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Included, but how? A critical investigation into elementary social studies standards about religion

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ABSTRACT

Teaching about religion in public schools is a complicated and nuanced topic. Though religious illiteracy has been named as a widespread concern throughout the United States, little research has been conducted that critically analyzes what teachers are asked to cover. Preservice teachers often confess they do not understand what they are and are not allowed to say about religion, and many teachers choose to ignore teaching about religion at all. In this study, I conducted a critical content analysis of elementary standards about religion included in the state social studies standards documents for all 50 states and the District of Columbia. Then, using critical religious pluralism theory, I investigated the standards based on the inclusion of religious groups in curriculum content, as well as the extent to which this inclusion demonstrates challenges related to inclusion in curricula. Finally, I critically interrogated the ideology of the standards and made suggestions for how teachers and teacher educators can advocate for the inclusion of religion in elementary social studies.

KEYWORDS

Critical religious pluralism theory; elementary social studies; religion; religious literacy; standards analysis

Teaching about religion in public schools is tricky. Though the National Council for the Social Studies (National Council for the Social Studies [NCSS], 2013) includes religious literacy as an essential aspect of the *C3 Framework*, religious illiteracy continues to be a widespread concern throughout the United States (Ellis & Marcus, 2019; Moore, 2007; Tannebaum, 2018). Further, elements of Christian ideology are often woven throughout school curricula and calendars, both explicitly and implicitly (Case et al., 2013; Gunn et al., 2020; James, 2015; Saylor et al., 2022). Studies have shown that preservice teachers do not understand what they are and are not allowed to say about religion (Graves et al., 2010; Saylor et al., 2022), and many preservice teachers enter the field with a decidedly non-neutral, missionary perspective (James, 2011; Oldendorf & Green, 2005; White, 2009). Often, in elementary schools, these perspectives have resulted in teaching that either ignores religion entirely or goes rogue, enacting units like "Christmas around the world" regardless of state standards (Bauml, 2022; Puchner & Markowitz, 2020).

Though religion is sometimes included in middle school geography standards and frequently included in high school world history standards (Hartwick et al., 2016), as this study demonstrates, elementary standards about religion are less consistently included. If the foundation for understanding social studies should be laid in elementary school (Libresco, 2018), students need to be introduced to scaffolded content, allowing them to

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build on these ideas in future grades (Hess, 2009), and scholars throughout the field have suggested elementary school is an auspicious time to study religion (Bauml, 2022; Tannebaum, 2018). Instead, because the United States is a majority-Christian nation, if a religious foundation is laid for most elementary students, it is a Christian foundation (Rodríguez & Swalwell, 2022), highlighting the religious traditions of the cultural majority (Bauml, 2022; James, 2015).

In recent years, scholars have appealed to teachers and teacher educators, positioning the inclusion of religious studies as an urgent matter necessary to prepare both students and future teachers as citizens (Bertucio & Marcus, 2018). As agents of their respective states, teachers have a duty to teach *about* multiple religions to prepare students for life in a diverse society (Nord, 2010; Rodríguez & Swalwell, 2022). Excluding religion from classroom instruction undermines the goals of multicultural education (Davila, 2015), which asks educators to acknowledge and affirm religious pluralism present among the students in their classrooms and the global community (Nieto & Bode, 2008). Further, most states had elementary social studies standards that explicitly referenced religion in some way at the time of this study.

If teachers align their classroom instruction with state social studies standards, what religious content can we reasonably expect students to have had exposure to? Because state standards force teachers to frame their instruction to some extent (Sleeter & Stillman, 2005), an examination of state social studies standards provides some insight into what religious literacy standards are being taught in elementary classrooms and how states expect teachers to think about religion in the classroom. While I found one study published two decades ago that provided a K-12 overview of religious standards (Douglass, 2000), no current studies critically examine the role of religion in elementary social studies standards.

In this study, I conduct a critical content analysis of elementary standards about religion included in the state social studies standards documents for all 50 states and the District of Columbia. I seek to advance the scholarly literature on teaching religious literacy in two ways. First, I employ critical religious pluralism theory (CRPT; Small, 2020) to investigate the reviewed standards on the basis of the inclusion of religious groups in curriculum content and the extent to which this inclusion demonstrates challenges related to inclusion in curricula. Second, using qualitative analysis strategies, I critically interrogate the ideology of the standards. Specifically, the question I seek to answer is:

(1) How are different religious groups and events included and addressed in elementary (K-5) state social studies standards?

Literature review

Religious literacy

Within the United States, there is widespread illiteracy about religion (Moore, 2007; Prothero, 2007; Tannebaum, 2018). Moore (2007) defined religious literacy as "the ability to discern and analyze the fundamental intersections of religion and social/political/cultural life through multiple lenses (p. 57). In contrast, Prothero (2007) defined religious literacy as "the ability to understand and use the religious terms, symbols, beliefs, practices, scriptures, heroes, themes, and stories that are employed in American public life" (p. 17). However,

regardless of how the term is defined, Prothero (2007) suggested that widespread religious illiteracy, a lack of the skills outlined previously, is a concern because this deficit breeds intolerance rather than peaceful coexistence. It hinders cooperative endeavors to promote respect for diversity in local, national, and global arenas (American Academy of Religion [AAR], 2010) and can spark prejudice that leads to antagonism and violence. Scholars working in the field of religious literacy have suggested that "young people will be ill-prepared to face the controversies of contemporary American life without a critical understanding of the intersection of diverse religious commitments and political controversies" (Bertucio & Marcus, 2018, para. 9). Religious illiteracy could be diminished through a non-devotional approach to teaching about religion in all grades, including elementary schools (AAR, 2010). Unfortunately, education professionals have often discounted the benefits of introducing children to a breadth of religions during early childhood (Peyton & Jalango, 2008) or have been unfamiliar with these benefits and unprepared to teach religious literacy (Saylor et al., 2022).

As agents of the state, many K-12 public school educators are responsible for teaching a government-approved curriculum that includes both religious and nonreligious perspectives (Nord, 2010). Despite this mandate, state standards that explicitly address religious topics, and encouragement from NCSS that religious studies have a place in the public school curriculum, some teachers have avoided religion during lesson planning because they were confused about religion's place in the classroom (Graves et al., 2010), worried about becoming the subject of a lawsuit (Bishop & Nash, 2007), afraid of retribution from parents or administrators (Tannebaum, 2018), or uncomfortable or unfamiliar with the topic (Gunn et al., 2020; Tannebaum, 2018). When religion is not included in classroom instruction, public school teachers undermine the goals of multicultural education (Davila, 2015). Instead, educators should acknowledge and affirm religious pluralism in their classrooms and the global community (Nieto & Bode, 2008).

To assist in meeting this goal, NCSS released the *Religious Studies Companion Document for the C3 Framework* as part of the updated *C3 Framework* in 2017. This addition outlined why teaching about religion is essential to the social studies curriculum and provides guidelines for this subject in secondary grades. In conjunction with NCSS, the AAR (2010) also published *Guidelines for Teaching about Religion in K-12 Public Schools in the United States*, outlining best practices and providing examples of what religious studies might look like in elementary school. These guides show that it is possible to engage in religious studies with children, and for the success of cultural diversity initiatives, it is critical to familiarize children with the varying religious faiths of various individuals and groups (Davila, 2015; Gunn et al., 2020).

Teaching religion in social studies

Though some scholars in the field have called for an integration of religion across all subject areas (Kunzman, 2012), others have suggested that social studies is best suited to address religious practices since the goals of social studies include building citizens capable of enacting reform (Hess, 2009) and an emphasis on multicultural perspectives (Allen et al., 2024). Tannebaum (2018) explicitly stated, "there exists no better place for citizens to learn about religion than in the K-12 classroom" (p. 31).

Throughout the field, a limited amount of research details what is happening surrounding religion in secondary and elementary social studies. Some secondary schools have offered independent courses in World Religions or the Bible/Hebrew Scriptures; however, research shows that a majority of classroom instruction that does take place about religion occurs inside of social studies courses (Hartwick et al., 2016). Hartwick et al. (2016) found that social studies treatment of religion, especially regarding teacher emphasis on diversity of religious views, varied based on the secondary social studies subject area. Unsurprisingly, World History teachers tended to emphasize a diversity of religious views more frequently than other content areas, including Civics/U.S. Government, U.S. History, and Economics, with Economics having the lowest value. Though dated, other studies showed limited engagement with Islam and Judaism in public secular and private Christian middle schools (Kunzman, 2006; Schweber & Irwin, 2003).

In elementary social studies, one place religious studies have been seen to thrive (though often problematically) is in "holiday curriculum" (Libresco & Balantic, 2011, p. 1). Holidays often embody national pride, as well as cultural and religious practices (Bauml, 2022), and potentially provide teachers with an entry point to religious topics. Unfortunately, research has shown these entry points privilege Christianity, often to the exclusion of other religious holidays (Rodríguez & Swalwell, 2022). James (2015) shared that while acting as a parent volunteer, she received pushback about adding activities to the agenda for her child's "Winter Party" that were not focused on Christmas, with the committee ultimately allowing her to include just one activity about Hannukah. In a study by Bauml (2022), 90% of teachers reported celebrating Christmas in the classroom and 70% reported teaching about Hannukah. Holi and Ramadan received only one mention each in the open-ended portion of the survey. In contrast, while this study only surveyed a small number of teachers, the results seem to align with what other research shows: religions other than Christianity are rarely covered in the elementary classroom. Even traditional elementary school units, such as holidays around the world, rarely included diverse religions. Generally, these units covered diverse Christmas traditions from countries worldwide, plus Hannukah (Bauml, 2022).

Though less common throughout the literature, another participant in Bauml's (2022) study mentioned covering Hannukah around the same time she covers World War II rather than when it appears on the calendar. The conflation of Hannukah and the Holocaust is documented in children's literature (Eichler-Levine, 2010) and has been observed in other studies about the presence of religion in elementary school (Allen, 2023). While it might be easy to think, "Look, a religion other than Christianity, all the news is not bad!," in reality, these examples further demonstrate Christian dominance, sending the message that Jewish culture is only relevant when it comes into direct contact with dominant American narratives (e.g., Christmas or World War II) (Allen, 2023).

Despite these concerns, introducing religious concepts in elementary school is critically important to laying the foundation for understanding more complex ideas about religion in secondary school social studies (Hess, 2009; Libresco, 2018). On the whole, teaching about world religions can support student engagement in a pluralistic democracy (Rodríguez & Swalwell, 2022), and an improved understanding of the role of various religions in day-to-day life through comparison and connection to their personal lives helps students begin to develop their ability to contribute as citizens (James, 2015; Rodríguez & Swalwell, 2022). Research has shown that many preservice teachers agreed that teaching about world

religions was important and felt it would fit well as part of elementary social studies curriculum (Tannebaum, 2018). Unfortunately, few of these same elementary and early childhood preservice teachers reported feeling prepared to teach about world religion, both because they were unsure of their First Amendment rights and lacked exposure to the principles and doctrines of religions other than their own. This feeling may exist because historically, teacher educators have not always felt that K-12 teachers have the time to address religion, and, as a result, they have not devoted time to religious topics as part of their teacher preparation programs (Zam & Stone, 2006).

Standards as official knowledge

Douglass (2000) provided a K-12 overview of religious standards published by the Council on Islamic Education more than two decades ago. Data in the study included national social studies standard documents, such as the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS, 1994) *Expectations of Excellence*, and state standards from all 50 states and the District of Columbia. Results from the study found that, while teaching about religion had become an established topic in public school curricula at that point in time, instruction was limited. Of almost 1,000 existing standards about religion across all grade levels, just over 100 were found in first through fourth grade. Douglass (2000) also questioned whether the topic was being approached with either seriousness or depth. Implications from the study included a recommendation to develop program of study documents at the district level, a suggestion that religion should be a tested subject area, encouragement for the design and adoption of new instructional materials that incorporate religion, a focus on improved teacher training, and revision of existing state standards. Indeed, since the study, every state has revised its state social studies standards in some way. As a result, no existing studies critically examine the role of religion in current social studies standards broadly or elementary social studies standards specifically.

Theorized as rooted in Judeo-Christian assumptions, some scholars have posited it is impossible to detach any standards from the historically religious ideals in which they were founded (Burke & Segall, 2015). Despite the important role state standards play as the *de facto* "official knowledge" (Apple, 2004; Ellis & Marcus, 2019) students are to learn, the way standards have been intertwined with religious assumptions is rarely studied or acknowledged, even among meticulous analysis of what, whose, and how perspectives are included (An, 2016; Vasquez-Heilig et al., 2012). Following the implementation of No Child Left Behind (NCLB), states moved toward the adoption of content-specific standards (Evans, 2001). These new standards further contributed to the whitewashing of U.S. History specifically and social studies content broadly since they generally represented existing cultural understandings that perpetuate dominant narratives (Allen et al., 2024; Barbour et al., 2007; Conner, 2023). Over time, standards surrounding people of color have increased in number, but the dominant narrative has not moved away from a Eurocentric framing (Busey & Walker, 2017; Conner, 2023; Journell, 2009). Instead, these additions created an "illusion of inclusion" (Vasquez-Heilig et al., 2012) while the central narrative remained largely unchanged. However, no specific analysis of social studies standards about religion has been conducted since NCLB was enacted.

It is important to acknowledge that what is included in state standards does not always fully reflect the instruction happening in the classroom—even social studies

teachers who try to follow state standards for the same content area and grade may stress religious topics in varying ways (Hartwick et al., 2016). Strong and weak framing of standards also impact teacher decision-making to some extent (Sleeter & Stillman, 2005). If a standards document has strong framing, little decision-making power is offered to teachers, while a weak frame encourages teachers to employ agency. Within these frames, teachers rely on their own experiences and personal practical knowledge as they make decisions about what to include and exclude as curricular gatekeepers (Clandinin & Connelly, 1987; Thornton, 1991). Often, teachers enter the classroom with their own agendas, both explicit and implicit. As mentioned previously, within the sphere of religious education, preservice teachers have often seen themselves as missionaries and enter the classroom with religious goals (James, 2011; Oldendorf & Green, 2005; White, 2009). In many ways, Christians have situated teachers as martyrs and saviors, positioning teaching as a calling rather than a respected and learned profession, praising teachers for their willingness to enter a field with low pay in service to the greater good (Logan, 2015). But insidiously, new teachers who identify as Christian have also benefited from privilege in school spaces and have been given the freedom to blend their Christian worldviews with their professional lives (Scullion, 2022).

These Christian beliefs are a significant factor in teachers' decision-making processes. In some cases, this manifestation appears as a choice to rely on potentially Christian-biased texts or school-sanctioned textbooks or an unwillingness to teach required science content such as evolution (Scullion, 2022). Organizations such as Gateways to Better Education have taught and reinforced the need for a pervasive teaching of Christian beliefs. A nonprofit organization founded in 1991, the goal of this Christian organization is to help "public school educators ... teach about the Bible and Christianity ... legally and appropriately within existing constitutional boundaries, current laws, and state academic standards" (Gateways to Better Education, 2018, para 1). In conjunction with this goal, they offer state-specific guides to help educators see where they can intentionally include teaching about the Bible and Christianity, often in conjunction with standards that allow teachers to use their judgment to determine what specific content should be covered. The following three examples are included to help illustrate how the guides provided by Gateways to Better Education (2021) manipulate the goals and intentions of the state standards:

(1) Some states include generalized references such as "beliefs," "culture," or "social institutions." In these cases, it would be very appropriate to teach about specific beliefs of Christianity in order to fulfill the standards adequately (p. 4).
(2) State standards also include an understanding of holidays that have religious significance. For example, Arizona kindergartners are to "explain and explore origins of key American symbols, traditions and holidays... Key holidays include... Thanksgiving ..." This should include the President's annual request that the nation use the day to thank God for his blessings (p. 5).
(3) State standards commonly include expectations that students will learn what the Pledge of Allegiance means. Many educators do not do this. However, doing so would provide students with a solid civics lesson on key aspects of American culture and values. Teachers can easily help students understand the phrase "one nation

> under God" as a reflection of one of America's core values as expressed in the Declaration of Independence, that our rights ultimately come from God and not the government (p. 5).

Because state standards lay the foundation or present a starting point for teachers as they navigate curricular choices (Apple, 2004), the existence of this guide is troubling as it clearly lays out an intent to use the state standards as a means to circumvent the law, centering a specific religion as a primary goal of classroom instruction. This goal is antithetical to the literature advocating for religious literacy that asserts it is critical to teach the religious faiths of all individuals and groups (Davila, 2015; Gunn et al., 2020) and affirm religious pluralism (Nieto & Bode, 2008) to create an educational environment where all students feel they belong (Moore, 2007).

Theoretical framework

Critical theories, at large, are concerned with issues of power and justice (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2002). While much of the research presently happening in social studies is centered on these issues as they relate to race, class, or gender, the misappropriation of power is also present within religion and other social institutions (Aronson et al., 2016; Edwards, 2016; Puchner & Markowitz, 2020; Tannebaum, 2018). Indeed, we have seen acts of abject terror take place in the name of religion throughout history with the creation of boarding schools, the Crusades, and antisemitic hate crimes. Hate crimes based on religion are second only to hate crimes due to race (Gunn et al., 2020). Despite this statistic, according to Edwards (2016), "there is a dearth of literature, certainly not an entire field of study, dedicated to discussing religious identity through a similar critical lens" (p. 19).

While any religion has the potential to be embedded in broader systems of power, within the United States, Christianity remains not only the dominant religious and spiritual culture (Blumenfeld, 2006; Ferber, 2012; Todd, 2010) but also the religion "implicated in virtually every other category of oppression: racism, sexism, heterosexism, ableism, classism . . . every one of these categories has been undergirded by Christian theological justifications" (Todd, 2010, p. 142). Often referred to as Christian hegemony, this power leads to the existence of Christian privilege (Puchner & Markowitz, 2020), a taboo and overwhelmingly sensitive topic (Case et al., 2013). Blumenfeld (2006) defined Christian privilege as "a seemingly invisible, unearned, and largely unacknowledged array of benefits accorded to Christians . . . [that] confers dominance on Christians while subordinating members of other faith communities as well as non-believers" (p. 195). In many spaces within the United States, "Christian perspectives and practices are generally so embedded in institutional policies and practices that many people do not even pause to reflect on them, particularly if those policies and practices embody the beliefs of the dominant culture" (Case et al., 2013, p. 191). This dominance is especially present in public schools, as seen in holiday activities related to Christmas: the construction of school calendars that privilege Christian holy days (Aronson et al., 2016; Heinrich, 2015; Puchner & Markowitz, 2020); the continued existence of school-sanctioned, Christmas-themed music programs (Davis, 2021); and teacher-sponsored class Christmas parties (Berry, 2010). Scholars (Case et al., 2013; Small, 2020) have called for researchers to consider the full influence of Christian hegemony and religious privilege in

the United States and the impact it has on the lives of people from religious and non-religious backgrounds.

In order to more closely consider privilege, marginalization, and who holds power in society, throughout this study, I lean on Critical Religious Pluralism Theory (CRPT). Building on ideas of Christo-normativity (Ferber, 2012) and Christian hegemony (Blumenfeld, 2006), Small (2020) proposed CRPT as a framework with seven key tenets and analytic questions. These tenets are:

(1) CRPT declares that the subordination of non-Christian (including non-religious) individuals to Christian individuals has been built into the society of the United States, as well as institutionalized on college campuses.
(2) CRPT critically examines the intertwined nature of religion and culture, and embraces an intersectional analysis of religious identity with race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, dis/ability, immigration status, socioeconomic class, and all other forms of social identity.
(3) CRPT exposes Christian privilege and Christian hegemony in society, as well as the related concept of the false neutral of secularism.
(4) CRPT advocates for a pluralistic inclusion of all religious, secular, and spiritual identities, recognizing the liberatory potential of these identities upon individuals' lives.
(5) At the institutional level, CRPT advocates for the field of higher education to utilize a religiously pluralistic lens in all areas of research, policy, and practice, accounting for power, privilege marginalization, and oppression.
(6) At the systemic level, CRPT advocates for religious pluralism as the means for resolving religious conflict in the United States.
(7) CRPT prioritizes the voices of individuals with minoritized religious identities and those with pluralistic commitments in the work toward social transformation (Small, 2020, p. 62).

These tenets act as guidelines for critically analyzing existing policies and practices with the goal of "acknowledging the central roles of religious privilege, oppression, hegemony, and marginalization in maintaining inequality between Christians and non-Christians in the United States" (Small, 2020, p. 7). Of the seven key tenets, four directly relate to the findings of this study: one, three, four, and seven.

CRPT asks researchers to recognize the pervasiveness of Christian privilege, calling out the ways Christian hegemony defines and bounds society while suppressing certain religious voices in society. The guidelines of CRPT offer concerted, intentional religious pluralism (defined as active, dialogic engagement with difference purposively to create a more moral, just, and inclusive society) as a solution. CRPT advocates for religious pluralism at a systemic level as the means for resolving religious conflict, and it prioritizes individuals with minoritized religious identities.

As with other critical theories, CRPT was not developed to replace Critical Race Theory. The guidelines included in CRPT provide a framework for critically analyzing research, policies, and practices as they relate to religion broadly and Christo-normativity specifically. Using CRPT as a guide, scholars are better able to interrogate and challenge dominant hegemonic Christian narratives and clearly see the ways in which Christianity is embedded

within schooling and society. In her conclusion, Small (2020) suggested that teachers and school administrators can use CRPT to "investigate which elements of their curricula, teaching methods, and school policies are based on Christian hegemony" (p. 82). With this charge in mind and an acknowledgment that a systematic review of social studies standards about religion has not occurred in more than two decades (Douglass, 2000), an updated critical analysis of social studies standards at all grade levels is necessary to further conversations about religious literacy. This study begins that process with an investigation of the religious foundation students receive: what elementary students, grades K-5, are expected to know and understand about religion based on state social studies standards.

Methodology

The purpose of this study was to investigate state standards based on the inclusion of religious groups and then critically interrogate the ideology of the standards. Specifically, the question I sought to answer was:

> How are different religious groups and events included and addressed in elementary (K-5) state social studies standards?

I drew my methodology, approach to methods, and presentation of findings from the work of other scholars in the field who have conducted similar kinds of standards analyses (An, 2016; C. Anderson, 2012; C. Anderson & Metzger, 2011; Journell, 2009; Shear et al., 2015; Vasquez-Heilig et al., 2012).

I performed a content analysis of K-5 religious literacy content included in state social studies standards from all 50 states and the District of Columbia. I used Grades K-5 for the analysis to align with traditional elementary school design. The standards were retrieved from each state's Department of Education website during the Spring 2023 semester, ensuring the standards being reviewed were the most current, publicly available set.[1] Every attempt was made to include all standard documents likely to include information about religious literacy. For example, in Alaska, rather than a single document that includes all social studies standards, the Department of Education publishes various documents for disciplines within the field, including history, geography, government and citizenship, and culture. In this case, all four documents were included in the analysis. However, the analysis does not include supplemental information that may be provided to teachers in addition to official standards documents. A complete list of the state standards documents analyzed is included in the Appendix.

Through this analysis, I attempt to understand how different religious groups and events are included and addressed in state standards and advance the scholarly literature on teaching for religious literacy in two ways. First, I employ CRPT to investigate the reviewed standards on the basis of the inclusion of religious groups in curriculum content and the extent to which this inclusion problematizes or disrupts simplistic representations in curricula. Second, I critically interrogate the ideology of the standards. I examined the number of times content standards addressed religion or religious groups explicitly, and then I considered how topics addressing religion or religious groups were discussed within the standards. As noted above, a key tenet of CRPT "declares that the subordination of non-Christian (including non-religious) individuals to Christian individuals has been built into the society of the United States" (Small, 2020, p. 62). In response, one portion of my analysis

examines how the ideology underlying groups and historical events were contextualized throughout the standards.

Similar to previous standards analyses (Busey & Walker, 2017; Vasquez-Heilig et al., 2012), I analyzed data across three phases. In the first phase, I conducted multiple keyword searches to find standards related to religion and religious groups; then, I organized these standards into spreadsheets. In the second phase, I read through the identified standards multiple times to explicitly code them based on the content covered and the standard's relationship to commonly identified disciplines within social studies. In the third phase, I conducted a line-by-line review of the findings generated by the first two phases. I then reread and reanalyzed the findings to root out any inconsistencies.

Phase one

Because of the volume of the material included in the analysis, a keyword search was used to find standards related to religious literacy. Initially, the keyword search included 18 terms. As I searched through the first 10 states, I found words in adjacent standards that seemed pertinent to the topic, expanded my search terms to 23, and started again at the beginning with the revised list. After completing all 50 states and the District of Columbia, I shared my list and thoughts about the initial search with a peer who helped me reconsider the search terms used. Following this conversation, I added 10 keywords and repeated the search process a final time. Ultimately, 33 search terms were used in an attempt to create a complete picture of religious literacy standards in elementary social studies (Table 1).

During the final search, I added religious literacy standards that did not include a keyword but seemed relevant to the dataset. For example, in looking through the Louisiana fifth grade standards using various keywords, I found standards 5.8, 5.9, 5.10, 5.11, 5.13, and 5.14 all included words about world religions. Based on this observation, I also looked at standard 5.12. While this standard did not include any of the chosen keywords, it did mention Martin Luther and the Protestant Reformation, and I added it to

Table 1. Keywords searched.

Key Words
Religion/Religious
Spirit/Spiritual
Holiday (with specific reference to religious holidays)
Christian/Christmas
Muslim/Islam/Ramadan
Jew/Judaism/Hanukkah/Holocaust
Hindu/Hinduism
Buddhism/Buddhist
Sikh
Mormon
Genocide
Persecution
Church
Mosque
Temple
Synagogue
Pilgrim/Pilgrimage
Mission/missionary/missionaries
Shaman
God

the dataset. However, even after this discovery, I did not include the names of specific Christian traditions (i.e., Protestant/Catholic) or religious figures (i.e., Martin Luther) in my overarching keyword search.

In organizing this data, I removed search terms that appeared but were not referencing ideas of religious literacy. For example, the word spirit sometimes referred to spiritual ideas but was also used to reference alcohol ("spirits" during the prohibition era) or patriotism (the "spirit of America"). In these instances, the standard was not included in the dataset.

Finally, standards documents often included additional materials that were not explicitly standards. For example, Wyoming included a glossary of terms. While nine of these defined terms included religious keywords and these data were collected, these definitions were not official standards and were not included in the total count of religious standards for the state. Similarly, some states included introductory materials that addressed religious topics. However, many of these states, though explicitly introducing the importance of religion at the onset of their state standards document, did not have any standards that included religious keywords.

Because each set of state standards was organized differently, the organization of these datasets varies significantly. Similar to previous standards analyses, an attempt was made to utilize a consistent approach when collecting data from state documents (internally and externally), regardless of format (Lancaster & Hilburn, 2023; Sabzalian et al., 2021). To organize these initial findings, I created individual spreadsheets for each state, which included copies of each standard and any information necessary to contextualize the standard (grade level, subject area, overarching themes or questions). Using these spreadsheets, I created a table that included each state, all keywords, and the number of times each keyword was found in each set of state standards.

Phase two

Once this data organization was complete, I developed categories contextualizing religious literacy standards. I coded all references included in the dataset to correspond with these categories. To develop these codes, I did an initial read-through of all 292 standards that included any religious keywords, and then I used descriptive coding (Saldaña, 2021) to create a list of terms meant to encapsulate the spirit or the nature of each standard. In some cases, these categories were broad. For example, each of the four disciplines typically included in social studies instruction—history, geography, economics, and civics, as well as a broad category for culture—were included in the overarching categories. In other cases, these codes were more specific, referring to specific historical events or time periods referenced in the standard (Colonial America, the fur trade, or the 16th Street Church bombing).

In some cases, the standards were strongly framed, and the connections to religion were explicit. For example, in conjunction with the fur trade, Alaska standards mentioned the Russian Orthodox Church. In other instances, though the standards were strongly framed, the connections to religion were implicit and potentially subjective, providing space for teacher decision-making. For example, the 16th Street Church bombing, on the surface, may not seem as though it should be coded as a religious standard simply because it uses the word "church." However, I chose to include it for two primary reasons. One, during the U.S. Civil Rights Movement (CRM), the Black church provided support to many of the most

well-known civil rights organizations. Some historians argue that church pastors and ministers were vital in the success of the CRM, and the Black church was responsible for mobilizing resources that made the CRM practically possible (Ghose, 2017). Two, the existence of standards that use the word "church" (15) compared to those that name other religious places of worship (temple, synagogue, and mosque; 1 collectively) helps demonstrate the pervasiveness of Christo-normativity throughout the study. For instance, even though coverage of 9/11 was included as a standard in several states, no states mentioned the increased number of mosques that were burned or destroyed following the attacks (Alfonseca, 2021) or any of the over 100 mosque bombings in the United States in the past two decades (American Civil Liberties Union, 2023).

Throughout the coding process, categories were also adapted to better describe the nature of the standard or fully encompass content students were asked to understand. After the first round of coding, in addition to the five main groups outlined above, I found 26 subgroups and 21 historical events or people groups. While many states did explicitly break down standards into history, geography, economics, civics, and sometimes culture, I did not rely on the state's choice of categorization. Instead, I looked specifically at the content to determine where to categorize each standard (though they often overlapped). Using these categories, I created a construct table (Miles et al., 2014) to display how the state standards, collectively, were positioned within each of the social studies disciplines.

Phase three

Armed with a full set of codes, I began a second round of categorizing to check myself and make sure standards had been properly placed in all relevant categories. While there are only 292 standards, there are more than 292 total items here, as I did not limit the number of categories where a standard could be placed. For example, Washington D.C. standard 4.8.2, "Explain how political, religious, and economic ideas and interests brought about the Revolution . . ." was included in both the specific historical event category for "American Revolution" and as a "reason for conflict." I did not look back at the initial categorizations during the second round of coding. In the second round of coding, I spent more time reading not only the initial standard but also subheadings to be more thoughtful about not only the words included in the standard but also the writers' intention based on their categorization.

Limitations and positionality

I recognize that using a keyword search is a limitation of this study. While I attempted to be sure to include words that were representative of many religious traditions, my choice of words was likely influenced by my positionality and experiences as a White, cisgender woman who was raised in a Christian home and continues to identify as a Christian.

Additionally, several standards related to holidays; however, many of them did not connect to religious holidays. Therefore, unless a religious holiday was explicitly stated, standards surrounding holidays were not included. The exclusion of holidays is a potential limitation of this study, as many standards included compelling questions like this example from the state of Washington for Grade 2: "How do different cultures and ethnic groups celebrate major holidays?" Using language

outlined by Sleeter and Stillman (2005), this standard would be classified as a "weak frame," encouraging teachers to use their judgment to decide what content to include. Weakly framed standards are difficult to code or analyze because, though this standard is potentially an entry point for conversations about religious holidays celebrated by diverse religious groups, it did not explicitly address a religious holiday. For that reason, I considered it outside the parameters of this study. Further research should be done to critically investigate state social studies standards that focus on holidays and the intentions behind these standards.

Relatedly, a second limitation of this study is the distinction between curriculum standards and actual classroom pedagogy. Teachers often enact curricula differently than reflected in standards documents (Hartwick et al., 2016). Additional research exploring how elementary standards about religion are enacted in the classroom is a critical next step to understand better how and what students are being exposed to about religion.

Findings

In this section, I discuss key findings that emerged from the study in three overarching categories. It is important to emphasize that I do not isolate single states for special condemnation or endorsement. Instead, I use examples from specific states to suggest themes across the data.

Appearance of religious groups or events in elementary social studies standards

In response to considering how religious groups or events are addressed in elementary social studies standards at large, I present three key findings. These include wide variation in the inclusion of religion in state standards, a skewed division of standards between upper and lower elementary grades, and a majority of state standards surrounding religion occur in history standards (as opposed to other social studies disciplines).

Overall inclusion of religion

In all 50 states and the District of Columbia, there were 292 total standards related to religion (Table 2). Eight states included no standards that touched religious topics, while 12 included one to two standards. Only seven states included 10 or more standards about religion (Figure 1).

The number of standards did not determine the state's approach to religion. Pennsylvania had seven standards addressing religion, but all occurred across upper elementary grades and were general, asking students to consider how belief systems and religions have broadly impacted their state, their country, and the world. Alternatively, Nebraska also had seven standards addressing religion, but they were scaffolded across first through fifth grade, situated within a geography frame emphasizing cultural comparison. In other words, the quantity of standards related to the topic did not equate to the quality of content covered within the topic.

Interestingly, several states noted religion as an essential part of coordinated, systematic study in social studies but did not choose to include standards explicitly about religion. For

Table 2. Overview of elementary state social studies standards about religion.

State	Year	Total Religious Standards	Specific Standards about Christianity	Specific Standards about all other religions	Lower Elementary Standards (K-2)	Upper Elementary Standards (3–5)
Alabama	2010	5	3	2	1	4
Alaska	2006	7	3	0	[a]	[a]
Arizona	2019	8	3	0	1	7
Arkansas	2014	1	0	0	0	1
California	2016	41	27	7	4	37
Colorado	2020	0	0	0	0	0
Connecticut	2015	6	0	0	0	6
Delaware	2018	5	0	0	[a]	[a]
Florida	2021	8	4	4	3	5
Georgia	2021	3	1	1	1	2
Hawaii	2018	18	3	7	3	15
Idaho	2016	4	1	0	0	4
Illinois	2021	0	0	0	0	0
Indiana	2020	4	1	0	0	4
Iowa	2017	0	0	0	0	0
Kansas	2020	2	2	0	0	2
Kentucky	2019	3	1	0	2	1
Louisiana	2022	24	12	8	4	20
Maine	2019	2	0	0	2	0
Maryland	2020	2	0	0	0	2
Massachusetts	2018	9	2	0	5	4
Michigan	2019	8	1	0	2	6
Minnesota	2011	11	0	2	4	7
Mississippi	2018	1	0	0	0	1
Missouri	2016	0	0	0	0	0
Montana	2021	0	0	0	0	0
Nebraska	2019	7	0	0	3	4
Nevada	2018	1	0	0	0	1
New Hampshire	2006	9	2	1	2	7
New Jersey	2020	7	0	0	1	6
New Mexico	2022	0	0	0	0	0
New York	2017	5	1	0	1	4
North Carolina	2021	9	0	0	3	6
North Dakota	2019	0	0	0	0	0
Ohio	2018	3	0	0	0	3
Oklahoma	2019	2	0	0	0	2
Oregon	2021	14	0	1	3	11
Pennsylvania	2009	7	0	0	0	7
Rhode Island	2008	6	0	0	1	5
South Carolina	2019	7	0	2	0	7
South Dakota	2015	1	0	0	0	1
Tennessee	2017	2	0	1	0	2
Texas	2018	4	1	0	1	3
Utah	2010	13	7	0	3	10
Vermont	2017	0	0	0	0	0
Virginia	2015	1	0	0	0	1
Washington	2019	1	0	0	0	1
Washington DC	2011	13	4	2	3	10
West Virginia	2016	2	0	0	0	2
Wisconsin	2018	3	0	0	0	3
Wyoming	2018	3	0	0	1	2
Total		**292**	**79**	**38**	**55**	**226**

[a]Standards did not reference specific grade levels.

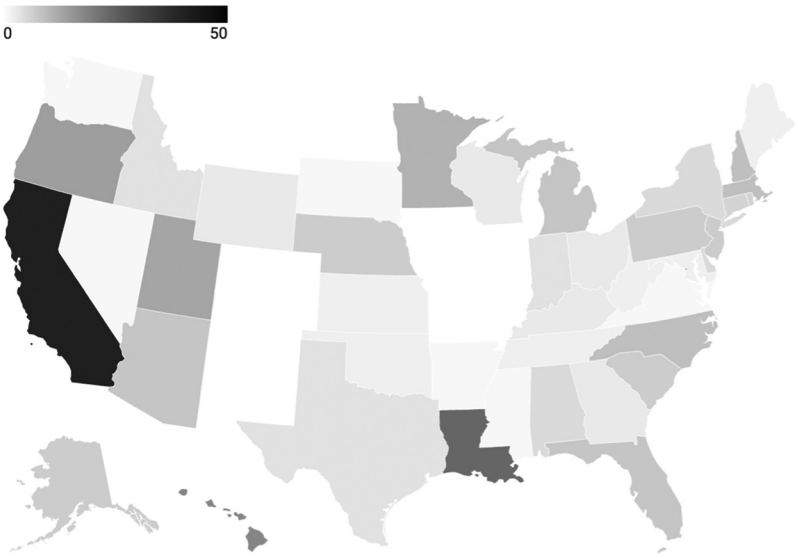

Figure 1. Number of elementary social studies standards that address religion by state.

example, the Introduction to the Iowa State Social Studies defined social studies in the same way NCSS does:

> Social studies is the integrated study of the social sciences and humanities to promote civic competence. Within the school program, social studies provides coordinated, systematic study drawing upon such disciplines as anthropology, archaeology, economics, geography, history, law, philosophy, political science, psychology, **religion**, and sociology, as well as appropriate content from the humanities, mathematics, and natural sciences. The primary purpose of social studies is to help young people develop the ability to make informed and reasoned decisions for the public good as citizens of a culturally diverse, democratic society in an interdependent world. (emphasis added)

However, the Iowa Standards went on to include no standards related to religion in any of standards.

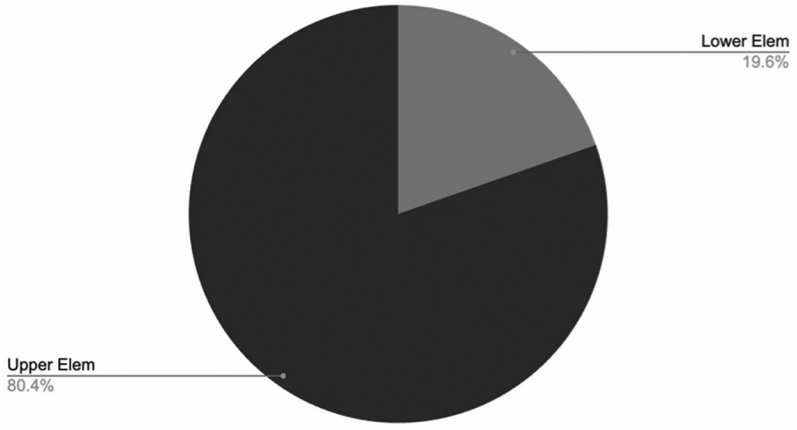

Figure 2. Division of standards in upper and lower elementary.

Division between upper and lower elementary

As seen in Table 2 and illustrated by Figure 2, there was a skewed division of standards between upper and lower elementary grades. Of the 292 total standards about religion, just 55 (19.6%) occurred in grades K-2. In contrast, 80.4% occurred in third through fifth grade. Massachusetts had the most K-2 standards with five across the three grade levels. Of the standards documents that included religious standards, 27 included zero or one standard in grades K-2, and only 11 states included three or more.

Only Oregon and Louisiana included at least one standard in each grade level from grades K-5 (Table 3). In Louisiana, the primary inclusion of religion in grades K-2 (three of the four standards included for these grade levels) was through the introduction of state and nationally recognized holidays. The list of holidays noted included two Christian religious holidays, Christmas and Mardi Gras. Alternatively, following the more traditional expanding communities framework common in elementary social studies (Halvorsen, 2017), Oregon standards began with students considering religion as a component of their personal identity, then moved toward looking at the religious backgrounds of people in their local community. Both examples demonstrate how religious content is scaffolded throughout lower elementary grade levels, although one uses more inclusive language.

Table 3. Lower elementary state standards about religion in Louisiana and Oregon.

Grade Level	Louisiana	Oregon
Kindergarten	K.4 Identify symbols, customs, famous individuals, and celebrations representative of our state and nation, including: State and nationally designated holidays: New Year's Day, the birthday of Martin Luther King, Jr., Inauguration Day, Washington's Birthday, **Mardi Gras**, Memorial Day, Juneteenth, Independence Day, Labor Day, Columbus Day, Veterans Day, Thanksgiving Day, and **Christmas Day**	K.3 Develop an understanding of one's own identity groups including, but not limited to, race, gender, family, ethnicity, culture, **religion**, and ability.
First Grade	1.8 Identify examples of Louisiana's culture, including: State and nationally designated holidays: New Year's Day, the birthday of Martin Luther King, Jr., Inauguration Day, Washington's Birthday, **Mardi Gras**, Memorial Day, Juneteenth, Independence Day, Labor Day, Columbus Day, Veterans Day, Thanksgiving Day, and **Christmas Day**	1.14 Identify and explain the perspectives of racial, ethnic, and social groups in our community on local issues including individuals who are American Indian/Alaska Native/Native Hawaiian or Americans of African, Asian, Pacific Island, Chicano/a, Latino/a, or Middle Eastern descent; **individuals from all religious backgrounds;** and individuals from traditionally marginalized groups.
Second Grade	2.7 Identify and describe national historical figures, celebrations, symbols, and places: c. Describe the significance of state and nationally designated holidays, including New Year's Day, the birthday of Martin Luther King, Jr., Inauguration Day, Washington's Birthday, **Mardi Gras**, Memorial Day, Juneteenth, Independence Day, Labor Day, Columbus Day, Veterans Day, Thanksgiving Day, and **Christmas Day**. d. Describe the history of American symbols, including the Liberty Bell, United States flag (etiquette, customs pertaining to the display and use of the flag), bald eagle, national anthem, Uncle Sam, Statue of Liberty, The Pledge of Allegiance, **and the national motto "In God We Trust**."	2.16 Identify the history and narratives of traditionally included and excluded individuals, groups, and circumstances, that impact the local community including individuals who are American Indian/Alaska Native/Native Hawaiian or Americans of African, Asian, Pacific Island, Chicano, Latino, or Middle Eastern descent; **individuals from all religious backgrounds;** and individuals from traditionally marginalized groups.

In other states, religious topics were not introduced until later grades, often with little to no foundation or framework to support complex ideas. For example, in Arkansas, only one standard included any religious keyword; the fifth-grade standard H.12.5.3 asked students to "Examine reasons for European exploration in the Americas from multiple perspectives (e.g., trade, religion, colonies, spheres of influence, wealth)." If students have never been introduced to religious ideas throughout their schooling experience prior to encountering this standard, how can teachers reasonably expect them to be able to engage with the idea? Similar situations occurred in many states, including Kentucky, Mississippi, Maryland, Nevada, Oklahoma, Tennessee, and South Dakota. In Kentucky, first-grade students encounter their first two standards about religion, 1.G.HI.1 and 1.G.KGE.1, when asked how culture (including religion) impacts their community and state. Unfortunately, the next time these students encounter religion is in fifth grade when standard 5.H.CE.2 asks them to "Analyze the role religion played in early colonial society," a task they are unlikely to be prepared for.

Where do these standards live?

As seen in Table 4, most state standards about religion, 249 of 292 (around 85%), appear to be categorized as history standards. Approximately 15–20% of the standards about religion are associated with geography, civics, or culture, while only about 1% are linked to economics.

Of particular note, multiple states, including New Jersey, included "Holocaust Law" statutes as part of their state standards document. For example, in New Jersey, statute 18A:35–28 read,

> Every board of education shall include instruction on the Holocaust and genocides in an appropriate place in the curriculum of **all elementary** and secondary school pupils. The instruction shall further emphasize the personal responsibility that each citizen bears to fight racism and hatred whenever and wherever it happens. (emphasis added)

However, despite this inclusion, no elementary standards included any keywords about the Holocaust specifically or genocides broadly. Florida included similar state law language based on House Bill 1213, passed in 2020. According to the standards document,

> House Bill 1213 (2020) directed the FDOE to prepare and offer standards for Holocaust Education. A new strand of content standards was added to social studies for Holocaust Education. To develop content-rich and developmentally appropriate Holocaust Education standards for Florida's students, the FDOE worked closely with the Commissioner of Education's Task Force on Holocaust Education and Florida teachers. Additionally, the FDOE received and considered comments from state and nationally recognized Holocaust educational organizations, Florida educators, school administrators, representatives of the Florida College System and state universities, business and industry leaders and the public.

This initiative resulted in an overarching strand titled "Holocaust Education" with three distinct fifth-grade student objectives (counted in this study as four standards):

> SS.5.HE.1.1 Define the Holocaust as the planned and systematic state-sponsored persecution and murder of European Jews by Nazi Germany and its collaborators between 1933 and 1945.
>
> — Students will define antisemitism as prejudice against or hatred of the Jewish people.
> — Students will recognize the Holocaust as history's most extreme example of antisemitism.
> — Students will identify examples of antisemitism (e.g., calling for, aiding, or justifying the killing or harming of Jews).

Table 4. Elementary state social studies standards about religion by discipline.

Discipline	Number of Occurrences	Broad Category or Theme within the Discipline	Number of Occurrences	Specific Events or Themes within the Broad Category	Number of Occurrences
History	249				
		General	10		
		As a reason for conflict	16		
		Connection to specific historical event or time period	131		
				African American Culture/ Churches	6
				American Revolution	3
				Civil Rights Movement	4
				Colonial America	35
				European Exploration	19
				Fur Trade	3
				Medieval Europe (inc. monasteries and crusades)	6
				Slavery	2
				State Specific	43
				Westward Expansion	5
				WW2	5
		Connection to specific historical group of people	67		
				Hindu	2
				Islam/Muslims	4
				Maya/Incas/Aztecs	6
				Missionaries (Spanish, French and/or Catholic)	24
				Mormons	7
				Indigenous Peoples	17
				Polytheistic Cultures	5
				West African Kingdoms	2
		Religious persecution	18		
				Generic persecution	2
				Holocaust	8
				Other Genocide	3
				Puritans/New England/Pilgrims	5
		Considered in the perspective of marginalized groups	7		
Geography	48				
		Within places with physical/ cultural characteristics	12		
		Defining feature of region/ community	18		
		Migration or immigration	14		
		Spread of world religions	4		
Civics	58				
		Government	8		
		Rights	35		
				Human Rights	3
				Political Rights	5
				Religious Freedom	27
		Patriotism	7		
		Religious leaders	4		
		Democracy, civic institutions, responsibility, and media	4		
Economics	4				
		General	3		
		Christmas Tree Farms	1		
Culture	58				
		General	35		

(*Continued*)

Table 4. (Continued).

Discipline	Number of Occurrences	Broad Category or Theme within the Discipline	Number of Occurrences	Specific Events or Themes within the Broad Category	Number of Occurrences
		Holidays (religious holidays specifically named)	12		
				Christmas	6
				Community Religious Observances	1
				Hanukkah	1
				Mardi Gras	4
		Spiritual influences/well being	7		
		Beliefs	2		
		Women in religion/gender norms	2		

While both states had legislation that mandates Holocaust education in elementary classrooms, only one state went on to include standards at the elementary level.

Inclusion of religious groups in curriculum content

In response to considering how religious groups or events are addressed in elementary social studies standards as part of specific content suggestions, I present three key findings. These include relative to Christianity, a limited number of standards that addressed any other religious groups or events; no attempt to disrupt or problematize simplistic representations in academic standards; and an emphasis on other religions often occurs when it aligns with one of two things: important events in American history or a more dominant religious orientation present in a specific state.

Standards addressing religious groups other than christianity

Previous analyses found that standards often included subtle ways of addressing race while marginalizing it (i.e., the "illusion of inclusion" (Vasquez-Heilig et al., 2012)). Here, however, non-Christian religions were just not included. As seen in Figure 3, keywords that related to Christianity explicitly (Christian, Christmas, church, Mormon) or implicitly (pilgrim, pilgrimage, mission, missionaries) were present much more frequently than words related to other religions explicitly (Muslim, Islam, Judaism, Jew, Hindu) or implicitly (temple, shaman). Many keywords about non-Christian religions were never present (Buddhist, Buddhism, Sikh, synagogue, mosque).

Some state standards were weakly framed, with the ability to include multiple religious traditions. For example, although it was the only religious standard in the elementary grades, South Dakota standards asked fifth-grade students to "Evaluate the influence, impact, and interactions of various cultures, philosophies, and religions on the development of the U.S." (5.H.2.4). While this standard was situated within U.S. History, it did provide space for teachers to exercise agency in choosing which traditions to introduce. In North Carolina, a series of standards across grades 2–5 also provided space for interrogating various religious traditions (Table 5).

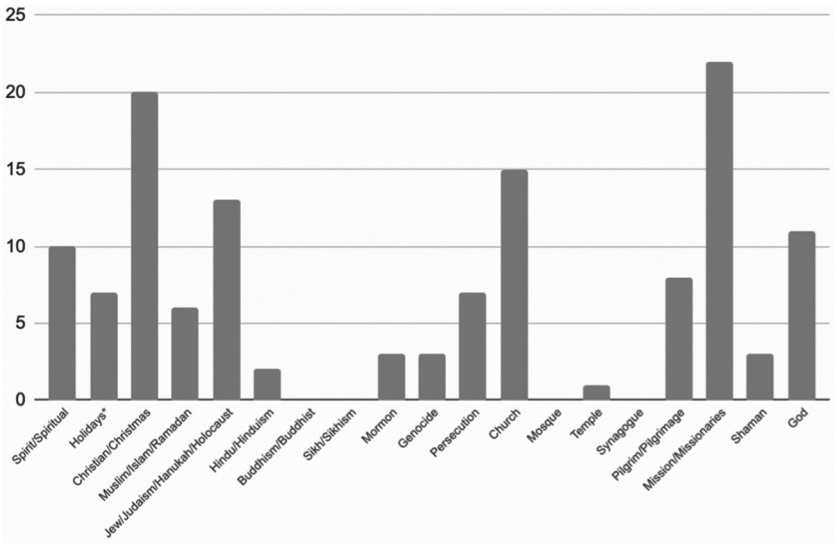

Figure 3. Frequency of religious keywords. *explicitly related to religion.

However, 79 standards (27% of all standards and 67.5% of standards that refer to a specific tradition) appeared to be written with a distinctly Christian perspective or using Christian terminology (Figure 4). For example, consider Standard 4.H3.1 in Arizona, which asked fourth-grade students to "Examine how economic, political, and religious ideas and institutions have influenced the development of individual rights, freedoms, and responsibilities in the Americas." While this overarching standard is broad, the document also listed key concepts that can be included in this area, situating a broad or weakly framed standard within a stronger frame. In relation to religion, it continued, "... how religious tensions in the New England Colonies established colonies founded on religious tolerance, ways in which society expresses itself (art, music, dance, crafts, and writings), and how religious beliefs of groups like the Quakers and Spanish missionaries led to questions about the morality of slavery and ideas of equality." Although the standard clearly stated that teachers are not limited to only the examples provided in the document, no attempt was made to name specific religions outside of Christianity, and the strong framing of the clarifying details decreases the odds that teachers will attempt to do so on their own. Alternatively, only 38 standards (or 13%, less than half the amount of Christianity, and only 32.5% of standards that refer to a specific tradition) were included for all other religious groups combined. Of these, roughly a third were about the Holocaust.

No attempts to disrupt simplistic representations of major world religions

Similar to other standards analyses that suggest diverse populations were often included in superficial and trivial ways (C. Anderson & Metzger, 2011; Shear et al., 2015), the few times religions other than Christianity were explicitly addressed in the standards, they were often presented simplistically. As demonstrated throughout existing research, students most frequently learned about Judaism when studying American involvement in World War II

Table 5. North Carolina standards about religion.

Grade Level	Standard	Objective
2	2.B.1 Understand how values and beliefs shape culture in America.	2.B.1.1 Identify the various values and beliefs of diverse cultures that have shaped American identity. 2.B.1.2 Explain how belief systems of various indigenous, religious, and racial groups have influenced or contributed to culture in America.
2	2.C & G.1 Understand how freedom, equality, and democracy contribute to the government of America.	2.C & G.1.4 Explain how various indigenous, religious, gender, and racial groups advocate for freedom and equality.
2	2.H.1 Understand how various people and events have shaped America.	2.H.1.1 Summarize contributions of various women, indigenous, religious, racial, and other minority groups that have impacted American history.
3	3.B.1 Understand how values and beliefs of individuals and groups influence communities.	3.B.1.1 Explain how the values, beliefs, and cultures of various indigenous, religious, racial and other groups contribute to the development of local communities and the state.
3	3.H.1 Understand how various people and historical events have shaped local communities.	3.H.1.1 Explain how the experiences and achievements of women, indigenous, religious, and racial groups have contributed to the development of the local community.
4	4.B.1 Understand ways in which values and beliefs have influenced the development of North Carolina's identity as a state.	4.B.1.2 Explain how the values and beliefs of various indigenous, religious, and racial groups have contributed to the development of North Carolina
4	4.C & G.1 Understand the role of citizens in local and state government.	4.C & G.1.2 Summarize the ways in which women, indigenous, religious, and racial groups influence local and state government.
5	5.B.1 Understand ways in which values and beliefs have influenced the development of the United States.	5.B.1.2 Explain how the values and beliefs of various indigenous, religious, and racial groups have contributed to the development of American identity.
5	5.C & G.2 Understand the ways in which the federal government has protected individual rights of citizens.	5.C & G.2.1 Summarize the ways in which women, indigenous, religious, and racial groups use civic participation and advocacy to encourage government protection of rights.

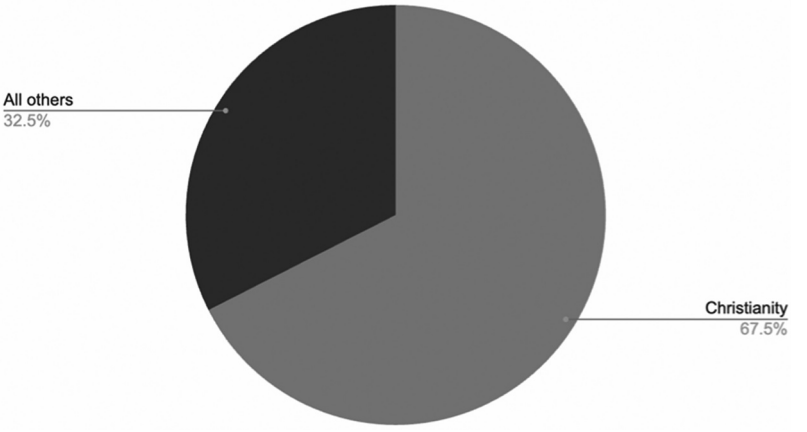

Figure 4. Frequency of religious keywords by tradition.

or when studying Hanukkah during units about winter holidays (Allen, 2023; Bauml, 2022). This finding is supported by what was seen in the standards. Across all 50 states and the District of Columbia, there were only 16 explicit mentions of Judaism. Eleven standards directly referenced the Holocaust or World War II, and one referenced Hanukkah. Of the remaining four, Louisiana standards mentioned the Jewish role in the Crusades, California standards discussed the Jewish settlers in the Middle Colonies, and Alabama standards suggested studying Jewish merchants as part of Westward Expansion. In New Hampshire, an additional standard occurred in sixth grade as part of a broad study of the three major world religions (included here because the standard category is labeled Grades 5–6).

Keywords about Islam occurred even less frequently, found only six times. Of these, four standards in Louisiana and Minnesota explicitly referenced historical events from the medieval time period, a second standard in Minnesota discussed the Islamic calendar, and (as above) in New Hampshire, one standard technically occurred in sixth grade as part of a study of the three major world religions.

The Hindu religion was mentioned only twice throughout the standards documents, in Minnesota and Louisiana, in both cases referring to Hindu Arabic numeral and calendar systems. Religious systems of West Africa and the Aztecs are also mentioned twice in the Louisiana standards, and, similar to Islam, they were situated in "The Medieval Period to Early Modern World." Buddhism and Sikhism were not mentioned at all, in any state, at the elementary level.

When do these standards occur?

Throughout the standards documents, there was an emphasis on specific religious traditions (both Christian and non-Christian) when they aligned with important events in American history or a more dominant religious orientation present in a specific state. Recognizing that some standards were placed in multiple categories, of the 292 standards associated with religion, 198 appeared to be directly connected with a historical event or group of people in the standards documents (Table 4). Most frequently, religious ideals came up during instruction on Colonial America (35), the impact of missionaries on the development of the United States (24), and European exploration (19). In these three categories, the religious ideals represented were almost exclusively Christian. The next two categories, the Holocaust and World War II (13) and Indigenous peoples (17) were slightly more diverse in terms of the religions present in the standard.

As mentioned, standards that directly address Judaism were most often considered while studying World War II. It follows that all of these standards relate to the Jewish faith. Four of the remaining five standards about Judaism were also linked with historical events, primarily within the United States (Middle Colonies and Westward Expansion).

When looking at standards with religious keywords that address Indigenous peoples, these standards almost exclusively focused on the relationship and/or conflict between Indigenous peoples due to religion (most frequently some denomination of the Christian church), often during the periods of exploration, colonialism, or Westward Expansion. Rarely, states highlighted the religious or spiritual beliefs of Indigenous peoples and asked students to study this belief collectively. For example, in Wyoming, standard SS5.2.2 asked students to "Identify and describe, compare and contrast ways in which unique expressions of culture influence people (e.g., tribal affiliation, language, spirituality, stories, folktales, music, art, and dance)." Also rarely, students were asked to consider a specific tribe or

nation. For example, Ohio acknowledged early Indian civilizations like the Mississippians had unique religions (5.2), and in Maine, standards asked kindergarten and first-grade students to understand the "uniqueness and commonality of individuals and groups, including the Maine Native Americans" (K.H.3 & 1.H.2). The document outlined religion as one area where unique attributes of a specific tribe can be addressed.

Several states appeared to emphasize a specific religion within their standard if that religion could be considered the dominant religion in their state. For example, more than half of the state standards about Mormonism were found in Utah (four out of seven). Three of these four standards were situated within the study of Utah state history. Similarly, in Massachusetts, there was a greater emphasis on the Pilgrims who founded Plymouth in their state history topics. Half of the standards related to missionaries were found in California state standards, again, situated within California state history.

Hawaii was the only state whose standards emphasized non-Christian religious traditions. While they did have many standards related to religion as it is traditionally covered (alongside the events previously outlined: European exploration, colonialism, and missionaries), their state history standards covered Hawaiian gods and goddesses in great detail, woven throughout discussions of Hawaii's unique culture and core values.

Christian ideology underlying the standards

After critically interrogating the ideology underlying the standards, I present three key findings: overt and explicit references to the Christian religion in four of five social studies disciplines, implicit references to Christianity through nonneutral language, and Christianity as a form of patriotism.

Overt and explicit references

Woven throughout standards documents throughout the United States, I found explicit language that demonstrates the ways in which Christian ideology permeates social studies instruction. In fact, in each of the core social studies disciplinary areas (history, geography, civics, and economics), atleast one standard explicitly privileged Christian traditions. In history, this permeation was the most prevalent. As an example, in many states, including Arizona, California, Texas, and New York, students were asked to investigate the role of Catholic missions or French/Spanish missionaries in the history of the state or country. When asked to evaluate social groups over time, New Hampshire standards suggested looking at the Shakers (SS:HI:4:5.1) or the Mormons (SS:HI:6:5.1), but no other religious groups were mentioned. Students in New Hampshire were also encouraged to consider spirituals as a form of art (SS:HI:2:3.2), and some states highlighted the role of African American churches during the Civil Rights Movement (Alabama, 4.14 & 5.12; Massachusetts, 5.T5.7).

Geography standards generally provided the most space for teachers to introduce other religious traditions. However, there were still instances where this choice was dictated and privileged Christian ideals. In considering "The geography and native peoples of Massachusetts," standard 3.T4.1 asked students to make a connection between migration and religious freedom, specifically as it relates to the Christian religion:

> Explain who the Pilgrim men and women were and why they left Europe to seek a place where they would have the right to practice their religion; describe their journey, the government of their early years in the Plymouth Colony, and analyze their relationships with the Wampanoag and Abenaki/Wabanaki people.

In the clarifying details, the standard developed this theme further, asking students to consider the challenges Pilgrims may have faced, including "maintaining their faith" (3.T4.1.b).

In topics related to civics and government, students were often asked to consider freedom of religion. In some cases (but not always), this topic was directly linked with Christian religious groups like the Puritans or the Shakers (Kentucky; 5.H.CE.2). Explicit links between Christianity and the discipline also came through when discussing patriotism, outlined in significant detail below.

Economics standards related to religion were uncommon. However, in one Michigan state standard, students were asked to describe Christmas tree farming as one of the major economic activities in the state (G4.0.1). I present this standard as an example demonstrating the depth to which students are exposed to Christo-normativity.

Implicit references

Throughout many states, standards documents used non-neutral language as the norm, centering Christian ideals as preferential. For example, the Wyoming definition of civic responsibility stated that it: "can include participation in government, church, volunteers, and members of voluntary associations." Though not a standard, this definition was included in the state standards document and is problematic because "church" is an inherently Christian term (as opposed to temple, synagogue, or mosque). This way of defining citizenship is mimicked in standards from several other states. In Grade 1 in Utah, a geography standard asked students to "Create a map showing important sites or landmarks [in] a school or community (i.e., firehouse, city hall, churches)" (1.3.2.a) while a citizenship standard asked students to "Identify neighborhood and community symbols and landmarks (i.e. firehouse, city hall, churches, other landmarks, city festivals)" (1.2.3.b). In addition, "church" was included in social studies vocabulary students should know and use; no other religious buildings were included.

Other states were successful in using inclusive language. Nebraska, in a similar standard, said, "Identify examples of cultural markers in the community. For example: religious or institutional structures, names of streets, types of businesses, buildings" (SS.2.3.4.b), and Wisconsin asked students to "Summarize how people (e.g. religious groups, civil rights groups, workers, neighborhood, residents) organize to gain a greater voice to impact and change their communities" (SS.PS2.c.4–5).

These opposing ways of approaching similar topics provide a clear example of how Christian ideals have permeated state standards in ways that are not always immediately obvious. However, once exposed, it becomes clear that, as CRPT suggests, the subordination of non-Christian individuals to Christianity has been built into U.S. society, including within elementary state social studies standards.

Christianity as a form of patriotism

Throughout the standards, there were multiple instances where ideas of U.S. patriotism and Christianity were explicitly conflated. For example, Florida state standards for kindergarten

defined patriotism as "allegiance to one's country" and included the specific text of the Pledge of Allegiance, "in God we trust," as part of standard SS.K.CG.2.3 (Table 6). In first grade, students were asked to recognize the national and state motto, "in God we trust," as symbols that represent the state and the country as part of standard SS.1.CG.2.4 and SS.1.CG.2.5. While there is no disputing that these words are correctly identified as part of the pledge and national/state mottos, directly linking them to patriotism and as words that represent our country and state demonstrate how Christian ideology is linked to ideas of citizenship. The same phrase was also included in the Louisiana state standards for second and third grade (Table 7), but in this instance, students were only asked to identify and describe the history of the national motto; it was not equated to patriotism or situated as a symbol that represents the United States as a whole.

The theme of Christianity as a form of patriotism was also seen in other ways in other states. In Massachusetts, first-grade students were asked to "demonstrate understanding of the ways people show pride in belonging to the United States by recognizing and explaining the meaning of unifying symbols, phrases, and songs," including "the melodies and lyrics of

Table 6. Florida standards about patriotism and national/state symbols.

Grade Level	Standard	Objective
K	SS.K.CG.2.3 Define patriotism as the allegiance to one's country.	Students will identify "I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America and to the republic for which it stands, one nation under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all" as the Pledge of Allegiance.
K	SS.K.A.2.2 Recognize the importance of celebrations and national holidays as a way of remembering and honoring people, events, and our nation's ethnic heritage	
K	SS.K.A.2.3 Compare our nation's holidays with holidays of other cultures.	
1	SS.1.CG.2.4 Recognize symbols and individuals that represent the United States.	Students will recognize the national motto ("In God We Trust") and "We the People" as symbols that represent the United States.
1	SS.1.CG.2.5 Recognize symbols and individuals that represent Florida.	Students will recognize that the state motto ("In God We Trust") and the state day (Pascua Florida Day) are symbols that represent Florida.
1	SS.1.A.2.3 Identify celebrations and national holidays as a way of remembering and honoring the heroism and achievements of the people, events, and our nation's ethnic heritage.	

Table 7. Louisiana standards about patriotism and national/state symbols.

Grade Level	Standard	Objective
2	2.7 Identify and describe national historical figures, celebrations, symbols, and places.	Describe the history of American symbols, including the Liberty Bell, United States flag (etiquette, customs pertaining to the display and use of the flag), bald eagle, national anthem, Uncle Sam, Statue of Liberty, The Pledge of Allegiance, and the national motto "In God We Trust."
3	3.6 Identify and describe national historical figures, celebrations, and symbols.	Describe the history of American symbols, including the Liberty Bell, U.S. flag (etiquette, customs pertaining to the display and use of the flag), bald eagle, national anthem, Uncle Sam, Statue of Liberty, The Pledge of Allegiance, and the national motto "In God We Trust."

patriotic songs (e.g., "America the Beautiful," "My Country, 'Tis of Thee," "God Bless America," and "The Star-Spangled Banner"). In the most commonly sung lyrics of three of these four songs, God is explicitly mentioned, as well as in the extended version of the fourth. First-grade standards in the District of Columbia included these four songs but added a fifth, "Lift Every Voice and Sing," which also includes references to the Christian God. Standard 1.2 asked students to identify and describe these national songs as "traditions of the United States that exemplify cherished ideals. . ."

Other kindergarten and first-grade standards in Florida (SS.K.A.2.2 and SS.1.A.2.3; Table 6) directly equated national holidays with our nation's ethnic heritage. Though there are no religious keywords in these standards, Christmas is the only nationally recognized religious holiday in the United States. This recognition requires us to consider whether the standard equates ideals of patriotism ("our ethnic heritage") with distinctly Christian ideas. A further kindergarten standard then asked students to compare these national holidays with the holidays "of other cultures," situating other religious holidays as distinctly un-American. Other states, such as Georgia and Alabama, explicitly listed Christmas as an important American holiday, though Alabama also included Hanukkah.

Similarly, and as noted above, Utah situated participation in "church" as civic responsibility and a character trait of a responsible citizen. Within their elementary standards documents for grades K-2, they defined civic responsibility as "the actions and attitudes of a citizen in a democracy that promote the common good. This may include participation in government, **church**, and community associations, as well as actions performed in various political, economic, civil, or environmental causes" (emphasis added). The definition of civic responsibility included in the Wyoming state standards also explicitly equated good citizenship with participation in church.

Implicitly, there were also instances in which Christianity and patriotism are linked. In third-grade standards for the District of Columbia, students were asked to investigate the statements of leaders who made "outstanding statements of moral and civic principles" (Table 8). While this language may seem innocent on the surface, looking closer at the standard reveals that though all four men specified are racially diverse (White, Black, and Latino), all four identify as or are explicitly connected to Christianity in some way. Frederick Douglass (African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church; Dilbeck, 2018) and Martin Luther King Jr (Baptist; Baldwin, 2010) were Christian pastors. Abraham Lincoln was raised as a Baptist, and although he did not formally join a Christian denomination as

Table 8. District of Columbia standards about patriotism.

Grade Level	Standard	Included Clarifying Information
3	3.4. Emphasizing the most significant differences, students describe Washington, DC, at the end of the 18th, 19th, and 20th centuries.	5. Identify and research outstanding statements of moral and civic principles made in Washington, DC, as well as the leaders who delivered them, that contributed to the struggle to extend equal rights to all Americans (e.g., Lincoln and his second inaugural address, Frederick Douglass and his speech against lynching at the Metropolitan AME Church, Martin Luther King Jr. and his speeches at the Lincoln Memorial in 1957 and 1963, and Rodolfo "Corky" Gonzales at the Poor People's March). (P)

an adult, he is generally considered to be a religious man who believed in the God of the Bible (W. B. Barton, 2005). While Rodolfo Gonzales may not have been specifically Christian, many of his rallies were held in Christian church buildings (Molina, 2021), and the organization he founded, Crusade for Justice, was connected with the Southern Christian Leadership Conference's civil rights campaign (Vigil, 1999). In his most famous work, *I Am Joaquin*, he names his people "God's children" and ends with the phrase "I am Aztec prince and Christian Christ" (Gonzales, 1967/2001).

However, and somewhat surprisingly, there did not seem to be a connection between a state's political ideology and its tendency to equate patriotism to Christianity. Of the states that implicitly or explicitly made this connection, just over 50% would typically be considered majority Republican states. The remaining half are split between majority Democrat and swing states.

Discussion

Prothero (2007) suggested that challenging conversations about religion in public life are only possible with a set of common knowledge. Standards name specific content knowledge educators are asked to teach students and, when they address religion, create a *de facto* body of religious content knowledge for each state (Ellis & Marcus, 2019). Though religious literacy standards are included in the *C3 Framework*, their existence throughout state social studies standards varies widely at the elementary level both at large and in how these standards appear across various grade levels. Findings from this study show that the body of religious content knowledge for elementary school students is extremely limited in almost all states, with only seven states including 10 or more standards about religion at the elementary level.

A lack of understanding of religious traditions and their role in the social and political dynamics nationally and globally creates an incomplete civic education. The foundation for understanding social studies ideas should be laid in elementary school (Libresco, 2018), and students need exposure to scaffolded content and ideas in order to build on these ideas in future grades (Hess, 2009). When 40 states have nine or fewer standards at the elementary level, the foundation to engage in middle and high school has not been laid. Further, when 80.4% of all elementary religious standards occur in upper elementary, the foundation has not been laid in the primary grades. Building stronger religious literacy across the elementary level would enable secondary teachers to explore the implications of religious disagreement and the influence of religious beliefs on political positions more fully.

Unfortunately, nearly all of the elementary state standards about social studies are broad and weakly framed or strongly framed, highlighting distinctly Christian religions, beliefs, or ideas. Weakly framed standards have the potential to be inclusive when teachers are well prepared and willing to engage in the work necessary to represent a variety of religious traditions accurately. However, the lack of explicit examples incorporated in the standards can be problematic as teachers must then make judgment calls about which material should be included. Studies have shown that preservice teachers lack knowledge about world religions other than Christianity (D. Anderson et al., 2013). This assertion makes sense as a majority of Americans come from a Christian background or profess Christianity and are likely to be familiar with the tenets of the Christian faith (James, 2015; Pew Research Center,

2015). Some research shows that "nearly half of the nation's public educators are practicing Christians—people who attend church at least monthly and say their faith is very important in their life" (Barna, 2014, para. 6). Given what the literature has shown about the number of preservice teachers who view the classroom as a missionary field, there is great potential for these standards to be manipulated, as seen in the work done by Gateways to Better Education (2021). Further, preservice teachers do not always realize that privileging Christianity is a form of bias or a structural issue (Gao, 2015; Subedi, 2006). If nearly 60% of state standards do not refer to a specific religion and allow space for teachers to select their own examples, there is a great deal of potential that these examples will be rooted in the teachers' own personal experiences or curricular goals. In the absence of explicit examples or guidance, areas where state standards show ambiguity about religion may mean that teachers are more likely to fill available space with examples from the Christian faith, even if done subconsciously or without prompting (Aronson et al., 2016; James, 2015).

In much the same way broad standards are inherently White and settler-centric (Barbour et al., 2007; Conner, 2023), there also exists a Christian narrative underlying all standards even remotely touching on issues of religion, specifically named or broadly written. This substratum begins with the language and structure of all state standards documents (Burke & Segall, 2015). The preponderance of standards related to Christianity is yet another example of the whitewashing of social studies curriculum that pushes a homogeneous narrative. Items that fall outside of that narrative (non-Christian religions and secular beliefs) are marginalized, supporting the assertation made in the first tenet of CRPT, which "declares that the subordination of non-Christian (including non-religious) individuals to Christian individuals has been built into the society of the United States" (Small, 2020, p. 62). Since a majority of the U.S. population identifies as Christian (Pew Research Center, 2015), this emphasis often leaves little room for the inclusion of other cultures, religions, or worldviews and, potentially, demonstrates one way Christianity, as the dominant religion in the United States since its inception, was "built into the society of the United States" (Small, 2020, p. 62). While subordination of non-Christian individuals is apparent in explicit standards, it is also present in implicit references to national leaders, as seen in the Washington D.C. standards about moral and civic leaders. Though the inclusion of only leaders who are Christian or are closely aligned with Christian organizations may not have been intentional, the exclusion of diverse religions in this standard highlights how Christianity permeates our culture in ways we do not immediately realize.

One reason for this lack of inclusion may be the widespread adoption of the expanding horizons approach (Akenson, 1989). This ethnocentric approach to teaching elementary social studies, initially developed more than 100 years ago, heavily emphasizes the environments with which students are most familiar (Akenson, 1989; Halvorsen, 2017). While scholars have critiqued this model and many states have begun to move away from this approach (Wade, 2002), changes to standards and curriculum are often gradual and leave behind structural issues in how content is addressed. Wade (2002) suggested the emphasis on students' self, family, and communities in the expanding horizons curriculum leads to the teaching of redundant and superfluous material students will learn outside of school. However, a curriculum following an expanding horizons approach need not fall into this trap. Incorporating pluralistic religious standards at the elementary level in conjunction

with investigating students' religious context could lead to rich discussion surrounding how one's own religious community applies beliefs to politics and society.

If standards are what teachers teach, we need a set of diverse, inclusive, pluralistic standards that include specific examples of multiple religious traditions. While there are many ways to consider which traditions should be included, one solution may be to consider cultural location as one aspect of this decision-making process. Given the ways the expanding horizons approach can be unhelpfully prescriptive and narrow, an alternative solution may parallel Nord's (2010) "Principle of Cultural Location and Weight." This principle suggests introducing students to multiple views, some more influential than others, and indicating the space in which these views carry weight in the larger (and potentially local) culture. Unlike the expanding horizons approach, decision-making based on this principle is not inherently ethnocentric. For example, it makes sense that Hawaii standards would address Hawaiian gods and goddesses in detail as an integral part of discussions about Hawaii's unique culture and core values or that, in the state of Utah, there would be a greater need to understand the cultural contributions of Mormons thoroughly. However, other states may not need to cover the same topics in depth. As a result of instruction grounded in an appropriate context, students would potentially be introduced to the beliefs held by a group; the setting of that belief in time, history, and physical location; and the importance of the belief for the religious group specifically. However, a pitfall of this approach may be a focus on only religious traditions that the teacher or district feels are relevant to the local culture rather than a more wide-spread approach that prepares students for citizenship in an increasingly global society. Further, without the requisite knowledge about world religions other than Christianity, there may be a tenancy for these representations to be superficial.

Ellis and Marcus (2019) suggested that education should not provide an oversimplified, homogenous perspective of religious traditions. Nationwide, only 13% of elementary standards, 38 total standards, covered all religions other than Christianity in elementary school social studies. It is hard to believe this representation could be anything but oversimplified. As seen in the findings, this oversimplification is demonstrated exceptionally well in the treatment of Judaism throughout the state standards, in which we see Judaism generally relegated to medieval history, Hanukkah, or the Holocaust. In reality, the Jewish religion is a complex and nuanced topic that continues to affect citizens across the globe (British Broadcasting Corporation, 2023), and even elementary students are able to think about this topic in complex and nuanced, developmentally appropriate ways (Allen, 2023).

Using CRPT as a lens through which to analyze elementary social studies standards also emphasizes the potential dangers of Christo-normativity. Tenet three of CRPT "exposes Christian privilege and Christian hegemony in society, as well as the related concept of the false neutral of secularism" (Small, 2020, p. 62). Throughout the findings, the ways in which Christian privilege and hegemony are intertwined with what teachers are asked to teach are clear. The First Amendment suggests that teachers can and should teach for religious literacy without proselytizing (Nord, 2010). Although social studies standards may not explicitly teach students how to become Christian, throughout the elementary grades in many states, they are situated in a way that implicitly suggests

Christianity is the superior choice, especially for "good" or patriotic citizens of the United States. This privilege is seen throughout the findings in non-secular language used in the definitions and standards related to good citizenship and in the teaching of patriotic hymns.

Implications and potential for change

The standards presented in many states create a bleak portrait of what elementary students are learning about diverse religious traditions (if they are being addressed at all). However, the charge for change in the way we teach about religion in the classroom is neither new or different. Almost a decade ago, K. C. Barton (2015) made the same plea, pointing out the need for education about world religions in a democratic society and ending with the admonishment that "greater attention to religion appears to be an obvious path to educating students who can make informed judgments and collaborate respectfully with others" (p. 61).

In response to appeals such as these, CRPT provides hope and guidance for teachers and teacher educators. In tenet four, "CRPT advocates for a pluralistic inclusion of all religious, secular, and spiritual identities, recognizing the liberatory potential of these identities upon individuals' lives" (Small, 2020, p. 62). Rather than suggesting that religion broadly, or Christianity specifically, is dismantled and removed from education, CRPT advocates for the removal of privilege and hegemony by intentionally engaging in religious pluralism. As an ideal, the theory defines pluralism as not just diversity, but engagement with diversity. It is centered on dialogue for the creation of a better society. CRPT further suggests that religious pluralism can be achieved through active, dialogic engagement with religious and non-religious differences (Small, 2020). In other words, there is a need to focus on religion more, not less; there is a need to do it through engaging strategies that invite participants into a dialogue; and, as outlined above, this engagement should start sooner to help students build a foundation for engagement throughout their education (Hess, 2009; Libresco, 2018).

Similarly, in tenet seven, Small (2020) suggested that "CRPT prioritizes the voices of individuals with minoritized religious identities and those with pluralistic commitments in the work toward social transformation" (p. 62). Aronson et al. (2016) touched on this idea in previous work, suggesting that culturally relevant education is also relevant to religious diversity, despite findings from this study that demonstrate how these minoritized voices (in the context of religion) are rarely prioritized in elementary social studies standards. While teachers certainly cannot cover every religion, it is also important to acknowledge there are many major and minor religions, as well as people who do not ascribe to any religious beliefs at all (K. C. Barton, 2015).

One way to reach the goals set forward by tenet four and tenet seven may be by helping teachers learn to embrace autonomy and make use of ambiguous state standards surrounding religion and culture, aligning multicultural lessons that emphasize religion with state-mandated content. Research shows that teachers are not always equipped to make sound decisions on curricular issues related to religion (Oldendorf & Green, 2005; Saylor et al., 2022; Tannebaum, 2018; White, 2009). Instead of teaching about religious diversity, these conversations are often avoided (Subedi, 2006). Tannebaum (2018) suggested that "pre-service teachers need to be introduced to practical pedagogical strategies that help K-12 students engage with world religions in meaningful and engaging ways" (p. 44). Yet despite

these assertions that teacher education programs should play a role in equipping preservice teachers to teach about religion (Saylor et al., 2022; Tannebaum, 2018), historically, they have not (Aronson et al., 2016; White, 2009; Zam & Stone, 2006). Teacher educators need to consider when and how they provide instruction in teaching religion as part of preservice teacher education.

Teacher educators may also consider creating spaces within teacher education programs to help preservice teachers examine their own religious identities (Logan & Hartwick, 2019) and provide them ample time to develop analytical skills to deeply consider ideas like Christo-normativity and religious pluralism. Without guidance on how to engage with both weakly and strongly framed standards about religion from teacher education faculty or the development of critical analysis skills to use as part of the decision-making process, preservice teachers may take their cues from their religious institutions, their personal experiences, or their observations of inservice teachers. Programmatic silence about religion may also prevent preservice teachers from understanding how their religious perspectives may harm K-12 students from diverse religious or non-religious backgrounds (Logan & Hartwick, 2019).

Advocates for religious literacy should consider developing recommendations outlining the skills and content that should be incorporated into existing standards and included in the classroom, working toward the pluralistic inclusion of diverse religious, secular, and spiritual identities. There are many resources that can help teachers and teacher educators become more familiar with both diverse major and minor religions and the process to advocate for changes in state standards. For example, the Kaur Foundation provides resources for educators seeking to learn more about Sikhism, the fifth-largest religion in the world, which has only been incorporated into secondary U.S. social studies standards in 18 states over the past 10 years (The Sikh Coalition, 2024). Groups such as the Religion & Education Collaborative also provide seminars and resources for educators that span the fields of religion and education. Though more work needs to be done, interrogating what is included about religion in state standards and why is a critical first step in deconstructing the hegemonic nature of knowledge systems in U.S. classrooms and moving toward social studies instruction that fairly and accurately represents the pluralistic religious, secular, and spiritual identities of all citizens.

Note

1. In some states, standards revisions are in process or have been passed during the course of data analysis. The Appendix outlines the specific standards document used to collect data for this study.

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