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# Re-Imagining Asian Religious Identity: Towards a Critical Pedagogy of Religion and Race in Australian Schools

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**Abstract:** This paper is drawn from a research project that investigates the relationship between teachers' understanding of the religious identity of Asian background students, and recent Australian curriculum initiatives focused on religion and religious identification. Based on responses from an Australia-wide survey, and follow-up interviews from teachers and principals in several Australian states, the project examined the ways that Australian teachers understand, respond to and talk about the religious identities of their students, and the implications of these demands for teacher practice and education. This paper is concerned with the findings from the interview phase that for a significant number of teachers, notions of religion were often elided with culture and race, and often subsumed by broader notions of a nominal 'white' Australian culture. Research conversations appeared framed by an often Christian perspective and sense of self, as opposed to a putative and Asian religious and cultural other. We argue that a better understanding of the ways that teachers participate in discourses of representations about Asian religious identities negotiated by Australian diasporic communities has direct implications for the refinement of policy and for teacher professional learning. In the light of our findings, we further argue that there is a need for curriculum, teachers and researchers to move beyond an understanding of culture and identity that is based on monolingual, monocultural and Anglocentric perspectives that frame the foreign as the 'exotic' other, and define it through references to limited, tokenistic artefacts of culture, which are reinforced by iconic use of language to talk about culture, religion and identity.

**Keywords:** religion; identity; Asia literacy; Australian curriculum; secondary education; race; whiteness; schools; teacher practice

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## 1. The Aim of the Study

How teachers and students understand and respond to Asian identities, languages and cultures, has been the subject of considerable inquiry and debate [1–8]. 'Asia and Australia's Engagement with Asia' represents one of the three 'cross-curriculum priorities' in the current Australian curriculum framework. The recent national curriculum statement [9] makes two references of interest to our inquiry. The first acknowledges that along with its geographical dimensions, "Asia can be defined in geographical terms, but it can also be described in terms of cultural, *religious*, historical and language boundaries or commonalities" ([9]; emphasis added). A second reference describes an "organising idea" that seeks to encourage learning activities responsive to the diversity in "ethnic background, traditions, cultures, belief systems and *religions*" of the peoples and countries of Asia ([9]; emphasis added). Besides this there are few, if any, references to religion, or to the religious dimensions to life within countries of Asia. Further, reference to the religious identification of Asians living in

Australia is scarce or not mentioned at all, despite data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics [10] reporting that the numbers of people reporting non-Christian religions had grown over the last decade (Buddhism (2.5%), Islam (2.2%), Hinduism (1.3%). Australians professing to be Christian remain at 63.9%, although the number of Australians of Asian background reporting their background as Christian is not easily available from ABS statistics.

This paper concerns one dimension of a larger project that examines questions about whether and in what ways religious dimensions related to engagement with Asia were being addressed, understood and discussed by Australian secondary school teachers, and with what effects. The aim of the research was to understand more deeply teacher understandings and practices in relation to government initiatives to prioritise better understanding about Asian identities, including Asian religious identities, among Australian students, and to promote the skills and knowledges that support social cohesion and global citizenship. This paper reports specifically on such understandings of religious identity, as articulated by teachers, and examines the implications of these understandings for the continued contention and implementation of the Asia-engagement policy, curriculum and practice, and for teacher education, in particular as these issues relate to the Languages classroom, where language and aspects of culture merge.

## 2. Discourses of Religious Identity in Education

A review of the literature suggests that three related directions can be identified that are relevant to the incorporation of religious traditions, concepts and practices into teaching. The first direction pertains to historical and present challenges of religious difference and pluralism in a globalising world [11–16]. In an era of globalisation shaped by transnational flows of people, knowledges and customs, the question of religion has become a pronounced marker of difference between cultures and societies. One crucial challenge is the way in which responses to other religions and cultures are “constructed out of a Christian systematic framework and simply applied to the ‘problem’ of the ‘other’” [15] (p. 394). This view of religious difference developed as part of the larger historical continuum of colonial exploration and expansion, out of which the present globalised condition has emerged [16]. As Appadurai argues [17] (p. 28), “complex colonial orders are centered on European capitals and spread throughout the non-European world. This intricate and overlapping set of Eurocolonial worlds . . . set the basis for a permanent traffic”. While other factors such as technologies of communication also shape globalisation, the larger historical encounters of colonialism offer a more comprehensive perspective from which to understand the challenge of religious difference and pluralism in globalised times.

The second direction addresses the relationship between religious identities and ethnic or cultural identities [18–27]. Religious labels are often evoked as shorthand for a range of differences related to culture and ethnicity. Given the way religious labels are used as an umbrella term for these differences, some scholars have argued that religious identities are actually ethnic in nature and have little actual religious content [22,23]. While this may be the case in certain situations, it cannot be generalised. The boundaries of religious and cultural identities remain difficult to pin down in any determinate manner. Further complexity is added by the way they reflect a Western-centric bias. When religious identity is conceptualised as an ethnic marker, religion is effectively emptied of any content or values, and regarded as a placeholder for the multiple ways in which a sense of peoplehood based on concepts of sharing and belonging are contested and formed [20,24–27].

A third direction in the literature addresses the impact of religious understanding on teachers’ knowledge and practice, and the challenges of incorporating religion-related subjects into the curriculum [28–40]. White [39] points out that regardless of whether the topic of religion is explicitly addressed or not, religious understandings and questions pertaining to religion are tacitly encountered every day in the school environment. Subedi [37] observes that views about religion invariably make their way into teachers’ practice, regardless of whether they teach about religion or not. Given the crucial role that educators play in facilitating students’ self-understanding and self-esteem,

interactions and interrelationships and worldviews, it is important to understand how teachers' religious identifications impact on their thinking and practice, so as to "promote positive interactions and learning in students, rather than promoting stereotypes and misconceptions among students" [39] (p. 41).

The three sets of discourses identified in the literature suggest that conventional ways of understanding 'religion' have been shaped by the legacy of colonialism and remain Euro-Christian-centric; that the relationship between religious and ethnic or cultural identity is fluid, and can be mobilised in multiple ways in response to social and political exigencies; and that it is important to enquire into the unacknowledged assumptions about 'religion' that teachers and students hold even if they do not profess any religious affiliation. This paper is concerned with each of these three directions—globalisation, identity and education—from which religious identity has been discussed, and theoretically grounds them in literatures that describe their manifestation as site and subject of the multi-dimensionality of language [41,42]. Language describes and provides the mechanism through which we understand, speak and act, and as such "meaning is produced and exchanged" even as it is concerned with the normative aspects of the social world that manifests it as meaningful [41]. Everyday lives and practice and the meaning we give them are negotiated by understandings shaped within the vicissitudes of shared culture and history [43,44]. The interrelation of everyday ideas and practice is understood, negotiated and performed within the 'habitus' and the common sense institutional structures, rules and normative context that are the frame and site of day-to-day life [45].

### 3. Methodological Framework and Data Collection

Data collection for the larger research project took place in two stages. Forty-six secondary school teachers and school principals responded to and completed an online survey, prepared by the research team and disseminated by the Asia Education Foundation (AEF) to its members nationwide. Half the respondents identified as Christian of a particular denomination and half expressed themselves as having no affiliation. The survey responses, which included both Likert-scale and open-ended responses, were characterised at one extreme by an avoidance of the issue (Educational institutions (are) not a place for religion), and at the other, cautious engagement with some religious issues, mostly restricted to observable practices, as typified by a teacher of mathematics, who argued that his subject area had little relevance to religion and that he was not really interested in the religion of any student but (it was) important to understand special celebrations.

The survey responses were used to clarify directions for further in-depth questioning in the second phase, particularly in drawing out the language used to describe cultural and religious issues. This next phase of data collection, with which this paper is concerned, involved seven secondary school teachers and principals who had completed the online survey and made themselves available for an individual semi-structured telephone interview. Although principals have a more distanced position to classroom practice, their awareness of whole-school policies and practices was considered valuable to the focus of the project.

Data analysis for the completed project was multi-dimensional. The first dimension of analysis described the survey data and documented its findings. The second engaged with the interview data more comprehensively to describe the themes and patterns in the survey and interview data [46]. The third, the focus of this paper, analysed five teacher vignettes, fashioned from the interview data and selected purposefully to demonstrate patterns reflected within the overall data. These themes were then examined through Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). This framework was employed to deconstruct and interrogate the tropes and silences that framed the teacher discussions. CDA operates from the assumption that language is dialectically integral to all facets of social life [47]. Taking the viewpoint that power operates through the ideological workings of language, such a critical analysis is concerned with the ways that language practices and notions include and privilege some members of the community, while excluding and marginalising others. As Fairclough [48] (p. 85) argues "texts do

not spout ideology” so much as they position speakers (and interpreters) within certain ideologies. The multidimensional and reflexive terms and conditions of language frame the ways in which identity and difference are understood and are performed [42]. The embodied and notional characteristics of language are implicated in that

What counts as normal is not, however, something that emerges naturally in the process of social agreement. Rather, this involves an immense amount of ideological work in the area of language and cultural politics to represent a particular as the universal and, in turn, as the national and culturally stable . . . Depending on the degree of proximity to and distance from the normative center, people can either be classified as fully-fledged community members or strangers [49].

The methodological tools provided by CDA frame the ways that identities of selves and others are described and examined, and allow their ideological underpinnings to be interrogated.

### 3.1. Teacher Vignettes 1: Engaging with Asian Religious Identity in Language Classrooms

The five vignettes were sampled to illustrate the discourses of the ways cultures and structures of identity and difference were played out in relation to the discussion of Asian religious identity. All interviewees fell into the category of ‘highly experienced teachers’ or ‘lead teachers’ according to the AITSL Professional standards [50]:

**Sam**—A teacher of Japanese language in a government high school in rural South Australia.

**Anne**—A teacher of Indonesian at a Uniting Church school.

**Martha**—A teacher of Indonesian at a large rural Lutheran school.

**Cameron**—An Information Technology and Mathematics teacher at a public school in Adelaide.

**Dorothy**—The principal of a Christian school in rural South Australia.

All interviewees are Australian-born except for Anne, who is of Indonesian Christian heritage. Although no claim is made of generalizability from only five narratives, an *intersectionality* of culture, race and religion (see [51]) in the samples selected was representative of the data as a whole, a phenomenon that was interesting and which happened to different degrees. The use of the language to describe the eliding of these constructs was congruent with the stereotyping that happened through references to iconic symbols; the language was iconic in itself in that it reiterated statements that reflected the language used in (Australian) curriculum, education policy and internal school communication that is intended to address complex issues but often does not go beyond a surface-level discussion. Our analysis begins with the stories of Sam, Anne and Martha, who as language teachers might be considered to be prominently positioned to engage with culture and identity in the classroom, and how social and religious aspects associated with the culture of countries where the language they teach is spoken are interpreted.

Sam, as a teacher of Japanese, provides one of several examples of the ways that discussions about religious identification are described in his classes. The focus of Sam’s conversation is on how he draws on aspects of Japanese culture to enhance student’s learning of the language. In a particular example, Sam discusses the ways that he discusses the Shinto spirit at the centre of the Japanese animation film *My neighbour Totoro* (*Tonari no Totoro*). He explains that this is part of a larger project, involving discussion with his Year 9 and 10 students about the place of Shintoism and Buddhism in Japan. Central to his argument is the inseparable nature of religious life from the everyday culture.

It’s hard to separate Japanese culture from its religious base. It’s just so prevalent in the culture so it’s important that students understand the connection there [ . . . ]

Students who might travel to Japan one day need to know that religion there is not something that’s spoken about, it’s not something that’s drawn directly connections to, but it’s a part of the rhythm of life in Japan.

For Sam, the development of pedagogy and practice with religious identity emerges from the interaction between religion and culture, and the importance that this will have for students, should they travel to Japan. It is difficult to know, from this story, to what extent such a discussion of a 'Shinto spirit' romanticises Japanese identity as something ancient and exotic. It does, however, describe a curriculum direction in which Japanese everyday life is positioned within a morphed relation between culture and religious understandings and practice, which is counter to a Western conception that sees religion and cultural customs as distinct entities in everyday life practices.

The integration of national, cultural and religious identity in Asian countries as intertwined, even as it is inalienably different, is told from a different point of view by Anne, a teacher of Indonesian who is of Christian Indonesian heritage. The co-educational Uniting Church School where Anne teaches has a predominantly Euro-Australian and Christian population. As within Sam's discussion of Japanese culture, Anne is emphatic that Indonesian culture cannot be understood separately from its religious base. As a Christian from Indonesia, Anne is accustomed to the visibility and active practice of religions being respected, whereas in Australia, she has been surprised that '*people can say negative things about religion*'. In Indonesia,

children are a lot more religious or (are) being brought up in religious families, and so religious values are very much followed, from respecting your elders, showing respect to people who are older than you to . . . religious restrictions to, oh sexual understanding and things like that . . .

Religious life in Indonesia is intertwined with the ways that the everyday is lived and

the way people operate and it's in that culture and the understanding of the difference between the Australian and other cultures. Understanding Indonesia, our biggest neighbour, our closest neighbour, and to understand the culture, to understand how we can coexist with the Asian culture means to understand what is not necessarily right or wrong, it's different.

What is different, Anne emphasises, is that in Australia this integration of religious norms and behaviours into everyday life is replaced by what she sees a far more superficial *cultural tradition sort of thing, including Christmas that was originally a Christian tradition* . . .

The differentiation between cultures and religious practices as they are lived in Asian countries and in Australia takes a different form for Martha, who teaches Indonesian at a large rural Lutheran school with *only about six or so Asian students and some of them prefer not to be identified as Asian*. Martha's story relates to the way in which Islam was approached in her Indonesian class after an invitation to visit a mosque. When representatives of the mosque offered to come to the school and talk to the staff about the proposed visit, Martha was reluctant on their behalf, and declined the offer. *Some of our staff are not as, what should I say, as polite as I would like them to be, as courteous and accepting*. However, Martha did subsequently take her principal to visit the mosque:

That was a real eye opener for him as well . . . he was quite surprised [to see a Muslim lady using an iPad] because she was dressed in a very traditional manner and she was a very quiet gentle lady, so to see her using an iPad so efficiently, I think that surprised him. So . . . I think it sort of questioned his stereotyping of people.

One outcome of this visit was that parents did give permission for Year 8 Indonesian language students to go on an excursion to visit the mosque, *but they're not allowed to go inside the mosque, so they're allowed to stand outside the door but are not allowed to go inside because they [parents] don't want them [students] getting ideas that are not from their particular religion*.

The trope of religious sacred spaces takes on a material as well as a metaphoric aspect in which spaces that are represented differently are considered as tense—and almost dangerous. The differential spiritual, behavioural and ideational understandings of a religion are perceived as a lesser concern if

they can be separated from the physical space of the mosque. The open door allows one to hear and see but not to participate: *The students have [got some exposure to these different ideas]. I've said to them, 'Just stand at the door' [and] I've kept the door open so they can hear.* By having the students stand at the open door, *they've still been able to look into the building and see and listen to what the imam and the education officers have had to say, which they've found quite interesting.*

These vignettes by Sam, Anne and Martha illustrate the ways languages teachers sought to discuss matters of cultural and religious identities with their secondary school students. Pedagogy and practice are framed within tropes of identity and difference, locale and temporality. In these narratives, Asian religious identity is conceived of as 'different', usually inextricably intertwined with cultures that are foreign and distant. The third story suggests that 'other' religious identities may even be inalienably different and exclusive, as illustrated through the metaphor of students standing outside the open door, but not crossing the line into the mosque itself. Martha emphasised that, by having the students stand at the open door, but not cross over the 'line' into the mosque itself, *they've abided by their parents' wishes*, maintaining a suggested detachment while still gaining an opportunity to experience, or learn about a religion that is unfamiliar compared to their own.

From a Language classroom perspective, where exploring other cultures may be considered as an integral part of the study of an additional language, notions of cultural and religious values continued to be reported on and discussed in language reinforcing tokenistic ideas. The narratives suggest 'imagined' religious and cultural identities, which most of the time appear to be clearly demarcated, rather than transnational, intercultural and hybrid. Even as the teaching profession is thought to be characterised by attitudes of inclusivity, teacher discourses analysed previously suggest that there is a tendency in Australia to approach such discussion from the perspective of a monocultural and monolingual mindset [52]. This is a far-reaching restriction that is difficult to overcome in current practice, and which continues to focus on the descriptive, describable and visible notions of culture, ethnicity, religion and identity rather than the discursive and reflexive aspects, not to mention their fluidity under the disjunctive influences of globalisation [17]. This mindset is in part reinforced by the current Australian curriculum which, as pointed out earlier, overlooks the dimensions of culture and religion in Asian countries while exhorting teachers to embrace a more complex understanding of and engagement with Asia.

### 3.2. Teacher Vignettes 2: Understanding Asian Religious Identity from Wider School Perspectives

The complex articulation of identity and difference that frames teachers' stories about Asian religious identity is described more comprehensively within two more stories narrated by a generalist teacher and a school leader. Cameron, an Information Technology and Mathematics teacher, works in a public school in Adelaide that attracts a sizeable number of international students from across Asia and the Middle East. While Cameron's school organises a *cultural assembly* to promote and celebrate its cultural diversity, religious identity does not feature strongly. Cameron's explanation for this is that, as a state school:

We rarely discuss religion and even the role of the [Christian] pastoral care worker is circumscribed . . . so basically he works as an extra support worker rather than a Christian one. In fact, while a prayer room is provided for Muslim students, Christian things don't come into much consideration or discussion in classes [and] neither do the religions of the countries of Asia.

Cameron's story highlights the ambiguities visible in much of the research data. For Cameron, the most overt acknowledgement of religious thinking within the school is the provision of a prayer room for Muslim students, and the placement of the Christian pastoral care worker, a position funded by the Australian Government under the National School Chaplaincy program. This program aims to provide support and guidance about ethics, values, relationships and spirituality, and though formally not religion-specific, the chaplains employed under the program are disproportionately Christian.

At the centre of Cameron's story is the juxtaposition between the particular character of the Muslim prayer room, a room available specifically for Islamic students, and the presence of an *extra support worker*, albeit an explicitly Christian one, who is identified by the school as universal in his spiritual commitment and impartial in his responsibilities to the students. The tension between the parochial condition ascribed to Islam and the all-encompassing Christian environment of the program not only assumes that the Christian care worker is an appropriate counsellor for all students, but operates within a deeper conversation in which Christian and religious matters are not discussed within the school.

The complex interaction between the taken-for-granted positioning of the Christian presence as dispassionate and non-aligned, and the partial nature of designated Muslim spaces within the school is again exemplified in a third project sponsored by the Student Representative Council (SRC). An inter-faith project called the 'Hall of Human and Cultural Awareness' *doesn't really happen*, as Cameron reports. It is not just that the student council has been unsuccessful in putting this project in place. The project's focus is one of 'interfaith'—that of working between faiths—of relating the project as a relativist way of working between different religions or members of different religions in inclusive ways. The council's focus is framed within generic terms that pertain to the characteristics of humankind and personhood generally and to the ideas, customs and social behaviours of particular groups. The matter of relating 'inter-' or 'between faiths' alludes to a specifically general sense of knowledge and concern about and a well-informed interest in 'others'. At the same time, the term *interfaith* assumes notions of a diversity of the 'different', who need to be brought together with 'us'. Moreover, the commonly accepted term 'faith' contains within it a specifically Christian and Western understanding about the ways that such conversations describe the doctrines of religions that are based on spiritual conviction.

The move to both acknowledge the presence of different religious groups within the school and within Australian communities, even as these differences are described as having no significance, is a much repeated trope within Cameron's conversation. Cameron's point that *our students on the whole are very accepting of differences, and in a few cases, celebrate them as well* can be understood from different perspectives. The first reasserts his contention that students within the school get on well together and their various cultural and religious festivities are sometimes, although not always, a cause for celebration. A second reading requires that Cameron's description of 'our students' who are accepting of 'differences' needs to be interrogated. It suggests that even as all students belong, some students who belong are different and do not belong in the same way. The proposition that such differences are a source of celebration suggests that the school comes together as a community to observe a special event, even as it is reductive in that it suggests that the focus of religious identification is that of token symbols, performances and festivities.

Dorothy, in her role as principal of a Christian school in rural South Australia, describes the ambiguities and tensions that frame the discussion of Asian religious identification from a different direction. Despite having sent their students to Christian school, Dorothy suggests that the local community is not one that *openly acknowledges a religious idea*. Some non-Christian families enrol their children in the school, mainly Hindu and Buddhist families who *don't mind [Christianity] at all, and they've settled in and blended very comfortably*. Muslim families who *can't accept Christian symbolism don't enrol*, she reports.

Dorothy's conception of her school environment is framed by at least two tensions. The first describes the ways that Christian thought is taught within the school and her understanding that her students might bring different spiritual knowledges and behaviours into the classrooms. Her narrative is then tempered by her understanding that the school is avowedly Christian. She voices this dilemma in her description of comparative religion classes, which *usually end up being a comparison with Christianity, although they don't have to be*. Her understanding is that, in the school, Christian belief provides the dominant centre to any discussion about other religious understandings. This latter notion brings to view the taken-for-grantedness of commonplace Christian thinking. The students:

... don't mind Christianity and [they happily attend] Christian studies and they will ask questions about Christianity, but I don't think many of our staff or students are asking questions [to non-Christian students] about what it is that you believe or understand or where does your faith belong?

Dorothy's argument that discussions about Asian religious identities at the school are being approached through the lens of Christian understandings and beliefs can be analysed from several directions. It documents Dorothy's basic premise, her acknowledgement of the differently empowered positions of different religious identities within the school. Despite her perceptiveness, Dorothy's response ignores the strong presence of Christianity in Asia and among Australians of Asian descent. Collapsing notions of Asian religious identity with that of non-Christian world religions, equates conception of western culture, geography and religion in particular ways that work together to set up Asian identities and Asian religious beliefs and practices as based on ontologies understood and embodied in ways distinctly different. This merging of geography and Western culture and its juxtaposition with Christianity frames a tension that Dorothy describes as taking place between the different religious philosophies of the school and its students. The interplay between local and global spaces and the Christian philosophy and spiritual direction of the school is conveyed in a complex manner in her last sentence: *Where does your faith belong*. The notion of religious identity is firmly placed in different and clearly demarcated geographical, cultural and spiritual spaces.

Dorothy's story illustrates a second direction in relation to the tensions and ambiguities that underpin the Asian religious presence within the school. Perhaps because of the openly Christian mission of the school, the students who choose to attend '*don't mind Christianity*' and are happy to 'blend in' with the school population and to the school's culture. Those who cannot accommodate the school's Christian outlook do not attend the school. The underlying trope within Dorothy's analysis of students' acceptance or rejection of the school's Christian ethos takes on new layers as the school's population has been changing through the arrival of recent migrants, including many refugees, in the area. Dorothy observes that these students integrate into the community, *because there are small numbers, that's a survival mechanism really ... and small numbers in the community, too*. This move from the discussion of non-Christian religions and their integration or self-exclusion from the school student body is described in the first instance as a matter of race. Dorothy tells a story about a *very perceptive [Year 3] girl* who described how *everybody in her class had white skin like she did* when she started at the school but now (a few years later), *there were so many different people here*. This positioning of opinion into the words of a young child takes on new connotations as the girl's comment was, in her opinion, *a good thing too*, although this was probably due to the fact that *she's more perceptive than pretty much anyone else in her year level*.

A further quote illustrates how Dorothy conflates religious and raced difference, and the integration of different groups with that of difference of nation and culture. Her focus has also broadened from that of concerns discussed within the school to those described by the *people in this town* and within Australia generally:

It's probably still an expectation by most of the people in this town that you absorb this culture, that you become Australian rather than Australia understanding a lot about where you come from ... [and that] probably leads to the dominant culture not questioning an awful lot about whether they should acknowledge more cultural [sic] ... to do with other communities.

As within her conversations about religious difference, tensions underpin Dorothy's understanding of cultural difference. While she acknowledges that members of an Australian dominant culture should pay more attention to recognising the cultures of different groups she appears to be accepting of a view that advocates that people *who come from elsewhere* should do more to become 'Australian'. Her exploration of the ways that other people feel about cultural difference morphs within

her discussion about non-Christian religious observance within the town. The religious orientation of most of the refugees is:

Christian but not solely, and there's [therefore] not a strong religious identity [in the school, or community] that looks different from Christianity, [ . . . ] there's no mosques in the town, there are some Buddhist groups that meet together, but there's no overt symbolism or temples or anything like that here.

Dorothy's story continues to ascribe narratives that juxtapose non-observance and integration by culturally and religiously raced other groups with absence and self-exclusion of the overtly different other. Within the town, religious identification of those differentiated within the community because of their refugee and migrant status is not of concern because most of the newcomers are Christian, their religious identification is *not strong* and their adherence to religion is not made obvious. The manifestation of forces towards the integration of religious diversity is discussed differently in relation to Islam. Religious observance by Muslims is not only covert but absent: *There's no mosques in the town.*

Dorothy's concluding comments pertain to those who are positioned as outsiders by the community. Her concerns that Islam is excluded from within the community are reframed in terms of the townspeople's concerns about what fellow community members think, and their uncritical adherence to media bias. Students' knowledge and understanding of Islam is *shaped by the media*. This is more problematic in the country areas because:

Country communities [tend to have] . . . a greater sense of everybody having a similar opinion and therefore not being very questioning or critical in terms of their thinking about what they read in the media or hear on the news or see on the TV.

The 'shaping in the media' that Dorothy refers to has significant implications for the current environment in Australia, where media and politics have in recent years combined to ascribe a sense of threat religious to 'others' and to Islam in particular; although radicalised or fundamental versions are (sometimes in a token manner) intended as targets, extremism is often less discriminated from mainstream Islamic values in the popular mind [53,54]. Dorothy's well-intended appraisal of her school and community's attitudes also seem to portray an assimilationist perspective, again an underlying discourse of whiteness, despite much evidence of the failure of such thinking with regard to Australia's own first peoples [55]. We argue in the next section that a re-imagining of Asian religious identity may throw light on the covert workings of the Christian underpinnings of a supposedly secular Australian society, and create the groundwork for a more sensitised rapprochement with the 'other'.

#### 4. Re-Imagining Asian Religious Identity

The issue we investigate in this paper is whether, and in what ways, do the interviewed teachers address the question of religion when developing and teaching an 'Asia-related' curriculum? In considering how religious norms operate within texts to privilege one religion over another/others/the religions of Others [11,56], the recent work of Stratton [57] was especially pertinent. While inquiring into the nature of 'everyday racism' in Australia, Stratton [57] found it remarkable that so "little attention has been given to religion in discussions of multiculturalism and its neoliberal aftermath" (p. 7). Stratton [57] then makes the claim that, while Australia has never had an official religion, always remaining ostensibly secular, a hierarchy of Christian denominations (Anglican/Protestant; first Irish, then Italian Catholic; Greek Orthodox) has been "imbricated with the relativities of whiteness in Australia. The assumption here is that all forms of Christianity have, at their core, a common repertoire of moral and ethical dimensions which inform a shared social order" [57] (p. 8). Given this dominant social- and state-order, being (or even thinking about) non-white and/or non-Christian becomes synonymous with outsider status, strangeness, disadvantage, and even potential danger. Just as problematically, members of the dominant Christian white culture "don't even

recognise themselves as making decisions based on a racialised history" [57] (p. 35), or a racialised present, and thus their privileges and biases remain largely invisible to them. Taken to extremes, as Wekker [58] points out in her critique of the Netherlands as "gentle" and "ethical", this can lead to passionate denial of the very existence of any form of discrimination.

Other writers have made similar arguments and provided further theoretical resources. Essed [59], drawing on studies of race in Netherlands and the United States, discussed the "culturalization of racism" (p. 188), and "the hidden agendas of the ideology of diversity" (p. 189). She went on to suggest that "normative values inherent in Euro-American culture ensures that cultural difference is overemphasized and conceptualized in hierarchical ordering" [59] (p. 189). Back in the Australian context, Hage's 2000 fieldwork [60] reveals subtle yet powerful ways in which the nexus of Christianity and whiteness worked to 'naturalise' each and both of these for some people, while simultaneously operating to "undermine the legitimacy of any other aspiring capital [national, religious, economic, cultural, etc.]" [60] (p. 62). Borrowing from Bourdieu, Hage [60] identified a natural order of white Christian 'aristocracy' who set the terms and dominate the field of cultural-religious values and norms in Australia. This 'naturalisation' is scaffolded by the use of iconic language that is applied with unquestioned acceptance because it is a part of educational discourse, as evidenced in the stories discussed here.

A surface reading of the teachers' comments suggests that teachers recognise the integral role religions have within countries of Asia; a deeper analysis of the data suggests that the recognition of Asia engagement is superficial and rooted in the notion of the non-Christian and non-white exotic other. The person of Asian heritage and Asian religiousness is often sidelined, diminished, obscured, ignored or absorbed by discourses which that describe the complex interplay between culture, religion, identity and difference. This diminution and obscuration of religion, and the distinctively religious elements within various cultures of Asia, is more problematic not only discursively, but also pedagogically and socio-politically. The danger here is that the deep and full significance of these religions (e.g., Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Shintoism) are lost to predominant Euro-Christian discourses and sets of cultural norms and values. This has the effect of perpetuating and reproducing the dominance of these norms and the privileges they bestow over religious identities positioned as other, and as different to a putative 'us'.

The complex interrelation between culture and religious identity, temporal and geographic location, and raced and ethnic identity was described from several directions. The first described the morphed relation between the daily practice of religion and culture overseas, which happens over 'here' in Australia. Respondents described the religious and cultural practice of what happens in other places—for example in Indonesia and Japan—as exotic, exciting and different to a perceived dominant, Western, Australian culture. The voyeuristic quality to practices and experiences in Asian countries overseas was seen in itself as being educational. The religious practices of other religions in other places become a bazaar of differences presented for the student gaze through the different medium of books, films and school-inspired tourism [11,15].

The relation between cultural and religious identity as well as place and space took on different forms when it was used to describe the presence of Australian Asian identity. Islam particularly was defined as being in contrast to Australian cultural and religious practice. The example of the students who were allowed to watch Islamic practice from the doors of the mosque, but forbidden to engage, dramatically portrayed a binary relation between spaces, ideas and practices that were alien, potentially dangerous and should not be entered—and that did not belong here. Other tropes that teachers used to define Asian religious identities resident in Australia were placed within Australian contexts, even as they were defined as other to it. Hindu and Buddhist Australian students were discussed as few in number, as not exhibiting overt signs of their difference and as not minding if Christian viewpoints were discussed in preference to their own. The potential otherness of Hindu and Buddhist thought and practice—and the intrusion of these differences into the spaces of the school—was understood as being inconsequential because of their small numbers and because these groups were felt to have

integrated into the every day of school life through their invisibility. Asian Christian religious identity was not discussed at all—this presents a silence that places such students outside of the discussion of both Australian and Asian religious identity altogether.

In summary, the conception of religious and cultural identity, especially as it applied to Christianity, was unacknowledged and naively defined. Most respondents were emphatic that, like themselves, their students did not understand Christian thinking and practice as a pertinent part of their day-to-day behaviour and that the Australian population was for the most part secular. Discussions of events and programs that did have a distinctive Christian focus were downplayed as being innocuous. While relevant, these kinds of assumptions failed to account for the particular directions that Western and Christian thought have had on Australian everyday thinking. It puts in binary relation a silence and naivety as to who-we-are and the strangeness of the religious practices and ideas of others. The absorption of Asian religious practice and thinking into everyday notions of how Australian school life can be understood and organised adds another dimension to this complex relation. The integration of Hindu and Buddhist understanding in relation to mind, body and spirit is a particular example of this thinking.

A final dimension to these narratives was the integration of tropes of religious identity and difference with commonplace understandings about race, ethnicity and belonging. These tropes, discussed through the voices of those who belong as 'us' but are not us (i.e., other people/outside the school/the community/the media) allude to Asian religious identities as being racially, ethnically and culturally different from us. These tropes assume the notion of an 'other' as differentiated—almost primordially—from us. A central concern of this study is that, as Jackson [61] points out in his interpretive approach to religious identity, any representation of world religions as homogenous belief systems may result in oversimplified accounts lacking in correspondence with the practices or beliefs of adherents.

## 5. Conclusions and Implications for Teacher Education

Failure to disentangle the elision between nation, culture, race and religion, and the normalisation of students as Asian and as a religious other has important implications for the ways in which a cross-curricular priority like the Asia capability dimension of the current Australian curriculum is understood, mandated and implemented. The problem of the ongoing acceptance of a white Christian dominance as the norm in Australian society that is reproduced in schooling is not only discursive, in that it shapes the lives of present and future members of that society, but also that it perpetuates a type of invisible discrimination. Byrne [1] has argued persuasively for naming this 'elephant in the room', especially given attempts by conservative governments to renew a Judeo-Christian Western mindset to underpin and shape the national curriculum. Byrne also notes [1] how this is happening at a time when the number of people identifying as Christian is declining statistically, yet funding is increasing for (Christian) religious instruction in schools.

The problem of whiteness, as elided in the Australian context with an invisible discourse of Christian dominance, is clearly something that teachers and teacher educators need to give closer consideration. Hooks [62] has pointed out how "race is always an issue of Otherness that is not white; that is black, brown, yellow, red, purple even" [62] (p. 94). On this basis, what is most needed is "the production of a discourse on race that interrogates whiteness", rather than focusing on the otherness of blackness and colour [62] (p. 94). Wekker [58] echoes this by pointing out that Whiteness as the dominant racial positioning is not studied in her context of the Netherlands, and that the history of the metropole is structurally set apart from the history of the colonies. She indicates that a way of responding might be to break down the thinking of signification through one single axis, and bring gender, race/ethnicity, class, sexuality and religion into mutual conversation. The questioning of unjust divisions has clear implications for academic curricula; knowledge production is not innocent, and awareness of these issues may inform an Australian response.

Such a critique needs to be “persistent, rigorous and informed” in order to identify the forces of “denial, fear and competition [that] are responsible for creating fundamental gaps between professional commitment to eradicating racism and the participation in the construction of a discourse on race that perpetuates racial domination” [58] (p. 94). This is a challenge and task that should be an integral part of teachers’ work towards social improvement and social justice. One group of researchers has reported on how addressing this challenge requires the normalisation of the fraughtness for pre-service teachers, out of which a culturally sensitive and relevant pedagogy can emerge [63]. Other educators have also utilised critical race theory in attempts to confront, subvert and transcend the “normativity accorded to ‘white’ landscapes” [64]. Such resolve requires constant renewal in order to overcome “privileging white comfort to avoid bringing conflict to the fore and thereby making ourselves uncomfortable” [65] (p. 233).

The cultivation of self-reflexivity appears to be one important objective to foster, given the colonial legacy of dominant understandings of religion in relation to non-Western traditions and cultural heritages, the ongoing challenge of unacknowledged Christian privilege in liberal secular contexts (including its unacknowledged role in shaping teachers’ perception of religion), the multiple ways in which religious identities relate to ethnic identities, and the need to be mindful of the ways in which ‘learning about’ and ‘learning from’ religion can intersect to engender both new and reductive understandings of the ‘other’. This is certainly pertinent with regard to the Asia Literacy initiative itself insofar as it is part of the ongoing challenge of building culturally responsive classrooms in a multicultural society. Self-reflexivity in teaching and learning is needed when addressing the complexities of religion and religious identification in relation to non-Western heritages.

As Allard and Santoro have argued [28], it is necessary to “rethink our teacher-education curriculum so that we might more actively engage with our students in examining taken-for-granted discourses around difference and identity”. Kalantzis and Cope [34] have argued for a more progressive approach to cultural diversity, rather than an assimilationist approach. Hickling-Hudson [33] likewise proposes a more proactive approach where schools move beyond contact with other cultures through food and festivals to build intercultural understanding and inter-relationships. What links these different proposals together—whether it be proposals for cultural diversity in schools, self-reflexivity in religion-related teaching and learning, or a more culturally responsive pedagogy—is the recognition that the challenge is not so much to accumulate knowledge of the other, but to cultivate an ethos of engagement, openness, social and discursive critique, and gradual change. This might be achieved, for example, by unpacking simplistic representations of the relationship between culture and religion, perhaps through an exploration of the three levels of religious traditions, groups and individuals suggested in Jackson’s interpretive approach [61]. The development of reflexivity in this approach, intended for students, may be equally useful in teacher education.

The cross-curricular ‘Asia and Australia’s engagement with Asia’ priority within the current Australian curriculum aims to promote an understanding of Asian religious identity as an important element in a transcultural and globally interconnected world. The experienced, institutional and normative aspects of religious identity, as perceived and articulated by teachers within educational institutions such as Australian secondary schools, provide a more comprehensive understanding of this priority as it is negotiated within the mesh of discourses around language, culture and race in schools. This paper has aimed to contribute to a more complex deconstruction of how teachers speak about religious identity in relation to an Australian curriculum priority with an Asia focus, and what underlying concepts of culture, ethnicity and race influence and shape the ways in which teachers understand their students’ religious identity. The ways that language is used to describe these views and experiences provided both the lens, the vehicle and the object of investigations. It is through the field of language education that submerged aspects of the Asia Literacy priority, and what exactly it is supposed to engage in and achieve, may be brought to the surface. The curriculum would benefit from a further refinement and reconceptualisation of this priority if it is meant to be relevant, deep, engaging and ‘authentic’.

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