

RELIGIOUS KNOWLEDGE AMONG PRE-SERVICE SECONDARY TEACHERS OF
ENGLISH AND HISTORY

A Dissertation
by
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ABSTRACT

RELIGIOUS LITERACY AMONG PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS OF ENGLISH AND HISTORY (December 2011)

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Supreme Court justices, religious studies professors, media experts, and sociologists suggest that Americans can not have an educated, informed democracy without some religious knowledge. Recent studies have revealed that Americans do not possess the level of religious literacy necessary to understand the daily news, much less what is needed to make sense of a multicultural world. One cause of this lacuna in religious knowledge is the failure of enlightenment ideologies that promised humanity that the progress of science and societal perfection would replace the need for faith; in a nutshell, as modernity increased religion would decrease. Two world wars, atomic weapons, and empirical data destroyed those utopian dreams; all the while traditional religion increased and prospered along with modernity. Believing that schools (and their associated teachers) are institutions of ideological management (including religious literacy), this research explored religious literacy among pre-service teachers of English and History/Social Studies. The specific research questions for this study were: 1) What is the level of basic religious knowledge among pre-service teachers of History and English? 2) Do pre-service teachers of History and English demonstrate higher-level thinking skills as relates to religion in public life? and 3) What knowledge do pre-service teachers of History and English demonstrate when

confronted with a discipline specific section from a standard North Carolina textbook or an interdisciplinary text dealing with religious knowledge?

This mixed-methods study, following a concurrent embedded strategy, involved 59 pre-service teachers, majoring in either secondary Social Studies Education or secondary English Education in the Spring of 2011 at a large public university in North Carolina. Students participated via an online *Religious Knowledge Survey* which included demographics, a replicated basic religious knowledge quiz, and exploratory sections on thoughts on religion in public life and textual analysis.

The findings from this study revealed a significant relationship between students who had experienced multiple faith communities and high basic religious knowledge scores. There was no significant relationship between students who had high basic religious knowledge scores and those who had taken a college religion course. In overall scores, 66% of participants scored above the third quartile, with a mean score of 80 out of 100. These results challenge previous studies done by Prothero and the Pew Research Center. In addition, only students with higher scores in basic religious knowledge did well in the exploratory sections, although high basic scores did not predict ability in more conceptual areas. Nevertheless, student performance on the successive sections which explored higher cognitive levels revealed a decline in the ability to apply religious knowledge to the modalities of contemporary life or to the evaluation of textbooks. The study found that less than 5% of pre-service teachers are prepared to address religion in the classroom, although 80% believed they were prepared, which illustrates the Dunning-Kruger effect experienced by participants.