

## Guest Editor's Introduction

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Ten or fifteen years ago, the so-called “culture wars” in the United States—particularly in the field of education—seemed primarily to involve the identity politics of race and gender. Even when religion made an appearance, such as in lawsuits over prayers at football games and graduation ceremonies, the religion at hand was still Christianity. The contrast being drawn, the conflict being played out, was between Christian practice and “secularism,” not among different faith traditions. Historically, the discourses in multicultural education also have focused on race, gender, and socioeconomic class. As scholars and opinion leaders have begun to understand and write about the salience of America’s religious diversity, the analysis of non-Christians’ experiences from the perspectives of multicultural education<sup>1</sup> and anti-oppression scholarship<sup>2</sup> has been slow in coming. An oppression-based analysis of religious diversity in the United States must consider the dominant status of Christianity—in some cases, specifically Protestant Christianity—and the subordinate status of Buddhism, Confucianism, Hinduism, Islam, Jainism, Judaism, Native American faiths, Shinto, Sikhism, Taoism, Zoroastrianism, as well as some non-Protestant, or non-mainline Protestant sects of Christianity.

The semantics and terminology used to describe religious diversity and oppression is part of the challenge, as it has been for describing other dimensions of diversity and oppression. The term “ethnoreligious”<sup>3</sup> has been used to represent the interaction, even the conflation, of ethnicity with religion, and, at the same time, the use of this one single word to convey such a complex and various historical phenomenon can appear to devalue the specifically *religious* identity and definition of groups whose *ethnic* identity and subordination in the United States has had historical primacy. In designing the initial “Call” for submissions to this special theme issue (whose working title had been “Ethno-Religious Oppression in Schools”), the emphasis was on the intersections of religious, cultural, linguistic, ethnic and/or racial difference and inequality. In the process of reviewing submissions for this special theme issue and reflecting on the range

of perspectives, the impossibility of fastening on a single terminology for such a complex and nuanced phenomenon became apparent.

In conceptualizing this historical scope of this special theme issue, it is important to convey that the complex intersections of ethnicity and racism with religious domination and subordination in the United States of America are not a post-9/11 phenomenon. Indeed, they are not even 20th-century phenomena, nor have they been limited to discrimination against non-Christian faiths. English, German, and Irish Catholics, Quakers, German Mennonites, and Greek or Syrian Eastern Orthodox Christians faced religious persecution, and Native Americans faced forced conversion and extermination in 17th-, 18th- and 19th-century America (Gaustad & Schmidt, 2002; Jacobson, 1998; Wills, 2005). Antisemitism, in its turn, took root on American shores from xenophobic seeds brought from Christian Europe, and in some forms continues to have a place in American culture (Diner, 2004; Michael, 2005). Today, the followers of Sikhism, Islam, Hinduism, and other non-Western,<sup>4</sup> faith traditions encounter prejudice and discrimination because of religion.<sup>5</sup> While members of these groups are often also racial minorities in the U.S., racism alone does not explain the discrimination experienced by these groups. Nor does the excuse that the faiths are “Eastern,” Islam, like Christianity and Judaism, is an Abrahamic faith with adherents of all ethnicities—yet Muslims in America face perhaps the most pervasive and virulent religious discrimination of the day, termed “Islamophobia.”

One of the most enduring and powerful misconceptions about religion in American history—the national origins myth we all learned in elementary school—is that America was created so that members of all religions could practice freely. In fact, the Puritans fled England in search of a place where they could practice *their* religion without fear or oppression. Their agenda for religious freedom was limited to their own freedom, which they did not extend to other religious groups. Whatever the precise contours of the truth behind this American origins myth, this much is clear: Every facet of American society is shaped, informed, defined, or given

its vocabulary and structure by religion. Concepts of religious freedom and religious expression are among those considered our most foundational.

This special issue of *Equity and Excellence in Education* explores the interactions of ethnic identity with religious oppression in schools and in society. This broad theme raises a number of questions, among which some of the most pressing are the following: What is religious oppression in a U.S. context? How do ethnicity and religion intersect and interact to marginalize and devalue the members of ethnic minority groups who are also members of religious minority groups? How is this interaction of ethnic and religious marginalization manifested in the education process? How does it impact students and education? How does it affect teachers? What can schools and teachers do about it?

Despite the crucial importance of these themes and questions, most writers of academic literature, not to mention the popular culture, consider ethnoreligious oppression as a subset of racism in those cases in which the religious target is also the target of U.S. racism. The religious nature of discrimination is overlooked because the visibility of the target population's ethnic and racial identity permits the presumption that the bias is racial/ethnic in nature. Only when a target population is racially white, is religious discrimination (e.g., antisemitism against white Ashkenazi Jews or anti-Catholicism against Irish, Italians, or Poles) seen for what it is. This double standard diminishes our understanding of these social phenomena and obscures the distinctive features of the experiences of non-white religious minority populations. When a group's racial characteristics become associated with any one religion (and so erasing religious pluralism within racial or ethnic groups), religious and racial identities become confused and conflated. The result is a one-dimensional identity that subordinates religion to racial or ethnic status, leaving individuals' religious identities and needs unrecognized and unfulfilled.

Sixty years after the United States released Japanese Americans (among them Buddhists and Confucianists as well as Japanese Christians) from forced internment, we are once again seeing the "racialization"<sup>6</sup> of a group identified by religion and/or national origin—this time Arab American Muslims, whose ethnoreligious identity has been portrayed as a threat to U.S. national security. Just as Japanese Americans were "racialized" as foreign, and by extension as presumptively disloyal, Arab Americans and Muslims have been raced as "terrorists": foreign, disloyal, and threatening. The popular media association of them with terrorism is similar to the mindset that led to the interment of Japanese Americans during the Second World War.

Another factor that masks ethnoreligious oppression in the U.S. is the absence of clear, accurate, and universally-recognized statistics on the numbers, faith

community identities, and geographical distribution of non-Christians in the United States (Carroll, 2000). Whereas the decennial census affords us a clear look at the ethnic and racial make-up of the U.S. population, it fails to enumerate peoples according to faith. The law expressly permits the Census Bureau to collect data on religious affiliation,<sup>7</sup> but the Bureau declines to do so, on the basis of a law that prohibits "mandatory" questions about religion.<sup>8</sup> Some non-governmental research surveys collect data on religion,<sup>9</sup> but usually do so, on a congregation basis. Surveys like these will undercount by design, because the religious practice of many non-Western faiths, like Hinduism and Sikhism, is not centered upon the house of worship as is typical of the Abrahamic faiths, nor do all people of faith identify with specific religious congregations. The American Religious Identification Survey (ARIS) tried to overcome congregational bias by using a random-digit-dialed telephone survey, but the substantial discrepancy between ARIS and other sources raises questions as to the degree of its success (Kosmin, Mayer, & Ariela, 2001).

The increasing religious diversity in the United States prompts scholars to ask whether we are a Christian country or a pluralistic society (Eck, 2001; Lippy, 2005). When I ask my in-service and preservice teachers this question, the discussion usually ends up with answers in two columns, one for "Christian" and one for "Pluralistic." It is the impossibility of making a plausible forced-choice decision between any single "yes or no" answer that helps my teacher/students to understand the challenges faced by non-Christians in U.S. social institutions, and especially in U.S. schools.

The scholars whose work appears in this special theme issue of *Equity & Excellence in Education* provide substantive material for anyone considering these questions. Marshall sets the stage by giving our present-day schools their religious and historical context, tracking incidents of religious oppression in the educational realm throughout U.S. history. Blumenfeld illustrates the phenomenon of Christian privilege in the larger U.S. social structures as well as in schools, and gives lie to the argument that Christianity has been absent from our classrooms, or that court cases invoking constitutional protections of religions have reduced Christianity's place as the privileged religion in our schools and society. If privilege is one side of the coin of ethnoreligious oppression, then discrimination against non-Christians is the other. Joshi discusses how the processes by which specific religions become identified with real or imagined ethnic/racial characteristics, need to be understood as key to the conflation of ethnicity with religious identity, that masks the diversity of religious experience in the U.S.

Subedi discusses the present day, examining the beliefs and practices of preservice teachers about religion and argues for including religion as a critical unit of analysis when teaching about social differences. Zine

gives voices to the gendered identities of young Muslim women, considering in particular the practice of veiling and how it has made Muslim women subject to dual oppressions based on racism and Islamophobia in society at large and patriarchal oppression and sexism from within their communities. Wingfield also addresses anti-Arab racism and anti-Islamic sentiment. He not only discusses its effects on Arab American and Muslim schoolchildren but also proposes a systematic transformation of school curricula to be fully inclusive of Arab Americans. MacDonald-Dennis explores the unique racial, ethnic, and ethnoreligious positionality of Ashkenazi Jewish American college students and presents an identity development model that synthesizes the intersecting racial and religious dimensions of the Jewish American experience. Moore provides some specific suggestions for effectively incorporating religion, and specifically Islam into a secondary school social studies curriculum.

We hope that this special theme issue of *Equity & Excellence in Education* will focus educators' attention on the importance of thoughtful analysis and scholarly writing about ethnoreligious oppression in the United States, whether as part of our historical legacy as a nation or in the present day. As we develop fuller understandings of where we as a nation have come from and understand the journey taken, we can give voice to the religious oppression experiences of young people from multiple religious and ethnic/racial communities in the U.S. in the present day. Consequently, we can also develop the educational policies, practices, curricula, and pedagogies that are culturally responsive and proactive in improving the lives and educational experiences of all students.

I predict that in ten years teachers and teacher educators in the fields of multicultural education and social justice education will more fully include attention to religious difference in their response to students in their schools and classrooms, and will be more knowledgeable than at present in figuring out how students from diverse religious backgrounds can (and *must*) be represented and incorporated into school curricula, and their needs considered when formulating school policies and practices. All of us who contributed to this volume are happy to have the opportunity to raise these issues and to initiate scholarly and pragmatic discussion that will be on-going and vital to American education in the 21st century.

## NOTES

1. See the works widely used in multicultural education, such as Banks and Banks (2004), Grant and Sleeter (2006) and Nieto (2003). Adams, Bell, and Griffin (1997) address anti-semitism but do not acknowledge the oppression of other ethnoreligious groups in the United States.

2. The scholarship describing the systemic dynamics of oppression draws on theoretical and descriptive accounts of op-

pression such as Memmi (1965), Fanon (1968), Freire's (1970), and Young's (1990) and a number of other sources summarized in the chapters by Bell and by Hardiman and Jackson in Adams, Bell, and Griffin (1997). These analyses have been supported by the revisionist U.S. histories of Steinberg (1981), Takaki (1994), and Zinn (1980). These, along with other works focusing on racism or other specific forms of oppression, are referenced in this volume as needed.

3. Lawrence H. Fuchs coined the term "ethnoreligious" in 1956 as a means to encapsulate ethnic groups such as the Irish, religious groups such as the Jews and Quakers, and even racial groups such as African Americans. Fuchs intended this to be a "catch-all" term. By contrast, I use the term *ethnoreligious* to refer to groups sharing similar ethnic culture and buttressed by religion. Whereas Fuchs used the term to unite dissimilar groups, I use it as an expression of the *confluence* of religion and ethnicity found in many contemporary communities. In these communities, the lines between religious practice and ethnic culture are permeable if not invisible; religious expressions blend, overlap, and co-exist with dimensions of ethnicity, race, and nation. See the Introduction in Goldschmidt and McAlister (2004) for a discussion on the co-constitutive nature of racial, religious, and national identities.

4. I refer to the Western canon as traditionally understood, with its European theology, art, culture, and intellectual moorings. In this schema, Islam, although one of the three Abrahamic faiths, is nonetheless an outsider.

5. Although members of some of these religions, such as Sikhism, have been present in the U.S. since the Colonial Era, immigration from non-European (and often predominantly non-Christian) countries was banned from 1917 to 1965; only with the passage of the Immigration and Nationality Act Amendments of 1965 did it become possible for people from Asia and Africa, many of whom are followers of Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, Sikhism, and other non-Western religions, to enter the United States in significant numbers (See Ngai, 2004; Takaki, 1994).

6. The terms "racialization" and "racial formation" are used by Omi and Winant (1986, pp. 62-69) to express the view that race and racism are neither fixed nor immutable nor rooted in nature. Instead, they "employ the term racialization to signify the extension of racial meaning to a previously racially unclassified relationship, social practice, or group. Racialization is an ideological process, an historically specific one" (p. 64). It is in this sense that religious identities, that have been stereotypically or historically identified with specific communities of color, intersect with racial categories and become "racialized."

7. "The Secretary may collect decennially statistics relating to religious bodies" (26 U.S.C. §102).

8. The Census Bureau says "Public Law 94-521 prohibits us from asking a question on religious affiliation on a mandatory basis; therefore, the Bureau of the Census is not the source for information on religion." The relevant law is found at 26 U.S.C. §225(d): "Where the doctrine, teaching, or discipline of any religious denomination or church prohibits the disclosure of information relative to membership," a respondent may not be punished for "a refusal, in such circumstances, to furnish such information."

9. The Pluralism Project ([www.pluralism.org](http://www.pluralism.org)) lists population statistics from many different sources, including

governmental and community-based organizations. See also Smith (2002).

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