrictions:

> I think it [banning Bible verses on official school emails] would be really negatively perceived because there would be Christians who would feel like they were being attacked. Christians already feel like they're being attacked in this country.

This perception may account for some Christian teachers' resistance to removing the Bible quotes from their emails. Another possible interpretation is that some Christian teachers may believe that, legally or morally, they have the right to display their religion openly within what they consider to be their own personal email signature boxes. However, public school email channels are an integral part of the "machinery of the State" (*Abington v. Schempp*, 1963) communication system. For the participants who noticed this issue at their schools, Bible quotes in email signature lines (especially after teachers were repeatedly asked to remove them and refused) were clear examples of Christian privilege that signaled a lack of understanding or a disregard for the First Amendment and an indifference to the feelings and beliefs of non-Christians, whether they were intended that way or not. The fact that this issue was addressed in school-wide meetings and emails, but not necessarily enforced by the administrations when individual Christian teachers refused to comply, may suggest that administrators are unwilling to speak to these Christian teachers one-on-one about the issue. Christian privilege seems to be a taboo topic of conversation that allows some Christian teachers who feel strongly about the issue to continue to include Bible verses in their official school emails without facing employment consequences.

In communications sent only within the school, participants spoke about receiving emails from colleagues inviting them to Christian gatherings. Fumiko (Buddhist) observed that the school-wide email system was often used for "teachers wanting to advertise for prayer meetings before first period." Bina (Jewish), who works at a different school than Fumiko, also noted that she received school-wide email invitations to Christian prayer meetings that took place before the start of the school day. Bina mostly ignored them, but she did feel that the use of school email communications to organize Christian teacher prayer meetings at the school, no matter when they were to be held, violated the First Amendment. She noted that teachers were not invited to faculty Muslim, Jewish, Buddhist, or Hindu prayer meetings or even atheist gatherings via the school email system. She suspected that non-Christian and non-believing teachers chose not to organize such meetings (as opposed to organizing them outside of official school communication channels), and she firmly declared that she would not have attended a Jewish prayer meeting at the school if one had been offered. For her, synagogue and state should remain separate.

Other reported common communications sent via school email systems were notices that a colleague was ill or had experienced a death in the family and asking the recipients to pray for their well-being. Not only common in person-to-person contact, the ubiquitous "I'll pray for you" showed up in emails sent through official school channels as well. For example, Lauren (agnostic) noted, "I have had quite a few times where teachers have sent things like so and so's sick and I'm praying for them" in emails that were addressed to multiple members of the faculty and staff. She laughed as she observed that "teachers love to send 'reply all,' right?" and suggested that some of the more religious email replies to simple announcements of colleagues' difficulties were not, in fact, meant specifically for her. Not having to (re)consider religious content or a comment such as "I'll put the sick colleague on my Baptist church prayer list" before hitting "reply all" is a Christian privilege seemingly entrenched in official public school email communications in north Georgia. Lauren (agnostic), Emma (atheist), Fumiko (Buddhist), Andrea (atheist), Bina (Jewish), and Ginny (atheist) specifically noted that these regularly received official school email communications crossed the line separating religion and state. These participants in particular considered religious content of a personal nature in official public school email channels a misuse of "the machinery of the State" (*Abington v. Schempp*, 1963) by the Christian majority.

Fumiko was the only participant who reported speaking to an administrator at her school about Christian privilege in school-wide communication channels as problematic. While she identifies as Buddhist, she is a member of a sect that does not worship a supernatural deity; she has much in common with the teachers who identified as atheists in the study. She cautiously spoke to the person responsible for investigating discriminatory incidents at the school, who promised to keep her identity private. It was important to her that "[friends and colleagues] don't know that I've tried to call attention to what's going on through outside channels. I don't want the retaliation. I love my job." In her meeting with this administrator, she "expressed concern that school electronics communications were being used for someone's personal religious agenda, like for Fellowship of Christian Athletes (FCA) stuff and teachers wanting to advertise for prayer meetings."

When I asked if she noticed a difference in the use of school communication channels after her meeting, Fumiko noted that the Christian teacher who was "the advocate for those [Christian] things happening" began to reword her emails to "some students came to me and asked if they could get together and pray before school next Wednesday, so if anybody feels compelled to join in…" rather than claiming the idea as her own. Fumiko suspected that the Christian teacher "had been spoken to about it, and that's why she's reframed how she presents the opportunities, like it's not her idea." This was not exactly the outcome Fumiko hoped for; FCA and Christian prayer meetings continued to be advertised as frequently as before. Further, the fact that teachers continued to be invited to participate in the prayers with students bothered her. She had been the faculty sponsor of an LGBT student group at a previous school and it had been made clear to her that she was "not supposed to participate in any events."

> My role was to open my door, let them use my space, make sure they don't damage school property, and then close up when they leave. But that's not what I saw from the people who were the faculty sponsors of these [Christian] groups. They got special treatment, I felt, because of who and what they were.

She also observed that, in addition to using official school email channels, the Fellowship of Christian Athletes student organization, sponsored by the athletic coach, continued to "use office aides to deliver fliers and things like that, and that was not okay with me" because no other school clubs were given that privilege. While her objections to the use of school communication channels to promote individual Christian religious agendas were heard and some minor changes made, Fumiko ultimately felt that "my opinions don't really matter a whole lot in the big scheme of things, but at least I try to voice my opposition when I have a chance."

Is the Pledge of Allegiance religious?

There is a long history of court cases having to do with the legislated daily recitation of the Pledge in public schools. Back in 1943, the U.S. Supreme Court opinion in *West Virginia State Board of Education v. Barnette*, 319 U.S. 624 [1943] held that:

> If there is any fixed star in our constitutional constellation, it is that no official, high or petty, can prescribe what shall be orthodox in politics, nationalism, religion, or other matters of opinion or force citizens to confess by word or act their faith therein.

In this case, a prior ruling compelling public school students to recite and use a prescribed hand symbol while saying the Pledge of Allegiance was overturned. However, in 1954, the Pledge of Allegiance was amended to include the phrase "under God" in an effort to "proclaim the religious character of the United States in opposition to the atheism of the Soviet Union" (DelFattore, 2004, p. 307). A 2002 case, *Newdow v. U.S. Congress*, 292 F. 3d 597, 602 (CA9

2002), ruled that the 1954 addition of "under God" violated the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment. However, on a subsequent appeal to the Supreme Court, atheist Michael Newdow was found to lack the standing to bring a suit in his daughter's behalf, and the case was dismissed. Today, the 1943 *West Virginia State Board of Education v. Barnette* ruling still protects the First Amendment rights of students who choose not to stand or recite the Pledge.

Teachers in public schools, however, may be required by laws and employment contracts to stand and lead the Pledge of Allegiance daily. I noted in Chapter 3 that asking teachers what they thought about the Pledge of Allegiance was not intended to be part of this study. However, the first teacher I interviewed brought the topic up as something that bothered her. But rather than finding the "under God" addition to be off-putting, as I do, Bina (Jewish) stated that she felt that not standing and reciting the Pledge "is disrespectful to the flag, to America. I guess I don't consider the flag to be religious. I think I take it as nationalism." Matilda (Jewish) felt that it was important to teach her pre-school students "to stand [during the Pledge of Allegiance] because it's a respectful thing to do." Vidula (Hindu), an immigrant from India, noted that while she knew she could not legally force her high school students to stand and say the Pledge, she "felt sad that they are not standing up." She believed that saying the Pledge was about being patriotic to the United States and since the students, even those who were not American citizens, were presently living in the United States, they should respect the practice. For these three teachers, who all identified as persons of non-Christian faith, standing and reciting the Pledge of Allegiance symbolized showing respect for America and was not religious in nature.

Hannah (agnostic/culturally Jewish) explains her feelings about the Pledge:

> The Pledge originally didn't have the 'under God' part, and it wasn't meant to be a religious thing. You need to just show pride in your country and the people who do go

> overseas and fight and try to keep us safe. On that side, I try to at least push [students] to be respectful. I also try not to step on their toes.

American patriotism is important to Hannah, but she noted that she either removed the words "under God" or changed them to "under the stars" when she recited the Pledge. The original intent of the pre-1954 Pledge inspires Hannah to publicly display her nationalistic pride without accepting the religious component that is now tied to the daily ritual.

Jason, an atheist, disagreed that the Pledge of Allegiance was symbolic of patriotism and objected to its daily recitation on the grounds that it is "perfunctory, superficial, and it doesn't require anything of citizens. I think it teaches people that 'I did my duty,' which is nothing. So that's why I'm against it." He also noted that "many of [my students] are either undocumented or their parents are undocumented." To him, forcing them to listen to the Pledge simply added to "the constant barrage of 'You're not wanted here'" that they heard in the news. For Jason, the unwelcome religious addition "under God" is one more factor triggering the antipathy that he feels for the daily recitation of the Pledge as a whole. Accepting that it is part of his job responsibility as a public school teacher, he stands for the Pledge but does not recite any of it.

The subject of the Pledge also came up in my interview with Bisma (Muslim):

> Me: I felt out of place in public school where you would think it's secular, so there's no religion here at all.
>
> Bisma: Yeah, there is. They said for the Pledge of Allegiance, for those that…we stand up but some of the Muslims won't say it, they would just keep the hand on their chest.
>
> But for me growing up, I would say the Pledge, just to fit in and not look like an outcast.

One interpretation for some Muslims refusing to say the Pledge may be that they see the addition of "under God" as a Christian construct, and therefore choose not to participate for religious reasons. However, as Jason described above, there can be nationalistic and political reasons for not saying the Pledge as well. Bisma deliberately continues to recite the entire Pledge in her job as a teacher to avoid being othered by the majority Christian faculty at her school and not because she wishes to demonstrate patriotism.

Emma, an atheist, feels that the "under God" addition to the Pledge of Allegiance demonstrates a clear example of Christian privilege in the public schools. "I certainly feel like there's a Christian subtext, you know? I mean, shucks, the 'under God' for the Pledge of Allegiance, right?" To her, just the fact that the Pledge is recited with the 1954 "under God" addition on a daily basis in the public schools indicates a governmental bias toward religion that deliberately excludes atheists, which is what it was originally designed to do (DelFattore, 2004; McCarthy, 2009). Emma and seven other teachers who identify as non-believers reported that they stand for the Pledge as required in their employment contracts, but either remove the words "under God" or are silent throughout the ritual.

Fourteen of my participants chose to talk about the Pledge of Allegiance in our interviews. Only three of them, teachers of faith who identify as either Jewish or Hindu, dismissed the words "under God" as an unimportant part of what they considered a completely American patriotic ritual. Bisma participated only to avoid drawing attention to her identity as a Muslim. The other ten participants saw the "under God" in the Pledge of Allegiance as an example of Christian privilege and, while they stood for the ritual, either did not say the words "under God" or remained silent throughout the entire Pledge. These teachers identify as either atheist, agnostic, Buddhist, or atheist/culturally Jewish. Two Muslim teachers in the study did not mention the Pledge of Allegiance, but neither had students in the class period in which the Pledge was said, so they were unobserved and not required to stand as a role model for students.

This may have affected why they did not choose to discuss the Pledge at the time of our interviews.

Overall, it was non-believers who resist using the words “under God” when they are required to stand and lead their students in the daily Pledge of Allegiance. Eleven of the fourteen non-Christian teachers who spoke about the Pledge felt uncomfortable, marginalized, or pressured to comply when required by administration (and state law) to stand and model it for students. There is little doubt that “one nation, under God” will continue to be a point of resistance as more non-Christian teachers and students enter public school classrooms. Ten of my participants concluded that reciting the Pledge of Allegiance should be acknowledged as a (Christian) religious activity.

Court cases arguing that the Pledge of Allegiance is unconstitutional for religious reasons have been brought into the judicial system mainly by parents of public school students. These parents lose their standing to bring court cases on behalf of their children attending public school for many reasons, including becoming a non-custodial parent, the child no longer attending a public school in the particular district in which the suit has been registered, or the child graduating from or dropping out of the public high school (DelFattore, 2004). To date, the U.S. Supreme Court has not been asked to rule specifically on the constitutionality of the state laws requiring that the Pledge of Allegiance be recited daily in public schools. Teachers who believe that the Pledge is unconstitutional and should not be repeated daily in public schools have not taken up the cause at this time. My participants’ jobs are tied to the law in Georgia mandating the recitation of the Pledge of Allegiance and their colleagues and administrators are likely to be majority Christian, which leaves them susceptible to reprisal if they choose to put their names on a court case against the saying of the Pledge in public schools for religious reasons. While teachers have the potential to bring court cases that can have standing over a longer period of time than those of parents or students in order to finally bring the issue to the Supreme Court, their vulnerability as non-Christians and as employees in the public school system makes this action improbable.

Proselytizing

Three teacher participants experienced what they considered to be Christian proselytizing within the public school workplace. The Merriam-Webster dictionary (n.d.) defined the verb "proselytize" as "to induce someone to convert to one's faith." The speech and actions that are used in this process may take many forms. McCarthy (2009), looking at the issue from the point of view of public school students, explained that, according to legal cases involving the Establishment Clause:

> Educators cannot lead prayer sessions, display or distribute religious materials, use religious references in instruction, wear proselytizing clothes, or disregard curriculum components for religious reasons. The judiciary has recognized that public educators don't have a right to use the influence of their positions to impose sectarian beliefs on students. (p. 716)

However, my participants noted that these legal guidelines were sometimes disregarded in their public school workplaces, even when students were involved. Further, proselytizing activities directed at public school teachers by administrators, colleagues, or students in the workplace appear to be somewhat common.

The first to tell her story was Andrea, an atheist. I included one of her experiences in Chapter 3 in which she attributed her disapproval about the public school renting the same Christian church with taxpayer money for several years in a row to First Amendment issues. Fear had compelled her to protest this practice in an anonymous letter. Another of her experiences at the Western County high school involved a Christian speaker who was invited to the public school to give a motivational speech to teachers during pre-planning week. Andrea felt that the speech, titled "Life's Goliath," was inappropriate before she even arrived for the mandatory meeting. The Old Testament story of David and Goliath is often used as a motivational parable for an underdog winning what seems to be an impossible fight. However, there is no question that David attributes his ability to defeat Goliath to his deity as he says: "This day will the Lord deliver thee into mine hand; and I will smite thee, and take thine head from thee" (1 Samuel 17:46 KJV). Andrea explained that the motivational aspect of this speech, drawn directly from Biblical sources, promoted finding strength in Christian religious faith. This is a clear example of proselytizing, "of inducing someone to convert to one's faith" (Merriam-Webster dictionary, n.d.). In this "motivational" speech, Christianity was directly advocated as the key to overcoming the challenges that the public school faculty would face during the upcoming school year.

Andrea told me that she was decidedly *not* motivated by this speech:

> At one point, I went into the bathroom and I realized it was the club of women who just couldn't take it anymore, who decided to hide out in the bathroom. That was a good feeling for me to realize I wasn't alone there. I kind of saw who my colleagues or my peers, my peeps, were.

In addition to other atheists, agnostics, and teachers who felt strongly about the separation of religion and state, "the club of women" might also have included teachers from other religious traditions who were uncomfortable with the Christian speech. Andrea believed that the women waiting out the speech in the restroom with her had also felt marginalized (and unmotivated) by the Christian proselytizing in a mandatory public school faculty meeting. There is no way to know if other non-Christian teachers, including Andrea's male colleagues, chose to endure silently, resisting the Christian privilege without leaving their chairs, perhaps purposefully ignoring the message of the speaker, or possibly even choosing to outwardly participate in the experience to avoid drawing attention to themselves.

Andrea chose to resist this demonstration of Christian privilege by removing herself from the situation in a socially-appropriate manner. It was acceptable for teachers to use the restrooms as needed during this meeting, and so leaving to do so was unremarkable. Andrea noted that she and the other women who "decided to hide out in the bathroom" remained in the bathroom until the speech was over, returning only to participate in the legitimate school business topics that were left on the agenda.

In this case, Christian proselytizing took place within the physical confines of the public school itself. However, it is common in north Georgia for some official school events to be held at local churches ostensibly for reasons such as space limitations at the school and affordability. Some of my participants spoke about being required to attend church-hosted high school graduation ceremonies, welcome-back-to-school events, and standardized testing sessions. Haynes (2011) observed that, legally, "school officials must demonstrate a clear, secular, educational purpose for holding a public school event in a house of worship" (n.p), but it is doubtful that holding any of these particular events in churches was necessary for secular educational purposes or that school officials were held accountable for demonstrating a secular purpose. For non-Christians, non-believers, and even attendees who are members of other denominational Christian churches, simply attending a public school activity at a Christian church adorned with the common religious accoutrements used by that church (which may include crosses, crucifixes, Bibles, hymnals, pews, a pulpit, Christian statues, baptismal fonts, and stained glass windows of Biblical scenes, etc.) can be daunting. A church specifically designed to be a sacred space is not automatically perceived as a secular space just because it is being used for secular public school purposes.

Haynes (2011) further emphasized that "school programs using facilities of religious institutions must not be opportunities for proselytizing by clergy or anyone else" (n.p.). My teacher participants, however, recounted experiences of proselytizing that took place at several of the church-hosted events that they were required to attend. Realistically, churches that are donating or discounting the cost of the use of the church space for a public school event may expect these events to be perfect occasions for "spreading the good news about Jesus Christ," and some of them choose to do just that.

Andrea (atheist) described the high school graduation ceremonies she was required to attend while she taught at a Western County high school:

> The principal there was very religious; he was outward as a Baptist. He would have our graduation at a big, huge mega church. They had big screens and everything, and he would sing at the beginning. It was horrible. It was always something, not really religious, but close.

As we talked about it, Andrea recalled that one year the song was "The wind beneath my wings," made famous by Bette Midler in the movie *Beaches* in 1989. As Andrea had noted, the popular song was not written to be specifically religious in meaning, but it has been widely adopted by Christians who attribute some of the lyrics to Biblical sources, mainly Isaiah 40:31 (StudyJesus.com, n.d.). Given that the principal warbled from the sanctuary of the Baptist mega church to the "congregation" sitting in pews in the nave, Andrea may be excused for not only thinking that this song was (borderline?) proselytizing, but also for questioning the overall religious tenor of the public school graduation ceremony. In the three years she taught in this school, she, and no doubt many of her peers, students, and their parents, found attending graduation ceremonies at the Baptist church uncomfortable and marginalizing.

Hannah (agnostic/culturally Jewish) attended a kick-off for the schools in her Central County cluster at a mega evangelical church in Fall 2019, about three months before our interview. Parents and students from the local elementary schools, middle schools, and the high school were invited to get together to learn more about the cluster and to meet each other. Hannah used air quotes around the word "invited" when she added, "All the teachers are invited, too." Laughing, she clarified: "Yeah, you *have* to be there." She noted that more people attended the kick-off than would have fit into any of the school buildings in the cluster, even the large high school in which she worked. The evangelical church annually donated the venue to the school system free of charge for this event. I note here, though, that "free of charge" does not mean that something (religious) was not expected from the attendees in payment. It is this "payment" that Hannah noticed and objected to.

Throughout the event, Hannah observed church members inviting people to stay and pray with them at the church afterwards. "I feel like they're really pushing it with people who are not Christians," she said, although she noted that "inviting someone to a prayer is an open invitation; you can choose not to go." However, refusing an invitation to pray with someone without seeming rude, especially while standing in their church, can be an uncomfortable challenge for anyone, and perhaps more so for non-Christians and non-believers who may not wish to reveal their religious identities or to discuss religion at what should be a secular event. Hannah believed that attendees had the right to expect a separation of religion and state at a public school function, even if that function is hosted by a church.

What Hannah found most off-putting about this event was the showing of a Christian video as an integral segment of the welcoming and motivational speeches given by school officials to the entire group of attendees:

> They even had a video this past time where the motivational speaker lady, her whole spiel was about finding Jesus, and how he led her. When you start putting the video into the whole thing where there's no escaping it, to me, that's when you've really gone way too far.

To Hannah, who identifies as agnostic/culturally Jewish, it was clear that the point of the video was to proselytize, to explain the benefits of the Christian religion practiced in the mega church, and to draw in converts. Like Andrea, Hannah was not motivated by the Christian speaker:

> "As soon as she started talking about that, I just shut down. I was no longer interested. It was like you're trying to motivate people for something that you alone value. It's a very personal thing. There were Muslim teachers, Jewish teachers, atheist teachers, agnostic teachers, who don't want to hear that. I really was surprised that they went that far."

Back at Cooper High, Hannah brought up the subject with her fellow teachers and "kind of got just a shrug off, eye-roll attitude about it," leaving her to wonder if they supported the Christian proselytizing that had taken place at this school function. Did they all accept (or embrace) what was to her a clear violation of the First Amendment and a slap in the face to non-Christians? "It really was surprising to me that [the school] would even do it. The fact that [showing the video] was even not questioned beforehand was mind-blowing." The Christian privilege demonstrated by this event struck Hannah as unfair and disrespectful; three months after it occurred, she still became agitated explaining it to me. Even though she could not be sure, she found it disturbing that her colleagues and, to her knowledge, even parents and students who had attended the event, did not publicly voice objections about the proselytizing video to the administration or the school board. This lack of public outcry deterred her from voicing her personal objections. As a non-Christian teacher at the public school, she felt that she was in a vulnerable position. She concluded sadly, “We don’t really have the true separation of church and state that people believe exists.”

Fumiko (Buddhist) taught in a Central County high school on the opposite side of the county from where Hannah works. Earlier, I wrote about her objections to the use of school communications systems for personal religious purposes and the anonymous actions she took to draw attention to the Christian privilege inherent in those religious communications. She was even more concerned, though, by an experience of open proselytizing that she witnessed, most likely because students were involved. Fumiko explained that there was a long-standing school policy of administering high-stakes standardized exams to students taking certain courses at a local Christian church near the school; originally, she had no objection to her students taking the tests at the church due to space limitations at the school. However, as she entered and left the church as a proctor for the exam, she noticed that “people from the church would try to talk to students as they were coming into tests and as they were leaving.” Students told her that the church members offered to pray with them. Not only was it inappropriate for *anyone* to be asked if they would like to participate in a Christian prayer at a public school testing event, but the invitation marginalized the worldviews of religiously diverse students. The implication was that the Christian God would in some way “help” students through the testing ordeal if they prayed (to him). This was an act of proselytizing, and Fumiko was immediately concerned. Worried about potential negative consequences, she dashed off anonymous letters to the local newspaper, the school board of Central County, the principal, and even national groups for religious equity.

Once again, she chose to object without revealing her identity. But she was not the only person to voice her concern about this incident. Local news reported that a parent complained to the administration, and that the administration requested that the church members discontinue the practice. The church members ignored this request, showing up to invite students to pray as they entered the church building for testing the following day. Fumiko reported that the school no longer uses the facilities at this particular Christian church for school functions, although functions for the public high school are still held at other Christian churches.

Religious holidays and observances

My participants of faith delicately navigate the stream of Christian privilege, working hard to ensure that they are able to participate fully in their own non-Christian holidays and worship schedules. They understand that Christian worship time on Sunday morning is sacrosanct in the southern United States. In fact, much of Georgia retains “blue laws” that restrict restaurants from serving alcohol at certain times on Sundays (when everyone should be sitting in a pew at the Christian church of their choice.) Christmas is the only designated federal holiday based on a religious celebration, and it is, without doubt, Christian. While religious accommodations are allowed for teachers of non-Christian faith working in public schools, they must be requested by the teacher and approved by the administration every time they are needed. This is not necessarily as simple for them to do as it may sound.

Non-Christian observances

Me: Do you have to use personal days to take off for religious holidays?

Margola (atheist/culturally Jewish): It’s taken out of my pool of days. I have to use them. (She smiled and winked at me.) I’d be happy to work on Christmas.

Me: I’m sure you would.

All participants of faith mentioned that the counties in which they worked allowed them to use three of their personal days to observe religious holidays. These three days are not added on to their personal days; they have the same number of personal days as Christian teachers whose religious observations are automatically accommodated by the Gregorian or Christian school calendar. The participants who identified as religiously Jewish or atheist/culturally Jewish unanimously resented this policy. Aron, an atheist/culturally Jewish teacher who reported that he chooses not to take Jewish holidays off, was nonetheless concerned: "I would have to take personal leave days, and I don't think that's ethical. It shouldn't cost me anything, so I do have a problem with that." Hannah, agnostic/culturally Jewish, also chooses not to take off time from work to celebrate the Jewish holidays but fits religious observances with her family into her work schedule. "Family dinners are easy to work out on weekends and after work. That's usually not too much of a problem." If she has a conflict in scheduling between the Jewish holidays and school activities, she automatically chooses her workplace responsibilities over religious considerations. Because the majority of her students do not identify as Jewish, they attend the public school on Jewish holidays. Hannah feels responsible to be there to teach them, even if it means missing a religious holiday with her family.

Margola, atheist/culturally Jewish, mentioned that she also used to put her school responsibilities ahead of her religious obligations, but had recently come to realize that she needed and wanted her family and the religion they observed to take precedence over her job. However, she anticipated difficulty scheduling time off to be with her family for Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, considered the most important holiday in the Jewish faith (History.com editors, 2020). Margola explained:

> I want to spend Yom Kippur with my family [in Augusta], but I can't do that just because it's too much driving back and forth. And Yom Kippur starts on a Tuesday night; the holidays were late this year because they're at the end of September, beginning of October. And so I can't do that, because there's this service we have the night before that begins at six o'clock. I'd have to eat my last meal; I'd have to take off half the day. It's just too much trouble to get down there to spend it with my family. So I have to make compromises because I've got work.

Because she also wanted to take time off for Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year based on the Hebrew calendar, and Passover, the commemoration of the Israelites' departure from their enslavement in Egypt, taking an extra half day off would put her over the allowed three days of religious leave for the current school year. Margola follows the Eastern County school district policy of taking only three days off for religious observations, but this means that sometimes she is not able to be with her family during the major Jewish holidays.

Matilda, a Jewish teacher who works at Stan elementary school in Western County, sat down across from me and immediately opened with:

> I can tell you that I was shocked when I got to the public schools at the backlash I got when the Jewish holidays came up. When I asked to take off, it was, "Are you sure? Is it that important of a holiday that you need to take off? You know you have to take personal time. You know you need to get a sub to take off." Anything they could do to get me not to take off or to make me feel guilty for taking off.

The strong administrative objections to her taking the main Jewish holidays off continued for each holiday for the first three years she taught at the school, and she suspects that the situation will not change in the next school year. She noted:

> The first year was tough because I think it was more of a shock like, 'Really? Are you asking me that?' Now it's, 'Yeah, it's that important to me. It's like a Christmas to us. It's our Christmas, so yes, it is *that* important to [my family] and to me. If I have to take my personal time, then yes, that's what I have to do to make it work.

Matilda actively resists the Christian privilege and what appears to be religious discrimination by the administration by insisting on exercising her right to worship without government (i.e., public school) interference. She takes her holidays off, using her own personal leave time and finding her own substitute teacher to fill in for those days. While she notes that at first she felt guilty that she was letting the school and her students down by not teaching on the Jewish holidays, she came to realize, "I do want to show my kids that our religion is important. We need to stand up for what we believe in." While the administration has never denied Matilda the time off for her religious observances, she knows that asking for the time always involves an unpleasant confrontation with an administrator. Further, the requirement that she find her own substitute for those days puts an additional burden on Matilda that, in many schools in Georgia, is shouldered by administrative staff. The implication here is that if Matilda were unable to locate a substitute teacher to work those days, the administration would deny her leave request. Whether the administration would (illegally) deny Matilda's request for religious leave for this reason has not been tested. Since she knows the policy, she now arranges for a substitute teacher well in advance of her needed leave days. Christians, with their holidays "naturally" worked into the school calendar, do not have to fight to ensure that they have the time to worship with their families on their religious holidays; Christians are openly privileged over Jewish teachers at this Western County school. Matilda suggested that this will be her last year working at this elementary school; she stayed there for four years because she was completing an advanced degree, and it was easier for her to remain where she was. Looking for a new job in a public school where the administration prizes religious diversity within their faculty and respects the First Amendment is at the top of Matilda's to-do list for the next school year.

In what seems to be an uncharacteristic accommodation, Bina, also Jewish, noted that at times during her more than twenty-five years of public school teaching in north Georgia, some principals allowed her to make up the eight hours that she would be out instead of requiring her to use a personal leave day. Several of the elementary school principals she worked for in Northern County required her to document her "make-up" hours on a piece of paper and turn it in rather than acknowledging that she is a professional educator who already puts in many more hours than required simply to do her job properly. When asked how she felt about that, Bina replied:

> It's frustrating. I mean I understand it because they're giving me the time off. But I think they know that [I'm] putting in the time. Some principals want to give you a hard time and some people don't. I don't know if it's about religion or my personality or what, but each principal is different.

Bina currently works in Belen high school in Central County where the policy requires her to fill out a form requesting leave for religious purposes. While she mentioned that "it's fairly easy in Central County" to take religious leave, she noted that her current principal will still negotiate with her about making up the time instead of automatically deducting a personal day from her limited pool of days. It is possible that Bina is accommodated in this way because she personally requests it from the principal(s) for whom she works. There is no evidence that other non-Christian participants of faith asked for or were given the option to make up religious leave time instead of using a personal day.

When asked if she ever needed to ask for time off for religious purposes, Vidula, a Hindu high school teacher, spoke about needing time off for certain festivals celebrated by her family.

> If I have a religious function in my house, I let the administration know, and that would take up a whole day. So if I have something at home, yes, they know at that time I would take that day off…Yeah, there is an option. And we apply for the leave.

Vidula requests religious leave for her religious observations, and the days are deducted from her pool of personal leave days. Although she has never been denied religious leave, Vidula is a bit disturbed by the (in)sensitivity of the American people to non-Christian religious holidays.

> In India, it's like a mix of everybody and those public holidays are for everybody. So Diwali is a holy day for everyone. Eid is a holiday for everyone. Christmas is a holiday for everybody. School, banks, offices, colleges, universities, like everything. So everybody gets [the time off].

This makes the timing of the various religious celebrations visible to the entire population, and, in Vidula's opinion, encourages the Indian population to be more aware of other religions than the American population she observes here in Georgia. Simply being obligated to request religious leave demonstrates to her that her religious observations are considered less important than Christian holidays here, which are automatically accommodated in school and business schedules based on the Gregorian calendar used in the United States.

The three Muslim teachers interviewed in this study all requested and took personal days for the traditional Islamic religious observances each year. Far from being questioned about the importance of their holidays the way Matilda (Jewish) was, the Muslims' religious needs seem to be generously accommodated.

Bisma, who chooses not to outwardly identify as Muslim at the public middle school where she works, needs the fewest accommodations, but she does request religious leave to celebrate Eid-al-Fitr, the three-day feast of thanksgiving at the end of Ramadan. However, she chooses to "take a half-day off and come in later" rather than taking the full three days. She notes that another major celebration, Eid-al-Adha, or the feast of the sacrifice, normally falls in the summer months when no accommodations from the school are required, and that her family also comes together to observe that holiday. During the school day, Bisma does not require time or private space for individual prayer; she chooses to perform her traditional daily prayers outside of work hours. She knows, though, that such accommodations are available at the school since some of her Muslim students use them.

Khabir (Muslim) spoke of an experience he had at a Central County middle school when he started working there after the 9/11 terrorist event in New York:

> I had a beautiful experience at the middle school. My principal came to me, the principal who hired me, a couple of months after I was hired. She asked me, "Do you perform your duties?" I was like, I thought she was asking me about [teaching]…I said, "Yes, ma'am, to the best." She said, "No, I know about that. I heard about that. But your religious duties. I'm from New York and growing up I had a few friends who were Muslims. And I know that they had to perform prayers and had a special diet. Please, you have to perform your duties. I will do everything in my power to accommodate and make sure that you have everything you need in this school."

Khabir continues to have strong feelings about this exchange with the principal:

> Since that day, I felt welcomed and part of the community and protected, and respected for what and who I am. I will never try to hide [my Muslim faith], and after September 11th especially, I was afraid of the backlash and stuff like that.

I note here that being asked about your religious devotion by your boss in a public school may not necessarily be “a beautiful experience” for some teachers. The principal must have felt that Khabir, as a practicing Muslim, might be in danger from hostile colleagues, students, or parents and took proactive steps to protect him. Right after 9/11, this could have been a valid concern. Was the administrator justified in openly asking about Khabir’s religious practice in this situation? Khabir thought it was not only justified but was also an act of compassion and caring. However, it may be argued that it was inappropriate for a public school administrator to openly ask a teacher about his religious practices, even under such circumstances.

Now that he teaches at a high school, Khabir continues to feel comfortable with his administration and colleagues. He uses his three days of religious leave to be with his family for Eid-al-Fitr. He keeps a traditional prayer rug in his classroom and has private time without responsibility for students when he uses it. Khabir reported that, although he did not request the accommodation, he was specifically given permission to fulfill his religious obligations during the school day, including having time and privacy to pray. However, Christian teachers do not need special permission to take a few minutes to pray or to read the Bible when they are not responsible for students. Is it the use of a special prayer rug that makes the ritual something an administration feels it must approve and accommodate? Khabir noted that he had always kept his prayer rug in a cabinet and locked his classroom door when he performed his ritual prayers prior to receiving explicit permission from the administration. He simply continued to do this.

Possibly, “giving permission” for Muslim teachers to engage in their daily prayer ritual needlessly “others” Islamic faculty members in the public school.

As a popular speaker for a local Muslim society whose goal is to teach non-Muslims about the Islamic religion as a religion of peace, Khabir has the freedom to attend one or two off-campus activities a month during the school day without using personal leave time or making up the time he is gone. A possible interpretation for this unusual flexibility is that the administration views him as an ambassador for both the school and the Islamic religion within the larger community. By supporting these activities, the school (and possibly the school district as a whole) may seek to demonstrate a generous commitment to accommodating religious diversity as an aspect of their community relations program.

Nuha, a Muslim teacher who wears a hijab and modest dress to school, also stated that she requests and is permitted time off to observe Islamic holidays:

> We only get three days each school year for religious leave, but it just so happens that one [holiday] will fall during the school year and one will fall in the summer. So they never happen during the school year at the same time. Each [holiday] is three days long, so it works out perfectly that I get to take off for that. I just tell my department chair ahead of time.

Nuha keeps a prayer rug in her file cabinet and uses it as required during the school day:

> We have five prayers a day, and there is a little gap, a specific amount of time, we have from one prayer to the next. We have five prayers a day, but they’re spaced out. At the end of the school day, I just pray because we have a little gap. So there’s time. So it just always works out for me.

Friday is the Muslim sacred day of worship. Unlike the Sabbaths in the Christian and Jewish traditions, Goitein (1959) explains that it is "not at all a day of rest, but one of obligatory public worship, held at noon, the most characteristic part of which is a sermon consisting of two sections" (p. 183). It is also a full official workday for public school teachers in the United States, which makes attending a worship service at a mosque at the traditional noon hour very challenging. However, Nuha's needs are accommodated:

> Now for Fridays, we do have our services on Fridays, and I got permission from the principal to leave early on Friday. But they also make a point of not scheduling an eighth period class for me, so I always have end of day planning, so I can leave and it's not an issue. So I get to go to my religious service on Fridays.

Nuha is not required to take personal leave for this time. This is an extraordinary religious accommodation that does not seem to be offered to others, including Jewish teachers who may wish to attend Sabbath services that begin at sundown on Friday evenings.

Bina (Jewish) addressed this situation:

> Being Jewish, our [Sabbath] is Friday to Saturday. There are [school] things you're supposed to go to on the weekends; you can't always do that or stay late on Friday. If they want you to go in on a Saturday, you can't do that. And it's not required in our contract; an elementary school that I worked at had a carnival or something that they wanted me to come work on a Saturday. I mean they would understand why you can't be there.

Bina does not request to leave school early on Friday to attend synagogue; instead, she tries to leave on time and hurries to get there or does not attend the synagogue that day. She now works at a high school that expects teachers to attend some Friday night athletic events. She frowned as she explained, “They understand why you can’t be there, but you still have to say why.” The feelings of discomfort at having to explain over and over that she has Jewish religious commitments on Friday and Saturday that preclude her from participating in these activities has not eased in the more than twenty-five years Bina has been teaching.

Although each school district officially designates three days for religious leave, the administrative accommodations offered to non-Christians of faith seem to vary by religion, by individual teacher, and by individual principal. Because of the timing of their holidays, Muslims can participate in their religious observations without worrying about going over the three permitted days of religious leave. This is not true of other religions; above, I noted that Margola (atheist/culturally Jewish) was unable to observe Yom Kippur with her family this school year because it fell on a Tuesday and she would have required an extra half-day of religious leave. She did not feel comfortable requesting additional religious accommodations from her principal, and so she worked during Yom Kippur. The allotment of three days of religious leave accommodates some non-Christian religious schedules and not necessarily others.

While these interviews suggest that some Muslim teachers may be offered religious accommodations that go beyond what is normally provided to other non-Christian teachers of faith, only Christian observations are fully accommodated without teachers having to request time off, using one of their personal days in order to be paid, or being asked to justify why they cannot attend a Friday evening or Saturday school activity for religious purposes. School activities are not regularly (ever?) scheduled for Sunday mornings when most Christian services are held.

Religious others and Christmas

> *I'm not saying I think one religion is possible and the others aren't possible. It's all possible. It's just that I have a hard time believing the stories. (Lauren, agnostic)*

The Christmas story continues to be positioned on a pedestal of reverence in many of the north Georgia public schools in which my participants work. Christmas decorations, Christmas parties, and Christmas traditions softly whisper (or triumphantly proclaim?) the Christian religious message that "Christ is born." My non-Christian teacher participants observe this display of Christian privilege at their public schools in December, and many of them are less than merry about it.

Lauren (agnostic) described the Christmas tree placed in her Central County public high school's main lobby last December:

> The art department put up a Christmas tree in the hallway, and it was pink, and it was, you know, very artistic. However, I thought that's really interesting because the majority of our students do not, if they're Christian, they're not proclaiming it loudly, and so I was really shocked.

She noted that, despite the fact that it was pink and artistic, it was easily recognizable as a Christmas tree. She felt badly that the school had allowed this display "because so many of our students are Muslim and we don't have anything for them ever. There's nothing out there for them." She also worried about the effect of the Christmas tree on a Jewish colleague with whom she worked closely. She texted him, asking if he was offended, and he replied that he was not offended, that "it doesn't bother me that much." However, considering the wording of his reply, she believed that "it doesn't bother me that much" implied that the display of a Christmas tree in the public school might have, in fact, disturbed him at least a little.

Emma (atheist) stated that Christmas trees and Christmas parties were common at Rose High School in Western County; she saw little effort being made toward religious or cultural inclusion in December. “It just ostracizes. Like it de-legitimizes or something like that. I just feel like school should be a neutral place, you know?” When I asked what she meant when she said public schools should be a neutral place, Emma mused aloud:

> I guess you can go one of two ways. If you’re going to put up a Christmas tree and you’re going to put up Easter baskets or whatever you do, then I think you need to talk about, at Eid time, you need to talk about what happens there. I mean, you need to be very inclusive, which could get messy because there’s tons of religions and there are offshoots of religion. I mean, not to even think about the little Jehovah’s Witness kid who’s standing there going, “We don’t do any of this shit.” So with that being said, it seems like it should just be an absence [of religion.] It just doesn’t seem like it’s appropriate, right? I mean, that’s something you should do at home.

Emma’s answer to this question highlights the difficulties involved in finding a compromise to the “culture war” in public schools referred to in Chapter 2. She concludes that the display of Christian privilege as evidenced by Christmas trees and Christmas parties marginalized anyone at the public school who did not celebrate Christmas and violated the First Amendment’s Establishment Clause by privileging one religion over others and non-belief. Her recommendation, that religion should remain a personal, family-oriented affair not outwardly displayed at public school, is one that has caused some Christians to suggest that the Freedom of Exercise Clause that upholds their constitutional freedom to worship without government interference is not being respected (Haynes & Thomas, 2007). From Emma’s viewpoint, however, providing equivalent displays for major holidays of all religions and religious subsets is unworkable in any public school environment. Public schools should remain religiously neutral, even (or especially) in December.

Margola (atheist/culturally Jewish), working at Perkins High School in Eastern County, described Christmas decorations and a Christmas tree. To make the display “inclusive,” she remarked that the media specialist would sometimes ask her to bring in a menorah. She laughed at this, explaining to me that Hannukah was a minor Jewish festival. In this religious tradition, Hannukah commemorates a “miracle” that occurred circa 164 B.C. while the Second Temple in Jerusalem was cleansed; one day’s worth of candle oil lasted for eight nights (History.com editors, 2020). She noted that she may or may not observe Hannukah and that she never takes personal religious days for the holiday. Many Christians, including the media specialist at Margola’s school, may believe that Hannukah is equivalent in religious importance to Christmas, but that is inaccurate for many people who identify as Jewish. However, because it occurs in November/December, it is easy to tie Hannukah in with Christmas so that it appears that other religious traditions celebrate major holidays around the same time. December becomes an “inclusive” month of religious holidays. Thus, a menorah placed next to a Christmas tree in a public school is meant to represent this diversity of religious beliefs.

Bina (Jewish) noticed that the students who attend public schools are rarely taught about the religious symbols presented in Christmas/Hannukah displays. She recalled that she was sometimes asked by Christian elementary school teachers to explain the story of Hannukah to their students, which she did, but that in the high school now she does not see an educational purpose in the display of a Christmas tree. A menorah is not part of her school’s holiday display, and she observed, “I don’t see much of Kwanzaa.”

I note here that Kwanzaa is not a religious holiday, but it is observed in December and so is often lumped in with Christmas and Hannukah as one of the major winter holidays. Kwanzaa is a seven-day observance founded by Dr. Maulana Karenga in California in 1966 as an attempt to promote African American solidarity following the Watts Rebellion of June 1965, a brutal riot sparked by the violent escalation of a "routine" traffic stop of a black driver by a white policeman (History.com editors, 2020). Including some of the symbols of Kwanzaa in a Christmas tree/menorah display seems simple. A Mkeka, a cloth or straw place mat; a Vibunzi, an ear of corn; and a Kinara, a candleholder with seven ceremonial candles would be sufficient to invoke the meanings behind the observation of Kwanzaa and prompt students to ask and learn more about the celebration. Since Kwanzaa is non-religious in nature, and is in fact relevant to the race riots that continue today, it may be argued that a Kwanzaa display in a secular public school would be more educational and appropriate than either a Christmas tree or a menorah.

Faculty parties and luncheons lose the non-religious designation of "holiday" gatherings when a Christian climate is purposefully invoked. Margola (atheist/culturally Jewish) told this story about a school in north Georgia where she previously worked:

> I do know a long time ago with my first principal, she's very involved in her religion, but she's very accepting, very progressive. But still, we used to have a luncheon, a Christmas luncheon before the holiday and she would say a Christian prayer for everybody. And everybody would close their eyes and I would not. And there was one of the staff members who spoke in tongues a little bit one time after she gave the prayer. It was a little unusual outburst. Somebody really felt the Spirit. And I thought, "That's pretty odd." They just couldn't help it. Just had to let it go. I'm so disrespectful. I don't take any of this seriously.

If a Christian prayer spoken in a public school cafeteria during a faculty holiday luncheon is so compelling that it influences a Christian teacher to "speak in tongues," it is likely not appropriate speech for a generic "holiday" gathering at a public school. Margola said that it was difficult for her to remain respectful; she felt a strong urge to laugh and "mock him behind his back because I'm mature like that." Retaining her sense of humor is how Margola resisted this over-the-top display of Christian piety and how she resists the Christian privilege that she observes at the Eastern county high school where she now teaches.

Hannah (agnostic/culturally Jewish) spoke about a conversation she had with some colleagues at a recent December "holiday" party for the department in which she works.

> I think the only really one-on-one thing that I ever said was, we were at our department's holiday party, and one of the [teachers] was telling another teacher who had just had a baby that she had to take her new daughter for photos with Santa. I looked and this woman [the new mother] is Indian, so my immediate thought is "No, she doesn't. She's not a Christian."

Hannah, who normally refuses to discuss religion with her colleagues, leaped into the lengthening silence left in the wake of what might be taken as a Christian command to a non-Christian colleague to participate in a traditional Christmas ritual.

> "We never did pictures with Santa. I was raised Jewish." It was almost like I had offended [the Christian teacher], attacked her. I just thought it was ignorant of her to assume that our Indian colleague, who is open about her culture and she shares it with us, would be taking her child to get pictures with Santa.

Hannah's impulsive action to explain to her Christian colleague that not everyone took their children to have pictures with Santa demonstrated a high level of resistance to Christian privilege that was uncharacteristic of her. Perhaps Hannah felt a need to protect the Indian teacher from having to deal with the Christian privilege inherent in both the assumption that everyone "had to" have their child's picture taken with Santa and the Christmas overtones of the "holiday" gathering itself.

The traditional greeting for Christians throughout the month of December is "Merry Christmas." Perhaps because Christianity is so prevalent in north Georgia, Christians also tend to greet non-Christians the same way. Bina (Jewish) explained the predominant response of the non-Christian participants to this common Christian greeting:

> People say Merry Christmas instead of Happy Holidays. You know, to me, it's just semantics. To me, it's just being nice. With my own friends, you know, when they wish me a Merry Christmas, I just joke back becomes it comes out Happy Hanukkah or Happy Kwanzaa. And they get it because I have an open dialogue with them, but I guess not everyone is open to hearing different things.

Emma (atheist) commented:

> If I didn't know anything about you and it was Christmas time, I wouldn't say Merry Christmas to you. I would say Happy Holidays. I do think it's weird when people say Merry Christmas to me if they don't know what I celebrate. It seems kind of one-sided or something.

While she is not offended by someone saying Merry Christmas to her, she always responds with Happy Holidays instead. Emma also discussed the discomfort of receiving a Christmas-specific gift from a student or parent. "It's one thing to think 'It's holiday time. I want to give you a present because it's my time of year where I give presents.'" However, she was a bit taken aback by the Snoopy Christmas Tree cup she received from a student one year. Her first thought was, "You're making a really big assumption." While she appreciated that the student wanted to give her a gift, she felt that giving a Christmas-themed item to a non-Christian teacher was inappropriate.

Fumiko (Buddhist) suggested:

> So if somebody says Merry Christmas to me, that means that they observe it, and it's something that's important to them and I don't get offended by that. I will even say it back to them as a friendly communication exchange.

However, she does not consider it an appropriate greeting in a public school setting, although she does make a reluctant exception if the individuals using the term both "knew that they were of that faith." Fumiko disapproves of situations in which a Merry Christmas greeting is routinely offered in the public school where the diverse religious identifications of students, teachers, and administrators are often unknown. From a First Amendment standpoint, Fumiko noted that "I wouldn't expect school officials to say [Merry Christmas] or to promote it in any kind of way." She explained that in her role as faculty sponsor of a student career club, she often found herself having to explain to her Christian students that the fundraising and socializing activities that they organized in December could not be religiously based. "I explain to them that we don't want to single out some folks and ostracize others. I think that's the way it should be in public education."

Holidays add challenges to the already complex lives of non-Christian public school teachers. In order to observe non-Christian holidays that fall when school is in session, they are required to request (and receive) permission for time off from the administration. The majority use the limited pool of their own personal days in order to be paid. While each teacher is allotted three days of religious leave, three days may not be sufficient time to allow the teacher to observe the major holidays celebrated in their faith tradition. Traveling to be with distant family or friends for these holidays is not really an option. These teachers also worry about a gap in the education received by their students who still attend school while they are out.

Christmas (or “Winter”) Break, on the other hand, usually spans the last two weeks of December, scheduled well ahead of time in the official school calendar. The convenience of being automatically provided with this lengthy interval gives Christian teachers the time to prepare for elaborate festivities as well as the option of traveling to be with distant family or friends for Christmas. Christian teachers do not worry about school responsibilities or students falling behind while they are out because the schools are closed. It is difficult to imagine Christian teachers accepting the religious accommodations offered to non-Christian teachers. Having to request and take three days of personal religious leave to celebrate Christmas would be unthinkable here in north Georgia.

Direct confrontation with Christians

> *From my perspective, religious freedom in [Christians’] eyes means that they can practice how they want, and they don’t care about the rights of anybody who’s not of the same faith. And that’s not how it’s supposed to work. (Fumiko, Buddhist)*

In using the word “confrontation” in the title of this section, I want to make clear that I refer to the first Merriam-Webster dictionary definition of confrontation as “a face-to-face meeting” (n.p.). The face-to-face experiences of some of my participants with Christian colleagues, administrators, and students concerning their non-Christian religious identities included dealing with religious insults, conversion attempts, and the brick wall of Christian certainty. Any of these Christian-initiated incidents might have escalated into open hostility. It is the reactions of the non-Christian teachers that stifled these confrontations, ensuring that they remained face-to-face meetings instead of developing into aggressive arguments. However, these experiences lingered with my participants well after the actual events, affecting how they responded to Christian privilege in their professional and personal lives.

Religious insults

Bina's voice was matter of fact as she related an incident in which an elementary student made anti-Semitic remarks to her in her own classroom:

> When I first started teaching, it was thirty years ago and special ed, I had one student call me the devil. I was in a rural north-western county. I blame the parents. I mean, how else would the kid come up with that? They knew I didn't have the same belief system.

The student was diagnosed with an emotional behavior disorder, and throughout the school year, the Christian parents stubbornly remained unwilling to work with Bina, who they knew identified as Jewish. Bina was sure that the student's reference to her being the devil was based on the anti-Semitic attitude of the parents. It is notable that while the student frequently had inappropriate outbursts, it was this one that stuck in Bina's mind for all these years. "She called me the devil."

Bina reported that she handled this episode by refusing to comment on the girl's insulting statement. When asked if she would handle it the same way today, she shook her head. "I would probably say something about being misinformed and that we all have our different beliefs, so that, hopefully, it won't happen again." This re-thinking of the situation might be interpreted as advocacy for education in religious diversity. Perhaps having a basic knowledge of diverse religious and non-believing worldviews might allow students to better understand (and be more tolerant of) religious others. However, I suspect that nothing Bina might have said in this situation would have altered the anti-Semitic attitude of the student or her parents. By saying nothing, Bina de-escalated the situation, but she was never able to entirely dismiss the incident as unimportant, even after thirty years. That anti-Semitism might show up even in the supposedly secular public school, in her own classroom, was a difficult reality for her to face.

After this unpleasant experience, Bina's perception of the religious climate of the school became an important factor in her job searches. She is careful to take teaching positions only in public schools where the students "come from all walks of life." She believes that choosing to work in schools where she feels comfortable about the overall religious environment, even if the teachers are majority Christian, has sheltered her from further incidents of personally-targeted anti-Semitic hostility in the public school workplace.

Matilda, a Jewish pre-Kindergarten (pre-K) teacher working in a Western County elementary school, recounted an experience in which she was acutely embarrassed by an administrator in front of her students' parents. While her pre-K class was physically held in a county elementary school classroom, the "Bright from the Start" curriculum used in the pre-K program is not the same as the curriculum used by the county. It is a goal of the program to introduce the young students to "religions around the world," and so the calendar in the program includes religious holidays such as Ramadan, Eid, Diwali [the Festival of Lights in the Hindu tradition], Christmas, and Hanukkah [the Festival of Lights in the Jewish tradition]. Matilda noted, "We try and talk about each holiday because each holiday is important. I do bring in things about each holiday."

When Hanukkah arrived during Matilda's first year of teaching in this program, "I brought in a book to read about Hanukkah, and I had brought in a dreidel and a piece of gelt for each kid to take home in a baggie." The students learned to play the dreidel game, and then were permitted to take the dreidel and instructions home to play with their families, if they wished. On her way to the bus, one of the students excitedly showed the administrator what she had received that day, and the nightmare began for Matilda. The administrator adamantly insisted that Matilda could not teach about or send home anything of a religious nature, despite the fact that the pre-K curriculum specifically included teaching about world religions. In her interview with me, Matilda stared straight into my eyes and breathed deeply before she spoke: “We had to send an email [to each parent] asking them to bring [the dreidels] back, to send them back.” Matilda complied with this humiliating directive, but when she later checked with the Bright from the Start office, she was told that she had done nothing wrong and that her lesson was appropriate for the curriculum.

In a twist of irony, later that month the administrator at the elementary school “wanted us to send home an ornament” as a “winter gift” for the parents. Matilda, teaching mainly non-Christian students, “came up with something that was just more memorabilia than an ornament that no one had a Christmas tree to hang on.” That the administrator assumed that the families of the students at the religiously-diverse school would have Christmas trees on which to hang an ornament was a definitive statement of Christian privilege from Matilda’s viewpoint.

Conversion attempts

Belen high school teacher Jason works with a religiously diverse student population but is open about being an atheist at school.

> I don’t necessarily bring it up in an explicit way, but I don’t shy away from it either. So if somebody asks me, I’ll say. I don’t think that’s a bad thing. I think it’s good for students to be exposed to differences. I may be different than a lot of people they come across in that way. I do notice that, when I am asked, I think they’re quite surprised because…they make assumptions that I’m Christian.

He is most likely correct about being different; only two of the nine teachers in this study who identified as atheist or agnostic chose to divulge this fact to their students. Although students may have regular contact with adults who are non-believers, they may simply assume, like many others who live in Bible-belt Georgia, that those teachers are Christian.

Perhaps one of the reasons the other seven atheist or agnostic teachers refused to share their identifications with students is because identifying as an atheist left Jason open to Christian conversion attempts by current and former students. As a philosophy teacher, however, Jason welcomed general discussions about religion. He explained:

> I did have a student, he graduated last year, who would come by and try to when he found out I was atheist, he would come by. We'd have these discussions that were after school because he was no longer in my class. He had been in my class as a junior, but his senior year he would come by sometimes and try to convert me, but in a nice way. He'd just kind of ask questions and probe and say, "Praying for you, Mr. Jason." I was like, "Well, that's okay if you want to do that. That's nice of you to be thinking of me."

Andrea, a high school biology teacher working at Dover High School, reported also being openly atheist with her students:

> I never used to want to say anything about religion because I think they start to look at you as like a Baptist or a Jewish person or whatever. I want them to just think of me as the science teacher. However, now they see it, but now I don't mind as much as I used to because Christianity is no longer sort of the dominant religion among the students. [When students] ask me, I just kind of say, "I'm a science teacher. I need evidence and so far I haven't gotten any, so I'm kind of not there." "You don't believe in God?" "No, I don't."

She has observed changes in the student population over the twenty years she has been teaching in north Georgia, “I have a lot of Hindu and Muslim [students] and I think they prefer me to be atheist because then I’m really not part of any of their groups.”

On the other hand, Cooper High School science teacher Ginny protects her identity as an atheist from both students and colleagues but has still found herself marginalized by Christian individuals. She offered this story:

> There was one teacher, I used to coteach a lot, who would talk about her religion a lot, about being Mormon. She told me that if I believe in God, I was fine, and I was like, “Who are you to tell me that?” For somebody else to tell [you] whether or not [you’re] okay, I think is not okay.

Since Ginny did not believe in a deity at all, she was frustrated by her colleague’s (unknowing and insulting) assertion that she was not, in fact “fine,” whatever that meant. Had Ginny chosen to disclose her atheist identity, she might have opened herself up to Christian conversion attempts, or her working relationship with the Mormon teacher, who seemed to assume that Ginny identified as some denomination of Christian, might have become strained. Ginny left the room rather than respond. She firmly believes that talking about religious matters in a public school the way her Mormon colleague did is “completely and totally inappropriate” and a violation of the First Amendment. When teachers feel free to promote personal Christian religious beliefs in a public school, Christian privilege is present there.

Seven non-Christian teachers of faith reported that, while they did observe indications of Christian privilege at their public school workplaces, they did not feel that they were targets of Christian conversion efforts. Perhaps because any religious faith is respected more than non-belief in the north Georgia area, Christians in the public schools did not attempt to convert the participants who identified as Muslim, Hindu, Jewish, or Buddhist.

Christian certainty

Some of my participants found that dealing with the Christian certainty of some of their colleagues and students was challenging. By Christian certainty, I refer to the idea that "adherence to a singular truth is a mark of religious faith and identity" (James, 2010, p. 621). Seen in this light, Christianity is the only truth. In some cases, even choosing to listen to or entertain ideas that may be contrary to (some) Christian religious teachings may cause theologically-certain individuals to feel that they are being unfaithful to their Christian principles. Christian-certain students who argue about religious/political topics without allowing other students to speak or who refuse to participate in lessons for religious reasons can impede the learning of all the students in the classroom (James, 2010; Juzwik & McKenzie, 2015). Christian-certain teachers in public schools can be even more problematic than the students (Dupper, Forrest-Bank, & Lowry-Carusillo, 2015). Several disturbing experiences involving Christian certainty were observed by six participants in the study.

The year before our interview, Andrea (atheist) attended a meeting to discuss the difficulties a transgender student with special needs was experiencing at the high school and what they could do to help them. Unfortunately, one of the two teachers who co-taught the science class for special need students was Christian-certain. He "refused to call her Zoe because that's not what her name is. He would purposely call her Robert out loud," which effectively (re)directed the class's attention to the student and their gender transition. Andrea heard his co-teacher speak to him about it, saying "please don't do that, it's hurtful." His response to his co-teacher was, "I don't care. That's his name. I call him by his name." As Andrea confirmed by looking at his Facebook posts, the teacher was positive that his Christian God disapproved of gender changes (and, not surprisingly, the rest of the LGBTQ population). Andrea interpreted:

> The teacher is really radical Christian. It wasn't that he was persecuting the kid because the kid was of a different religion, but he was persecuting the kid because he [*sic*] was doing something that he deemed against his [the teacher's] religion.

When one of her main difficulties turned out to be the vocal Christian-certain teacher who refused to "compromise his faith" by accepting her as transgender, Andrea's group was at a loss as how to help Zoe in her transition from male to female. The power wielded by this Christian-certain public school teacher in his interactions with the transgender student may have caused Zoe life-long trauma. As far as Andrea knew, the administration did not intervene in the situation, and she was not sure why.

At the same high school during the same school year of the incident described above, Andrea (atheist) also observed that Christian certainty was openly displayed by another of her science colleagues. She noted that the young teacher "basically told the kids that evolution wasn't true, and she wasn't going to teach it." There were apparently no professional consequences related to this decision; in fact, the Christian-certain teacher was asked to mentor a new science teacher during the next school year. She continued to "not teach" evolution despite the clear state and county curriculum standards the school's other biology teachers followed to teach the topic. By refusing to teach evolution, this teacher places her students, many who anticipate attending college, at a significant disadvantage. The deep-rooted Christian certainty of even one teacher can diminish the quality of the education received by some students in public schools. Andrea questioned the actions of the administration in allowing the science teacher to refuse to teach a major section of the curriculum for personal religious reasons and to mentor a new teacher. “I don’t know why they made some of these decisions.”

The four non-Christian biology teachers in the study reported that they taught evolutionary science to their students as required by the curriculum. They also all noted that they had to address challenges from some Christian-certain students when the topic of evolution was introduced.

Nathan (agnostic) confirmed:

> I have some kids who, when I teach evolution, they straight up tell me “I refuse to learn this because it’s against God.” And I’m like, “Okay. Well, you can fail the test. That’s fine by me.”

In reality, Nathan makes a concerted effort to help students understand the context of the science:

> We’re not talking about the origin of man. We’re talking about evolution. It’s not different to them. It’s the exact same thing. That’s a religious context. They’ve also learned, over the years, “Oh, if there’s a hard question that I do not have the answer to, well, the simplest answer is that’s the way God made it.” That’s the way their parents answer complicated questions, so why not them. It makes sense. But then I just answer it in scientific terms.

In his six years of teaching biology, he had two Christian-certain students who refused to learn the material no matter how he tried to present it. Ultimately, they chose to fail the academic test on scientific evolutionary theory. Despite joking about it, Nathan was *not* fine with these students failing the test, and he admitted to being frustrated by the situation.

Andrea (atheist) reported that “I’ve had kids say things like I’m not allowed to believe that kind of thing, or I’m not allowed to believe, it’s against my religion.” She explained to me that when teaching evolution and genetics, she "lets the rules out there at the beginning. This is science class. This is what's considered to be science, and this is *not* considered to be science." However, she noted:

> Kids will bring you something. One kid brought me this book, wanted me to look at it. I'm like "Oh my God, this is a waste of my time. It's all just been proven nonsense." Really, it still doesn't have any evidence and they want to go into that whole intelligent design thing. I was like, "Thank you for bringing it to me."

Andrea quickly ends exchanges like this. She is all about science and does not permit students to trap her in proselytizing situations. Andrea has advanced academic degrees in science and takes pride in continuing to educate herself in the content she teaches. Her students have the opportunity to learn evolutionary science from an expert teacher, even if they are "not allowed to believe" what she has taught them.

Ginny (atheist) is also proactive about addressing the potential conflict between her students' religious beliefs and evolutionary science.

> At the beginning, I'll be like, look, I know some of you guys are religious and you have ideas about the world's origins and that's fine, and I know you don't believe in evolution because of your religion and that's fine. I'm not trying to change your mind. But I do want you to know what you don't believe, I need you to understand, when you say "I don't believe in evolution," I want you to know what that means.

What bothered Ginny the most about students' refusal to learn about evolution was that they did not understand the science well enough to explain how and why it differed from (or ran afoul of) their Christian religious beliefs. She felt that if a student adheres to blind religious faith to the point of insisting on remaining ignorant of scientific knowledge, "they don't grow as a person."

To Ginny, education about evolution was vital, and she noted that she did not get tangible pushback from her Christian students after she explained this.

Fumiko (Buddhist) also chooses to address her Christian students' resistance to learning about evolution right at the beginning of the unit. Like Andrea (atheist), Fumiko draws a hard line between what is science and what is not science.

> I just wanted to say up front that I'm not here to try to change your mind about whatever you believe. I'm here to teach you scientific facts and how we arrived at this and how we know. You're going to be assessed based on these facts and not those beliefs.

She believes that handling a possible conflict before it could escalate kept her from having to deal with Christian-certain students or parents later.

Fumiko also told the story of a school district meeting for science teachers that she was asked to attend on behalf of her high school.

> One of our school board members wanted to open up the possibility of looking at alternatives like creationism and intelligent design and whatever. This was a school board member. My department chair at the time knew that I would be really up in arms about that, so he sent me to go and represent the school.

Fumiko paused here in our interview, rolling her eyes, her body language expressing what I interpreted as disgust.

> This gentleman, who's a physician, so he's a highly intelligent, very well-educated person, he just wanted to know what we thought about not everyone has the worldview…and I'm like science isn't really about your personal worldview. Science is fact-based. It's objective. So I think he was actually surprised that everybody in the room

> thought he was crazy for even suggesting it, and we all basically said, ‘I’m not teaching anything other than science.” I’m glad nothing ever came of it.

Ginny (atheist) agreed. When I asked if she would teach intelligent design if she were required to do so, she laughed. “With a straight face? I don’t think I could. I’d have to ponder it a while and figure out how I could do that and still keep my personal integrity.”

As these experiences demonstrate, my non-Christian public school teacher participants found that dealing with Christian certainty could be problematic. All worked in schools in which the faculty and administration were majority Christian, although the students in these schools were religiously diverse. These teachers reported that Christian certainty presented in such ways as a Christian colleague harassing a transgender student or refusing to teach evolution even though it was in the curriculum, students refusing to learn the science of evolution because they believed it conflicted with their religious beliefs, and even a school board member suggesting to county science teachers that they should teach creationism or intelligent design along with evolution. These experiences directly influenced the professional lives and personal emotions of the participants who were present at or directly involved in these conflicts. However, the final experience with Christian certainty that I will recount here was profoundly moving for the teacher who graciously told me the story and for me as well.

Aron, a literature teacher at Perkins High School, met once a week with the twenty or so students in his advisement class where they engaged in activities such as “restorative justice circles and conversations.” Aron (atheist/culturally Jewish) met his advisement students on the first day of their freshman year and would continue with the same students for the four years until they graduated. One of the main purposes of a high school advisement class is to foster a long-term bond between the students and the adult advisor. This time together allows the students to learn about each other and the teacher and hopefully helps students feel comfortable talking to at least one adult at the school if they have issues. This was Aron's third year with the students.

The topic of the advisement class that day was "the idea of respect, what it means to respect others, and what it means to possess self-respect." Aron observed that "the kids launched into the conversation and really, it was amazing where they took it, but one place they took it was religion." A boy in the class, who Aron noted "has had some experiences that have made him a little cynical and he comes by that cynicism honestly," expressed his opinion, "when you hold another person in high regard, when you respect another person, there's always some level of self-interest in that. It's never truly self-sacrificing." The girl sitting next to him disagreed, "In my Christian belief, respecting others and self-sacrifice generally isn't or shouldn't be self-interested. It is supposed to be genuine self-sacrifice." Aron observed that the two students, who were friends even though they "certainly have had very different [life] experiences," talked for another minute or two before being drawn into a conversation moving in a different direction.

Aron noticed after a while, though, that the girl was tearing up and starting to cry. He decided to "let it go at first thinking she'll be okay, she'll pull herself together, she's tough. And she is tough." But when the girl put her head down on the desk, obviously distraught, Aron thought she might appreciate some privacy. He asked her if she wanted to step out into the hall for a moment, and she indicated that she wanted him to come with her.

> So, I walked down the hall with her, and she just completely fell apart, I mean, just sobbing, and this is very, very unlike her, like she is always composed. She comes across even as aloof a lot of the time. She's not, but she comes across that way because she holds her stuff together.

When the girl had recovered enough to speak, Aron explained:

> She was just really frustrated that she couldn't find the words to express how deeply important it is to her, that her holding others in high regard and respecting them and being self-sacrificing for them is genuine and not self-interested.

However, something even deeper was bothering her:

> She broke down again and [talked] about how much she worries for other people's souls if they won't be with Jesus in the afterlife. And she said that and then immediately said, ‘I know that you have a different religion and I'm not trying to make you uncomfortable.’ It was a very, very powerful moment. I mean, this is a truly good kid.

Aron interpreted this for me:

> She was expressing to me concern for the state of my soul. And I'm thinking with probably ninety-nine out of a hundred adults that I would hear something like that from, I would hear it as condescending and terrible, and I would say something rude in response. But this kid, I know this kid, I know how good she is and how genuinely she means it and how innocent she is. So, as a public school teacher in this space, my obligation in that moment is to help her feel better.

But Aron was not sure exactly how to go about doing that. Challenging the student’s theological understanding that only those who believed in Jesus Christ would be able to enter heaven, “to be with Jesus in the afterlife,” was not an option. He felt that her Christian certainty was “so basic to her selfhood” that challenging it could psychologically harm her. Instead, wondering if he was handling this situation at all correctly, he had the following conversation with her:

Aron: All right, part of your belief is trusting God. Right?

Student: Yes.

Aron: Also, we can't presume to know the mind of God. Right?

Student: Yes.

Aron: And we can have our church doctrines, but those can't ever really encompass the will of God. Right?

Student: Right.

Aron: So maybe then we can just trust that God actually is looking out for all of us.

To Aron's relief, the student began to feel better, and one of her friends came out of the classroom to check on her and to hug her. Aron said about the emotional experience:

> This became very personal, which put me in a weird spot. It was a weird and kind of weirdly tense moment between me and this kid who I really think the world of. It was one of those moments in school that it was hard and a little painful, but ultimately a good moment.

The student remained in Aron's classroom until she had texted with her mother and composed herself, and an hour later was prepared to return to her classes. But weeks later, Aron was still uncertain that he reacted correctly to this situation:

> So there are these moments where I don't think I sacrificed my integrity as an atheist Jew or whatever you want to call me to help this kid feel better. I don't think I caused her to sacrifice any piece of her dignity. I think I handled it as well as it could have been handled, but it's like two weeks later or three weeks later, and I'm still replaying this in my head. It was a very, very powerful moment and it's going to take me a long time to disentangle all of the moral threads involved.

While Aron did handle this delicate situation with his student's Christian certainty as well as he was able, it is likely that he felt conflicted and uncomfortable talking to her about putting faith in a God in which he did not believe. Perhaps he also had moments where he *did* feel that he "sacrificed [his] integrity as an atheist Jew" as a necessary aspect of his job as a public school teacher. He felt unable to be truthful about what he believed due to potential negative effects on the theologically-certain student in his classroom.

Many of the other non-Christian participants also found it prudent not to disclose their atheist, agnostic, Jewish, Hindu, and in Bisma's case, Muslim beliefs, to students or colleagues in their public school workplaces in north Georgia. The non-Christian teachers participating in the study saw, understood what they were seeing, and reacted carefully when Christian privilege presented in the public school environments in which they worked. Perhaps the most profound effect of Christian privilege on these teachers was to silence their worldviews and their non-Christian voices.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

Introduction

The purpose of this study is to contribute to the body of educational research on how Christian privilege manifests in public schools. Despite the fact that American public schools are subject to First Amendment restrictions that prohibit government establishment of a national religion and government interference in individuals' worship practices, there is evidence that Christianity may be privileged over other faith traditions and non-belief in some public school environments (Blumenfeld, 2006; Blumenfeld, Joshi, & Fairchild, 2009; Nelson, 2009).

The following research questions directed the study:

1. What experiences do non-Christian teachers have in public schools with respect to Christian privilege?
2. How do non-Christian teachers believe their experiences affect them personally and professionally?
3. How do non-Christian teachers resist Christian privilege?

This qualitative interview study focuses on understanding how sixteen non-Christian teachers working in public schools in north Georgia experience Christian privilege, how they feel these experiences affect them personally and professionally, and how they resist the Christian privilege they observe in the workplace. Framing the study in a social constructionist epistemology encouraged me to view linguistic, political, historical, and cultural contexts of social interactions as vital aspects of meaning-making (Burr, 2015). Social constructionism also allowed for the understanding that the (inaccurate) religious discourse, "America is a Christian nation," is firmly embedded within the social structures in which these non-Christian teachers live and work in north Georgia, and needed to be considered throughout the study design, implementation, and analysis processes.

Research studies published about religion in public education provide evidence that Christian privilege is present in public schools. For example, Dupper, Forest-Bank, and Lowry-Carusillo's (2015) study recounted non-Evangelical students' struggles to maintain their own religious identities in public middle and high school environments in which only Evangelical Christianity was acceptable. The students' experiences included physical and verbal bullying by Evangelical students and by adults – teachers and administrators – in the schools. Rural atheist teachers in Howly, Howly, and Dudek's (2016) study felt the need to protect themselves by not disclosing their religious non-belief to others while working in public schools. Non-Christian and non-mainstream Christian participants had no difficulty "seeing" the discursive Christian privilege that manifested in the schools in these studies.

Further evidence of the presence of Christian privilege in public schools or universities can be found in studies in which Christian teachers or students are the participants. At a public university, James (2010) found that some of her Christian preservice teachers refused to participate in activities that asked them to think critically about their own religious beliefs. Subedi's (2006) students, also Christian preservice teachers attending a different public university, thought it was acceptable to privilege Christianity in public school if the numerical majority agreed. Logan's (2014) study of four Christian preservice elementary teachers revealed they openly relied on their own faith to guide them as they completed their practicum hours in a public school. Hartwick's (2014) survey study of public school teachers in Wisconsin indicated that 88.3% of the respondents identified as Christian, and that a significant number of these Christian respondents brought their faith into the classroom in such ways as praying for students or teaching only from district-sanctioned textbooks that might be Christian-biased. These studies suggest that Christian teachers or preservice teachers may act to reify the discursive Christian privilege already present in the public schools in which they work or will work.

The research literature suggests that Christian privilege does exist in public schools and that its presence does influence the behavior and attitudes of those attending or working at the schools, whether they identify as Christian or non-Christian. The current study of non-Christian teachers confirms these conclusions. In their interviews, all sixteen non-Christian teacher participants recounted experiences they had with respect to Christian privilege. These experiences influenced how they formed (or chose not to form) interpersonal relationships with colleagues and students. These non-Christian teachers made decisions about their professional lives based on the strength of the Christian privilege they perceived in the cultures of their public school workplaces and on a fear of losing the support of Christian supervisors. Perhaps most telling, they routinely resisted the Christian privilege entrenched in the public schools; their actions and even their silent resistance indicate that non-Christian teachers are already doing work to promote religious equity in the religiously diverse public schools in north Georgia.

Silencing diverse religious voices

The religious cultures of the public schools in north Georgia are socially constructed and maintained by the majority Christian teachers and administrators who work in them. These religious environments are products of the historical backgrounds of these public schools and their ties to the Protestant religion, the Bible Belt geographic region of the United States in which they are set, and multiple political discourses concerning the role public schools should play in our representative republic. Christianity continues to be privileged; religious diversity continues to be both directly and indirectly marginalized.

However, social constructionism also recognizes that human beings are always in a state of becoming. Multiple social interactions that reflected Christian privilege within their public school workplaces affected how these non-Christian teachers outwardly reacted to the experiences at the time, their reflections about the workplace and their own place as a non-Christian within it, and if, how, and why they thought and spoke about these experiences with others, including me as a researcher.

Why silence matters

Christian privilege remains present in the public schools, especially when non-Christians are not comfortable speaking out about it. In this study, participating non-Christian teachers reacted to marginalizing encounters with Christian privilege in the public school workplace by remaining silent. This silence took numerous forms, was contextually dependent, and subtly conveyed a messy and complex mixture of human emotions. Participants did not verbally indicate to colleagues or administrators that they felt uncomfortable or marginalized when subjected to these situations. However, participants were aware of feeling one or more emotions during and after these experiences, including irritation, boredom, worry, anger, weariness, frustration, and anxiety. These were feelings that they clearly articulated to me as a researcher but chose not to express to colleagues or administrators.

The most common reaction to experiences of Christian privilege was to limit interactions with colleagues. The non-Christian teachers felt that they were outsiders at their schools, and they chose to remain outsiders. They were wary of trusting their Christian colleagues and administrators. Atheist and agnostic teachers did not trust Christian colleagues to respect their lack of belief in a supernatural deity. These participants had all been questioned about "lacking a moral compass" by Christians at some point in the past, and this caused them to believe that some religious colleagues would see them as poor role models for students. They were unwilling to risk their professional reputations or spark an unpleasant confrontation by openly identifying their religious beliefs or protesting acts of Christian privilege. Jewish and Muslim teachers worried that colleagues might be anti-Semitic or Islamophobic. They limited interactions of a personal nature to only those colleagues that they knew well and trusted to accept their beliefs as legitimate ways of viewing the world. Recurring observations of Christian privilege in the public school over time reinforced non-Christian teachers' general lack of trust in their Christian coworkers' acceptance of religious diversity and strengthened their decisions to remain silent. Participants felt that this solution did help to decrease the number of experiences of Christian privilege they were individually subjected to by colleagues, but they also recognized that they had purposefully positioned themselves as outsiders in the workplace. Limiting interactions with Christian colleagues allowed for a level of comfort for the non-Christian teachers. However, it also permitted a rift to open that could interfere in the effectiveness of faculty teamwork.

Non-Christian teachers are often caught in a web of Christian privilege that creates and sustains an unstable foundation for a collaborative teaching community. Teamwork requires a level of trust in colleagues and administration that many non-Christians lack. For example, when a Christian colleague refuses to teach evolution as part of the science curriculum and another harasses a transgender student because her gender change offends his Christian values, non-Christian colleagues find it difficult to work with them. Non-Christian teachers typically find attempts to convince theologically certain Christian colleagues that their religious views are harmful to students is futile. A splintered science department in which some teachers teach evolution and some Christian teachers do not impairs the school's science program as a whole and disadvantages students who do not have the opportunity to learn the entire curriculum as mandated by the state of Georgia. Students who are interested in pursuing college education and careers in STEM fields are especially handicapped if their teacher's Christian values are allowed to limit their ability to learn scientific evolutionary theory in the high school classroom.

Another common reaction for non-Christian teachers was to (temporarily) assimilate into the Christian-privileged culture. Some non-Christian teachers of faith felt comfortable participating in Christian prayers at mandatory faculty meetings. Other non-Christian teachers would essentially "pass as Christian" if they felt the occasion called for it. For example, instead of identifying as non-believing, teachers will simply thank a Christian colleague who offers to pray for them, or they will respond with "Merry Christmas" when it is said to them. Given the propensity of the general north Georgia population to assume that "everyone" is Christian, passing as Christian is not difficult, even if that is not the intention of the non-Christian teacher. In addition, non-Christian teachers of faith might choose to take only a half day or not take off at all for non-Christian holidays to avoid being seen as troublesome by requiring time off when students will be attending school. Taking action to assimilate into the general Christian culture of a public school can make it easier for non-Christian teachers to avoid being personally targeted as religiously other. However, assimilating – pretending to be something you are not – can be frustrating and tiring. Non-Christian teachers may come to resent the administration and their colleagues for positioning them in Christian privileged situations in which they perceive that their best option is to assimilate. Why should they have to hide their personal non-Christian worldviews to be accepted as a member of a majority-Christian faculty?

On the other hand, some non-Christian teachers choose to become ambassadors for their own worldviews. This choice says more about their strong belief systems than about trust in colleagues to accept them as non-Christian. Most visibly diverse, Muslim teachers can choose to wear a hijab, keep a prayer rug in their classrooms to use during private times, and ask for time off to attend Friday worship observances and holidays. This openness indicates to Muslim students that they have adult support in the schools for their religious needs and ostensibly creates a space for dialogue between Muslims and non-Muslims. Less visibly diverse (none of the male Jewish participants wore yarmulkes to school), Jewish teachers may insist on taking their holidays off no matter how much the administration (illegally) protests, and they may choose to openly share their traditions with students when it is part of the curriculum. Buddhist and atheist or agnostic science teachers make clear their expectations that students will learn scientific evolutionary theory, even if this challenges students' and colleagues' fundamentalist Christian beliefs. The actions of these teachers expose that they are not Christian. However, becoming an ambassador for non-Christian beliefs is not equivalent to speaking out against Christian privilege. Even when some non-Christian teachers' religious diversity becomes visible, Christian privilege continues to thrive in the public school culture. Non-Christian teachers continue to be othered in the majority Christian public schools whether they are visible or not.

Non-Christian teachers worry that non-Christian students experience religious marginalization similar to what they experience in the schools. They make sure that students who openly identify as non-Christian or non-believing know that they are available to talk privately if they feel the need. They also respond by acting as sponsors for religious student clubs (e.g., Muslim student associations), sometimes even if they do not identify as that religion. They make a point of not allowing any of their student clubs to hold Christmas or "holiday" parties in December. Fundraising activities such as selling Christmas ornaments and wrapping paper or Christmas cookies were often suggested by Christian students in these clubs, and non-Christian teachers were careful to approve only fundraising efforts that were not Christian-biased.

Participating teachers all felt that protecting non-Christian students from feeling marginalized and isolated was a vital task for them. They went about this by working individually with students. While the resistance to Christian privilege and support for non-Christian students non-Christian teachers provide is invaluable, these actions may have negligible effect on the general Christian privilege in the school culture at large. Silencing non-Christian teachers maintains the status quo. Christian privilege remains.

Expecting administrators to deal with Christian privilege

Even though non-Christian teachers keep silent about their experiences with Christian privilege in the public schools, they do expect the administration to step up to protect their religious freedom, their students' religious rights, the curriculum to be taught, and the First Amendment. Unfortunately, many of the research participants noticed that this did not happen.

While administrators did speak at faculty meetings about general First Amendment "rules" such as not including Bible verses in school email communications, Fumiko (Buddhist) and Lauren (agnostic) noted that the administrators at their separate schools did not seem to follow up with individual teachers who continued to do this; Bible verses showed up in some Christian teachers' email signature spaces for the remainder of the school year. They both worried that non-Christian parents and students who were receiving emails from these teachers would feel unwelcome in the school as a result. Administration renewed the teaching contract for the Christian biology teacher at Andrea's (atheist) public high school for the next school year even though she openly continued to *not* teach evolutionary science for religious reasons. The lack of action from administrators who choose not to address such First Amendment violations with the individual Christian teachers who commit them strengthens the foundation of Christian privilege at these public schools.

Allowing such acts of Christian privilege to remain unchecked reflects poorly on the school's reputation among non-Christians in the community and its ability to provide a quality education to all students. An administration's lack of recognition that a problem exists, or worse, recognizing but not addressing these issues, indicates poor leadership and, ultimately, suggests an inappropriate acceptance of the Christian privilege in the school.

When administrators are openly Christian

Administrators who openly identify as Christian while in their positions in the public schools in north Georgia solidly anchor the Christian privilege that is already there. Administrators are in positions of power, and how they use that power influences the entire culture of the school. Administrators who are perceived as accepting or promoting tacit or open Christian privilege enforce the silencing of non-Christian teachers and decrease the likelihood that the faculty will work together as an effective team of religiously diverse educators.

Non-Christian teachers are fearful that openly Christian administrators might retaliate against them professionally if they openly complain about Christian privilege. They worry that an administrator might not be supportive if a parent or student files a complaint against them. They are concerned that taking religious time off might "count against" them with the Christian administrators since they were not present at the school when many of their students were; as committed teachers, they also worried about their students getting behind while they were out.

Non-Christian teachers are also concerned that a Christian administrator might give them low scores on their subjective performance reviews. Receiving low scores could affect whether the teacher received pay-for-performance salary increases, which grade levels and subjects they were assigned to teach, and possibly the likelihood of receiving a teaching contract for the following year. Lack of support or negative action taken by a Christian administrator has the potential to damage a non-Christian teacher’s professional reputation.

When they felt that they had to object to experiences that were clearly (to them) an infringement of the First Amendment separation of church and state, two non-Christian teachers wrote anonymous letters of protest to administrators and school boards. They honestly believed that their careers would be in jeopardy if they signed their names, but anonymous letters are often dismissed by authorities as invalid evidence that a problem exists. Anonymous protest letters may simply act as another form of the silence non-Christian teachers keep when confronted by acts of Christian privilege in the public schools. The final choice to investigate (or dismiss) the incidents written about in anonymous protest letters lies in the hands of the Christian administration.

The most important concern for non-Christian teachers working for openly Christian administrators is job retention. They will remain silent or anonymous to retain their positions. Their jobs put a roof over their heads and food on the table; putting that at risk is unthinkable. This additional pressure to accept Christian privilege without complaint keeps non-Christians from feeling comfortable working in the schools. Some non-Christian teachers will search for open positions at other schools, school districts, or private schools. Five participants noted that they had moved from vulnerable public school positions in the past or were planning to leave their current positions at Christian-privileged public schools as soon as possible. Reporting to an openly Christian administrator can create a highly stressful situation for non-Christian teachers.

Is Christian privilege here to stay?

Since teachers and administrators in the north Georgia region identify mainly as Christian, the majority population has the strength to form school environments that privilege

Christianity. The religious privileges afforded to Christians, such as feeling free to offer (only) a spoken Christian prayer before mandatory faculty meetings or to use public school communication systems to promote Christian activities, prevents these public schools from creating school cultures that are welcoming to non-Christian teachers. While Christians working at the school often fail to recognize these privileges, non-Christian teachers feel othered by the Christian-centeredness of the supposedly secular public schools in which they work.

This study suggests that educators' lack of substantive knowledge about the First Amendment concerning religion in public education generally reinforces Christian privilege. Admittedly, First Amendment expectations are not solid and fixed, especially where public school spaces are involved. DelFattore (2004) notes that "dealing with diverse religious views in a free society is a matter of social or cultural maintenance, not once-and-for-all solutions" (p. 314). The meanings assigned to the First Amendment religion clauses change over time as individual elements are (re)interpreted by the American judicial system. When and for whom are religious rituals, literature, and images acceptable in public schools? If educators are unsure how to legally respond to matters that relate to religion in the public school, often the response is no response at all. What is left in place is the Christian privilege that is already there.

Christian privilege is also strengthened by school policies in north Georgia districts that work to limit the religious diversity of the teachers hired. Highly religious non-Christian teachers of faith are wary of taking jobs in public schools that offer only three days of religious leave paid by their own accumulated personal leave time. Non-Christian teachers who are hired by schools that privilege Christianity often choose to leave those schools to find jobs in other schools, other school districts, private schools, or in fields other than education.

First Amendment Violations

All participants mentioned the First Amendment in connection with their expectation that public schools are supposed to be secular. By secular, they meant “non-religious” or “keeping church and state separate.” Many of them felt that their experiences with Christian privilege in public school workspaces crossed the boundary of what was legal according to their understanding of the First Amendment mandates. Observing multiple Christian educators using official school communication channels for religious purposes, subjecting religiously diverse faculty members to spoken Christian prayers at mandatory meetings, decorating the school for Christmas (This is okay in a public school if a menorah is placed nearby, right?), hanging Christian motivational posters on classroom walls, and teacher and teacher club sponsors praying with Christian student groups on school property alarmed them. These recurring Christian actions and others like them suggest that the Christian majority had established their religion within public school space in violation of the Establishment clause of the First Amendment.

The Free Exercise clause of the First Amendment is challenging to interpret in the public school. Teachers have the right to wear their traditional religious garments and unobtrusive religious jewelry while working in the public schools (Haynes, 2008). Nuha, a Muslim teacher who wears her hijab and modest dress to school every day, observed that her clothing did send a message to students that they could talk to her about the Islamic religion, but she noted that she did not discuss her religion with anyone unless asked a direct question. Vidula wears her traditional Hindu religious clothes only to her school’s international festival one evening a year. She also spoke about her Hindu faith only when asked direct questions. None of the other participants wore any faith-identifying clothes or religious jewelry. On the other hand, participants noticed that many Christian teachers wore crosses or the Christian Ichthys symbol.

They found modest, personal Christian displays to be acceptable according to their understandings of the Free Exercise clause. They even considered teachers' classroom desks a personal area and supported a teacher's right to have a Bible or Bible verse plaques placed on them. However, they considered Christian teachers' large crosses and frequent open references to their personal religious beliefs to be forms of proselytizing. The Free Exercise clause of the First Amendment protects a citizen's right to proselytize, but not when that citizen is a government employee teaching in a public school.

The non-Christian teachers in this study understood the First Amendment's religious clauses and had opinions about how they are to be applied in a public school setting. They recognized Christian privilege in the schools as problematic. Christian educators who are not knowledgeable about the First Amendment and its place in public schools might openly proselytize or follow the lead of the dominant Christian majority in helping to create a school culture that privileges Christianity. Other educators who are unsure of what the First Amendment allows in a public school might try to forbid all religious references in their classrooms.

Prohibiting all religious references in public school settings may seem to be the ultimate solution to the question of how public schools should deal with religious diversity. In theory, all stakeholders in a public school would behave as if religion existed only in private homes and designated places of worship. Parents in north Georgia who firmly believe that they are responsible for training their children in their own religion would no longer have public schools interfering in their children's religious education. Historically, Muslim and Christian believers have fought not only with each other, but also with others of their own faith about who was to lead the religion or how scripture was to be interpreted. These conflicts led to the creation of different denominations and sects within major religions (e.g., Sunni-Shia Divide of 632; Great

Schism of 1378; Protestant Reformation of 1517), and these sects still do not always coexist peacefully. Having the ability to ban all religious references might potentially protect members of different sects, different faith traditions, and non-believers from being bullied or feeling ostracized in public schools. Protecting all members of the public school community is vital, but "removing" religion by banning all religious references will not have this desired effect. Instead, religion will remain, an enormous rainbow-colored elephant that everyone in the public school can see and no one can talk about.

There are complex issues involved in banning religious speech in public schools. First, the Free Exercise clause allows students to bring their religions into the schools with them, and, to a limited extent, allows teachers to do so as well. Banning all religious speech within the public schools is illegal and, realistically, impossible to enforce. Who decides what constitutes religious speech? Is it a religious or simply a cultural reference or habit if a student or teacher says "God bless you" when someone sneezes? Is telling another teacher about your daughter's mission trip with her church or synagogue religious speech? Ten of my participants would argue that saying the Pledge of Allegiance constitutes religious speech.

Second, teaching *about* religion is part of the state Language Arts and Social Studies curricula (Georgia Department of Education, 2021) that cannot and should not be ignored. Participants who taught Language Arts observed that colleagues who refused to allow religious discussion to enter the classroom chose reading assignments that excluded non-Christian religious or LGBTQ characters or situational aspects. In many cases, literature textbooks purchased by school systems across the country have already been censored to omit any references contrary to Christian values, making it easier for teachers to exclude those topics (Delfattore, 1992). Overtly Christian values in the texts, such as assuming that a "real" family consists of a mother, father, and children only, typically pass unnoticed in school cultures that privilege Christianity except by those who are marginalized by them. My participants explained that they chose not to use the textbook as their only source of content specifically for this reason. Religious or atheistic beliefs are an integral aspect in relating to and understanding literature in academic settings, and an education that does not allow students to connect literature with their lived experiences, including religious ones, does a disservice to students. Language Arts teachers should be taught strategies for creating inclusive academic environments in their classrooms instead of banning student religious speech.

Religion must also be addressed by educators teaching Social Studies curricula (Georgia Department of Education, 2021). Social Studies teachers who do not understand how to teach this curriculum within First Amendment mandates may choose to teach only at a surface level. They may ask students to memorize the five Pillars of Islam and the Buddhist Eightfold Path without providing the context that is necessary for understanding these practices and how Islam and Buddhism relate to each other historically, politically, and geographically. Not only do the Christian students in the class learn little about other religious traditions, but students who identify as non-Christian may not learn about Christianity either. Lauren (agnostic), a high school world history teacher, remembered being surprised early in her teaching career that a Buddhist student in her class did not know any stories about Jesus. In a Christian privileged school, there may be an assumption that students (including students who identify as Christian) know more about the Christian religion than they really do (Prothero, 2007).

There is little occasion for all students to learn *about* religion when the curriculum is distilled to minimal factoids or excludes major concepts that can help to explain the role(s) that religion has occupied and continues to occupy in the history and lives of human beings. If the

Social Studies teachers whose primary jobs in the public schools are to teach *about* religion as a vital component of world history and geography are uncomfortable because they do not know the curricular content or are not sure what constitutes a violation of the First Amendment, opportunities for students to make connections to both secular and religious understandings in the curricular content and to exchange ideas with their religiously diverse peers in an academic setting are wasted.

Public school policies limit religious diversity of faculties

Both Nuha (Muslim) and Bina (Jewish) mentioned that their highly religious Muslim and Orthodox Jewish teacher acquaintances chose to work in private religious schools rather than in the public schools, even though the pay was much lower. They indicated that these highly religious teachers feared that their need to be out for certain holidays or regular worship practices would not be accommodated by public school administrators. This study confirms they are right to be concerned; policies in north Georgia permit teachers to take only three days of personal religious leave per school year, and there are no policies allowing flexible scheduling for teachers for religious reasons. However, individual administrators have input into accommodations for teachers of faith who work at their schools. On one side of the spectrum, Matilda's (Jewish) administrator made asking for her three religious days difficult by questioning her inappropriately: "Is it that important of a holiday that you need to take off?" After grudgingly approving a leave, the administrator required Matilda to find her own substitute for the religious days she was out and to use her own accumulated personal leave days to be paid. Matilda was willing to jump through these administrative hoops to observe important Jewish holidays with her children, but she was angry her religious needs were so obviously unimportant to the administrator at the public school. On the other side of the spectrum, Nuha's administrator provided significant accommodations for her Muslim religious needs. The school arranged her teaching schedule so that Nuha could leave early to attend Friday noon Muslim worship services with her children at their mosque. Since the school was able to schedule Nuha for a non-teaching planning period, her leaving on Fridays did not inconvenience any other teachers or students. She was not docked in pay for this weekly time away from the school. She felt that this was fair because, like most other public school teachers, she spent considerable personal time grading papers and writing lesson plans. Nuha was happy with her job and her religious accommodations, but she noted that the principal at her school would be leaving at the end of the term. She sighed when I asked if a new administrator would continue to accommodate her religious needs, and she admitted she did not know. She was unsure she could continue to work in the public school if these religious accommodations ended.

Later, I learned that the new principal at Nuha's school did continue her religious accommodations for the next two school years. However, the anxiety Nuha felt over this issue made her feel personally marginalized; she needed "special perks" that Christian teachers did not receive and to which she was not automatically entitled as a teacher in a public school. She was othered, even though her religious needs were accommodated.

While some administrators in north Georgia public schools are willing to be flexible, it is by no means certain that religious non-Christian teachers will have religious needs accommodated beyond the three policy-protected religious leave days. Non-Christian teachers of faith are likely to seek jobs in private religious schools that accommodate the needs of students and teachers of their own religion, or they may choose to leave the education field altogether. This reduces the number of qualified teachers available to work in public schools that are often understaffed. It also limits the religious diversity of available teachers, thereby decreasing the likelihood that public school faculties will become more religiously diverse. Any benefits that students and teachers might gain from being exposed to a variety of worldviews in an academic setting is lost. The Christian privilege and policies that discount the value of non-Christian viewpoints are damaging to public school systems as a whole.

While non-Christians do, if necessary, fight for and take their three days of religious leave, as Matilda (Jewish) did, dealing with administrative negativity and colleagues who sustain a school culture of Christian privilege gets exhausting. Acts of Christian privilege that disturb non-Christian teachers are likely to lead to teacher turnover in the public schools; non-Christian teachers may change jobs when they find the Christian privilege at their current public schools overwhelming. Policy in the three north Georgia counties that employed participants at the time of their interviews required newly hired teachers to remain at the same county school for three years. This means they cannot transfer to a county school that might have a more accommodating administrator, so accepting a job at a particular school has long-term ramifications. When asked the question, “How does religion impact your decision to take a particular job?” participants explained that both their own religious beliefs or non-beliefs and the religious culture of a public school were significant considerations when making employment decisions. They did their research about public schools in which they were interested in teaching before they accepted a position. They looked for schools with diverse student populations, hoping that religious diversity among the students would temper the strong Christian privilege that can be created when both students and teachers are majority Christian. An administrator wearing even a small Christian cross necklace during an interview was a decided turn-off, even though participants knew that wearing modest religious jewelry was acceptable according to the First Amendment. The administrator’s visible religious statement makes religion a factor in the power differential that exists between a supervisor and an employee, making non-Christian teacher applicants uncomfortable. Participants noted signs of Christian privilege such as Christian motivational posters on classroom walls and talked to teachers who already worked at the school to try to get a feel for the general school culture. Only the school's location relative to their homes (an easy drive is much preferred) and the presence of friends already teaching there were more important to them than the cultural environment when they chose to take a position in a public school. However, no matter how carefully the teachers had vetted the public schools in which they were working, this research indicates that all non-Christian participants had experiences with Christian privilege at those schools in which they felt marginalized.

Implications for public education

This research study indicates that non-Christian teachers' religious voices and cultural backgrounds are silenced by experiences with Christian privilege in public schools in north Georgia. Non-Christian teachers' voices may not be included when decisions are made regarding important aspects of education in the United States. Oppressive institutional level decisions such as attendance policies and schedules influence the availability of non-Christian teachers and the likelihood that they will choose to work in the public schools. In addition, non-Christian teachers see the normative institutional oppression when they are offered Christian privileged textbooks and materials for use in their classrooms. Non-Christian teachers' voices should also be heard as potentially oppressive Christian-privileged events are planned on the school cultural level. If religious diversity is acknowledged and respected when critical decisions are made, the Christian privilege that marginalizes non-Christian teachers and students may lose strength in north Georgia public schools.

Hearing non-Christian teachers' voices as a valuable resource

School calendars privilege Christian worship practices and holidays on an institutional level of oppression (Blumenfeld, 2006). Non-Christian teachers of faith in north Georgia are permitted to use three of their own personal days to be absent for their religious needs, but they and their non-Christian students who are also out for religious observances miss out on the active teaching and learning that continues at the schools despite their absence. Absence policies like these also work to decrease the number of qualified highly religious non-Christian teachers who are willing to work in public schools. Modern technology allows for greater flexibility in scheduling and administering a 180-day school year than at any other time in our history, so why are non-Christians' religious needs still not considered when public school calendars are designed? Ultimately, the goal of American public schools is to provide the highest quality of education available to a religiously diverse student body. Is this goal possible when the school calendar is firmly entrenched in Christian privilege?

Another normative aspect of institutional Christian privilege are the materials purchased by the school districts for use in the classroom. Non-Christian teachers can play a larger role in selecting textbooks for school districts to purchase. Since many textbooks published for use in Georgia have already been approved (i.e., censored) by Christian organizations such as Educational Research Analysts in Texas before they are chosen by districts to be offered to the general public school population for review (DelFattore, 1992), non-Christian teachers' input on the equity of these texts for all students can be invaluable. Non-Christian teachers can point out texts that have inaccurate or inadequate details about their own religions as well as observe evidence of Christian bias. It is not acceptable to consider this input less valuable than mainstream (Christian) input, even though there may be fewer responses. The majority input should not weigh more heavily than minority religious opinions simply by virtue of the number of responses. When non-Christian teachers' voices are heard and respected, they have the potential to promote institutional religious equity in vital areas of decision-making, including the design of the school calendar and district-adopted texts.

Normative Christian privilege also appears on a cultural/social level at public school events (Blumenfeld, 2006). In this study, Christian privilege often showed up at large-scale welcome-back-to-school events and high school graduation ceremonies that were held in churches where Christian proselytizing by church members was permitted. Christian prayers were spoken before mandatory faculty meetings held in school cafeterias. These school-wide events, mandatory for teachers to attend, worked to create an environment of oppressive Christian privilege at the individual school level.

Even events such as PTA or school athletic and club fundraisers can be vetted by non-Christian teachers so that obviously Christian privileged Christmas wrapping paper, ornaments, and holiday cookie sales are avoided. Non-Christian students who are asked to participate in these fundraisers are marginalized, set apart from the rest of the school family. Consulting non-Christian teachers about these events as they are planned might decrease the instances of Christian privilege that marginalize non-Christian teachers, students, and parents. However, this is only possible if non-Christian teachers feel comfortable presenting alternate viewpoints and ideas.

Unfortunately, asking non-Christian teachers to speak up about the Christian privilege firmly embedded in the public schools in which they work is unfair. This study indicates that non-Christian teachers have valid concerns that keep them from speaking out. Unless eliminating or reducing Christian privilege becomes a priority in making public school systems safe and welcoming for non-Christian teachers and students, non-Christian teachers will most likely remain silent.

Professional development needed

Christian privilege must become a topic openly discussed in north Georgia public schools. If Christians are to “see” the Christian privilege embedded in the local schools, there is no substitute for professional development sessions offering direct instruction about the topic for administrators and in-service teachers. Normative Christian privilege must be made visible if the worldviews of non-Christian teachers are to be respected in the public school space.

Professional development in this area must be more substantial than what is happening in these schools today. It is not enough to simply tell Christian teachers that they are not supposed to include Bible verses in their official school emails. First, it is necessary to explain normative Christian privilege in such a way that it is clear to Christians that their personal religion is not being attacked. Second, Christian teachers must understand that including religious text in official public school communications is a violation of the First Amendment per the Supreme Court ruling in *Abington v. Schempp*, 374 U.S. 203; 83 S. Ct. 1560 [1963] and is not an arbitrary rule made up by the school’s administrators. Finally, Christian teachers should be made aware that non-Christian teachers’ experiences with Christian privilege makes them feel marginalized. They should know that non-Christian teachers respond to this feeling of marginalization by withdrawing from collegial interactions, remaining silent about observed Christian privilege, and even worrying that their jobs are at stake if they work for openly Christian administrators. Non-Christian teachers’ reactions to experiences of Christian privilege in the public schools in which they work affect how well the faculty is able to work together to support their students’ learning.

Normative Christian privilege is a serious issue in public schools with majority Christian faculties. Opening the topic for discussion in a non-threatening professional development session is a necessary step toward encouraging Christian teachers to become allies with their non-Christian colleagues in identifying and removing normative Christian privilege from our religiously diverse public schools. Although non-Christian teachers do resist in their own ways, especially in support of non-Christian students, they feel threatened by the Christian privilege that they experience in their public school workplaces. Because of this vulnerability, resistance to Christian privilege in the public schools cannot be considered the responsibility of non-Christian teachers alone.

Implications for teacher education programs

As noted in Chapter 2, there are a number of studies focusing on preservice teachers' attitudes and reactions toward the introduction of Christian privilege as a topic of discussion in undergraduate classes (Blumenfeld, 2006; Blumenfeld & Jaekal, 2012; James, 2010; Subedi, 2006). Not only do the preservice teachers in these studies feel uncomfortable discussing religious diversity issues in general, but specifically mentioning Christian privilege in class may also cause more extreme negative reactions. Some Christian students refuse to accept that Christianity is in any way privileged in the public schools and argue instead that Christianity itself is under attack; others refuse to participate in discussions, activities, or assignments concerning diverse religious views. While the objectives of these lessons may range widely from helping preservice teachers understand and respect the religious diversity of their future students and colleagues, teaching the constraints of the First Amendment regarding religion in public schools, or even to clarifying curricular content across a variety of subjects, those objectives may fail given the negativity of some Christian students.

Trust and the ability to work together can make preservice teachers stronger and more likely to succeed in their communal goal of becoming effective teachers. Students who choose to argue about Christian privilege may resort to proselytizing, taking up valuable class time and turning the discussion away from the lesson's objective. Students may refuse to participate in the class because they consider religion or Christian privilege a taboo topic or because they are so theologically certain in their beliefs that they will not consider alternate viewpoints. These students not only miss the lesson, but they also physically and emotionally distance themselves from their professor and peers. This decreases the efficacy of collaborative learning.

Preservice education classes are an ideal place for students to learn how to participate in and lead open discussions about controversial or uncomfortable topics such as Christian privilege. While not all discussions will be the engaged intellectual conversations that a professor would wish them to be, practice in participating in discussions over time can give preservice teachers opportunities to understand that others' perspectives are worth listening to with an open mind. They should learn that the objective of these discussions is not to determine that someone is right and someone else is wrong, but to better understand the topic and why others may hold strong differing viewpoints about it.

Content classes are also necessary for preservice teachers whose curriculum includes controversial topics. Social studies and language arts classes, for example, often include religious material that teachers need to understand and be willing to discuss openly with peers and, eventually, with their public school students. They need a solid background in their own content, which includes understanding and being sensitive to Christian privilege in classrooms of religiously diverse students. Preservice science teachers who insist that they will ignore the curriculum and refuse to teach evolution for religious reasons may need to be guided onto a non-teaching career path. It is unfair for public school students to be denied science curriculum based on a teacher's religious bias.

These preservice teachers are our next generation of public school teachers. In an era when student religious diversity is increasing at a much faster pace than teacher religious diversity, it is necessary for our majority Christian preservice teachers to be willing to understand the religious other. Christian privilege should be understood as a cultural phenomenon embedded in social discourses that marginalize anyone who is not Christian. Teacher educators must help students understand Christian privilege in general and how it manifests, while being clear that Christianity itself and those who identify as Christian are not being attacked in any way. Teacher educators have a great challenge facing them.

Future research on Christian privilege in public education

This research study offers valuable insight into how non-Christian teachers experience Christian privilege while working in public schools. However, there are many aspects of the topic that should be explored. This is an area of educational research that has just started looking for answers to questions about religion in public education.

Non-Christian teachers working in public schools in the north Georgia area notice and feel marginalized by school cultures in which Christianity is privileged. It may be the case that non-Christian teachers in north Georgia, solidly situated in the Bible Belt region of the U.S., have more experiences with Christian privilege in their public school workplaces than do non-Christian teachers working in other parts of the country. A study following the protocols of the current study but located in other regions of the United States would help determine the effect of geographical area on the experiences of non-Christian teachers.

However, political charts indicate that the population of the United States is polarized into “red” states with voters that primarily vote for the Republican Party and “blue” states with voters that mostly vote for the Democrat Party. Voter party choice is often influenced by cultural and religious values (Ehrenhalt, 2021). Politics and religion become closely intertwined and public school educational issues become fodder for politicians promoting their own agendas. Do the politics inherent in red and blue states affect the experiences of non-Christian teachers in terms of Christian privilege? A comparison study of non-Christian teachers working in red and blue states would shed light on how political climate affects the Christian privilege present in American education.

Another interesting aspect of Christian privilege may be its effect on non-Christian teachers of faith compared to its effect on non-believers. While all sixteen participants observed Christian privilege in their schools, it is possible that their individual religious identifications played a role in what experiences they chose to talk about in an interview and how they felt about them. Additional interview research could delve into the role of faith in non-Christian teachers’ experiences with Christian privilege in the public school workplace.

A further useful area of research would be to compare non-Christian participants’ experiences across the grade levels and subjects they teach. This research suggests that Christian privilege has been observed by non-Christian teachers in north Georgia public elementary, middle, and high schools, but the prevalence rate of experiences with Christian privilege is unclear since this study was not designed to allow that comparison. It would be important to know if Christian teachers who are very religious prefer to teach at elementary schools, for example. Christian privilege observed in these elementary school classrooms could have a profound effect on non-Christian students due to their young age.

Another factor of interest would be a comparison of experiences of Christian privilege by teachers who teach the same subject. In this study, the four non-Christian high school biology teachers all noted that they needed to take steps to encourage their students to see evolutionary theory as science and not religion. This needs to be explored more deeply to fully understand what is happening in the public school science classrooms. Do non-Christian and Christian high school biology teachers who teach evolutionary science experience Christian privilege in their dealings with students, parents, and colleagues? What stories would they tell and how would they react to these experiences?

Participants of faith spoke about feeling marginalized by county policies that allow them to request three days of religious leave using their personal leave days. The counties in this study followed a traditional schedule with a long summer and late December breaks that included Christmas. However, there are school districts in the United States that follow year-round or other non-traditional calendars. Do these calendars consider non-Christian holidays to make it easier for non-Christian teachers and students to attend their own religious observations? What is being done, if anything, to adjust school calendars to minimize Christian privilege? Research on alternative school calendars would give us insight into how a Christian-privileged school calendar might be updated to consider the needs of non-Christians of faith.

Some of the participants' administrators chose not to deal individually with Christian teachers who refused to be First Amendment compliant by adding a Bible quote or using openly Christian speech within the official school communication systems. Perhaps they were unaware that Christian teachers who worked for them might refuse to teach the evolutionary science curriculum or might verbally abuse students who took actions that the Christian teacher felt was against his religion (e.g., such as being transgender or non-heterosexual.) Do Christian and non-

Christian administrators recognize Christian privilege in the public schools and do they understand the constraints of the First Amendment as they apply to public schools? How do administrators believe that their actions or inactions contribute to the culture of Christian privilege that may prevail in their schools? A survey study of public school administrators about Christian privilege could offer a valuable starting place for understanding this issue.

This study suggests that non-Christian teachers may chose to leave schools and counties when they feel marginalized by an atmosphere of Christian privilege in a school. Five of the participants in this study remarked that they had left previous teaching positions because of experiences with Christian privilege. Research into the turnover rate of non-Christian teachers could offer insight into how often and why a teacher chooses to leave a position because of experiences with Christian privilege. Also, surveying non-Christian teachers who work in private schools about why they choose not to teach in public schools would be enlightening. Is it restrictive religious leave policies, the curriculum, the presence of Christian privilege, fear of religious discrimination, or something else that discourages these teachers from working in public schools? Increasing the number of qualified non-Christian teachers might be valuable to school districts, especially since the number of non-Christian students who attend public schools is increasing. A religiously diverse teacher population could allow teachers to learn about and from each other and to better understand their religiously diverse student population.

This research included three participants who identified as atheist or agnostic/culturally Jewish. Their identity as culturally Jewish seemed to play a bigger role in their experiences with Christian privilege than did their identities as non-believers. I did not include two teachers in the study who identified as atheist/culturally Christian. When I spoke to them, both teachers were reluctant to identify as non-Christian even though they said their main religious identification was atheist. Their reasons for this reluctance included disappointing family members who were strongly Christian, enjoying celebrating Christmas with their friends and families, and choosing to fit into the Christian-privileged society with which they were familiar. Learning more about if and how teachers who identify as non-believer/culturally Christian observe and react to Christian privilege in their public school workplaces is another important area of research.

None of the participants in this study spoke about Christian allies at their schools. No one noticed a Christian speaking up to point out that a spoken Christian prayer was inappropriate at a mandatory faculty meeting or that putting up a Christmas tree in the school's lobby marginalized Muslim students and teachers. However, a case study focusing on one or more Christian allies and how they work in the Christian privileged public schools to reduce the marginalization of non-Christian teachers, students, and parents may prove highly interesting.

This study also did not deal with the professional effects of Christian privilege on non-Christian teachers. For example, do non-Christian teachers have the same opportunities for professional advancement as Christian teachers? A study focused on advancement opportunities such as school district training for new administrators might answer this question. Are non-Christian teachers being recruited into these programs leading to administrative positions? Interviewing non-Christian public school administrators about their experiences with Christian privilege over the length of their careers would also be valuable.

Historical research into public education indicates that Christian privilege has always been present in American public schools (Kunzman, 2006). We can see how Christian privilege was contested in public schools by reading Supreme Court decisions in cases that dealt with such specific religious matters as Christian prayers over school intercoms and Bible reading as a devotional instead of as a work of literature to be studied (DelFattore, 2004). This current study indicates that non-Christian teachers experience Christian privilege while working in our public schools today. However, while participants recounted experiences from both their past and current teaching experiences (in some cases spanning twenty or more years), there is no evidence to determine the degree to which Christian privilege has affected non-Christian teachers over time. Additional research as described above is needed before we can begin to predict how and if Christian privilege in the public schools will manifest in the future.

Christian privilege works to keep diverse religious ideas, traditions, philosophies, and understandings hidden. Any opportunity to create a wider understanding of diverse religious worldviews is lost when only a Christian worldview is perceived to be welcome. This research indicates that some public schools in north Georgia do not sustain an environment in which non-Christian teachers feel that their religious viewpoints can be safely shared. When non-Christian teachers feel that they must protect themselves from potential religious prejudice by monitoring every word they utter or keeping silent, they feel marginalized. More research is needed to provide evidence to support an effort to decrease Christian privilege, to highlight the value of non-Christian teachers' worldviews, and make our public schools First Amendment compliant.

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APPENDIX A: IRB CONSENT FORM

UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA
CONSENT FORM
Non-Christian Teachers' Experiences in Metro Atlanta Public Schools

Researcher's Statement

You are being asked to take part in a research study. The information in this form will help you decide if you want to be in the study. Please ask the researchers below if there is anything that is not clear or if you need more information.

Research Coordinator:	Vicki Scullion Doctoral Candidate College of Education: Educational Theory and Practice Vicki.Scullion25@uga.edu
Principal Investigator:	Todd Dinkelman, Ph. D. Associate Professor College of Education: Educational Theory and Practice tdink@uga.edu

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to understand the experiences of non-Christian teachers who work in public schools in metro Atlanta. You are being asked to participate because your experiences working in public schools that have a majority-Christian population are valuable. Your stories will offer insights into the challenges and/or benefits that arise as you navigate working as a religious-minority faculty member at a majority-Christian public school.

Taking Part is Voluntary

Your involvement in the study is voluntary, and you may choose not to participate or to stop at any time without penalty. If you decide to withdraw from the study or the investigator terminates your participation, the information that can be identified as yours will be kept as part of the study and may continue to be analyzed, unless you make a written request to remove, return, or destroy the information.

Study Procedures and Time Commitment

For this project, you will be asked to participate in one 60 to 90-minute interview at a location of your choice. You will be asked questions concerning your teaching and religious backgrounds and how your minority religious status has affected you as you work in a metro Atlanta public school. In addition, you may be asked to verify transcripts and engage in follow-up conversation or email communications.

Audio Recording

Audio recordings of interviews may be used so that researchers don't have to rely on individual notes during fast-paced conversations. Interviews containing identifying information will be transcribed by the researcher only. However, outside services may be used to transcribe interviews that contain no identifying information. All recordings will be kept secure and will be destroyed after data collection is complete.

Please provide initials below if you agree to have this interview audio recorded. Please also indicate if you agree to allow the audio without identifiers to be sent to a service for transcription.

_______I agree to have this interview recorded.

_______I am willing to allow the interview to be transcribed by an outside service.

If you are interested in participating in the study, please read the additional information on the following pages, and feel free to ask questions at any point.

Benefits

There is a need for research to understand how non-Christian teachers make meaning of experiences they may face in a majority Christian environment. This study will offer insight into how the religious diversity of teachers is taken into account in public schools.

Risks and discomforts

This research study asks questions about your experiences as a non-Christian teacher working in a majority-Christian public school. Non-Christian religious beliefs and non-belief are sometimes misunderstood or openly criticized by individuals who are members of the majority-Christian society. Describing experiences in which you noticed or were negatively affected by Christian privilege in your workplace may pose a risk if you were to be identified by colleagues or administrators.

Confidentiality of records

Steps will be taken to ensure the anonymity of the participants during all phases of the research and analysis processes. A pseudonym will be assigned to each participant and used throughout the study. Only the researcher will have access to a master list connecting the participant and the data. The master list of direct identifiers, including copies of online forms with participant biographical data, will be stored in a locked cabinet accessible only to the researcher. It will be destroyed after data collection is complete. The researcher does not plan to share this information with anyone who is not connected to this research study. It is possible that the information collected may be used by the researcher in future studies without additional consent after all identifiable information has been deleted. The researcher will not release identifiable results of the study to anyone other than individuals working on the project without your written consent unless required by law.

Internet Data Collection

This research involves the transmission of data over the Internet. Every reasonable effort has been taken to ensure the effective use of available technology; however, confidentiality during online communication cannot be guaranteed.

Participant rights

If you have any questions or concerns regarding your rights as a research participant in this study, you may contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB) Chairperson at 706.542.3199 or irb@uga.edu.

If you agree to participate in this research study, please sign below:

_________________________	_______________________	_________
Name of Researcher	Signature	Date
_________________________	_______________________	__________
Name of Participant	Signature	Date

Please keep one copy and return the signed copy to the researcher.

APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW GUIDE

Interview Guide with Possible Probes

1. Tell me about your teaching background.

    Possible Probes:
    a. Why did you become a teacher?
    b. What do you like about teaching?

2. Tell me about your religious background.

    Possible Probes for people of non-Christian faith:
    a. What do you do on a regular basis in regard to religion? How does your faith affect your daily life?
    b. How do you schedule religious activities that conflict with school activities?
    c. How do you present your religion while you work in a public school?
    d. What is your experience with Christianity?
    Possible Probes for people who identify as atheist/agnostic/none:
    a. Did you always identify as atheist/agnostic? If not, what caused you to change from your previous religious identification? When did that take place?
    b. What does being an atheist/agnostic/non-believer mean to you? How does it affect your daily life?
    c. How do you present your religious identity while you work in a public school? Do you ever feel the need to "pass" as Christian? Why?
    d. What is your experience with Christianity?

3. Tell me about your experiences with public school culture regarding religion.

    Possible Probes:
    a. How important do you think religion is in the school culture?
    b. What experiences have given you these perceptions?
    c. Do people in the school know your religious identity? Why or why not?
    d. Do you think your religious identity fits into/is accepted by the overall school culture?
    e. What do you do to fit in or do you choose not to fit in?
    f. How does your religion impact your decision to take a particular job?

4. Tell me about your interactions about religion with the people at your school.

    Possible Probes:
    a. How do you interact with your students about your religion or religion in general?
    b. How do you interact with colleagues and administration in regards to religion?

5. Can you tell me a story about a time you felt that your religious identity might not fit into the dominant school culture?

Possible Probes:

a. When and where did these experiences take place?
b. How did you react to these experiences? Why did you choose to react this way?
c. How do you feel about these experiences?
d. Have you ever had a conversation with someone about this experience?

APPENDIX C: GOOGLE BACKGROUND SURVEY

Religion in Public School Study

Name: ______________________

Public school in which you currently teach: _______________________

Demographics of this school (For example, approx. number of students, rural, suburban, or urban, ethnic breakdown, Title I?)

____

Preferred contact information:

Phone ____________________

Email ____________________

Preferred pseudonym: ______________________

1. How long have you taught in public schools? ___________

2. How long have you taught in public schools in the metro Atlanta area? ____________

3. What subjects and grade levels do you currently teach? _____________________________

4. How do you identify yourself in terms of religion? (For example, atheist, Muslim, Hindu, agnostic, Wiccan, Pagan, Buddhist, Native American spiritualist, Jewish, etc.)

____

5. How long have you identified this way? ___________________________

6. How important is religion in your daily life? ________________________

7. Did you identify with any other religions prior to adopting your present religious beliefs/non-beliefs? If so, please list them here. ____

8. Is there anything you would like me to know about you? ______________________________

9. Do you have any questions for me? ____

Thank you for completing this background inventory form. I will contact you soon to schedule an interview date and time. I appreciate your interest in this study.

Researcher contact information: Vicki Scullion

Email: Phone:

APPENDIX D: RECRUITMENT EMAIL

Dear ,

My name is Vicki Scullion. I am conducting a UGA dissertation research study about the experiences of non-Christian teachers working in metro Atlanta public schools. A colleague of yours suggested that you might be interested in participating in the study.

Your participation in the study would consist of one 60 to 90-minute interview with me at a place of your choosing. In addition, you may be asked to verify transcripts and engage in follow-up conversation or email communications. I understand how limited your time is, and I will do my best to make participating in this study easy for you.

If you are interested, please complete the linked Google form to provide general background on your teaching and religious histories. https://forms.gle/rRGbdhMGCPD4uW3f9 This information will give us a starting point for the interview. Steps will be taken to ensure the anonymity of participants during all phases of the research and analysis processes.

Thank you for considering participating in this study. I look forward to hearing from you soon.

Best,

Vicki Scullion
Doctoral Candidate
Department of Educational Theory and Practice
University of Georgia

APPENDIX E: EMAIL TO SCHEDULE INTERVIEW

Dear ,

Thank you so much for offering to participate in my research study!

The next step is to set up a 60 to 90 minute interview. I can meet you at your school if you like, or we can meet wherever and whenever is convenient for you. I can meet any day this week except Friday. Do any of these days work for you?

I'm looking forward to talking to you about your experiences as a non-Christian working in a public school. I definitely appreciate your help!

All the best,

Vicki Scullion
Doctoral Candidate
Department of Educational Theory and Practice
University of Georgia