Functions of Religious Literacy in Literary Discussions of National Board-Certified English Teachers

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The overarching goal of this study was to understand how high school teachers and students respond to religious topics in English Language Arts (ELA) classrooms. Most ELA researchers believe literary discussions are important for both ELA learning as well as the establishment of democratic pluralistic principles. Scholars have also recently called for the examination of religion alongside other social categories in ELA instruction. Backed by theories and research from religious literacy scholarship, critical literacy, and literary literacy in ELA, this study examined literary discussion transcripts and teacher analyses of discussions from 101 National Board certification portfolios to examine what and how religions were represented across high school ELA classrooms. It also examined the different pedagogical functions that religion played in these teachers' literary discussions. Quantitative analysis of the data indicated that talk about religion was recurrent but not always substantial. Religion was often discussed in general and Christian-centric ways. Qualitative analyses indicated that religious literacy functioned in literary discussions in four ways: 1) comprehending or appreciating cultural contexts; 2) examining texts through religious lenses; 3) drawing on personal religious experiences to connect to a text; and 4) examining religion in the world based on themes from a text. Implications of the study provide recommendations for teaching about religion in ELA contexts that can simultaneously support religious, literary, and critical literacies.

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1.0 Introduction

A growing number of researchers, scholars and teachers in English Education have emphasized the need to discuss the role religion plays or ought to play in English Language Arts classrooms. Most U.S. English Education researchers believe that one of the primary goals of the English Language Arts (ELA) is to promote attributes of democratic citizenship in a pluralistic society. Through literary analysis, ELA teachers often aim to expose students to a variety of human experiences and alternative worldviews, inviting them to draw connections from literatures of these worldviews to broader society and social contexts (NCTE/IRA, 1996). ELA researchers over the years have gained new insights into the way discussion of texts can meet these goals by addressing various dimensions of human experiences across race, gender, class, sexual orientation, etc. (Appleman, 2015; Beach & Myers, 2001; Wargo, 2017). It remains unclear, however, what approach scholars recommend for addressing religion and religious identities in the ELA classroom. Even less clear is the role scholars and teachers believe religion *ought* to play in ELA.

Over the past decade, scholars have produced a growing collection of case-study data supporting the notion that religion can play an influential role in both learning and teaching in ELA classrooms (e.g., Damico & Hall, 2015; Dávila & Volz, 2017; Juzwik et al, 2019; Olshefski, 2021; Skerrett, 2014a; Weyand & Juzwik, 2019). These studies have provided insight into the way religion can be addressed in ELA contexts in ways that are constitutionally legitimate, culturally responsive, and disciplinarily productive (Dávila, 2015; Feinberg & Layton, 2013; Moore, 2010). To date, there exist no broad scale studies across English Language Arts sites that can 1) speak to the frequency with which topics related to religion are addressed across ELA classrooms in the U.S., and 2) provide a clear picture for ELA teachers and scholars of the ways in which religion is

discussed when it comes up. The present study aims to fill these research gaps by examining discussion data of 101 ELA teachers who were certified by the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS) to analyze how often and in what ways religious subject matter is addressed. The study further examines how instances in which religion is addressed in NBPTS ELA discussions reflect the broader standards of English Education and National Board conceptualizations of "Accomplished Teaching."

The research questions that guided the study were:

1) What religions were represented across NBPTS ELA discussions, and how were they represented?

2) When religion was addressed in NBPTS ELA discussions, what function or functions did it serve in ELA teaching and learning?

1.1 Defining Religion

Religion is notoriously challenging to define. Smith (1967/1992) argued that the word *religion* can connote at least four drastically different meanings: 1) reference to someone's personal piety; 2) outsider descriptions of a community; 3) insider descriptions of their ideal community; and 4) a generic summation of the prior three possible definitions.

The first sense, which Smith refers to as "personal piety," is often used to describe the character trait of an individual who engages in spiritual practices ("I don't pray; I'm not religious") or holds firmly to certain beliefs ("he is religious, so he probably won't buy a drink"). The second sense of *religion* is often used to describe certain communities of people who share beliefs, values or practices ("according to their religion, God is …"). In this sense it is used to describe a culture

or a community. Anthropological and ethnographic approaches to *religion* have defined it as a "system of symbols" that establishes consensus within a community around a "general order of existence" making particular moods or attitudes "seem uniquely realistic" (Geertz 1973, p. 90). A third sense of *religion* is used by insiders of communities, often in reference to an ideal standard for beliefs and practices. Use of *religion* in this sense often involves discussion of what or how *religion* ought to mean—in other words what it means to be a *true* Muslim or a *true* Christian. In this sense, the meaning of what it means to be *religious* is negotiated by the people who affiliate with or participate in the group's rituals or practices. The last sense of the use of the word *religion* refers to "a generic summation" (Smith, 1967/1992) of the complex web of assumptions the word could possibly entail. As it is, *religion* is used by speakers and writers to refer to something that is not sufficiently described as *politics* or *economics* or *art,* for example. In this sense, the word *religion* comes with the invisible qualification, "for lack of a better word." In essence, references to religion-generically-summarized reflect the famous "pornography dodge" of *Jacobellis v. Ohio,* which is to say "we know these things when we see them" (Juzwik et al., 2019 p. 3). *Religion* in this last sense, according to Smith, is a conglomeration of the prior three uses of the word. "In so far as it is historical, [the word *religion*] is as complex as all 'the religions' taken together. In so far as it is personal, it is as diverse as the [people] whose piety it synthesizes" (p. 49).

I believe this last sense – the understanding of *religion* or *religions* or *religious* as a generic summation of the possible meanings that could be interpreted by the words— is the most appropriate for the purposes of this exploratory study. Whether it be in reference to personal piety, the reference to a system of beliefs in a particular or general community by either an outsider or an insider, the goal here is to examine the ways in which religion or religions or religious subject

matter—however they are conceived by speakers in the discussion— are addressed in ELA classrooms.

It is also important to mention that, as Juzwik et al. (2019) have noted, when people in the U.S. refer to *religion,* "they are actually writing about some form of Christianity" (p. 2). This conflation of *religion* with *Christianity* can reinforce Christian normativity, most often white Christian normativity (Joshi, 2020). I recognize this inequitable tendency, and I have thus tried to be specific where I can. When I use *religion* I often do so because the specific religious context is either difficult to determine or difficult to limit to one specific religious legacy. I have tried to use the word *Christianity* when the focal religious legacy I am discussing is indeed particularly and solely Christianity. Furthermore, when it is clear, I try to be distinct about the racial contexts of the religions I mention, and in this dataset this occurs most often when discussing white Christianity.

1.2 Theoretical Background

My study was informed by three overlapping theoretical frameworks in educational research: religious literacy, literary literacy in English education, and critical literacy, which I discuss in more detail in Chapter 2 of the present study.

1.2.1 Religious Literacy

Religious literacy is the ability to navigate conversations around religious beliefs and identities (Biesta et al., 2019). Although the ability to interact productively around religious subject matter is vital for the flourishing of a democratic society (James et al., 2015), scholars largely agree that Americans tend to be religiously "illiterate" (Moore, 2007; Prothero, 2007). A common solution proposed by religious literacy scholars is to include within both K-12 curricula and pre-service teacher training formal courses devoted to teaching about religions from an academic perspective (Moore, 2010; Soules & Jafralie, 2021), as opposed to a more devotional perspective.

1.2.2 Literary Literacy in ELA

Literary literacy conceives of knowledge and literacy in ways that complicate much of the discourse around religious literacy. Discussions of literary literacy in ELA emerged within a broader body of scholarship around the notion of disciplinary literacy. Disciplinary literacy re-examines school-based knowledge by conceiving of academic disciplines (e.g., biology, algebra, literary studies, etc.) as discourse communities engaged in specialized literacy practices that result in unique forms of knowledge (Moje, 2007). By looking at school-based content areas (e.g., science, math, English etc.) against a disciplinary literacy backdrop, educators can reflect on the ways in which their instruction affords students opportunities to engage authentically in the same literate practices as experts in the discipline. This notion of literacy has compelled ELA scholars and educators to reflect on the literate practices specific to English Language Arts classrooms. One such practice has been referred to as "literary literacy" (Rainey, 2017) which involves a set of tools, expectations, and goals different from, say, historical literacy and scientific literacy. Such a

conception of literacy compels scholars and educators who are invested in religious literacy to consider how literate practices within different disciplines inform or are informed by various religious literacies. The aim of this study is to further this conversation by considering ways in which the literary literacy commitments in English education can or do draw productively on religious literacies, and vice versa.

1.2.3 Critical Literacy

Critical literacy is the third theoretical framework informing this study. Critical literacy (Freire & Macedo, 1987) emphasizes how the role literate practices are used as a means for humans to resist systems of oppression, thereby transforming their ways of being in the world. Whereas disciplinary literacy invites reflection on how to engage students in authentic knowledge-producing practices, critical literacy invites scholars and educators to reflect on social consequences of that knowledge by attending to ways discourses are used either to resist or reinforce hegemonic power structures (Vasquez et al., 2019). Critical literacy in English education already invites teachers to reflect on the degree to which their teaching explicitly activates students to transform society for the sake of social justice and equity (Kinloch et al., 2019). Scholarship on critical approaches to literary literacy in English education (e.g., Appleman, 2015; Beach et al., 2015; Fecho, 2001), however, tend not to examine religion explicitly. This study aims to draw together both critical and religious literacy theories to support ELA instruction.

1.3 Contribution to the Present Study

My study aims to build on a growing body of scholarship that has drawn critical attention to the role religious literacies have played and can play in instructional practices in English education (e.g., Burke & Segall, 2016; Dávila & Volz, 2017; Hadley, 2021; Juzwik & McKenzie, 2015; Olshefski, 2021; Sarroub, 2002; Skerrett, 2014; Wheatley, 2019). Prior work in English education has demonstrated that religious literacies "find their way into English language arts curriculum, learning, teaching, and teacher education work" (Juzwik et al., 2019, p. 1). However, many ELA educators remain hesitant about explicitly acknowledging or engaging religious beliefs and practices in their English classrooms (Dávila, 2015). Furthermore, studies examining Christianity's role in English education provide potentially conflicting narratives (LeBlanc, 2017, p. 104), creating tension between cases in which religious literacies supported school-based practices in English education (e.g., Skerrett, 2014) and those in which religious literacies created uncomfortable ethical and social dilemmas (Juzwik & McKenzie, 2015; Olshefski, 2021). A few studies (e.g., Damico & Hall, 2015; Dávila & Volz, 2017; Dávila & Epstein, 2019) have showcased teaching practices that recruit religious literacies in ELA instruction to support critical conversations about privilege, power and "othering" in ways that avoid marginalizing students who identify strongly with religious communities. Dávila's work has illustrated a way to facilitate discussions of religion that both invites explicit and critical examination of religion but also affirms the identities of students of diverse religious experiences. The present study contributes to scholarship in the field of English education that examines the role religion can and ought to play in literary literacy learning in high school ELA classrooms.

1.4 Context of the Present Study

Data for this study was retrieved from the Accomplished Teaching, Learning and Schools (ATLAS) database[1]. The database is made up of portfolios originally submitted to the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS) by teachers seeking, and subsequently obtaining, certification. All instruction included in ATLAS portfolios reflects what the National Board refers to as "Accomplished Teaching." According to Hakel, Koenig & Elliot (2008), "accomplished teachers demonstrate that they know their students, their subject matter, and how to teach it; think systematically about their practice; and learn from their experience" (p. 3). Furthermore, having received National Board teaching certification, accomplished teachers have achieved the highest professional teaching certification available in the U.S., and this certification has been shown to have a significant influence on student achievement (Cowan & Goldhaber, 2016).

This dataset of highly certified teachers allows for the examination of a broad range of teaching practices across contexts. Furthermore, the instruction that is included in this study have been thoroughly vetted by education experts in ELA professions and determined to reflect high instructional standards according to expert researchers and professionals in both education in general and English education specifically (NBPTS, 2016). The fact that the instruction in these videos has been endorsed by the National Board suggests that moments in which religion happens to "find its way" into the data can be considered not only appropriate practice according to experts in the field, but even "best practice." In other words, instances in the dataset in which students and

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[1] https://www.nbpts.org/support/atlas/

researchers talk about religion provides a close approximation for what the broader field of ELA research considers to be high quality instruction about religion in English Language Arts.

1.5 Literary Discussions

Literary discussions are a vital component of English Language Arts teaching practice (Applebee et al., 2004; Nystrand & Gamoran, 1991) because they support disciplinary literacy aims of supporting argumentative reasoning and the examining of single texts through multiple perspectives (Appleman, 2015; Beach et al., 2020; Rogers & Soter, 1997; Sherry, 2014). Literary discussions are also particularly public and spontaneous and reflect the collaborative intellectual activity of "thinking together" (Mercer 2002). The spontaneity of talk data is also important for this study. Especially due to the widespread hesitancy among teachers to speak openly about religion in the classroom, any talk about religion in a literary discussion is a complex "discretionary moment" (Ball, 2018), and much is to be gained by examining accomplished teachers' responses to such talk.

1.6 Methods

This study began with 101 portfolios submitted by ELA teachers for consideration for National Board certification. Each portfolio includes a transcript of a 15-minute literature discussion video, a 12-page teacher commentary, and miscellaneous instructional materials. Informed by the prior research on religious literacy, literary literacy in English education, and

critical literacy, data was reduced through line-by-line analyses and analytic memo writing to determine each source's relevance to the study's research questions. The remaining 47 portfolios deemed relevant to the study were coded through a combination of a priori categories drawn from related studies as well as emergent categories constructed through grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014). A final cycle involved synthesizing coding categories, resulting in four functions of talk about religion in ELA literary discussions: knowledge of religion for cultural context, religion as a literary lens, personal religious connections to text, and a critical examination of religion's role in the world.

1.7 Conclusion

Contrary to mid-twentieth century theories that predicted the increasing irrelevance of religion as societies modernize and develop economically (Weber, 1958), religion remains "a profoundly normal part of the lives of a huge majority of people in the late modern world" (Davie, 2010, p. 162). Additionally, as educational theories like multicultural education (Banks & Banks, 2019) and culturally responsive/ relevant/ sustaining pedagogies (Paris & Alim, 2017) have become ubiquitous in educational scholarship, education professionals have increasingly drawn attention to religion's role in pluralistic democratic visions of education. It is my hope that the central emphasis on religion in English education contexts will contribute to an ongoing conversation among expert scholars and professionals in English education regarding religion's role not only in ELA, but also within broader conversations of education as well as our democratic society.

2.0 Literature Review

This study draws on three different bodies of scholarship, each conceptualizing literacy in a different way. Between these three bodies of scholarship exist some overlapping conceptions of literacy. The bodies of scholarship—i.e., literary literacy in English Education, critical literacy and religious literacy—are described below. Also, as depicted in the triple Venn diagram below (Figure 1), each of the three bodies of scholarship overlap with the other two. In the second half of this chapter, I describe these intersections. In the final section of this chapter, I describe the center of the diagram, making the case for why the present study ought to be located along with other studies linking these three bodies of scholarship.
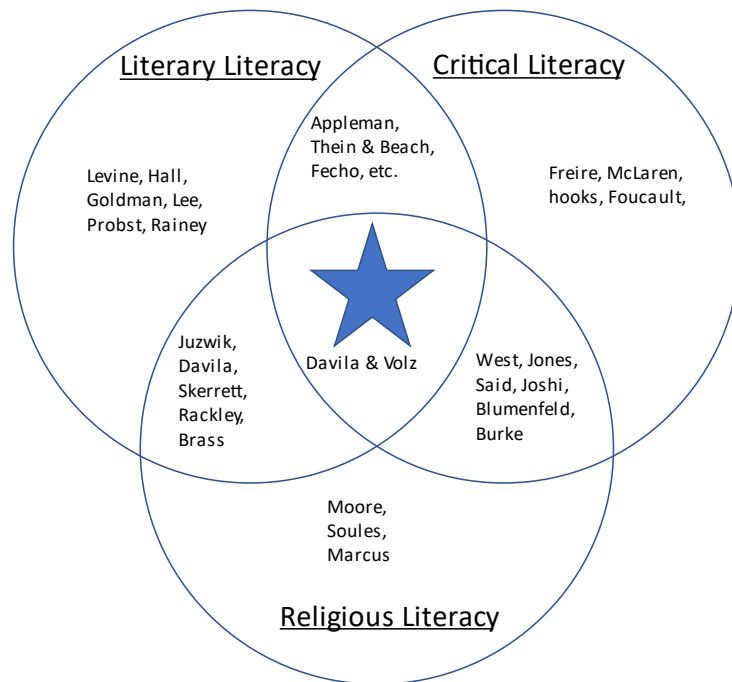
Figure 1: Literary, critical and religious literacies (triple Venn)

2.1 Literary Literacy

The first body of scholarship, which focuses on the notion of literary literacy, relies on conversations of disciplinary literacy. Proponents of disciplinary literacy rely on a conception of literacy as a set of socio-cognitive tools (Vygotsky, 1962) that humans use to generate specific forms of knowledge (see, e.g., Moje, 2007). Thus, just as the practices experts engage in vary from discipline to discipline, so too does the form of knowledge that they produce. Disciplinary literacy proponents argue that this variation across practices and knowledge types across disciplines also entails different textual and cognitive tools and different literacy demands. In other words, the set of characteristics that come to define one as "literate" depends on the discipline in which they are participating (Lee & Spratley, 2010). For example, the literacy tools used to support scientific inquiry include the ability to describe the natural world through text structures that reflect the scientific method (Cervetti & Pearson, 2012). The specific and predictable form of scientific texts allows for ever-increasing summarization, which in turn supports ongoing efforts to systematically categorize and search in order to efficiently build on prior discoveries. Historical disciplines involve a different set of practices and tools which lead to knowledge in a different form. As opposed to examination of the natural world through the scientific method, historical literacy relies heavily on document analysis, sourcing, and corroborating evidence (Monte-Sano, 2010; Shanahan, Shanahan & Misischia, 2008). Thus, to apply the same expectations to historical writing and scientific writing is to misunderstand the goals and aims of either discipline.

Understanding literacy in English Language Arts requires a clear articulation of the types of knowledge being constructed through ELA instruction, as well as the practices and socio-cognitive tools used to construct that knowledge. A variety of disciplines inform the practices valued in secondary ELA classrooms. For example, students and teachers in ELA draw on

knowledge produced within disciplines ranging from journalism, poetry, cultural studies, linguistics, sociolinguistics, drama studies, research writing, to name a few. These disparate disciplines are all concerned with the production and examination of language in one way or another, but their emphases and priorities differ depending on the discipline. One key practice within secondary ELA instruction, which is the central focus of the present study, is literary analysis, or *literary literacy* (Rainey, 2017).

Literary literacy in ELA is also informed by a variety of disciplines housed within academic departments in universities, and therefore the knowledge produced by literary analysis varies depending on the discipline shaping it. For example, Probst (1990) argued that literary analysis often supports one of five different types of knowledge: knowledge of self, knowledge of others, knowledge of texts, knowledge of contexts, knowledge about processes. These different knowledges reflect different commitments across disciplinary communities under the umbrella of literary studies. For example, emphasis on literary analysis with the end goal of producing a knowledge of self reflects the goals of reader-oriented theorists (e.g., Louise Rosenblatt, Stanley Fish, etc.), whereas the emphasis on knowledge of texts reflects the commitments of the New Critics (Cleanth Brooks, T.S. Eliot, etc.). These commitments are historically and socio-culturally situated within different but intersecting disciplinary communities (Bressler, 2011). Therefore, the instruction of literary texts in ELA classes is invariably influenced by one or more disciplinary communities that have their own ideological commitments, lines of inquiry, and tools with which to support learning deemed valuable.

The link between ELA learning at the secondary level and the disciplinary commitments informing instruction is more often assumed than explicitly named or recognized. However, the consequences of adopting one set of disciplinary assumptions over another are not insignificant.

As Appleman (2015) has argued, the approach a teacher takes to texts is a politically laden enterprise. The traditional reliance on autobiographical, reader-response and New Critical theories of literary analysis is as politically charged in what it does *not* allow as the emphases on Critical Race, Marxist, Feminist and Queer theories *do* allow. Students who are encouraged to engage a text only by personally connecting to it, for example, have been shown to risk over-identifying with characters whose lives are vastly different from their own. Lewis (2000) has shown that such over-identification can preclude important conversations that texts were intended to generate in the first place, as was the case when white readers grossly misinterpreted Ralph Ellison's "Battle Royale" as an underdog story reflecting U.S. meritocratic ideologies. Despite decades of discussion around the importance of naming the disciplinary influences of different approaches to literary analysis, it remains common practice within ELA classrooms to engage in autobiographical, reader-response, and New Critical approaches to literary analysis without naming the disciplines' ideological commitments.

2.2 Critical Literacy

A second body of scholarship that informs this study is critical literacy. Drawing on the Frankfurt school of Critical Theory developed in Germany (e.g., Horkheimer, 1972), critical literacy examines the relationship between education and systems of oppression through Marxist theories of class struggle. In other words, literacy and education are seen by critical literacy

scholars as a means by which populations of people can be empowered to resist political oppression.

Critical literacy examines the learning of texts and language for the roles they can serve as mechanisms for *conscientização*, or critical consciousness (Freire, 1970). Freire and Macedo (1987) argued for a conception of literacy as reading both "the word" as well as "the world." They offer a theory of literacy "as a form of cultural politics" arguing that in order for literacy to promote "democratic and emancipatory change" it "cannot be reduced to the treatment of letters and words as purely mechanical domain." Rather, literacy ought to be conceived "as the relationship of learners to the world, mediated by the transforming practice of this world taking place in the very general milieu in which learners travel" (viii). In this sense, critical literacy goes beyond an inquiry into the use of literacy tools to achieve disciplinary purposes, but also includes engaging with text in order to transform one's own way of being in the world.

For Freire, this transformative literacy is necessary not only for the emancipation of the oppressed, but also for the oppressor. Referring to it as the "oppressor-oppressed contradiction," Freire writes, "The pedagogy of the oppressed is an instrument for their critical discovery that both they and their oppressors are manifestations of dehumanization" (1970/2011, p. 48). Freire's pedagogy is as attentive to the liberation of the oppressed as it is to the liberation of the oppressor. Liberation must include the transformation of the oppressor's consciousness as well as the oppressed consciousness. Therefore critical whiteness scholars like Leonardo (2009) and Allen & Rossatto (2009) who, while working for the liberation of the oppressed (i.e., people of color marginalized by systems of racism), also examine the undertheorized identities of the oppressor (i.e., white people). Examination of systems of oppression are also important when thinking about

the role of religion in society. In the U.S., this involves reflecting on the relationship between whiteness and Christianity (Joshi, 2020).

2.3 Religious Literacy

The third body of scholarship, Religious Literacy, is largely based on a concern for "how little Americans know about religion" (Soules, 2019, p. 1). Drawing on the metaphorical use of literacy employed by Hirsch (1987) in his notion of Cultural Literacy, Prothero (2007) argued in *Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know ... and Doesn't* that despite the fact that America is a deeply religious country, Americans have surprisingly little knowledge about basic facts about world religions. He argues that one solution to this problem is for American public schooling to include religion classes.

Religious literacy scholarship draws on broader arguments regarding religion in public education in general, that "the idea of liberal education does commit us to *take religion seriously* in both schools and universities" (Nord, 2002, p. 10; cited in Juzwik et al., in press, p. 3). This argument (see also Greenawalt, 2005; Haynes & Thomas, 2001; Marty & Moore, 2000) challenges interpretations of the First Amendment – "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof" (U.S. Const. amend. I)— that incorrectly assume any and all conversations around religion are prohibited in state-sponsored classrooms (Dávila, 2015). Scholars argue that such interpretations fail to address the legal nuances around religion and public education, noting with importance the Supreme Court Rulings in the 1960s that allow for, and even encourage, the teaching "about religion" in public schools (Engle v. Vitale, 1962; Abington v. Schempp, 1963), so long as:

(1) the school's approach to religion is *academic,* not *devotional*.

(2) The school strives for student *awareness* of religions, but does not press for student *acceptance* of any religion.

(3) The school sponsors *study* about religion, not the *practice* of religion.

(4) The school may *expose* students to a diversity of religious views, but may not *impose* any particular view.

(5) The school *educates* about all religions, it does not *promote* or *denigrate* religion.

(6) The school *informs* students about various beliefs, it does not seek to *conform* students to any particular belief. (Bracher et al., 1974, p. 2; cited in Moore, 2010, p. 7)

By misinterpreting the Supreme Court's ruling as a prohibition against any and every mention of religion in public school classrooms, educators risk subjecting a new generation of Americans to widespread religious illiteracy (Prothero, 2007), which arguably contributes to "a climate whereby certain forms of bigotry and misrepresentation can emerge unchallenged and thus serve as one form of justification for violence and marginalization" (Moore, 2010, p. 5). As such, scholars continue to justify the project of developing a pedagogy of religion that meets the legal standards of neutrality on the grounds that religious literacy is key in establishing a robust pluralistic democracy (e.g., Feinberg & Layton, 2013).

Religious Literacy, particularly á la Prothero, often risks being characterized as the mere acquisition of foundational and factual knowledge about dominant religions. Like Hirsch's Cultural Literacy, conversations around Religious Literacy can easily be construed as an exercise in conserving a cultural heritage felt to be in fast decline. Biesta et al. (2019), therefore, suggest an alternative metaphor for conceptualizing Religious Literacy, i.e., literacy as navigation. If to be literate is to be able to "navigate a complex range of social practices" (p. 19) then religious literacy involves "an improved quality of conversation about the category of religion and religious belief itself" (p. 21).

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Diane Moore (2007) argues for a cultural studies approach for navigating religion in public schools. Such an approach relies on the assumptions that religions are dynamic, internally diverse, and culturally embedded. She argues that such an approach is not only constitutionally sound, but it also can "help diminish discriminatory practices while also providing information to help educators proactively shape their educational environments so that *all* students feel a sense of belonging" (p. 33).

A cultural studies approach to the role of religion in public schools has been important to the expansion of courses on world religions, but it has made limited impact on the ways content area teachers approach religion within, say, 10th grade biology, European History, or 10th grade World Literature. For this study, this particular limitation is significant because a cultural studies approach aligns with only a limited set of disciplines informing ELA learning. The emphasis scholars have historically placed on "knowledge of the self" and the connections between academic worlds and students' social lives (Beach & Myers, 2001; Probst, 1990) complicate Moore's recommendations against discussion of "devotional religion" which is particularly likely to arise when ELA teachers seek to have students produce "knowledge of self."

2.4 The Intersection of Critical Literacy and Literary Literacy in ELA

Critical literacy and disciplinary literacy are often viewed as intertwined in ELA. As of November 2018, the National Council of Teachers of English, for example, officially resolved to "promote pedagogy and scholarly curricula in English and related subjects that instruct students in civic and critical literacy" (NCTE, 2019). According to Vasquez, Janks & Comber (2019), this conception of critical literacy is understood as the focus "on the interplay between discursive

practices and unequal power relations—and issues of social justice and equity—in support of diverse learners" (p. 302). ELA scholars and researchers have proposed critical approaches to reading (Appleman, 2015; Borsheim-Black & Sarigianides, 2019), writing (Janks & Vasquez, 2011), and language (Baker-Bell, 2020; Godley & Reaser, 2018). The commonality across these critical literacy approaches, as Vasquez et al. observed, is the process of examining literate practices not as ends in themselves, but as means to understanding and transforming unequal power relations, with the particular aim of fostering social justice and equity. As Beach, Thein & Webb (2015) described their approach to ELA instruction: "a critical inquiry approach allows students to use academic skills and thinking to go beyond traditional notions of English language arts to examine larger aspects of human, interpersonal, and lived-world questions shaping reading, writing, speaking/listening, media/digital literacy, and language use. This approach focuses primarily on addressing problems and issues associated with well-being, fairness, and democracy" (p. 5). In other words, criticality means teaching students to read "the word" in order to understand and transform "the world" (Freire & Macedo, 1987).

Many ELA scholars and educators acknowledge the explicit political edge involved in such a conception of critical literacy. Fecho (2001), for example, noted that his critical approach to ELA instruction always "teeters on the fulcrum of threat" (Fecho, 2001, p. 30). Appleman (2015), who argues for the explicit instruction of Critical theories in secondary ELA classrooms, responds to the criticism that her approach was "too political" by saying, "First, teaching is essentially a political act, a political stance—a stance that advocates for the literacy rights of everyone, a stance that acknowledges that when you give someone literacy, you give them power. Second, even our seemingly neutral reading of texts is political" (p. 8). Similarly, many ELA scholars who recruit

Freire's theory and practice of critical literacy for English Education conceive of the work as a pedagogical approach but also as "way of being" in the world (Vasquez et al., 2019, p. 302).

When supporting critical literacy in ELA instruction, scholars have been clear that efforts are most effective when teachers are strategic and committed to facilitating critical conversations with their students. Otherwise, discussions are ineffective (Skerrett, 2011), and could even perpetuate oppressive perspectives (Lewis, 2000). For example, Skerrett observed that many teachers who believe they are hosting critical conversations about race rely too heavily on incidental talk (Skerrett, 2011, cited in Borsheim-Black & Sarigianides, 2019). Incidental talk is often the by-product of an approach to instruction about racism that relies on talking about it "when it comes up." As scholars have noted, however, this approach "does not ensure that student understanding is carefully introduced, scaffolded, practiced, and assessed" (Borsheim-Black & Sarigianides, 2019, p. 23; Skerrett, 2011). Although there is a productive and growing body of literature on anti-racist teaching, there are not yet the same efforts being poured into critical approaches to religion in ELA teaching, and whether those efforts would be worthwhile.

2.5 The Intersection of Religious Literacy and Critical Literacy

Scholars have long engaged the subject of religion from a Freirian critical literacy perspective. Scholars have navigated theological discourses by creating critical awareness of the systems of oppression both resisted and perpetuated by dominant religion. In most cases in the U.S., these conversations zero in on white Christianity as the focus (e.g., Du Mez, 2020; Jones, 2020; West, 2009). Drawing on Marxist critiques, West (2002) discussed the "equivocal character" character of religion, noting its capacity for either "freedom and liberation" on the one hand, or "domination and

pacification" on the other (West, 2002; p. 118). In particular, a running theme across this work parallels that of Paulo Freire's critical literacy project is the attention paid to the often-unrecognized power and privilege wielded through white Christian and male privilege (Du Mez, 2020; Jones, 2020).

Many scholars in the U.S. who are engaged in critical analysis of religion through Freirean frameworks agree with the notion that categories of oppression like racism, sexism, heterosexism, ableism, classism have all been undergirded by Christian theological justifications (Todd, 2010, p. 142). As the Critical Race Theorist Derrick Bell once stated: "Most racists are also Christians" (Bell, 2005, cited in Taylor, 2006: p. 51). Christian justifications for systems of oppression carry significant potency because of the well-documented fact of Christian privilege and Christian normativity in U.S. institutions. Recent scholarship drawing on critical theories for the explicit purpose of examining Christian hegemony is Small's (2020) theory of Critical Religious Pluralism which aims to acknowledge "the central roles of religious privilege, oppression, hegemony, and marginalization in maintaining inequality between Christians and non-Christians in the United States" (p. 61). Similar work has noted the ubiquity of overt and covert instantiations of Christian privilege in the context of U.S. public schooling (Blumenfeld, 2006; Blumenfeld & Jaekel, 2012; Blumenfeld, Joshi, & Fairchild, 2009; Burke & Segall, 2017).

For some, the extent to which White Christianity is the subject of such critical examination is simply proof of the existence of anti-Christian bias within academic scholarship. Joshi (2020) conceded that anti-Christian bias in academic discourse is a real and valid threat, however, she maintains her analysis of White Christian Privilege as important in the following way.

Even if some Christians may have personally face real obstacles, criticism, or discrimination related to their faith, such experiences do not negate the power of Christian

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privilege. This book does not deny the existence of anti-Christian bias; rather, it aims to

chow that White Christian norms nonetheless remain entrenched in our institutions, laws,

and civic culture in ways that set up an uneven playing field in everyday public, social, and

work life to the disadvantage of many religious minorities. Moreover, none of the strategies

presented here to ameliorate this problem aim to diminish Christianity, but rather to ensure

equal opportunity for all religious traditions and for those who embrace no religion. (p. 10)

Here Joshi acknowledges the possibility that individual White Christians may have faced "real

obstacles, criticism, or discrimination" for their religion. Her Critical analysis, however, is not to

be confused with an attack on Christianity as a religion or belief system. Rather, critically exposing

the inequities ingrained in America's religious tapestry is a vital step toward ensuring "equal

opportunity for all religious traditions and for those who embrace no religion." As it stands, being

a white Christian entails an "invisible knapsack" (McIntosh, 1989) that when unacknowledged

results in the same inequitable realities as refusal to acknowledge white privilege or male privilege.

A last point to make regarding the intersection between critical literacy and Religious

Literacy is that attention to religious patterns of power and privilege in America is a project

embraced not only by academic outsiders, but also by religious insiders. Jones' polling research

(2014, 2020), drawing on the Public Religious Research Institute (of which he is the CEO),

illustrates the way a white Christian insider engages in social science research to acknowledge and

expose patterns among White Evangelicals' social attitudes that often reinforce anti-pluralist, anti-

Black, and anti-LGBTQIA+ ideologies. Much of Jones' work explicitly calls attention to anti-

democratic attitudes of white Evangelicals that result in public policies that result in the oppression

of marginalized groups in this country. Similar Du Mez's (2020) recent historical analysis of the

systemic sexism and militant masculinity is evidence that committed Christians also engage in this

critical literacy project. This is not to say that Jones and Du Mez have not experienced harsh criticism from Christians, but their efforts to persist in this critical work despite the social cost in their communities is a testament to the fact that critical literacy is embraced both by those who have been marginalized by white Christian privilege and those who could otherwise enjoy the fruits of white Christian privilege. This is a reflection of Freire's argument about the nature of oppression. Both oppressor and oppressed suffer under the existence of oppression. Both are constrained and limited and both seek liberation.

2.6 The Intersection of ELA Literacy and Religious Literacy

A growing body of scholarship has taken an interest in the role of religion in ELA learning and instruction. According to LeBlanc (2017), a recent swell of ELA research has focused on religion (mostly Christianity) as a potential resource in literacy classrooms, arguing for "greater theoretical and methodological attention to the religious domain of literate life" (Skerrett, 2014, p. 16). Indeed, many educational researchers (e.g., Dávila, 2015; Glazier & Seo, 2005; Sarroub, 2002; Rackley, 2016) have argued for more attention to religion in literacy research based on pluralistic democratic visions of multicultural education (Banks & Banks, 2009; Paris and Alim, 2017) and multiliteracies (New London Group, 1996). If race, ethnicity, culture, gender & sexuality can be resources by which students make meaning in school settings, so too can religion. Notably, however, these studies emphasize students' religion in the learning process, and in nearly all cases focus on religious minorities. Other studies (e.g., LeBlanc, 2017; Juzwik & McKenzie, 2015; Spector 2007), however, have critiqued and troubled the notion of religion in literacy learning contexts, often focusing on ways in which dominant religion (i.e., white Christianity) can obstruct

or complicate educational visions of a pluralistic democracy.

Scholarship on religious identities in literacy learning have shown that text-based learning is largely done in the midst of many other identity negotiations that students bring with them into the class. According to studies, these negotiations seem to disproportionately burden students who do not align with White Christian norms, i.e., students of color and/or students who identify with religions other than Christianity. Sarroub (2002), for example, examined the way six Yemeni high school girls, caught "in between" religious and secular worlds (Yemeni vs. American identities), were compelled to develop "in-between texts that helped them bridge two cultures." They engaged in ways of thinking, speaking and being (i.e., discourses) that would allow them to "perform successfully or to enact cultural norms that were acceptable and valid in the given context"—be they American or Yemeni. Creating these discourses (i.e., "shedding a layer of clothing at a party" or "reading a book or poem clandestinely") sometimes meant weighing the perspective that what they were doing was impure or sinful. Sarroub's primary argument in her work was that "diverse literacy practices are part of a larger geopolitical way of life" and that public school teachers who value diversity would do well to acknowledge that there are conflicting visions of literacy and multiple ways to enact them.

Similarly, Reyes (2009) and Skerrett (2014b) both offered case studies of the way Latina students' religious "underlives" (Reyes, 2009) played significant roles in their school learning. Skerrett (2014b) observed how a student named Nina's Protestant Christian identity was not simply developed in religious settings, but rather in relationship with more secular identities and literacy practices across multiple social contexts (i.e., high school or dance settings). In addition to developing a Christian identity, Nina also negotiated other identities such as popular teen, Hip-Hop dancer, public speaker, student, and granddaughter, all of which were contingent on and

influential to her religious identity. Like the Yemeni students in Sarroub (2002), Nina at times needed to negotiate competing expectations from her secular and religious communities, identifying different that support or inhibit her relationship with God. Reyes (2009) more specifically examined the way Zulmy's Catholic identity surfaced in her use of a science club scrapbook. Identifying as a "church girl," Zulmy used a science assignment as a literacy tool to construct her religious identity, and thus integrated "her personal interests with the sanctioned interests of the school" (p. 264). Both Reyes and Skerrett ground their studies in the argument that supporting diverse democratic education requires teachers' deeper understandings of the religious identities that students bring into the classroom.

LeBlanc (2017) argued that "not all literacy and classroom interactional scholars, even those with an avowedly religious perspective, have painted so comfortable a picture" (p. 104) as Skerrett has done. In contrast to Reyes and Skerrett's accounts of religion as a potentially productive resource in classroom learning, LeBlanc's (2017) examination of classroom discourse of middle school boys in a religion class at Catholic school revealed ways in which Christian discourses were leveraged to oppress and marginalize a Black student positioned as a racial and religious outsider. Religious identities emerging from beneath the surface in this study seem to work against democratic pluralistic values. During a small group assignment in which students were to come up with examples of the Catholic teaching about charity for the poor, LeBlanc's data revealed that students, despite the lesson's emphasis on religion through a social justice lens, drew on their own religious resources to position Charles as an outsider. When Charles defended himself, saying "I'm Christian," a classmate responded, "No you're not[,] You're Black" (p. 102). Thus, LeBlanc called attention to way religion in classroom settings like this can contribute to oppressive social structures.

Spector's (2007) analysis of public school 8th grade English classrooms made up of majority Christian students studying *Night* demonstrated that students and teachers drew from their Christian narratives to interpret Weisel's story, which at times perpetuated Christian privilege and anti-Semitism. What's perhaps most significant about Spector's (2007) account is that many of the Christian-infused interpretations of *Night* were not much different from those found in Fundamentalist Christian schools as seen in Schweber & Irwin (2003).

Juzwik and McKenzie's (2015) study of Charlie's use of a personal writing assignment in English class as a means to "share the gospel" with his classmates demonstrated how the surfacing of religious identities is not always a comfortable goal. Charlie is contrasted with his teacher, Sam, whose Christianity is described as being more open to difference of beliefs. In his Cosmopolitan evangelical identity, Sam "maintained an openness that respected the distance between his own beliefs and those of others. This openness was also modeled in his friendship with the atheist teacher down the hall" (p. 138). By contrast, in his populist evangelical identity, Charlie vowed to use his writing in Sam's English class as an opportunity to "share the gospel at least in some way or just to give the Lord praise in every paper we write" (p. 141).

Charlie's assignment, which he titled "I Believe in Faith," depicted a young woman who lost her husband and home to a fire. She prayed to God for "someone to give me a home and hope, so that I might live again." Her prayer was answered in the form of "a small group of Americans carrying lumber, nails, and hammers" who, it seems, were on an evangelistic church mission trip. Charlie concluded in his essay that though "all things will fall short of one's expectations" there is one thing that won't: "One who is eternally faithful to those who are faithful to Him, nothing on earth is comparable to the love that God lavishes on those who love him." He goes on to conclude that "true faith is an unutterable trust in God." Juzwik and McKenzie noted that such an assignment

is worth examining as a way for Charlie to enact and communicate his religious identity. In addition to stating what his beliefs are, Charlie is also using this assignment as a means to "share the gospel" to his classmates so that they might also come to "trust in God" in the way he does. Such a surfacing of religious identity in English class may make scholars, teachers and students feel uncomfortable as it straddles a fine line between freedom of expression of religion and the endorsing of a religious perspective.

Extending this work, Weyand & Juzwik (2019) provided a glimpse into the way White evangelical identities might benefit from opportunities to bring their religious identities into dialogue with others. In this study, Jeremy, a White evangelical senior at a public school, engaged in a school assignment by joining the traveling campus ministry of an evangelical Christian preacher. The study followed the progression of Jeremy's identify from a private to a public Christian identity. In his private identity, Jeremy largely assumed that if he made his faith known he would be labeled as a "stupid racist bigot" and a "sexist." However, because he was required to receive feedback from his classmates on his project, he developed an ability to be open and honest about his identity and beliefs. "He is not silently hiding his faith and feeling victimized as he once did, but he is sharing his faith openly to invite discussion and scrutiny."

According to the above studies, religious identities operate (often invisibly to educators) beneath the surface of school learning. On the one hand, a commitment to cultural diversity in the classroom requires that teachers invite students' religious ways of thinking, speaking and being to the surface. On the other hand, these religious identities can pose complications and problems to educators and fellow learnings when students are religiously compelled to proselytize to their fellow students. However, if teachers are aware of students' religious reasoning, these challenges to diversity can be mitigated, and as seen in Weyand & Juzwik (2019), religious students can be

given the opportunity to revise their discourses in ways that meet both their religious standards as well as the academic and social standards in the classroom.

According to Brass (2011), disciplinary literacy in ELA is uniquely inclined to activate Protestant Christian religious identities, not only because of the relationship between school literacy learning and white Protestant religious literate practices (e.g., Heath 1983), but also because of the history of English Language Arts instruction as a means "to resurrect an 'old' spiritual project begun in Christian churches and Sunday schools" (Brass, 2013, p. 110). Drawing on *English Journal* articles by NCTE in the early 1900's, Brass noted that English teaching was first conceptualized by NCTE community as a "lay priesthood called to the cure of young souls." This characteristic of English teaching as a form of spiritual leadership, though perhaps "secularized" continues to shape how English teachers understand the nature of their work. Some explicitly draw connections between their callings as English teachers to their faith convictions (Hadley, 2021; Hadley & Fassbender, 2019; Olshefski, 2021). But perhaps more common is the inclination that English teaching is a form of therapy, charged with the responsibility to transform students' worldviews for the sake of a socially just society (Petrone & Lewis, 2012 p. 269). Indeed, many scholars in ELA have noted the unique similarity between legacies of spiritual disciplines and the kinds of affordances reading in ELA contexts provides (Juzwik, 2019; Macaluso, 2019; Pike, 2004, 2011). The disciplinary literate practices in ELA in these conceptions are versions of old religious spiritual disciplines in the form of meditative, mindfulness practices.

2.7 Intersection between ELA, Religious and Critical Literacies

Instruction drawing on religious, critical and ELA disciplinary literacies was examined in

Dávila & Volz (2017) in their study of a 6th grade English classroom's engagement with religiously diverse texts. In their observations, students, when invited to examine different and multiple religious perspectives, embraced the values of religious and cultural diversity and, furthermore, were able to recognize when mainstream adult narratives demeaned or underrepresented religious beliefs as "Other." This study spoke directly to Dávila's (2015) prior survey study that showed that even though the majority of her preservice teachers would consider teaching a text with religious content, they would be inclined to censor that content. Dávila and Volz's study is important in showing that if teachers take responsibility to understand religious identities, the promotion of religious literacy in the classroom is not only possible but can also lead to critical conversations about equity and inclusion.

Similarly, Damico & Hall (2015) depicted a fifth-grade unit that resulted in rich learning experiences when a teacher responded respectfully to a students' religious reasoning. During a unit on racism in the US, students drew explicit connections between the lynchings of innocent black people and the death of Jesus on the cross. The student was hesitant at first to offer his interpretation by saying "we can't use any religious stuff in school" (p. 191). But with encouragement from his teacher (Ruthie), he went on to say, "That … how in the Bible it says Jesus got whupped, I mean beat with those cords they got. The only difference [between Jesus and the Black man lynched] was … he [Jesus] was nailed to a cross" (ibid.). By welcoming this students' responses the teacher reflected not only culturally responsive teaching and sound critical race pedagogy, but she also made space for the discussion of a longstanding and legitimate academic inquiry known for drawing connections between the crucifixion of Jesus and the oppression of Black Americans. Black Liberation Theology often ascribed to James Cone (2011) (1) "offers a lens to frame and understand suffering, especially the suffering of an enslaved,

oppressed, or marginalized group, in relation to the suffering of Jesus Christ; and (2) it emphasizes the explicit naming and addressing of systemic social injustice (i.e., the working to liberate oppressed groups" (p. 195). Damico and Hall demonstrate that engaging in culturally relevant pedagogy through a critical race theory lens also involves an ability to welcome and address certain closely aligned religious narratives.

The aim of the present study is to motivate further integration of three bodies of literature: disciplinary literacy in ELA, religious literacy and critical literacy. While Damico & Hall and Dávila Volz have begun to lay the groundwork for the integration of these scholarly fields at the elementary and middle school level of single focal classrooms, the present study draws on a broadscale dataset of high school ELA settings into the conversation.

3.0 Methods

This study employs examines talk about religion in a subset of ELA literary discussions retrieved from the Accomplished Teachers, Learning and Schools (ATLAS) database. The study's research questions are as follows:

1) What religions and senses of religion were represented across NBPTS ELA discussions?

2) When religion was addressed in NBPTS ELA discussions, what function or functions did it serve in ELA teaching and learning?

This study focused on literary discussions because they are typically seen as a vital component of English Language Arts teaching practice (Applebee et al., 2004; Nystrand & Gamoran, 1991). Taking on a variety of forms including whole class discussions, literature circles, or "fishbowl" discussions (to name a few), the goal in facilitating talk about a focal piece of Literature often involves engaging students in academic argumentation using literary texts as evidence to support original theses or claims (Chisholm & Godley, 2011; Lee, 2007; Olshefski et al., 2020) as well as invoking the sharing of narratives, small stories, personal connections to a text, or personal reflections based on the focal text (Beach & Myers, 2002; Ives & Juzwik, 2015; Juzwik et al., 2008). Scholars view literary discussions as a social means through which to generate thinking tools (Vygotsky, 1962) that can transfer to disciplinary literacy practices important in ELA, like literary reading (Rainey, 2017) and academic writing (VanDerHeide, 2018). Scholars also view Literary discussions as an important instrument for preparing students for civic participation in democratic citizenship by exposing them to a variety of interpretations of a single text and inviting them to hold multiple perspectives in tension (Appleman, 2015; Beach et al., 2020; Rogers & Soter, 1997; Sherry, 2018).

Literary discussions are a particularly conducive research space when considering the intersection between disciplinary literacy in ELA and religion. Discussions have classically been conceived of not only as "learning to talk," but more significantly as "talking to learn" (Britton, 1961). These social interactions bring to the surface the ideologies and frameworks most readily available to students. And for some students (and teachers) the most readily available frameworks happen to have been developed in or in response to religious contexts (Juzwik & McKenzie, 2015; Skerrett, 2014; Olshefski, 2021). Given research on the tensions of acknowledging religion or religious identities in public school settings (Dávila, 2015; Weyand & Juzwik, 2019), the moments in which religion does "rise to the surface" (Schweber, 2015) are likely to be complex teaching and learning events. How Accomplished ELA teachers respond in such "discretionary moments" (Ball, 2018)—moments in which religion in any sense is acknowledged—can provide important insight toward promising practices for navigating religion in ways that are legal, appropriate and instructionally sound.

3.1 Data Sources

This study draws on a collection of three different data sources. The first and central data source includes transcriptions of literary discussions in secondary ELA classrooms. The second data source includes teacher commentaries on the literary discussions. The third data source includes miscellaneous instructional materials submitted by the teacher for additional context.

Each data source was retrieved from the Accomplished Teaching, Learning and Schools (ATLAS) database. The database is made up of portfolios originally submitted to the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS) by teachers seeking certification. According

to its promotional literature, the National Board aims to be "the gold standard in teaching certification" (2016, p. 4). Emphasizing five core propositions, the National Board assesses each portfolio for its evidence of the teacher's (1) commitment to their students and their students' learning, (2) knowledge of their subjects, (3) management and monitoring of student learning, (4) systematic thinking about their practice, and (5) their involvement in learning communities. Each of the portfolios included in this dataset has been determined by a National Board-certified ELA teacher or an expert ELA scholar to have met these five NBPTS standards (NBPTS, 2016).

The 116 portfolios considered for analysis were categorized by the ATLAS database as "9th-12th grade Literacy & English Language Arts" with at least one of the following key terms: *reading, speaking, listening* and *discussion*. Fifteen portfolios were omitted from this initial search for not meeting the criteria of a literature discussion. Omitted portfolios were either not student-centered discussions (e.g., students spoke infrequently or not at all during the video) or were not a discussion on or related to a literature text (e.g., were instead sessions on peer-review feedback for student writing). The resulting dataset consisted of 101 portfolios.

Transcripts were generated for the fifteen-minute instructional videos in all 101 portfolios. All videos were transcribed into Excel documents, which allowed for segmentation of data into consistent units of analysis, i.e., turns at talk (Sacks et al., 1978). In most cases, turns at talk were easily determined by changes in speaker. However, in some cases, segmentation was complicated by overlapping speech or "backchannel" talk, including non-lexical utterances ("uh huh") as well as "completions by a recipient of sentences begun by another, requests for clarification, 'brief restatement' of something just said by another" (Duncan & Friske, 1977, cited in Schegloff, 1982, p. 77). Such backchannel talk was included in the turn at talk during which it occurred, and was indicated by braces ({ }). Student names were originally omitted from transcripts and were

replaced with numerical labels (St. 1, St. 2, etc.). During analysis, I replaced student labels with pseudonyms. To keep track of student speakers and interactional context data, classroom maps were also generated to provide a record for where students were sitting throughout the discussion. See Appendix A for example of a classroom map.

Accompanying each instructional video in the portfolios was a 12-page (double spaced) teacher commentary (roughly 3000-4000 words), providing details regarding the literature discussion's instructional context, the planning procedures, analysis of the instruction and learning, and a critical reflection on the lesson. Not only did these commentaries provide important contextual details informing my analysis of the literature discussion, but they were themselves exemplified reflection and critical analysis in and of themselves. Rymes (2016) referred to National Board commentaries as strong examples of the methodology she recommended for classroom discourse researchers. According to Rymes, these commentaries illustrate how teachers understand "discourse patterns in classrooms and the high student achievement that results."

> To become nationally board certified, teachers need to be able to 'think systematically about their practice and learn from experience' (Core Proposition #4, National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, www.nbpts.org). To illustrate such systematic thinking, a large part of the National Board teaching portfolio used to assess individual teachers includes description, analysis, and reflection on 'video recordings of interactions between you and your students'—in other words, classroom discourse analysis. (Rymes, 2016, p. 4).

In this way, the teaching commentaries were invaluable for providing essential contextual details of the events that occurred in the literature discussion transcripts.

Each portfolio also included miscellaneous instructional materials, providing seating charts, handouts, rubrics etc. As these items were optional, their usefulness in the present study varied across portfolios.

3.2 Phase 1: Initial Coding and Data Reduction

The first step in analyzing the data was to systematically select portfolios relevant to the examination of talk about religion and to omit others. This initial stage reflected the initial coding phases common in grounded theory approaches to data analysis (Charmaz, 2014). I began by conducting line-by-line analysis of each discussion transcript and teacher commentary, identifying turns in discussion transcripts that included explicit references to religion or turns that responded to turns with references to religion. In this initial stage turns were labeled *explicit*, *possible*, and *unclear* for their references to religion.

Turns with *explicit references* to religion included the use of at least one term commonly associated with religion, religions or religious subject matter. These terms included (a) the use of the world *religion*, or its cognates (i.e., religious, religiosity etc.), (b) the name of any world religion(s) (i.e., Islam, Chrisitanity, Hinduism, Judaism, Buddhism, including non-religious affiliations like atheism), (c) a religious concept (God, prayer, worship, sin etc.), (d) a religious text (Bible, Koran, etc.), (e) a place of worship (i.e., synagogue, church, temple), (f) a religious figure (Jesus, Muhammed etc.), or (g) holiday (Christmas, Passover etc). Turns with pronouns whose antecedents fall under these categories were also labeled as having explicit references to religion.

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Turns with *unclear or possible* evidence of a reference to religion included terms with concepts or ideas that have both religious and non-religious uses (e.g., references to "evil," "redemption," etc.) or discussion of topics and issues that are often associated with religious or theological perspectives (i.e., "meaning of life" or "belief statements"). These were categorized as *possibly explicit.*

In addition to coding turns for the explicitness of religious references, I drafted brief analytic memos for each discussion transcript and related teacher commentary summarizing initial perceptions of the portfolio's potential relevance to the study. Analytic memos following initial discussion transcript analysis addressed the question: "How do teachers and students across high school ELA classroom contexts discuss religion in response to literature?" Analytic memos following initial teacher commentary analysis addressed the question: "How do teachers reflect on religion's relationship to their instructional goals, planning, and educational practice?" See Appendix B for sample analytic memos.

During this cycle of analysis, I also examined the focal texts students were expected to engage with in each discussion. Within scholarly conversations around multicultural literature, representation of multiple cultures and identities in the ELA curriculum is important as diverse texts affirm student identities in both reflecting students' cultures and exposing students to different perspectives through texts the reflect identities unfamiliar to them (Sims Bishop, 1990). With this in mind, I conducted a surface-level analysis of the religious representation in the texts students were expected to engage in the dataset. Across the 101 discussions, 105 different texts served some role in the discussions (in most discussions students focused on one text, but some had more than one). Not all of these texts were directly referenced in each discussion, but they were each listed in teacher materials as being at least one of the focal texts for that day's discussion.

After the initial round of line-by-line coding and analytic memo writing was completed, I formatted the analytic memos in an Excel spreadsheet, arranging transcript memos and commentary memos side by side so that each portfolio took up one row. I then labeled each portfolio according to the relevance to the study. In an early round of this process, I labeled portfolios as *definitely relevant, maybe relevant,* and *not relevant*. In a later stage of this process, I reviewed memos and potentially relevant turns at talk in the *maybe relevant* portfolios and determined based on context whether the talk or reflection included any explicit reference to religion. If there was at least one explicit reference, the portfolio remained in the dataset for further analysis. If it was determined that the reference was overly interpretive, the portfolio was omitted and was not considered in subsequent rounds of analysis.

I then examined religious references as my unit of analysis. Classroom discussion transcripts with clear or possible religious references were uploaded to NVivo and were first labeled according to which religions and what kind of religious subject matter were being referenced. Religious literacy scholars argue that being religiously literate involves familiarity a broad range of religious traditions (Moore, 2010; Soules, 2019). The extent to which religious diversity is reflected in the dataset provides insight into the ways in which NBPTS ELA discussions reflect the values of multiculturalism and diversity. Drawing on religious literacy literature (Moore, 2007; Prothero, 2007), likely religions included the major religions of *Christianity*, *Islam*, *Judaism*, *Hinduism*, *Buddhism*, and *atheistic/ agnostic worldviews*, though other religious traditions (e.g., Taoism, Sikhism) would have been labeled accordingly had they come up in the data.

Through this analysis it became clear, however, that religious references varied according their specificity. For example, when students spoke about the ethics of euthanasia in the following

excerpt, they referenced religion in such a way that could apply to many different religious traditions.

Discussion Transcript Excerpt 1: Euthanasia Discussion

Turn #	Speaker	Talk
62	Janelle	Because some people think that euthanasia is murder, right? And some people think that murder is sin. {"Okay." Ms. Theresa} And people believe that you go to Hell.
63	Ms. Theresa	Okay, so if you have a belief in Hell, that's going to guide your choices in life. Yes.
64	Deanna	And also. It's, like, l-l-losing hope, like, in, religions, like, when you lose hope, you lose faith in the people you love, so it's, like, going against what you believe in, never to lose hope.

There was no definitive evidence in this portfolio of which religious traditions Janelle or Deanna had in mind. Because both Muslims and Christians believe in Hell (Pew, 2014), these references were labeled as *general—afterlife*. Other general religious references included *general—sin*, *general-Bible*, *general –religious ritual (i.e., baptism or blessings)*, *general—prayer.*

Other references to religion or religious subject matter were more specific than the world religion categories mentioned above. Religious literacy scholarship argues that religions are internally diverse and culturally embedded (Moore, 2010). Thus, acknowledgement of particular kinds of Christianities (like *Catholicism*, *Black Christianity*, *Dutch Christianity*, *Puritanism*) were labeled accordingly. Specifications of Islams (i.e., *Sunni* and *Shia* Islam) and Judaisms (*Zionist*) also occurred in the dataset and were labeled accordingly.

I also examined the contextual meaning and senses ascribed to religious references. With Smith's (1967/1992) four senses of religion in mind (i.e., personal piety, insider-community, outsider-community, religion in general), I reexamined each instance of religion and drew on

contextual features to determine the "domain" or "figured world" (Gee, 2015; Holland et al., 1998) that speakers were situating each reference. Five different categories emerged when examining figured world indexed in each reference. The five codes I developed as a result were labeled as 1) *unrealistic,* 2) *realistic-fictional,* 3) *real-historical,* 4) *real-present,* and 5) *real-personal*, which I explain below.

Some talk was coded as unrealistic. Of all the coding categories, these were the least "real" configurations of religion(s) or religious subject matter. They represented religion(s) or religious subject matter as entirely other-worldly and often had an element of pretend or play involved. They included mentions of religious subject matter that appeared to have no involvement in the lived realities of the speakers of listeners in the room (i.e., when a student asked during a discussion of Dante's *Inferno* if the story included any gods, or when a teacher during a discussion of *Theseus* invited groups to designate as speaker "the student who has the closest connection with the gods and goddesses"). These references were not only not taken as real within the context, they were also not even meant to be realistic in the sense of reflecting any particular religion with accuracy or nuance.

Other references to religion were coded as *realistic-fictional.* These references to religion conveyed religious subject matter in such a way that demonstrated an understanding or appreciation for the religious realities within narrative and poetic text worlds. However, references to religion coded as *realistic-fictional* lacked evidence in the language of the turn at talk or surrounding turns at talk to suggest that the religious subject matter was intended to have any bearing on lived religious experiences of real people today or in recent history. The religious agent in these references was a fictional *he* or *she* or *they. * For example, when discussing the film *Water* by Deepa Mehta, a student noted how a character "was clearing away her sins. And so she would

go to the next life like sinless." The student spoke of religious subject matter (i.e., the baptismal submersion in water and its ability to clear away the character's sins in "the next life") in a way that took seriously the importance of these concepts to the character in the text world without clearly indicating their importance in the speaker's or listeners' lived worlds. The religious sentiments were held by the fictional character and were configured within a fictional world.

Other references to religion were coded as *real-historical*. Religions and religious subject matter were sometimes invoked within specific historical facts. Similar to literary references, historical facts about religion were not connected to lived world realities today but were described as real for people or characters living in a particular period of time. For example, in a discussion of *The Crucible,* teachers invited students to connect character motivations to the historical facts of Puritan settlements in America.

Discussion Transcript Excerpt 2: *The Crucible.*

turn #	Speaker	Talk
26	Ms. Randi	they come from England, because they've been mistreated and persecuted, and now they're coming to start this new settlement, and everything's gonna be great, and they're gonna practice their religion as they want, and then, ironic, what do they do?

The difference between these and the *realistic-fictional* references lies in the fact that *real-historical* references acknowledged the importance of religion in real lived context, while the *realistic-fictional* references were not explicitly drawn to literal realities. In the example above, the Puritans were described as having literally been mistreated and persecuted.

References to religion that referenced realities within current contexts were coded as *real-present*. For example, in a discussion of the Federalist Papers, one student noted that "a great majority of Republican ideals about the situation of abortion are based on Christian theology, and

which is using the Bible as a crutch to use against abortion." In this example, the role of religion was referenced as part of a relevant, lived-world context during the present day.

The last code for references to religion(s) or religious subject matter were those that are real and personal, coded as *real-personal*. Reference to realistic and personal representations of religion reflected the speaker's own religious identity or affiliation. These included mentions like "I'm Jewish" or indications of religious practices like involvement in church, etc.

3.3 Phase 1 Quantitative Analysis

Phase 1 codes were analyzed quantitatively. I describe the quantitative methods used below.

3.3.1 Data Preparation

Using the query function in Nvivo, the frequencies of each religious reference type were calculated and recorded in an Excel spreadsheet with all 101 portfolios as rows. Two columns titled "religion in discussions" and "religion in commentary" were populated with binary variables to indicate whether or not religion was mentioned in either data source. Also included in the spreadsheet were columns dedicated to each portfolio's grade level, course type (e.g., AP, regular, honors), and class size and the focal text(s) for each portfolio. A column was dedicated for the total turns in each literature discussion that included religious references, with 22 columns for each possible religion category (Christianity-general, Christianity-Puritan, Islam-general, Islam-Pashtun, religion-general-sin etc.) and five senses of religion categories as columns. Additionally,

data for stretches of talk about religion were recorded, providing the length of each stretch of talk in which religion was discussed as well as the total number of students' turns and teachers' turns that made up each stretch of talk about religion.

3.3.2 Quantitative Analysis

A combination of statistical analyses was conducted using STATA, including average frequencies of religious reference types per discussion, average frequencies of religious reference types per stretch of talk, average student speakers and student turns per stretch of talk about religion, average teacher turns per stretch of talk about religion. ANOVAs, t-tests, pairwise correlations, and Chi squared tests were used to examine the dataset for any statistically significant correlations (e.g., grade level and frequency of religious reference types).

3.4 Phase 1 Qualitative Analysis

After these initial analyses of religious references across the dataset, I was able to determine which discussions had included references to religion that were relevant to the study's research questions. I proceeded to draw on Rymes' (2016) methodology to conduct a three-dimensional analysis in which the researcher considers 1) the social context, 2) the interactional context and 3) individual agency.

The social context dimension suggests that language-in-use is inextricably intertwined with its social environment. Relevant social contexts range from the immediate local context to broader social contexts like the socio-political cultures in which discourse occurs (what Gee, 2015, refers

to as Big D Discourses). Rymes notes that "not only does what we say function differently depending on the social context, but also what we say changes what might be relevant about the social context" (p. 25).

Therefore, the fact that the discourse data in this study occurs in English Language Arts classrooms matters greatly. But national location as well as historical context are also relevant. This is potentially one of the greatest limitations of this dataset. The social context available to us is limited because portfolios have been de-identified to protect the teachers' and students' identities. At the same time, the details deemed relevant by the teacher through their commentaries help provide as full a picture as we can get of the social context in which these discussions occurred. Although much of the social context was unavailable to me, I was able to rely on the teachers' commentaries for as much social context as I could possibly glean. But I also situated these portfolios within another social context—that of the English teaching community. Each of these portfolios were submitted as a teacher's "best foot forward" to be considered for prestigious certification. And as such, they are framed within a broader social and professional conversation about what it means to be a successful (i.e., "accomplished") English teacher. Even though the disciplinary context in which classroom interactions occur is not a social context addressed in Rymes' framework, it is one worth considering when examining data of this type. English teachers from a variety of local contexts share a goal of being competent and productive teachers. How they define that varies, of course, but for the purposes of this study I am able to look to teacher commentary data to see what matters to each of these teachers and why.

The second dimension in Rymes' approach is the interactional context, what Gee (2015) called "little-d discourses." Examining interactional contexts involves closely examining the meanings that are co-constructed through the language-mediated social interactions between

speakers and listeners. The concern here is how interlocutors achieve certain social arrangements through their speech. Language is a social tool used to position individuals as certain kinds of people (smart kid, jock, stoner, class clown) (e.g., Leander, 2002). The array of language tools that are used to achieve certain interactional goals is vast, but discourse analysts often operate with a core set of tools. For example, Wortham & Reyes (2020) recommend starting with deictics, reported speech and evaluative statements. Rymes (2016) focuses on communicative repertoires.

A third important dimension in Rymes' methodology is the consideration of individual agency. Rymes defines individual agency as "personal control, the ability to act in ways that produce desired outcomes or contribute to our own personal goals and projects" (p. 43). For the present study, the notion of personal control is especially relevant when I considered literary discussions from the perspectives of the teacher. Not everything that occurs in the discussion transcript was intended by the teacher, nor was it all controlled. This is one of the most challenging realities for any teacher facilitating discussion-based learning. Teachers and facilitators can only control so much.

With Rymes' methodological recommendations in mind, I revisited the 25 portfolios that had the most substantive talk around religious subject matter and drafted analytical memos reflecting on the social interactions around religion evidenced in the discussion. Each analytic memo included an analysis of the social context as indicated by the teacher in their commentary, interactional context and evidence of individual agency in every stretch of talk in which religion played a role.

3.5 Phase 2 Synthesizing Codes

In a final phase of analysis, I engaged in a process of focused coding (Charmaz, 2014), which involved searching for the most frequent categories of talk about religion to construct the most salient categories. This process "requires decisions about which initial codes make the most analytic sense" (Charmaz, 2014, p. 138). Upon re-examining phase one coding categories of the religions referenced and the five senses of religious references (unreal, realistic, historical, contemporary, and personal), it was clear that not all references to religion were considered instructionally significant. Conversely not all references to religion were religiously significant.

I thus constructed four conceptual categories to address how religion supported teaching and learning in literary discussions: as *background information, a literary lens, a personal connection,* and *a subject of critique.*

The first pedagogical function of religious literacy in English language Arts class discussions found across the dataset was to provide basic background knowledge to support text comprehension and a deeper understanding of others. Sometimes background knowledge of the religious dimensions of a text's setting supported deeper understandings of character motivations and actions in a story. Also, readers commonly drew on shared knowledge of religious symbolism, imagery, and narratives to make sense of a text. This use of religion largely reflects the approaches promoted by religious literacy advocates (e.g., Moore, 2010, 2007; Soules, 2019) whose aims are to help students know more about diverse world religions. It especially aligns with Moore's cultural studies approach that seeks to address religious identities in a neutral and academic way. Within a literary knowledge perspective (Probst, 1990) this reflects a knowledge of contexts.

A second important function of religious literacy in the dataset was to provide resources for the development of literary theories through which to read and interpret literary texts. In

contrast to the above approach which recruited religion to enrich knowledge of the text's context, readers who used a religious literary theory approach recruited religious concepts to enrich their interpretations of a text. Over the last decade, scholars have called for English teachers to emphasize the practice of literary interpretation rather than emphasizing the content of canonical literary works. This involves providing students with multiple literary frameworks through which to engage a text. Religious literacy scholars support this approach insofar as it allows room for an understanding of religious systems of meaning making to be internally diverse and dynamic (Moore, 2007; 2010). It reflects Probst's literary knowledge of processes, shedding light one different ways people can make sense of the same text when applying a different set of methodological assumptions. This is also what Appleman (2015) has promoted in her scholarship on the use of literary theory in secondary ELA settings.

In some cases personal religious literacy played a significant role in English Language Arts discussions, particularly when students were invited to draw connections between a text and their own lived worlds. For example, in a discussion of *The Color Purple,* Hannah drew on her own Catholic identity to pose a question to the text, saying, "I thought that was interesting because she does believe in God. she says that she always thinks of God when things get bad, but she never asks Him for help." She wondered about why the shape of Celie's prayers would be so different from her own. This use of religious literacy is especially aligned with reader-response approaches (Rosenblatt, 1978) to engaging a text in which it is assumed that readers draw on their own personal experiences through which to make meaning of the text. ELA scholars have promoted this approach by recommending teachers invite students to make connections from the literary world of the text to their own social worlds (Beach & Myers, 2001). This inevitably involves students calling attention to the values and expectations they bring with them into the classroom to support

them in understanding the potential of a text. As Skerrett (2014a) has called for, it involves students bringing their "whole selves" into the classroom, religious identities and all.

Another way in which religious literacy functioned in the discussions in my dataset was to support reflection on the role religion itself can, does and should play in society and culture. Many conversations in English language arts education today have emphasized the importance of reading not only "the word" but also "the world." For example, when scholars argue for the teaching of literary theory, they do so with the expectation that students will learn not only how to apply, say, a feminist reading to The Great Gatsby but also to examine the way gender structures and influences their own experiences, family dynamics, and social context. The purpose of engaging with texts is not merely to have students know a canon of literature, but ultimately to enable students to "read the world" (Freire & Macedo, 1987). This is a value especially important for ELA approaches that seek to use their teaching to support equity and social justice (e.g., Beach et al. 2015, Fecho, 2004; Vasquez et al. 2019). "Ultimately," argue Beach and Myers, "we must be able to openly discuss and negotiate the values and expectations of the diverse worlds we continually encounter so that we are better able to generate with others new shared social worlds" (p. 2).

3.6 Limitations

The anonymized data analyzed in this study precluded any investigation of the relationship between location and approach to discussions about religion in the classroom. Demographic data suggests that religious attitudes vary in somewhat predictable ways across the country (Jones, 2014), and it is reasonable to assume that areas with a high concentration of one or another

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religious affiliation might evidence different ways of engaging instruction around religion in the English Classroom. However, my dataset did not include the geographic location in which the discussions about religion in ELA classes took place.

Another limitation of this dataset is that the 15-minute videos provided only a snapshot of classroom activity and were snapshots curated by the teacher submitted as evidence of Accomplished Teaching according to NBPTS standards. This places two constraints on the data. The first is the limited instructional context we are afforded with such videos. We do not have, for example, student work. Nor do we have any access to the teacher for follow up questions or member-checking. Another constraint is that these data were not compiled with the aim of recording talk about religion in ELA literary discussions. As such, instances in which religion arise in the discussions are snapshots in time.

3.7 Research Positionality

Qualitative research is always both limited and motivated by the constraints of the researcher's social identity (Milner, 2007). Researcher positionality is particularly important in research related to religious subjects and identities (Pavia, 2015). My religious experiences have been mostly shaped by my educational experiences within white Protestant Christian spaces. My experiences within white Protestant Christian churches, schools, social groups, and academic conversations have most certainly shaped not only my interpretation of these data, but it has also informed what I even consider relevant data. As a researcher with such a background, it has been especially important that I engage in self-reflection and collaborative discussion with others of different backgrounds to determine when my background was an affordance (i.e., providing an

awareness of religiously-charged signals in the data that others might not see) and when it has been a limitation (i.e., reading Protestant interpretations into the data when they are not there, or overlooking other religious traditions).

4.0 Quantitative Findings

In this chapter I provide quantitative findings for the first research question informing this study: What religions were represented across NBPTS ELA discussions, and how were they represented? I present these findings through quantitative and statistical analysis. I first discuss the frequency of talk about religion in the dataset and then describe the overall statistical findings related to the religions represented in both the discussions as well as the focal texts in the course. I end with a description of the domains or senses of religion referenced in the dataset.

4.1 Frequency of Talk about Religion

Quantitative analyses of the dataset revealed that across 101 portfolios of teachers seeking National Board certification, nearly half (44%) included at least one religious reference. Among the 44 discussions that included references to religion, there were a total of 89 stretches of talk about religion (some discussions had one stretch, others had several), with an average length of 8 turns-at-talk per stretch with a maximum of 37 turns. Stretches of talk about religion had an average of 3 students participating and at least one teacher turn as well. As Figure 2 illustrates, the majority of these discussions had very short interactions around religion (last 1 to 3 turns at talk).
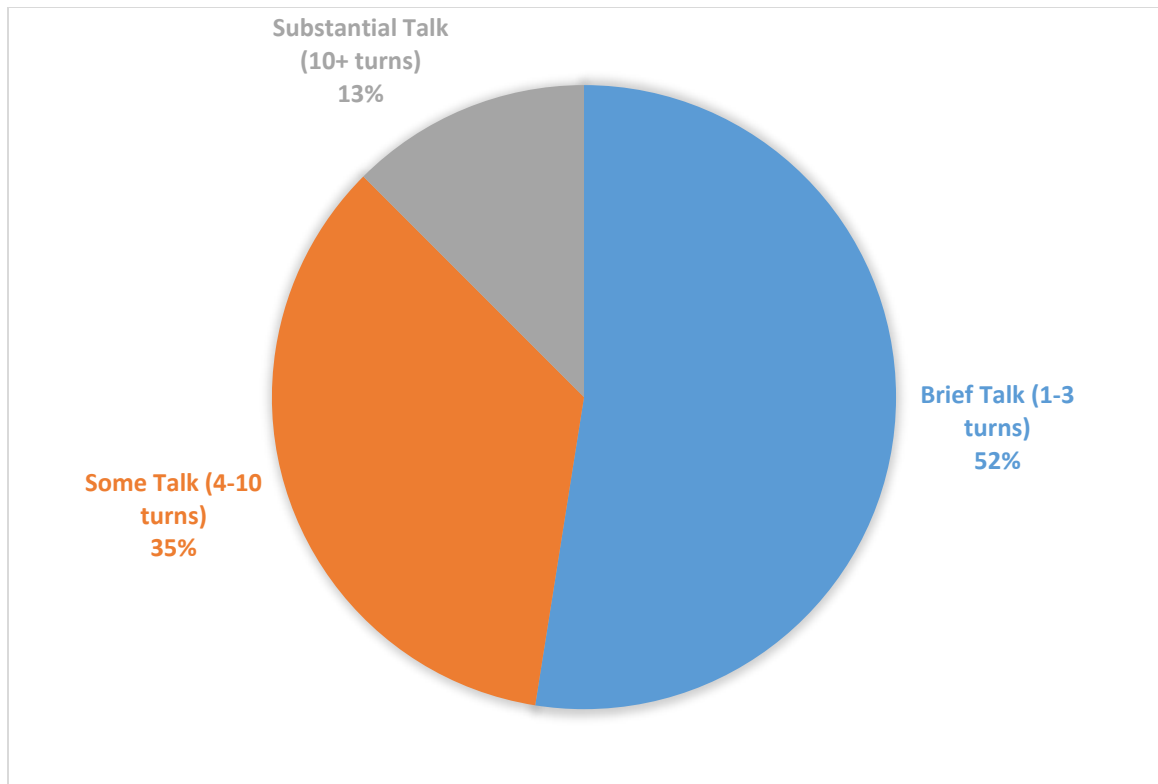
Figure 2: Pie chart illustrating the amount of talk about religion in discussion

4.2 What Religions were Represented in the Data and How?

Table 1 provides an overview of the religious reference types across the dataset. The Discussion column indicates how many discussions included at least one of each reference type. For example, there were 35 discussions with general religious references. There were 141 general religious references across the entire discussion and the discussion with the most general religious references included a total of 21 general references to religion. The typical text(s) column indicates the focal texts in the discussions with the highest frequency of each religious reference type.

Table 1: Frequencies of religious references across discussions

Religious reference types	Dis-cussions*	Ref-erences	Max ref-erences	Typical text(s) under discussion
General religious content	35	141	21	Dante's *Inferno*; *The Odyssey*
Christianity (Gen)	16	33	5	"Middle Passage"
Puritanism	4	22	16	*Scarlet Letter*
Atheism/Non-belief	4	8	3	*Waiting for Godot*
Islam (Gen)	4	7	4	*Kite Runner*
Catholic	3	5	2	*Bless Me Ultima*; *Romeo & Juliet*
Judaism (Gen)	3	3	1	"Middle Passage"; *Scarlet Letter*; Culture readings
Transcendentalism	2	10	9	*Grapes of Wrath*
Black Christian	2	3	2	"Middle Passage"
Hinduism (Gen)	2	3	2	*Romeo & Juliet*
Sunni-Shia distinction	1	5	5	*Kite Runner*
Indigenous Spirituality	1	4	1	*Bless Me, Ultima*
Dutch Christianity	1	1	1	"Middle Passage"
Buddhism (Gen)	1	1	1	Dante's *Inferno*
Zionism	1	1	1	*Metamorphosis*
Taoism	1	1	1	*Romeo & Juliet*

* each discussion could have more than one religious reference type

Analysis of the 101 portfolios revealed that the majority of mentions of religion did not specify a particular religion, but rather spoke of religion or religious subject matter in general terms. Such references included mentions of god, gods, or goddesses (28%), uses of the word *religion* and its cognates without further qualification (21%), ambiguous religious references about afterlife (18%), mentions of sin in a religious sense (16%), references to the Bible (7%), or religious rituals (6%).

Although the religious context being evoked in these general references are ambiguous and could have applied to more than one world religion, most had an unmistakable meaning and

importance within Christianity. The few general religious references that were unrelated to Christianity included Eastern religious concepts of Samsara and Karma (3% of all the general references), which occurred in discussions of *Romeo & Juliet*, Kafka's *Metamorphosis* and Twain's "The Story of the Good Little Boy."

4.2.1 References to Christianity

Christianity was the most commonly represented religion in the dataset. As seen in the table above, Christianity was referenced 66 times across 24 discussions total. There was a variety of types of Christian references. Half of the Christian references were general Christian references (33 references over 12 discussions). General Christian references were those references that had clear Christian implications, but were unclear about the specific denomination or kind of Christianity being referenced. For example, the following comment alludes to Christianity in a general sense by referencing the purity of Jesus: "Dante isn't pure so why would they highlight someone who wasn't as pure as like Jesus?" Even though technically students could be speaking about Christianity as it pertains to Dante's Medieval Catholic context, this student's comment seems predicated on the assumption that the character of Jesus was indeed pure—an assumption held by many but not all Christian denominations. Similarly, the following were also considered general Christian references: references to Christ figures (e.g., "Gatsby was like a Christ-like figure," T073), passages in the Christian Scripture (e.g., "'Thy husband is thy lord, thy life, thy keeper, thy head, thy sovereign,' […] Paul's letter to the Ephesians," T076), Christian rituals (e.g., the reference to "confirmation" when a student said: "at the beginning in Sinclair's like confirmation, it seems like he's like pulling Sinclair away from his religion," T091), or Christian theological concepts ("Well the king did come from beyond the grave wherever he was, heaven or

hell purgatory," T093), or Christian houses of worship ("my um church youth group always goes up there and like helps build and paint stuff," T110).

But there were also references to specific Christian sub-categories. For example, Catholicism was referenced a total of five times across three discussions (in response to *Bless Me, Ultima; Scarlet Letter*; and *Romeo & Juliet)*. Black Christianity was also discussed five times across three discussions (in response to "Middle Passage," "White Man's Burden" by Kipling, and Phyllis Wheatley's "On being brought from Africa to America"). In the discussion on Robert Hayden's poem "Middle Passage," Dutch Christianity was specified ("At this point in history, they evangelized Africa. I know the Dutch had already been there," T022). Each of these specific references, however, were brief compared to the discussions of Puritanism, which appeared 22 times across 4 discussions, and occurred in response to *The Scarlet Letter*, *The Crucible,* and Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*.

4.2.2 References to Islam

Islam was addressed a total of 12 times across 4 discussions, which, by comparison, is less frequent than references to Puritanism. Three of these discussions included a single brief mention of Islam and occurred in discussions in which the focal texts contained no Islamic themes. One of these instances included a brief comment mislabeling Gandhi as a Muslim ("Or was he Islamic?" [T110]) in a discussion that was about power, equality and human nature in *Animal Farm, Julius Caesar* and "Harrison Bergeron,"—texts that do not make any mention of Islam. Another instance was a student's self-disclosure of her Muslim identity (e.g., "I'm Muslim, so it doesn't affect [me]") during a discussion on *The Scarlet Letter*. A third reference to Islam occurred in a discussion on culture and identity when a white male student backed up his argument that persecution can occur

within a culture by offering an illustration of Islamic culture, saying "if you're Muslim or something you have to go to mosque every, whatever, but um, like, just uh if you, if you're not normal, you will be treated as such." That majority of references to Islam occurred in a 10th grade discussion of *The Kite Runner.*

4.2.3 References to Eastern Religions

Like Islam, discussions in which Eastern religions were referenced were few, totaling eleven references across 4 discussions. Similar to the patterns shown above regarding references to Islam, references to Eastern traditions occurred in response to texts both with and without Eastern religious themes. In a discussion of *Romeo and Juliet,* one requirement for students was "to synthesize the actions and decisions of characters in the play to address cross-curricular ideas, such as world religions and philosophies" (T067 Commentary). As such, both Hinduism and Taoism were applied as literary lenses through which to understand the characters. (e.g., "[Benvolio] always thinks before he acts and talks. So, he doesn't really need to balance anything out. Because what Taoists believe is that everything has to be in balance." T067, turn 33). In another discussion, each student was assigned a different literary article on *Metamorphosis*, and one student's article examined the novel through the Eastern religious philosophy of Samsara, and how the text "follows the concept of 'Samsara'" (T079). Students went on to examine the ways in which they saw the definitions of Samsara, (wonder, journey or bondage) playing out in the text. Additionally, there were two references in separate discussions evoking Eastern religious concepts briefly. In one a student briefly mentioned Karma (e.g., "whether you believe in karma or whatever you do, like, there's gonna be bad times," T074). In the other, a student briefly mentioned Buddha (e.g., "we all assume that like the purity is in God or Jesus or Buddha or whatever," T024).

A discussion revolving around the text *The God of Small Things* (Roy, 1997) and the film *Water* (Mehta, 2005) included five references to Hinduism. This teacher of this lesson set the explicit goal of holding a "discussion of Indian history, religion, culture, and society via these works of literature" in order to allow "students to see the obvious and subtle differences and similarities between our own culture and theirs." Students drew on their knowledge of Indian religion (which the teacher notes they learned in prior social studies courses) to inform their analysis of characters according to their caste ("Well Norian, because he was a Brahmin, the highest caste…" T030).

4.2.4 References to Judaism

Although Judaism as a religious identity is more common in the US than is Islam or Eastern religions, its representation was lower both in the texts taught and in the total number of references. It appeared in the same number of discussions as Eastern religions or Islam (i.e., four), but unlike those religions, references to Judaism never led to any discussion. In fact, all but one of these references were self-disclosures ("How should I know, I'm Jewish?" T053; "I'm a naturalized, recent, Jewish immigrant," T063). In a discussion about "Middle Passage" by Robert Hayden, a poem with several allusions to Christianity, a teacher asked a "young man […] of the Jewish faith, [who] was not entirely familiar with the traditional Christian imagery of Hayden's poem" to explain the religious imagery in the text. The student responded by saying "Well, seeing that I'm not too familiar with the uh Bible, Judaism and Christianity are similar" (T022, turn 13). As such, this can also be considered its own form of a self-disclosure. The one mention of Jewish subject matter that was not a self-disclosure was in a discussion of *Metamorphosis* in which a student shared with the class an argument related to Kafka's identity as a Zionist, how the author "talked

about how Kafka was a Zionist, but everyone believed that he was a fake Zionist, like, he talked about it and he talked it up, but he wouldn't really do it." (T079).

The one text that includes clear references to Judaism, *Night* by Elie Wiesel, did not generate any discussion of religious themes, at least not in the 15 minutes of instructional data provided for National Board Certification. But based on the other data provided by this teacher, we can see that religion was absent from the instructional plan. For the lesson, the teacher invited students to submit questions for the day's discussion. Many of the student questions connected to religion in one sense or another. Some examples of student-provided questions with religious themes included: "Why did Elie start to lose his faith?" "Why did Elie begin to lose his faith?" "Do you think God was helping them, keep in mind that Elie mentioned some miracles could have come from God's grace." "After reading *Night*, and seeing how Elie loses faith in god, did you question your faith in god?" Thus, it is clear that the students found the religious elements of *Night* to be important.

4.2.5 References to Nonbelief, Atheism, Agnosticism

Although the category of nonbelief or atheism is not religious per se, it is a philosophical framework that is often in dialogue with religious belief. It came up in 8 references across four discussions. Two discussions addressed atheism in response to Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (e.g., "I see that Godot isn't really supposed to represent God because not all people extrapolate from just God," T055; "if there's no real point to it. there's no God, if there's no afterlife, […] then what we do find meaning in beauty is the everyday existence. How does Godot kind of play around with that?" T083). Another reference to non-belief was in the discussion about *The God of Small Things*, in which a student contrasted a character with the broader religious context of the novel: "Chacko

is a liberal type. He, you know, is very progressive, he's a Marxist, he uh didn't allow his uh father to beat his mother" (T030). The most extensive discussion of atheism was in response to Twain's "The Story of the Good Little Boy" which I discuss in depth below.

4.3 Religions Represented in Focal Texts

In addition to examining the religions that were discussed by the students and teachers in the dataset, I analyzed the types of texts students were working with. Across the 101 discussions, 105 different texts served some role in the discussions (in most discussions students focused on one text, but some had more than one). Not all texts were directly referenced in each discussion, but they were each listed in teacher materials as being at least one of the focal texts for that day's discussion. See Table 2 for a list of religions referenced in each text.

In total, 43 out the 105 course texts emphasized one or more religious themes. Christianity was by far the most common religion to be represented in these texts as it appeared in 32 of them across 56 discussions. The most commonly assigned texts to include Christian themes were *The Scarlet Letter* (3 discussions), *Macbeth* (3 discussions), *Romeo & Juliet* (5 discussions), *Hamlet* (3 discussions), *To Kill a Mockingbird* (5 discussions), *Fahrenheit 451* (3 discussions), *Brave New World* (3 discussions), and *Cather in the Rye* (3 discussions). Islam was represented in three texts which appeared in one discussion each. Texts with Islamic themes included *The Kite Runner*, *Persepolis*, and *Othello*. Eastern traditions were represented in *The God of Small Things* and the film *Water* by Deepa Mehta, both of which occurred one time and in the same discussion. *Night* by Elie Wiesel appeared in one discussion and was the only text referencing Jewish themes. Other texts, in addition to dealing with Christian themes, did so in the context of non-white spirituality

and faith. These texts included *The Color Purple, Beloved, Bless me, Ultima, Their Eyes were Watching God, Things Fall Apart, What is the What,* and "White Man's Burden." Six texts provided examples of or commentary on non-belief, i.e., either atheism or agnosticism: *1984, Brave New World* (used in three discussions)*, Anthem* and *The Fountainhead, The Stranger* (two discussions)*,* and *Waiting for Godot* (two discussions).

Not all discussions of texts with religious themes included references to religion in the discussion, and conversely not all discussions with references to religion were based on a text with religious themes. Of the 101 discussions in the dataset, 58 included a text with religious themes, most of which (n=32, 55%) included talk about religion in the discussion video. Although a large portion of the discussions involving texts with religious themes did not include talk about religion (n=26, 45%), the constraints of the data do not allow us to draw any conclusions as religion may have been a topic of discussion seconds, days, or even months before the camera was turned on or after it was turned off. However, a Chi- squared analysis indicated that discussions about religion were much more likely to occur when texts included religious themes ($p < .01$).

Table 2: Religions referenced in focal texts of class discusions

Text	Author	Religion(s) referenced		Used in # Classrooms	Religion in discussion
1984	Orwell, G	Christianity	nonbelief	1	0
The Color Purple	Walker, A.	Christianity	other	1	1
Anthem	Rand, A.	nonbelief		1	0
Beloved	Morrison, T.	Christianity	other	2	0
Bless Me Ultima	Anaya, R.	Christianity	other	1	1
Brave New World	Huxley, A.	Christianity	nonbelief	3	1
Catcher in the Rye	Salinger, J. D.	Christianity		3	0
Crucible	Miller, A.	Christianity		1	1
The Inferno	Allighieri, D.	Christianity		1	1
Demian	Hesse, H.	Christianity		1	1
Fahrenheit 451	Bradbury, R.	Christianity		3	1
Fountainhead	Rand, A.	nonbelief		1	0
God of Small Things	Roy, A.	Eastern		1	1
Grapes of Wrath	Steinbeck, J.	Christianity		2	1
Hamlet	Shakespeare, W.	Christianity		3	2
"I, too"	Hughes, L.	Christianity		1	0
Into Thin Air	Krakauer, J.	nonbelief		1	0
Kite Runner	Hosseini, K.	Islam		1	1
Macbeth	Shakespeare, W.	Christianity		3	0
"Middle Passage"	Hayden, R.	Christianity		1	1
Night	Weisel, E.	Judaism		1	0
Oliver Twist	Dickens, C.	Christianity		1	0
"On being brought …"	Wheatley, P.	Christianity		1	1
One Hundred Years …	Marquez, G. G.	Christianity		1	0
Othello	Shakespeare, W.	Christianity	Islam	1	0
Persepolis	Satrapi, M.	Islam		1	0
Picture of Dorian Grey	Wilde, O.	Christianity		1	1
Romeo and Juliet	Shakespeare, W.	Christianity		5	3
Scarlet Letter	Hawthorne, N.	Christianity	Transcend.	3	3
"Story of the Good little Boy"	Twain, M.	Christianity		1	1
Taming of the Shrew	Shakespeare, W.	Christianity		1	1
The Stranger	Camus, A.	nonbelief		2	0
The Sun Also Rises	Hemingway, E.	Christianity		1	0
Their Eyes were Watching…	Hurston, Z. N.	Christianity	other	1	0
Things Fall Apart	Achebe, C.	Christianity	other	2	0
Things they Carried	O'Brien, T.	Christianity		1	0
To Kill a Mockingbird	Lee, H.	Christianity		5	1
Twelfth Night	Shakespeare, W.	Christianity		1	1
Waiting for Godot	Beckett, S.	nonbelief		2	2
Water (film)	Mehta, D.	eastern		1	1
What is the What	Eggers, D.	other		1	1
"White Man's Burden"	Kipling, R.	Christianity	other	2	1
"Wife of Bath Prologue"	Chaucer, G.	Christianity		1	1

Most discussions with talk about religion(s) or religious subject matter included references to general religious content in which the specific religious tradition being alluded to was either unclear or ambiguous.

The quantitative findings presented above provide an overview of the frequency with which religion was discussed across a dataset representing 101 highly regarded high school ELA teachers from across the United States. Overwhelmingly, both the texts and references to religion within discussions focused on Christianity. Over half of the discussions (55%) included a focal text that addressed religious themes. Of the texts with religious themes, a large majority included Christian themes. However, religion was not always discussed during literary discussions of these texts. Similarly, in most cases references to religion in the discussions implicitly or explicitly revolved around Christian subject matter (see Table 2).

4.4 Sense or Domains of Religion Referenced

Five different categories emerged when examining the different contexts implied in each reference to religion: *unrealistic, realistic-fictional, real-historical, real-present,* and *real-personal. Unrealistic* references were the least "real" configurations of religion(s) or religious subject matter. They represented religion(s) or religious subject matter as entirely other-worldly and often had an element of pretend or play involved. They included mentions of religious subject matter that appeared to have no involvement in the lived realities of the speakers of listeners in the room. *Realistic-fictional* references to religion conveyed religious subject matter in such a way that demonstrated an understanding or appreciation for the religious realities within narrative and poetic text worlds but lacked evidence in the language of the turn at talk or surrounding turns at

talk to suggest that the religious subject matter was intended to have any bearing on lived religious experiences of real people today or in recent history. *Real-historical* references were invoked within specific historical facts. *Real-present* references to religion referenced realities within current contexts. *Real-personal* references discussed religion(s) or religious subject matter in ways that were real and personal to the speaker.

As Table 3 shows, the overall, a plurality of the references were categorized as *realistic-fictional* (n=102) and almost a quarter as *unrealistic* (n=58). The *real-present* category made up a fifth of the religious refences (n=49), with the *real-historical* at (n=49) and the *real-personal* at (n=9).

Table 3: Distribution of Domains of References to Religion

	Total References	Total Discussions
Unrealistic	58	16
Realistic-Fictional	102	27
Real-Historical	31	11
Real-Present	49	18
Real-Personal	9	6

The distribution of the religious senses of references to religion(s) or religious subject matter also varied by grade level. Table 4 provides the raw counts for all references to religion across the whole dataset, organized by grade level and the focal text of the discussion in which the references were made. Figure 3 illustrates the patterns of the total references by grade level.
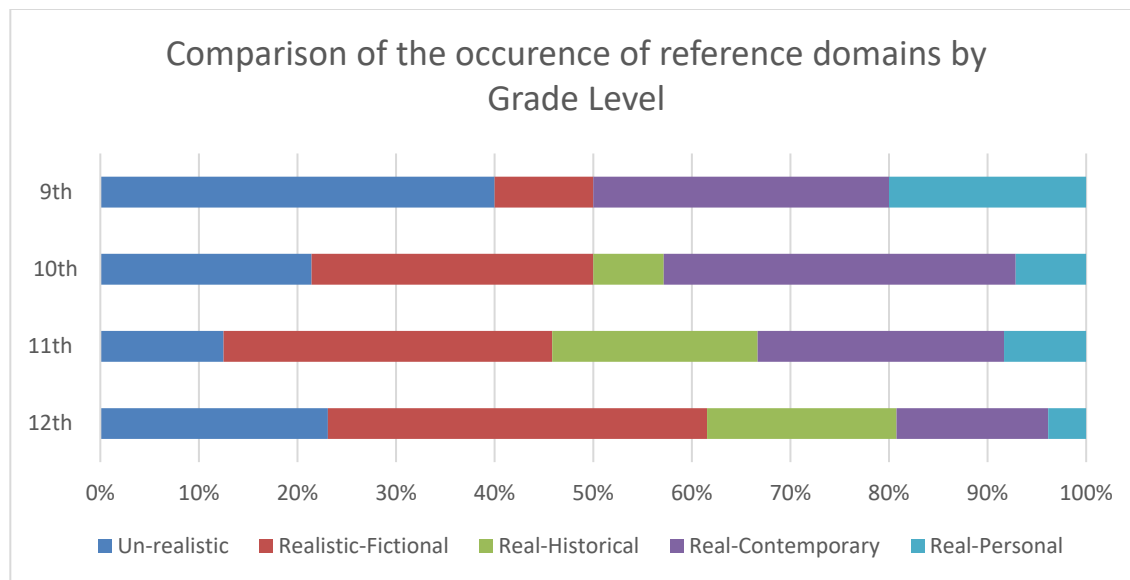
Figure 3: How religion was discussed across grades (stacked bar)

When examining the occurrence of religious reference domains within each grade level, it is clear that the higher the grade level the more widely the *realistic-fictional* category of talk about religion is distributed across discussions. *Personal* references appear less frequently, as well as r*eal-contemporary* references. Why these differences across grade levels exist can possibly be explained by the patterns in focal texts across the curricula (see Table 4). But it is also possible that 12th graders are more likely to be expected to confine their interpretive work with texts to the text alone. It is possible that the decrease in *real-personal* has to do with development toward a literary practice in which readers are expected to decenter the self and focusing instead on close-reading, a shift from knowledge of self to a knowledge of texts (Probst, 1990).

Table 4: Raw counts of domain reference types organized by grade level.

Focal Text	grade	Un-realistic	Realistic-Fictional	Real-Historical	Real-Contemporary	Real-Personal
Speak	9	0	0	0	1	0
Scarlet Letter	9	1	0	0	1	2
Fahrenheit 451	9	0	1	0	0	0
Romeo and Juliet	9	0	0	0	0	1
Romeo and Juliet	9	2	0	0	5	0
To Kill A mockingbird	9	3	0	0	0	0
Odyssey	9	15	0	0	0	0
TOTALS	**7**	**21**	**1**	**0**	**7**	**3**
Dante's Inferno, Odyssey, Oedipus	10	13	5	0	3	0
Edith Hamilton's Thesus; Epic of Gilgamesh	10	3	0	0	0	0
Kite Runner	10	0	0	0	10	0
Taming of the Shrew	10	0	2	0	1	0
Euthanasia and the right to die (Rebman)	10	0	0	0	7	0
Once upon a time (Gordimer)	10	2	2	0	1	0
Romeo and Juliet	10	0	2	0	0	0
Animal Farm; Harrison Bergeron; Julius Caesar	10	0	0	2	0	1
TOTALS	**8**	**18**	**11**	**2**	**22**	**1**
What is the What	11	0	1	0	0	0
Twelfth Night	11	0	0	3	0	0
Scarlet Letter	11	3	14	10	5	3
Crucible	11	0	2	5	0	0
Love song of J. Alfred Prufrock; Influence of Culture (Nisbett); Not by Genes alone (Boyd); I ask my mother to sing (Lee); Mythology (Hacker)	11	0	0	0	1	1
Great Gatsby, Death of a Salesman	11	2	0	0	0	0
Wife of Bath Prologue	11	0	2	0	0	0
The Metamorphosis	11	3	0	1	2	0
Federalist No 10; Persepolis; articles surrounding Time's 2011 Person of the Year: "the Protester"	11	0	0	0	5	0
Waiting for Godot; Fountainhead	11	0	1	0	2	0
Grapes of Wrath	11	0	13	0	0	0
Demain by Herman Hesse	11	0	4	0	0	0
Scarlet Letter	11	0	4	1	1	0
TOTALSD	**13**	**8**	**41**	**20**	**16**	**4**
Bless Me Ultima	12	0	9	0	0	0
Middle Passage by Robert Hayden, Beloved	12	0	7	3	2	0
Brave New World	12	0	1	0	0	0
God of Small Things; Water (film)	12	0	5	0	1	0
Lord of the flies	12	1	2	0	0	0
Hamlet	12	4	0	0	0	0
Hamlet, Rozencrantz & Guildenstern are Dead; Waiting for Godot; The Stranger	12	2	0	1	2	0
Tears, idle tears (Tennyson); Story of the Good little Boy (Twain)	12	0	3	2	6	1
Beloved; The Color Purple, The Sun Also Rises; As I Lay Dying; Their Eyes were Watching God;	12	0	2	0	0	0
Convergence of the Twain	12	1	0	0	0	0
Hamlet	12	2	0	0	0	0
Munch Paintings and Metamorphosis	12	2	0	0	0	0
White Man's Burden; Things Fall Apart	12	0	1	1	0	0
The Pearl (Steinbeck)	12	0	1	0	0	0
Picture of Dorian Grey	12	0	3	0	0	0
I, too; On being brought from African; Negro	12	0	0	2	0	0
	16	**12**	**34**	**9**	**11**	**1**

Discussions of certain texts like *The Odyssey* and Dante's *Inferno* included a high frequency of *unrealistic* references to religion, perhaps because of the mythological nature of these texts. Similarly, a tenth-grade discussion of the *Kite Runner* elicited a high frequency of references to religion in the *real-present* sense, perhaps because of the way the novel addresses experiences within a religion in a real and contemporary sense. Not surprisingly, then, a discussion on *The Scarlet Letter* prompted a high frequency of talk about religion in the *historical* sense, due to the novel's setting of a religious community in the past.

The variation across religious domains in the dataset suggest that there is a trajectory in the way students engage with religion in texts across grade levels. The ninth-grade classrooms notably allowed for more room for students to play with religious concepts, distancing religiously-laden subject matter from reality. Twelfth graders were more likely to situate religious subject matter within textual analysis. This trend is notable, particularly when taking Moore's (2010) cultural studies approach to teaching about religion into account. It seems that students only incidentally and occasionally seemed to be exposed to discussion of religion in a way that enriched the contextual realities of the text. Students are not increasingly exposed to discussion of religious histories or contemporary realities as they progress in the curriculum, but are rather more likely to be expected to engage with religion insofar as it supports "knowledge of texts." This suggests a set of priorities that may resist the kind of instruction Moore (2010) has in mind when she recommended ELA teachers use their class time to teach about religious cultures in their classes.

5.0 Qualitative Findings

In this chapter I address the second research question: When religion was addressed in NBPTS ELA discussions, what function or functions did it serve in ELA teaching and learning? I provide an overview of four different functions of religious literacy from the dataset: 1) comprehending or appreciating the cultural context reflected in a text; 2) employing a literary lens through which to interpret a text; 3) supporting personal connections to a text; and 4) "reading the world" (Freire & Macedo, 1987) based on ideas from a text.

5.1 Understanding the Context

One function of religious literacy in NBPTS English language arts class discussions was to provide basic background knowledge to support text comprehension and a deeper understanding of others. Often background knowledge of the religious dimensions of a text's setting support deeper understandings of character motivations and actions in a story (Fisher et al., 2012). For example, reading texts like *The Crucible*, *The God of Small Things*, or *The Kite Runner* require at least some basic knowledge about the religious contexts in which the stories are set. Also, many texts drew heavily on religious imagery. Readers commonly draw on shared knowledge of religious symbolism, imagery, and narratives to make sense of a text (Moore, 2010). Knowing, for example, that Kate's monologue at the end of *Taming of the Shrew* (i.e., "Thy husband is thy lord, thy life, thy keeper") is a direct reference to Ephesians 5:22 which implores wives to "submit to your own husbands as to the Lord" can open the conversation to the religious dimensions upon

which the text is playing. While in many cases, NBPTS teachers explicitly instructed students about the religious backdrop of a text, it was also common for teachers to ask questions that assumed at least some religious literacy.

Expanding students' background knowledge through religious literacy occurred most often across the NBTPS dataset in circumstances in which students encountered texts set in unfamiliar cultural and religious contexts. The goal in these scenarios was typically to enable students to develop empathy for and understanding of a culture different from their own. In these cases, religion was often categorized as a subset of culture.

For example, in a discussion of *The God of Small Things* and the film *Water*, both of which take place in India, the teacher's NBTPS video reflection reflected her belief in the importance of having students understand the cultural and religious context in which these texts take place, emphasizing that the texts depict "a society that students knew very little about and had many misconceptions of." As with other NBTPS teachers, this teacher included religion within a list of other aspects of culture that students may be unfamiliar with. She noted how instruction about "Indian history, religion, culture, and society via these works of literature allowed students to see the obvious and subtle differences and similarities between our own culture and theirs." As such, incorporating instruction on Indian religious believes served to support students understanding of the cultural context of the texts they were studying. The following excerpt was described by the teacher as a successful "cultural and religious connection to the environment via the use of water as a symbol."

Discussion Transcript Excerpt 3: *God of Small Things* and *Water*

turn #	Speaker	Talk
31	George	I think uh that what we're talking about right now, may be the reason that **Gandhi appears at the end of the film. Because Gandhi, as he is portrayed in *Water* is a symbol of rationalism.** And it's, you know uh, when he shows up, it's like, nice Diti sees that [xx] have to have a refuge from cycles of hatred and of tradition conceived for the purpose of basically personal gain. Um Gandhi's existence in the movie is an indictment of uh of almost every action that's taken in this passage by the scheming old women.
32	Sarah	So I think that uh Gandhi, in the movie, **represents more of like rebirth because um they talk about how much society will change once Gandhi takes power.** Like the widows will gain power. And so the untouchables won't be untouchable anymore. You know, there will, there will be more rights. So I think they look at him as like, not really rationalism, because some people think that he's just crazy. Like the Brahmin caste, um doesn't see him as rational, so I think it's like more of a hope in an idealized society.
33	Lee	Well, building off of what she said, uh like **how Gandhi represents like rebirth, u**h I think that like kind of coincides with like the movie's title *Water*. Like for me, at least, or the way I saw it. I felt like Water was like sort of like rebirth throughout like throughout the movie. And like they washed themselves, and cleared, like i**t was kind of like washing away their sins. Like being reborn**, I thought, who was the girl? LIke the one who killed herself {several students reply "Kalyani"}. Kalyani, I thought that it was symbolic when she drowned herself. Because the way she was killing herself, she was submersing herself in water, and I thought since **I thought water was like clearing away your like sins and stuff,** she, in a sense, she was clearing away her sins. **And so she would go to the next life like sinless.**

In the stretch of talk, George and Sarah offered interpretations largely based on background knowledge of Indian culture and history. For example, George offered the interpretation that Gandhi at the end of the film served as a symbol of rationalism and an indictment of "the scheming old women," an interpretation that drew on background knowledge of tensions between Indian philosophy and religion. Likewise, Sarah provided a perspective on the social and material aspects

of the culture in which the film was set. For example, she emphasized that Gandhi's presence in the film represented a metaphorical rebirth in the sense that Gandhi's political power would usher in a new kind of social order, one that involved overturning the caste system (e.g., "the untouchables won't be untouchable anymore"). Lee's comment built on both Sarah's and George's cultural observations to tap into the religious rebirth and specifically the symbol of water in the film. More specifically Lee took the symbol of rebirth out of the primarily cultural context in which George grounded it and expanded it to apply to Kalyani's literal reincarnation, arguing that the character's immersion into water meant that she would "go to the next life like sinless." In order to make this connection, Lee made use of an understanding of Hindu religious teaching (i.e., reincarnation) to make sense of the text. In this way, religious literacy enriched students' cultural literacy, as the teacher intended, allowing them to draw connections between Indian culture, religion, and literary texts. This ultimately supported one goal of multicultural education in English language arts by reducing students' potential prejudice (Banks, 1994) against unfamiliar cultures.

Similarly, a 10th grade English teacher in a predominantly white rural community chose to assign the novel *The Kite Runner* specifically because "the characters' cultural and religious beliefs are very different from my students' culture and beliefs." Her goal was for students to be able "to learn to accept and appreciate cultural and social differences among people," or what James Banks would refer to as "prejudice reduction" (Banks, 1994). To meet this goal, the teacher supplemented reading of the novel by assigning mini research projects on cultures and religions within Afghanistan. As such, students were able to draw on religious and cultural literacy to examine why the characters acted in the way that they did. For example, religious literacy regarding knowledge about tensions between Sunni and Shia Islam allowed students to engage in the following discussion.

turn #	Speaker	Talk
76	Sarah	Um what do ya'll think about the second line paragraph on page 25, **"never mind any of those things because history isn't easy to overcome, and neither is religion in the end, I was a Pashtun and he was a Hazara. I was a Sunni and he was a Shia and nothing was ever going to change that."**
77	Whitney	Kinda accepts the fact that they're not friends, that's what I think. He knows that. {several students speak at once} {"He realizes that everything's against them like."} He's not gonna do anything about it.
78	Ross	And a part in the book where he even kinda says like, he was against the world, and like, um when he did like Hazara or something, he said the world always wins, like no matter what happens. {student: "For his birthday party?"} Yeah the birthday party, um I don't know what page it's on.
79	Inna	I think **that paragraph shows that religion plays a big role in Amir and Baba having like mixed feelings, like they can't show their true emotions in public with Ali and Hassan.**
80	Whitney	Yeah like you can't really blame them. [xx].
81	Inna	Yeah because they're two totally different religions.
82	Carla	I don't think they really know, because **like they were raised like so much based off of their religion and like how that's how they knew to grow up.** I don't think they really know theirself like, how they truly feel.
83	Emily	I thought Baba was really nice. He kinda sticks to his own morals. **Not necessarily religious, but he sticks to his own morals but religion kind of.**
84	Denise	So he wouldn't like raise him to hate the, the Shias, would he? {several students speak at once} {video cuts off}

In this stretch of talk, religious literacy can be seen in the form of knowledge about the distinction between Shia and Sunni Islam and functioned to support students' understanding of the relationships within the novel. As student one argued in turn 79, religion played an important role in the tension that Amir and Baba must have felt in their relationships with Ali and Hassan. Student one is technically inaccurate in describing them as "two totally different religions," but although Sunnis and Shi'ites are both categorized as Muslims, the division between the sects is far from resolved and goes back centuries. Echoing this complexity, Carla noted in turn 82 that Amir and

Baba were "raised based off of their religion" (Sunni Islam), which is to say that as a result they were taught that being friends with the Shia characters in the novel was off-limits, no matter how bad they felt about it or how much they wanted the opposite. On the other hand, as students seven noted in turn 83, Baba's religious morals seem to contradict what society expected of him in terms of his relationship with Hazaras. Emily went back and forth between categorizing Baba's kindness as a moral or religious attribute ("Not necessarily religious, but he sticks to his own morals but religion kind of"). This is important because it shows that the student was grappling with the embeddedness of religion in Baba's moral framework. And so, with their moral convictions on the one hand and their societal expectations on the other and their religious identities bridging the two, Baba and Amir are left "having like mixed feelings" about how to treat Ali and Hassan. Realizations like this indicated to the teacher that the students successfully learned "that different cultures have different standards and that just because the beliefs and actions are different from what the students know does not mean that they are wrong." In other words, religious literacy helped the students not only to appreciate the internal conflicts of the characters on a deeper level but also to "shorten the distance" (Louie, 2005) between themselves and another culture.

In addition to supporting the reading of texts set in non-white, non-Christian cultures, religious literacy also supported the building of background knowledge for students who were engaging American texts like *The Crucible* and *The Scarlet Letter,* texts whose Puritan settings were heavily embedded within white Protestant Christianity. In one particular discussion of *The Scarlet Letter*, students drew on what they learned about the basics of Christianity within Puritan contexts from history class in order to make sense of the themes in the novel. See for example, the exchange below which took place in a small group of four students.

Discussion Transcript Excerpt 5: *The Scarlet Letter*

turn #	Speaker	Talk
88	Ms. Janet	what would be kind of an interesting topic for Dimmesdale to talk about at the election sermon?
89	Katherine	like in his new
90	Elain	in his new like being? {Teacher "yeah"}
91	Gayathri	to forgive?
92	Katherine	Like being like honest with yourself kind of and um saying like you know don't hide from yourself. Kind of like cause it's not gonna lead to anything good.
93	Elain	**Even if it's like sinful, you should still be true to like who you are. Cause otherwise, you're like sinning by not being yourself, and making life hard**.
94	Gayathri	**But that doesn't really sound like too Puritan**, like Puritan. {Elain "yeah wait what was it--"}
95	Mayuri	I feel like it had to be something that satisfied the people's beliefs but also, was related to him {Elain "yeah"} and like hinted at his sin.

In this exchange, students hypothesized about the content of Dimmesdale's elections sermon, a detail Hawthorne never provided in the novel. Katherine wondered if perhaps the message of the sermon was about "being like kind with yourself." Elaine took Catherine's idea one step further by saying "even if it's like sinful, you should still be true to who you are." Gayathri drew on background knowledge about the basics of Puritan religion when she observed that Elaine's comment did not "really sound like to Puritan." Indeed, Gayathri was likely drawing on the idea that Puritans were known for the doctrine of Total Depravity, the belief that humans are inherently sinful at birth. As such, the belief that "you should still be true to like who you are," would run counter to the belief that humans are depraved at the core. In the sense Gayathri drew on background knowledge of Puritan beliefs to make textual inferences.

The discussion of Puritanism among this group of multicultural students is not unlike the discussion of the largely white class discussing *Kite Runner*. Gayathri's observation that Elain's interpretation didn't "sound too Puritan" exemplifies the way outside knowledge can provide a different and illuminating perspective of a text, particularly when it comes to religion. Of Gayathri, Ms. Janet wrote the following:

Teacher Commentary Excerpt 1: Ms. Janet's Reflection

> [Gayathri] moved the US from India in 1995. While her religious and moral beliefs often leave her feeling unconnected, it is clear that she was making connections to her classmates through her feeling about the characters actions in the book.

Gayathri's observation about what does and does not sound like Puritanism possibly derived from her own positionality as an outsider. Other students may not have been able to pick up on the ironies of Dimmesdale's Puritan theology of human sinfulness and his conclusion to pursue being true to oneself.

Another example of students drawing on background knowledge of Puritanism to make sense of a text occurred in a discussion of *The Crucible*.

Discussion Transcript Excerpt 6: *The Crucible*

turn #	Speaker	Talk
25	HaNa	**Wasn't that, like, when the Puritans came, like, you said something about them living in persecution, cause they were persecuted where they first came from? And didn't they not wanna do that?**
26	Ms. Randi	Right, I think that's one of the ironies, right? That, here **they come from England, because they've been mistreated and persecuted, and now they're coming to start this new settlement, and everything's gonna be great, and they're gonna practice their religion as they want, and then, ironic, that what do they do?** {"Persecute." St 18 WF(?)} Right? (..) So, maybe, it sounds to me like HaNa is saying that, the irony is that they tried to solve their own moral dilemma by persecuting other people, right?

| 27 | HaNa | {overlapping} But it's cause that's where they came from. That's, like, that's how people get their morals, cause they were taught that. {"Ahhh." T061} They're used to that, and that's the only way they were taught how to solve their problems. |

Just prior to this exchange, students were discussing the harshness of the punishments meted out to people accused of being witches. HaNa brought in a perspective of the Puritans' history to unpack why they would have been so harsh with the people accused of being witches. She recalled how Puritans once lived "in persecution," asking "didn't they not wanna do that?" In other words, since Puritans knew what it felt like to be on the receiving end of religious persecution, why would they want to perpetuate it after they had found their own religious freedom on American soil? The teacher re-voiced her observation, by saying "that's one of the ironies, right? […] that they tried to solve their own moral dilemma by persecuting other people." HaNa reconsidered whether or not this was truly surprising, remarking that persecution was "the only way they were taught how to solve their problems." Which is to say, because the Puritans were persecuted themselves, it makes perfect sense that they would go on to persecute others. In this way religious literacy in the form of background knowledge of religious history allowed HaNa to weigh claims explaining the actions that took place in the play.

The above examples of religious literacy as background knowledge all supported students' understanding of the setting and context of a text. Religious literacy as background knowledge can also support students' ability to make sense of religious imagery or allusions in a text. In a discussion of Shakespeare's *Taming of the Shrew*, students relied on religious literacy to address the following prompt, "Is Kate tame? How should we interpret the final tone of Kate's speech at the end of the play? Is she sincere? Sarcastic? Beaten down?" In order to make an argument about Kate's tone at the end of the play, students drew on knowledge of the Bible and religious history and belief to defend different interpretations of the following passage from Act V.

74

Thy husband is thy lord, thy life, thy keeper,
Thy head, thy sovereign; one that cares for thee
And for thy maintenance; commits his body
To painful labor both by sea and land,
To watch the night in storms, the day in cold,
Whilst thou li'st warm at home, secure and safe;
And craves no other tribute at thy hands
But love, fair looks, and true obedience—
Too little payment for so great a debt. (5.2.162-170)

During the discussion, Elisa was the first to draw attention to this passage, which, in the students'
texts included a gloss identifying the Biblical allusion the passage in Ephesians that instructs
women to "submit to your husbands as to the lord."

Discussion Transcript Excerpt 7: *The Taming of the Shrew*

turn #	Speaker	Talk
12	Elisa	Okay, so for the ending of the book, "Is Kate tamed, and how do you interpret it?" I kind of, interpreted it as sort of being sarcastic, and I thought this at first because when I was reading it, because you just saw it in the movie instead of reading it in the book, but when I started reading it, I noticed on the side that um certain lines, line 162 to 70 which said, **"Thy husband is thy lord, thy life, thy keeper, thy head, thy sovereign," et cetera. It says, "See Paul's letter to the Eph-"{"Ephesians." multiple students}** Um and she wasn't coming up with those words on her own, she was quoting someone else, and by doing that, I think it, kind of, made her speech seem like it wasn't as personal and it wasn't as um original. And so, I thought that might have been Shakespeare's way of showing that it was sarcastic, by her putting other people, and that was also for lines 171-176 where she says, "Such duty like the subject of the prince," and um I thought that was, like, his sneaky way of, kind of, letting us know that she wasn't actually tame. Um Katie?

Although Elisa's observation did not make any mention that the text was Biblical, the textual gloss
she cited cross-referenced the Bible, noting the allusion to Paul's letter to the Ephesians, which in
Christianity is typically considered authoritative and sacred text. The text being referenced
implores wives to "submit to your own husbands as to the Lord," a passage which centuries of
Christian thinking have taken as binding authority in Godly marriages. By drawing attention to

this intertextual connection, Elisa (knowingly or not) opened the conversation to the religious connotations of Kate's tone at the end of the play.

Several turns later, Michelle circled back to the importance that the reference was to the Bible, by saying the following:

Discussion Transcript Excerpt 8: *The Taming of the Shrew*

turn #	Speaker	Talk
17	Michelle	**the part that uh Elisa picked out where she mentioned how it's in the Bible verse**, it's almost, like, how I interpret it is almost that Kate was trying to be obedient, but, like, couldn't really, like, necessarily, like, think of the words herself. So, she use-, so she used something that she knew, uh and that she was trying, just trying to be uh obedient and trying to uh prove to this audience of people that she was obedient and then what she now believed.

Similar to Elisa, Michelle's argument rested on the assumption that Kate's use of other people's words was significant. Michelle, however, was the first to make the specific connection to the fact that the other person's words were "in the Bible verse." In contrast to Elisa's argument, which claimed that the use of other people's words indicated a lack of sincerity, Michelle's observation that the words being quoted were from the Bible indicated a tone of obedience and sincere belief in her role as a "tame" woman. In order for Michelle to make this nuanced connection, she needed to draw on knowledge of Biblical literacy, observing not only that the passage quoted was biblical, but also that "this audience of people" to whom Kate was speaking would find such a use of a Biblical reference to be proof that she was now obedient.

Two turns later, Rashmi built on Michelle's argument with an increasingly specific explanation about the religious significance of the Biblical reference in Kate's monologue.

Discussion Transcript Excerpt 9: *The Taming of the Shrew*

turn #	Speaker	Talk

| 19 | Rashmi | Um I wanted to actually go back to what Michelle said **about how um [Kate] quotes the Bible when she says um on page 219 um starting from line 162 um, "Thy husband is thy lord, thy keep-, thy life, thy keeper," et cetera.** And um what I, kind of, interpreted this as was um the Bible is, like, something that, like, everyone should follow. And it's, kind of, like a guide or a standard, and so I think that by him including this he [i.e., Shakespeare] was, kind of, trying to get at that, that um women, this is how they should be, like, this is, like, the standard by which, by which they should live. And so, in that respect, I would say that um Kate was tamed, because when, if you look at it from their perspective and their time, um women, like, that was their role to, kind of, be submissive and give in to men. So, by him adding that in there, it was basically, this is the standard, and this is what women should be like. |
| 20 | Ms. Erin | Let's call on one of the yellow cups. It's time for a different perspective, I feel like. |

Rashmi specifically returned to Michelle's observation about the Biblical reference in Kate's monologue to make the argument that Kate was tamed. She explained that underneath Kate's quotation was the assumption that the Bible was "something everyone should follow" as "a guide or a standard." She argued that "from their perspective and their time" this Biblical standard for women's expectations to be "submissive" and to "give in to men" were the norm. As such, as the discussion unfolded, students increasingly made use of their awareness of religious beliefs practices to make sense of the underlying meaning of the play.

At times, teachers seemed to avoid the direct discussion of the religious connotations of a text. Ms. Erin, for example, responded to Rashmi's comment not by inviting students to further problematize the religious undertones of the monologue and their relationship to sexism in the play, but rather to completely change the subject. She explained it in the following way:

Teacher Commentary Excerpt 2: Ms. Erin's Reflection

At this point, I noted repetitive conversation and emerging disengagement, shown by nonverbal signals: Shane stares into space. Sierra fidgets and shifts in her seat. Jamie, Jon, Amy, and Tim lean faces on hands. Brett and Tim begin leaning back in their chairs rather than forward. After Rashmi's comment, I knew that it was the right time for me to model an appropriate opportunity to [change the subject].

Although the reason she gave for changing the subject had nothing to do with the increasingly direct religious implications of the discussion, her choice to do so implies that the relationship between religion and gender in the play was not her primary focus in the lesson. She assumed that there was not much more that could be said on the topic. As such, the talk around religion in this discussion reflects what scholars who have studied race talk in class discussions referred to as incidental talk (Skerrett, 2011, cited in Borsheim-Black & Sarigianides, 2019). Incidental talk is often the by-product of an approach to instruction about racism that relies on talking about it "when it comes up." As scholars have noted, however, this approach "does not ensure that student understanding is carefully introduced, scaffolded, practiced, and assessed" (Borsheim-Black & Sarigianides, 2019, p. 23; Skerrett, 2011). Furthermore, this increasingly direct discussion of the religious relationship between the Bible and sexism was labeled by the teacher as "repetitive conversation." The signs she listed as evidence of "emerging disengagement" could have been seen by another educator as indications of productive discomfort and all the more reason to pursue further inquiry into the topic.

In contrast to the discussion above, some teachers like the one below directly invited students to examine the religious connotations in a text. In this case, it appeared that Mr. Simon assumed that religion was more important to students' thinking than it might actually have been.

Discussion Transcript Excerpt 10: *Middle Passage*

Turn #	Speaker	Talk
12	Mr. Simon	"Deep in the festering hold the father lies, of his bones, New England pews are made, those are altar lights that were his eyes." Josh, what do you think about these religious connotations there?

13	Josh	Well, seeing that **I'm not too familiar with the uh Bible, {Mr. Simon "well I know"} Judaism and Christianity are similar {Mr. Simon "'exactly"}, but I thought in these two paragraphs that you were just um reading {Mr. Simon "mhm"}, I saw a big contrast between kind of the glory of taking back these animals, these slaves and making the best of them in the new world.** And between that and the evil that they're really, you know, bestowing upon the slaves {Mr. Simon: "Right"}. "Standing to America, bringing home black gold, black ivory, black seed" is kind of glory and that contrast between evil. "Deep in the festering hold thy father lies, of his bones, New England pews are made, those are altar lights that were his eyes."
14	Drew	They also need uh (.) they also **kind of need a religious figure throughout this voyage** because throughout this we see that they're going through a time of spiritual crisis. {Mr. Simon "mhm."} "What port awaits us, Davy Jones or home? I've heard of slavers drifting, drifting, play things of wind storm and chance, their crews gone blind, the jungle hatred crawling up on deck." It's like they know, they understand that they're becoming uncivilized and they're trying to find a way to change this.
15	Elaine	To justify their actions {Drew "yeah, and"}-- that's what they need. A justification for their actions. So, they say God is with them and everything's okay.
16	Mr. Simon	And you have that sort of **anaphora of the hymn, that Jesus [our Savior pilot] throughout this entire thing that sort of brings and invokes the God into all of this,** so that it's almost as if to me, they're looking for their justification. They're looking to justify the horrific actions that they're [putting out]--.
17	Drew	Which is ironic because these are often like, **these spirituals are often sung by slaves** {Mr. Simon "yes, yes"} to get through all of the times of turmoil. So, **it's ironic that they're claiming that God is on their side as a justification for the enslaving of blacks.**
18	Josh	I think it's also ironic, though, that the blacks are the ones who receive the justification from a lot of the whites in the new world. At the end talking about John Quincy Adams {Mr. Simon "mmhmm"}, he says it was completely justified what the blacks did when they revolted and attacked the white slavers. You know, the suffering that they had been enduring, you know--

In contrast to the discussion about *Taming of the Shrew*, Mr. Simon explicitly invited students to draw on prior knowledge of Christianity to make sense of the imagery in the text. However, participating successfully in this discussion was contingent on the ability and willingness to navigate complex and potentially volatile religious subject matter. It also required

that students were already equipped with prior knowledge about Christian faith and practice. Mr. Simon's initiation, "What do you make of these religious connotations," assumed that Josh (the student he is speaking to) not only could recognize but also could understand and make meaning out of the religious imagery of the text's references to pews and altars. Josh's response ("seeing as I'm not too familiar with the Bible") revealed that he had little confidence in his prior knowledge of Christianity, and he instead went on to speak about the pursuit of "glory" and the "contrast between good and evil." Drew, on the other, took up the teacher's prompt directly in turn 14, arguing that the white slavers in the poem found themselves in the midst of a "spiritual crisis" and were in search of a religious figure to guide them on this voyage, that they are relying on religion to change the fact that they are becoming "uncivilized." Building off of Drew's interpretation, Elaine argued that the religious connotations of the poem suggested that what the white slavers needed was a justification for their evil actions, the ability to say that "God is with them and everything's okay." The teacher's talk in turn 16 affirmed the direction Drew and Elaine took the discussion, most notably by adding textual evidence to support their claims that the white slavers relied on a sense of God to justify their actions (" you have that sort of anaphora of the hymn […] that sort of brings and invokes the God into all of this, so that it's almost as if to me, they're looking for their justification."). Drew relied on historical religious literacy in his claim in turn 17, "it's ironic that they're claiming that God is on their side as a justification for the enslaving of blacks," because the spirituals being referenced were traditionally sung by slaves, not the white slavers.

In another group in Mr. Simon's class, students again relied on background knowledge of religion to hold a robust discussion about the meaning of the text. This time, the topic was initiated by a student.

Discussion Transcript Excerpt 11: *Middle Passage*

Turn #	Speaker	Talk
49	Carl	**I was looking at more of the religious side of it {Mr. Simon "okay"} as with what you and Cynthia were just talking about. Here it says, "Their moaning is a prayer for death." {Mr. Simon "Yes"}. And "some try to starve themselves." And then you go down one, two, three, four stanzas later, it says, "Jesus Savior pilot me {Mr. Simon "over life's tempestuous sea"}. We pray that thou will grant, O Lord, safe passage to our vessels bringing souls." It's, I mean it's not so much praying for death, it's praying and knowing that Jesus can lead them to freedom forever {Mr. Simon "okay'"} and allow them out of --**
50	Mr. Simon	Who is, **who is praying to Jesus here**, Carl?
51	Carl	The slaves.
52	Mr. Simon	Really?
53	Carl	That's how I took it.
54	Mr. Simon	Okay, did anybody here take it a different way?
55	Anthony	I took it as the sailors.
56	Mr. Simon	Exactly, good. Not that that's, I think, I think you're (Carl) on to something in the sense that the religion of the slavers was eventually forced upon the slaves themselves. So, I think they could be. So, I think there's a real sort of duality there.
57	Teresa	For this point in history they evangelized [back and forth about pronunciation of word] Africa. **I know the Dutch, for example {T "yeah"}, had already been there.**
60	Mr. Simon	So historically speaking then, Anthony, when you say it's the slavers that are the ones that are praying, what's ironic about all of this?
61	Anthony	Uh that they're so much in the wrong and they don't see it all {T "exactly"}and that aspect of hypocrisy.

In the sequence of talk Theresa and Carl argued for an interpretation that assumed people praying to Jesus were the slaves on the ship. The teacher and Anthony, however, understood the references to the people praying to be about the slavers. Although Carl's assumption that it was the slaves praying to Jesus was directly contradicted by the teacher ("who is praying to Jesus here, Carl?"), Teresa offered support for his claim by noting that Dutch missionaries had likely been to Africa prior to the events reflected in the poem, demonstrating the possibility that some slaves may already have adopted Christian beliefs and practices prior to being captured by white European slavers in the 1840s. As such, participation in this portion of the discussion is contingent on the

ability to navigate religious doctrine and history across time and place. Similar to the prior excerpt of talk in this class, the ability to interpret the irony and significance of the text was strongly enriched when students brought with them background knowledge of religion. In the prior two cases, the background knowledge that students brought to the text enriched the discussion significantly. However, it seemed that the teacher entered into the discussion with the assumption that students already had a store of background knowledge of Christianity, but there were clearly some students who were asked to speak to "religious connotations."

5.1.1 Section Summary

Religious literacy in the form of background knowledge of religion was recruited in different ways across discussions. In some discussions, background knowledge aided students as they made sense of the setting of a text or the cultural context in which a text was written. This often occurred in discussions of texts that reflected religious cultures new or unfamiliar to students, i.e., the backdrop of Islamic cultures in *The Kite Runner*, Indian beliefs and cultures in *God of Small Things* or the film *Water*, or even the Puritan settings of *The Scarlet Letter* or *The Crucible*. There were other times in which background knowledge of Christianity in particular enriched students' interpretations of a text, helping them to make meaning of religiously loaded imagery in a text. However, it is important to underscore that not every student can be expected to come to class with the same background knowledge of religious beliefs and practices.

Additionally, it is significant that the ways in which religious literacy was invoked to support background knowledge of a texts reflect the Christonormativity discussed in prior research (Blumenfeld & Jaekel, 2012; Blumenfeld, Joshi, & Fairchild, 2009; Burke & Segall, 2016; Joshi, 2020). Knowledge of Hinduism or Buddhism were relevant to interpretations students offered for

texts like *God of Small Things* and *Kite Runner*, but the discussion excerpts above do not reflect the deepest possible engagement with the religious concerns in either text. A mere mention of reincarnation or the existence of Sunni or Shia Islam were basic forms of religious literacy. In these cases, the concepts were noted, but the navigation of the topics seemed to drift quickly to "safer" more "familiar" subject matter. Interestingly, the discussion of Puritanism seemed to probe a slightly deeper layer of religious background knowledge. Gayathri, who did not identify with Christian Protestantism, was able to identify a subtle but significant tension within a character based on her understanding of Puritanism, something that her fellow classmates (who it seems might have been more familiar with Christianity) did not notice.

Instead, religious literacy that supported understanding of textual context was largely governed by Christian-centric assumptions. Students were taught non-white, non-Christian texts as a means to expose students to exotic faiths, and texts that drew heavily on Protestant Christian knowledge and practices were engaged in ways that seemed to assume prior knowledge of Protestant Christian texts, cultures and theologies.

5.2 Constructing an Interpretive Lens

Another common function of religious literacy in the NBTPS English language arts class discussions was to provide resources for the development of literary theories through which to read and interpret literary texts. In contrast to the above approach which recruited religion to enrich knowledge of the text's context, students (and sometimes teachers) who used a religious literary theory approach recruited religious concepts to generate and evaluate literary interpretations of the text. This approach was complex, drawing on a form of religious literacy beyond factual

information about religions and including conceptual knowledge. The literary knowledge that students engaged in in the following excerpts reflects Probst's (1990) notion of literary knowledge of processes of meaning making.

This approach also aligned with current trends in high school literary analysis. Over the last decade, more scholars have been calling for English teachers to emphasize the practice of literary interpretation rather than emphasizing the content of canonical literary works (Appleman, 2015, Beach et al., 2021). This approach involves providing students with multiple theoretical frameworks through which to engage a text. Teachers who put this into practice, for example, explicitly teach theoretical lenses such as reader response criticism, Marxist criticism, feminist criticism, queer theory, and critical race theory. The following discussions reflect the application of religious frameworks to the analysis of literature.

In one discussion in a 11th grade IB class, students drew on knowledge of Hindu, Buddhist and Christian concepts to interpret patterns and symbols in Kafka's *Metamorphosis.* Students prepared by selecting a scholarly article to enhance their understanding of the text. For example, one student selected an article titled "Samsa and *Samsara*: Suffering, Death, and Rebirth in 'The Metamorphosis'" (Ryan, 1999), which provided a reading of the text that provided an interpretation through the Buddhist and Hindu concept of Samsara. The concept of Samsara, whose origin is often traced back to the Upanishads, has three common definitions: "wander, journey and bondage." It refers to "this world of craving, lust, suffering, death, rebirth, and disease" (Ryan, 1999, p. 133), and deliverance from this cycle is dependent on one's Karma. In the following discussion, Jenny introduced this concept as a framework through which to interpret the text, and her fellow classmates discussed the affordances and limitations of Samsara as a theoretical lens through which to examine the novel.

Discussion Transcript Excerpt 12: *The Metamorphosis*

Turn #	Speaker	Talk
1	Jenny	[The article is] kind of comparing Samsara with the story and how it ties in and how it follows the concept of Samsara. And uh and the um the metaphor of uh Kafka with Gregor and so I was just gonna ask if you guys think that that all makes sense? Like, do you think that that has any value, that "Samsara" relates back to "The Metamorphosis?" And, like, specific examples and stuff.
2	Aiden	I think the, um the, like, **rebirth aspect of it definitely relates to it, because he is, like, born again as a bug**. But I think um there are some other aspects that you said, like, um, (..) like, uh life and death, maybe, like, I don't feel like the book, I'm sure there is life and death in the book, but I don't think it's focusing as much on it as, like, the rebirth aspect of it. **So, I think parts of "Samsara" are, like, connecting to the book, but other parts aren't.**
3	Nina	Yea, I do think Gregor goes through a lot of pain. Not just emotionally, but, like, it relates to the physical pain of his family turning on him, cause that apple gets lodged in his back {laughter from St 10 WF} and for the rest of the book, he's like, "It's hurting me forever and ever." And {"Mmhmm." St 11 HF} yea, he did, he never gets used to it.
4	Eli	I'm not sure how much it has to do with it, because when he turns into a bug, he doesn't, like, die as a human and turn into a bug. **He, so, like, he wasn't really reborn.** He was, sort of, changed.
5	Jenny	Hmm.
6	Marcus	I think it's also worth noting that it had, what was it? It's also important, and to note that **after Gregor does die, uh his family also seems to uh be reborn.** They take a new spirit. His father goes back to work. Erica, his sister, is going to be, what was that, his parents are going to consider marrying his sister and they uh start their life over again.
7	Jenny	And also um **within the article it's, it also defines "Samsara" as having three common translations. And it also means "wander," "journey," and "bondage."** And bondage, not actually, like, physically being tied down, but the effects of it. Like, you could really get back to "Metamorphosis" when um Gregor has to stay at work and he has to work for his family and all of the other routines of his life, so.

In this discussion, students drew on their understandings of the religious concept of Samsara and used those understandings to interpret the novel. Some students had more in-depth and accurate knowledge of Samara than others. For example, Aiden evaluated the appropriateness of using Samsara as a framework through which to interpret the novel based on an understanding of Samsara as rebirth, life and death. Aiden argued in the beginning of turn 2 that the notion of rebirth

"definitely relates" to the novel as the main character was "born again as a bug." But he found the

notion of life and death to be more of a stretch and therefore concluded that "parts of Samsara are

like connecting to the book, but other parts aren't." His argument relied on the misunderstanding

that the ideas of rebirth, life, and death used to describe Samsara are three distinct and separate

concepts, whereas, according to Ryan (1993), "anything objectionable in our lives is a part of

Samsara" (p. 133). Eli's argument in turn 4 seemed to operate on the same assumption as Aiden's,

that Samsara must necessarily involve literal death and rebirth—"when he turns into a bug he

doesn't like die as a human and turn into a bug" – and therefore Samsara in Eli's mind didn't have

much to do with the novel at all.

Nina and Mark on the other hand seemed to have more in-depth understanding of the

concept of Samsara and thus are better able to apply the concept to construct a meaningful

interpretation of the text. Nina drew on the understanding of Samsara as having to do with suffering

and pain in this life, and concepts of like rebirth, death, and pain not as literal facts about Samsara,

but as different ways of conceptualizing Samsara. She thus argued that "I do think Gregor goes

through a lot of pain" and concludes that "he never gets used to it." She noted the analogy of the

apple being lodged in Gregor's back not simply as a literal example of his pain, but as a

representation of the emotional pain he experienced in losing his family. Mark too drew on an

analogical understanding of Samsara to argue that "after Gregor does die, his family also seems to

be reborn. They take a new spirit." These two arguments reflect a deeper and more accurate

understanding of the Samsaric world from which Gregor was seeking escape, which aligns more

with the argument Jenny was offering for her peers' consideration (Ryan, 1993).

Later in this same discussion students evaluated both Christian and Jewish frameworks for

analyzing the text. Similar to the discussion of Samsara, the depth of students' knowledge of

Christian and Jewish religious concepts affected how productive their use of the concepts were as

literary lenses.

Discussion Transcript Excerpt 13: *The Metamorphosis*

Turn #	Speaker	Talk
31	Suzy	**So, do you see any, sort of, like, religious ties with that?** I know when I was reading it, the, the three, like, bearded strangers that came to the house, I know that, kind of, to me, I was like, "So, reference to the three kings, Bible," you know what I'm talking about? Okay, so, I don't know, and I thought that was a really interesting thing and my article, kind of, brought it up. Do you guys think there's any, sort of, like, religious ties? St xx, I know you mentioned that you do think, like, **I do think there's ties to Christianity in the writing [that I can see.]**
32	Jenny	Yea, there's also the apple lodged in his back. {"Yea." Suzy} And, you know, it's, like, **the Garden of Eden, eating the apple.** So, yea, that's what I was thinking.
33	Eli	**I'm not sure that there's any religious ties, I definitely know that there are political ties,** because he was, like, we all know that, like, he was from Germany, right? Like, he, but, like, most countries, they call their country the mother country. And so, his father was really strict and, like, held, like, the same, like, political views as Germany did at the time. And then throughout the book, like, the mother just, sort of, watched just like the father did and, like, essentially beat him while he was a cockroach. He, like, did all this stuff to him, so, like, that was, like, the mother countries, so, like, other countries surrounding Germany, it's, like, just starting to, like, go to World War I.
34	Suzy	So, **if not religious, what do you guys think that [your book three] then represented then?** Cause it was really ambiguous, their description there was not [xx] [xx]. And in every scene they were in was very, like, un-, almost uncomfortable and it, it just seemed, kind of, faded. So, what do you guys think? Cause they were obviously significant.
35	Nina	I think **they more represented the outside world than anything specifically, uh religious leaders or politically.** Because up until then, Gregor was looking out the window and he's like, "Oh, I wish I could still see everything that was across the street," et cetera, et cetera, and then boom all of the sudden, three people are living in his house and he sees them for the first time, but he can't distinguish anything about them, because he's been secluded for so long, I guess is one way to put it.
36	Matt	I think those people represent Kafka's, uh, like, his, the little hope he has, because in the last trial article, uh **they talked about how Kafka was a Zionist, but everyone believed that he was a fake Zionist, like, he talked about it and he talked it up, but he wouldn't really do it. So, I feel like that manifests itself in the book.** Like, these three men are his hope of being in the outside world, but back inside, he really doesn't want

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to be back in the outside world, because all he did was work and he didn't lead a very happy life.

| 37 | Renee | I think similarly to Suzy, kind of, I think the three men represent the illusion of the family. How the [xx] [xx] resort to [xx] so, not [xx] [xx] [xx] [xx]. Um the article, or not article, but the, the one my group chose was in the back of the book and it was talking about how each, um or the, the guy who wrote it said that he knows that each character was an allegory, um, like, personifying a particular defect that was, like, related to one of Gregor's needs. [xx] [xx] [xx] [xx]. **I didn't really think there was any religious aspects,** I mean, I think there [xx] [xx]. |

As the above sequence of talk suggests, the prospect of applying religious frameworks to understand a text was challenging and required a sophisticated form of religious literacy. Suzy's observation in turn 31 that the novel's three visitors represented the three kings required a familiarity with the Biblical story Jesus' birth as well as the ability to draw parallels between both texts' underlying themes. Jenny, too, needed to draw on the significance of the Biblical Garden of Eden story to connect it to the apple lodged in Gregor's back (turn 32). Matt, likewise, was able to initiate the argument that Kafka's insecurity about his identity as a Zionist likely informed the way he introduced the three men into the final section of the novel. It is difficult to know whether Eli, Nina, and Renee's knowledge of these religious concepts and texts was too general for them to accept the arguments that the three visitors represented the three kings in the story of Jesus' birth, but based on their responses that religion had little to do with the novel, it seems possible. Eli responded to the Biblical allusions mentioned by Suzy and Jenny by saying that "I'm not sure that there's any religious ties, I definitely know that there are political ties," arguing that the symbolism in the novel likely signified Germany's role in World War I. Nina argued that the three characters likely represented the outside world more than anything religious. Renee argued that the novel worked as an allegory, not in the religious sense, but rather in the sense that each character

personified a particular defect. It's also possible that they were familiar with the references to the Bible but found that they were a stretch in the case of this novel.

At other times, teachers directed students to apply religious concepts to literary interpretation when those concepts were not clearly relevant to the context of the literature. In a ninth-grade discussion of *Romeo & Juliet*, one of the teacher's goals was "to synthesize the actions and decisions of characters in the play to address cross-curricular ideas, such as world religions and philosophies." More specifically, students were asked to prepare for the discussion by answering the following question (among others):

Teacher Commentary Excerpt 3: Ms. Sarah's prompt for *Romeo and Juliet*

Consider how followers of the Eastern religious philosophies we have studied this semester would respond to this question of: a) why Romeo and Juliet die, b) whether they must die, and c) why the adults survive the tragedy?

The discussion included interpretations of the text through Hindu and Taoist frameworks. For example, in the following stretch of talk, Kevin and Michael drew on Hindu beliefs to provide an interpretation of Romeo and Juliet's death at the end of the play.

Discussion Transcript Excerpt 14: *Romeo and Juliet*

Turn #	Speaker	Talk
7	Kevin	Hindus believe that uh uh that it was like hell on Earth, like, and so, like, heaven was, like, a place where you wanted to be instead of being on Earth.
8	Ms. Sarah	And so, so, take that somewhere of, in a sense of why would that say something about how Romeo and Juliet's life and death um might have meaning to another culture?
9	Kevin	Yea. Uh that, like, in a past life Hindus also believe that karma could affect, like, uh like, another life, like, [xx] [xx].
10	Michael	Um what Art and Kevin said. Kevin said, like, Earth was, like, Earth was hell and then Art said, "Hell was after he died." I think Romeo and Juliet, once they figured out that they couldn't be together, they thought that, they realized that Earth was like a living hell for them. They thought that anything other than that would be better, because they can't be together.

| 11 | Ms. Sarah | Right so, to what extent did Romeo and Juliet really think this out? {murmurs from class} How deliberate were they in their actions um and can we earnestly and honestly say that they were that thoughtful about it? Maybe. You guys are all 15. You're young. You're impetuous. Do you feel their actions were appropriate. {"No." Multiple Students} {laughter from Ms. Sarah} |

In this brief sequence, Kevin and Michael addressed the prompt provided by the teacher, examining Romeo and Juliet's death through the lens of "Eastern religious philosophies." Kevin offered an interpretation of Romeo and Juliet's death based on his understanding of Hindu perspective of Karma and the afterlife, that life on earth was hell and that "heaven was, like, a place where you wanted to be instead of being on Earth." Kevin, upon the teacher's prompting in turn 8, sought to elaborate this idea by discussing the concept of Karma and reincarnation by referencing "another life," suggesting that Romeo and Juliet's experiences in the play might be explained by something that occurred in their past lives. Michael drew on Kevin's point to argue that "Earth was like a living hell for them" since they could not love each other freely, and that they therefore "thought that anything other than that would be better."

Later in the discussion, Michael drew on the Taoist understanding of Karma to make sense of the character of Benvolio.

Discussion Transcript Excerpt 15: *Romeo and Juliet*

Turn #	Speaker	Talk
31	Melissa	I also think that Benvolio is the only person that was really, um didn't judge by what he heard from other people. Like, the stories that were passed on. He just, like, saw it as it was, like, a big, ridiculous, like, people just, like, not knowing why they don' like each other, but they're just, like, fighting each other. So, he was just, kind of, like, "There's no reason to do this, you don't know why it started and it doesn't really involve you that much, so there's no reason to fight."
32	Anna	And, and there was, **they have a thing about karma.** And I think the fact that Benvolio, it's a fact that Benvolio didn't do anything wrong, so nothing happens to him at the end.

| 33 | Michael | That's kinda similar to what I was gonna say about **Taoism**. Like, that **religion**, Benvolio is, like, the only one that doesn't really make irrational decisions. He always thinks before he acts and talks. So, he doesn't really need to balance anything out. Because what Taoists believe is that everything has to be in balance. |

For Ms. Sarah, connecting the text to other world religions (i.e., cross-curricular connections) is important for helping students "to see literature in a larger context," "to recognize that literature addresses a shared human experience, and [to] see beyond age, gender, culture, religion, etc. when considering the experience of being human." As such, even though Michael's and Kevin's use of Eastern beliefs to develop interpretations of Romeo and Juliet's death might risk oversimplifying both religion and the text, the teacher encouraged it as a means to foster multiple perspectives in the classroom.

In another discussion, Ms. Grace approached her instruction of *Lord of the Flies* by introducing her 12th graders to four different "philosophical and psychological concepts"—what scholars consider "literary lenses" (Appleman, 2015). Each of the four frameworks (i.e., Hobbes, Transcendentalism, Christianity, and Freud) provided a different perspective of the nature of good and evil in the novel. This example is particularly interesting because it provides direct instruction of Christianity as a literary lens, as demonstrated in the "pre discussion" graphic organizer that students completed (see figure X). This is one of the few cases in which there appears to be a somewhat "sustained and strategic" focus (Skerrett, 2011) on religious beliefs to support students' ability to analyze text.

However, despite Ms. Grace's emphasis on Christianity as a literary lens, the pre-discussion work that students did, and the teacher's multiple attempts to guide students towards the use of Christianity as a literary lens, the resulting literature discussion only tangentially used Christianity as a lens for literary interpretation. According to the teacher's reflection, there were

three students in the discussion who "directly referred to one of the three concepts (Transcendentalism, Freud, Christ)." However, the references to Freud and Transcendentalism were more explicit than the references to Christianity, not for lack of the teacher's attempts to generate thinking and discussion about the text through a religious lens.

Discussion Transcript Excerpt 16: *Lord of the Flies*

Turn #	Speaker	Talk
1	Sara	Alright, let's go on. Um, "describe the symbolic and thematic significance of the title, Lord of the Flies."
2	Carla	Well **isn't Lord of the Flies is Beelzebub, and that's like the devil and the devil like loves everything evil and like decay and rotting.** It kind of ties with all of that. (..)
3	Ms. Grace	Keep digging. That's the thing on the stick. That's the sow's head. That's, go to the next level of that. That if it is, that is Beelzebub, or however you say it, yes.
4	Alison	It kind of fits how the whole island is going down. **Like they're all evil and want to kill and want to destroy everything. In a way it kind of fits the devilish part of it.**
5	Rachel	Definitely and the Lord of the Flies I think is just kind of a **physical like symbol for the id in every person that well Freudian came up with, or Freud came up with. But I think that it's titled Lord of the Flies because in the end, what do we take out of the book?** That all these kids have a violent nature, that they got rid of civilization and started killing, which was kind of the whole point, was that every person, well maybe not every person, but to a degree, every person has this id where they're you know innately, {"primitive"}, primitive yeah.

This is the one brief moment in the discussion in which students drew on religious literacy to interpret the text. Specifically, Carla's and Alison's references to Beelzebub were informed by a Christian framework, as Beelzebub (literally translated as Lord of the Flies) is commonly traced back to a passage in the Bible (2 Kings 1:2-3, 6, 16) as a description of the deity worshipped by the Philistines, characters represented in the Bible as enemies of the Israelites and therefore enemies of God (e.g., Judges 10:6). Within Christian tradition, Beelzebub often functions as another name for Satan. Thus, Carla's association of the novel's title with "everything evil and

like decay and rotting" drew on a Christian conception of the devil, which students were instructed was "an entirely different entity" that seduced humankind into evil acts. The teacher in turn 3 probed Carla's point for clarification ("go to the next level") by drawing attention to the "sow's head on stick," i.e., the moment in the novel where the phrase "Lord of the Flies" is used:

> [I]n front of Simon, the Lord of the Flies hung on his stick and grinned. At last Simon gave up and looked back; saw the white teeth and dim eyes, the blood—and his gaze was held by that ancient, inescapable recognition. (Golding, 1954, p. 138)

It was Rachel in turn 5 who took the interpretation "to the next level," but not by examining the text through a Christian or Biblical perspective, but through Freud's psychic apparatus of the id, ego and superego. She thus argued that the head on the stick was "a physical symbol for the id in every person."

In the sequence of talk below, the teacher attempted to draw students back to the Biblical nature of the reference to the Lord of the Flies.

Discussion Transcript Excerpt 17: *Lord of the Flies*

Turn #	Speaker	Talk
19	Ms. Grace	So what's that implying? He's saying the devil. He did use the Lord of the Flies and that is a Biblical reference and he says, "I'm part of you. I'm the reason it's a no go."
20	Carla	**So is it like the opposite of transcendentalism? Like instead of having the divine intellect you have the devil inside of you?**
21	Naomi	Well one of the quote it says, "I'm the Lord of the Flies." It says, "Come on now. Get back to the others and we'll forget the whole thing." I feel like it's basically saying **forget what you saw and let the evilness spread. Forget what you just learned and go back and let things take place and just let evilness, just go with it. (.)**
22	?	Yeah I see that too.
23	Ms. Grace	Any other ideas? Do you guys agree with that at all? Or is that just a really too farfetched of an idea? What Golding is saying about the evil and man's potential for it, I think, is what--
24	Shannon	That it's in everybody. I definitely think that's true.

25   Amy   Like the Lord of the Flies is kind of representing like everyone's evil side and he's talking. Like your evil side is telling you, I'm a part of you. Basically, that's what it's representing it's like he's talking to his evil side. Like that evilness inside of him is talking to him. And that's what like The Lord of the Flies is representing what his evil side is telling him. I don't know, something like that.

Here the teacher drew students' attention to the Christian framework again by highlighting the fact that the Lord of the Flies is indeed "a biblical reference." Carla examined the implications by arguing that it's "the opposite of transcendentalism" which meant that "instead of having the divine intellect you have the devil inside of you." Although not specified, this analysis reflects both the Christian and Hobbesian assumption of the inherent evil of humankind. Naomi's analysis in turn 21 seems to reflect most the notion of evil as seduction, which was presented to students as a Christian concept ("forget what you saw and let the evilness spread"). However, despite the fact that the teacher provided explicit instruction prior to class and multiple invitations in class, students still did not apply Christianity to their reading of the text. Given the dataset, it is impossible to know exactly why they did not apply it, but the data seem to suggest that even with strategic and sustained instruction and preparation, whether a student chose to apply a religious lens to a text was entirely up to them. It's likely that the success of applying religious literary frameworks to interpretations of class texts was contingent on students' identities or experiences related to the religion at hand.

In contrast, in another discussion students drew on transcendentalist concepts as religious concepts as they engaged in a wide-ranging collaborative interpretation of multiple texts they encountered throughout their English course (including *Grapes of Wrath*, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*). Although Transcendentalism was introduced to students as an artistic movement in American history (alongside Romanticism and Realism), its connection to the

Protestant Christian context out of which it was borne played a key role in these students'

discussions of it. Transcendentalism appeared to be understood by students not only an artistic

movement, but one that was defined in opposition to institutional religion. Take, for example this

excerpt from a small group brainstorming how different characters throughout American literature

reflected the values of Transcendentalism.

Discussion Transcript Excerpt 18: Transcendentalism

Turn #	Speaker	Talk
22	Mr. Karl	Well tell me this(.) what characters did you guys discuss for examples of Transcendentalism.
23	Vanessa	Huck. From Huckleberry Finn.
24	Mr. Karl	Why Huck?
25	Sheila	Uh, he tends to find that solace on the raft and in nature in general. **And he finds spirituality and moral reasoning especially in nature but not from organized religion.**
26	Vanessa	And he's not exactly the most conformist based guy either.

Here Vanessa was not simply describing the character of Huckleberry Finn as it was written by

Mark Twain, but rather she was applying the lens of Transcendentalism to the text to see how it

fit or did not fit the description. The primary characteristic that Sheila used to make the case for

Huck's Transcendentalism was his rejection of organized religion, that he found "spirituality and

moral reasoning especially in nature but not from organized religion" (Turn 25).

Students in this particular discussion frequently turned back to Emerson's seminal essay

"Self-Reliance" to inform their perspective of Transcendentalism, particularly drawing on the

passage in which Emerson asked "What have I to do with the sacredness of traditions, if I live

wholly from within?"

[M]y friend suggested,—"But these impulses may be from below, not from above." I

replied, "They do not seem to me to be such; but if I am the Devil's child, I will live then

from the Devil." No law can be sacred to me but that of my nature. Good and bad are but names very readily transferable to that or this. (Emerson, 1841/2017, p. 598)

Like Huckleberry Finn who said "All right then, I'll go to Hell" as he decided *not* to hand Jim to the southern slavers (Twain, 1884/2017, p. 242), Emerson announced "if I am the Devil's child, I will live then from the Devil." Even though some might make the case that Transcendentalism is much less a religious concept than it is a philosophical or historical one, this passage is heavily imbued with the religious themes of sacred traditions and laws, as well as the religious imagery of the Devil and allusions to Heaven ("from above) and Hell ("from below"). Students also examined the character of Jim Casey in Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath* from a Transcendentalist lens. The following exchange also illustrates how students specifically drew on Emerson's quote to frame their analysis.

Discussion Transcript Excerpt 19: Transcendentalism

Turn #	Speaker	Talk
44	Nancy	**He wants to find God for himself. I think that's what makes him transcendental. He wants to find God like himself**. And he doesn't necessarily, like, he doesn't want his calling to define him and so he, cause **he doesn't agree with everything he hears and he wants to sleep with women, so that's, that goes against what, what traditionally defined a priest.** So he, he like wants to find himself. I guess. That's what I put.
45	Austin	And they went into isolation for awhile. {"Yeah" WF}. Just kind of, took off and chilled out in the woods somewhere and--
46	Sheila	**He compares himself to Jesus cause he goes to nature and finds himself and finds his calling and does some thinking**, as you put it which what [name] was just talking about, reminded me of this quote from "Self-Reliance" um (.) "'but these impulses may be from below, not from above.' I replied, "they do not seem to me to be such. But if I am the devil's child, I will live then from the devil. No law can be sacred to me, but that of my nature. Good and bad are but names that are read--readily, very readily transferable to that or this." (.) And so, I think Jim Casey sort **of starts to apply religion to himself rather than as a blanket effect, you know. It's not organized religion, it's not something he's trying to preach, but it's something he's trying to find.**

In this sequence of talk, Nancy and Sheila both provided analyses of Jim Casey's character using the lens of Transcendentalism but painted starkly different pictures of Casey. Nancy argued that Casey's search for God on his own terms ("he wants to find God for himself") was what made him transcendental. He engaged in individualistic and self-reliant thinking by questioning the teachings he inherited ("he didn't believe everything he heard") and went against what "traditionally defined a priest." In particular, Casey's primary motivation for searching for God on his own terms was perhaps less transcendent than it was licentious ("he wants to sleep with women"). Sheila's analysis, on the other hand, cast Jim Casey in the role of a Christ-figure, which is a common reading of the text (Shockley, 1956). In the same way Jesus fasted for 40 days in the desert before beginning his ministry, Casey went off by himself to find his calling and do "some thinking." Sheila drew on Emerson's quote not to distinguish religion from Transcendentalism, but to emphasize a different kind of religion. She noted how "Jim Casey starts to apply religion to himself rather than as a blanket effect," and went on to distinguish this form of religion from "organized religion." For Sheila, Casey's religion is considered Transcendentalist once Casey decided to stop preaching it and forcing it on others, and instead pursued it for himself.

Another example of Transcendentalism being understood by distinguishing spirituality from religion can be seen in the following example in which Jen argued that Jim Casey from *Grapes of Wrath* reflected Transcendentalist values.

Discussion Transcript Excerpt 20: Transcendentalism

Turn #	Speaker	Talk

| 3 | Jen | Jim Casey may even be partially transcendentalist. Well, it seemed like, uh, pages 23 and 24 were just like full of transcendental ideas. It, like, how he says, uh, "maybe it ain't a sin, maybe it's just the way folks is, maybe we've been whipping the hell out of ourselves for nothing" and like yeah, 23 and 24. And like, uh, "there ain't no sin, there ain't no virtue, there's just stuff people do" and uh **he starts talking about how like he doesn't know Jesus but he loves him.** And **that even though he's been a preacher for so many years, that uh, he's starting to believe, like, go against it, like really listen, almost listening to his heart, you know. Instead of what the Bible tells him.** Cause like before he was like giving these big speeches and stuff, **and people were starting to talk in tongues around him and he was very strict on how things were meant to be done and religious practice** and then he goes on to say that he's starting to go in a different direction and like, that maybe all men got one big soul that everybody uh, is a part of. And he says he still knows it. and um, then um Joad goes on to say that you'll get kicked out of, like **you won't be able to preach for any church if you say things like that.** {"Excellent" T} But he believes it. |

In this case Jen examined the character of Jim Casey through the lens of Transcendentalism, arguing that Casey's his position towards Christianity positioned him as "partially transcendentalist." Behind her Casey's quote that "maybe it ain't a sin" is the Transcendentalist notion that "Good and bad are but names" (Emerson). Central to the text and to her argument was the way Jim Casey chose to love Jesus as opposed to knowing about him ("he doesn't know Jesus but he loves him"), how he listens to Jesus "with his heart" rather than to "what the Bible tells him." She noted how his conversion involved leaving behind a lifestyle of successful preaching ("big speeches" that inspired people "starting to talk in tongues"). Jen noted how Casey went from being "very strict on how things were meant to be done" in terms of his "religious practice" to believing that "all men got one big soul." She concluded her analysis with Joad's observation that such a shift in beliefs was likely to be challenged by "any church." As such, Jen's analysis of *Grapes of Wrath* through a Transcendentalist perspective was not only about Transcendentalism as an artistic movement but was also heavily informed by its relationship to religion, particularly

Pentecostal Christianity. In summary, the approach this teacher took to literary analysis involved taking up a theoretical framework of Transcendentalism. Although Transcendentalism alone may not invoke religious conversation, it brought to many students' attention the religious themes across several texts, i.e., *Huckleberry Finn* and *Grapes of Wrath*.

5.2.1 Section Summary

Using religion to inform the lens through which one is reading draws on a different form of religious literacy, one Biesta et al. have described as the ability to navigate, rather than as content knowledge. Within the NBPTS discussions in which literacy informed students' analytical frameworks, or literary lenses, students drew on religious frameworks at the explicit prompting of the teacher, as was the case when students applied Taoist readings of *Romeo and Juliet* or when students examined *Lord of the Flies* from multiple frameworks, including Christian and Transcendentalist readings of the text. As seen in the discussion of *Metamorphosis*, students evaluated religious frameworks (Samsara, Christianity, and Zionism) in response to professional scholarship. In another example, students were explicitly instructed one religiously connotative framework (Transcendentalism) and were instructed to apply it to multiple texts. In cases where religion was used to construct analytical frameworks, teachers often relied on direct instruction of these religions to do so.

It is notable that the specter of Christian normativity (Joshi, 2020) loomed large within the above discussions, such as section 5.1. Non-Christian and non-white religious concepts were recruited (some might even say appropriated) out of any cultural contexts to support largely white and Christian-friendly interpretations of texts. The notion of Samsara seemed less a practice of understanding the epistemic processes important in a Samsaric perspective of the world, and more

a disembodied lens to support Christian-sounding interpretations. In this perspective it is perhaps not surprising that the conversation veered quickly from a Samsaric reading of the text to more Christian readings (unpacking of Christian symbolism of the three tenants and the Edenic implications of the apple lodged in Gregor's back etc.).

Similar to the uses of religion to support contextual knowledge, these discussions did not reflect deep and sustained engagement with religious frameworks or epistemic processes by which literature can be interpreted.

5.3 Connecting Personally to a Text

A third function of religious literacy in the dataset was students' use of their own religious identities to make personal connections to the literature. Many of these cases demonstrate the difficulty students had integrating personal religious beliefs into academic discussions of literary texts and the difficulty teachers had responding to these situations. In nearly every case, personal connections between the topic of discussion and the student's own religious faith were either resisted or ignored by others.

In the following excerpt of a small group discussion from a 12th grade AP class, one student—Hannah—drew on her own religious identity to make sense of *The Color Purple*.

Discussion Transcript Excerpt 21: *The Color Purple*

Turn #	Speaker	Talk
24	Mr. Jordan	One thing, you brought up a good point in your journal **about asking for God.**

25	Hannah	I said that the letters are to God from Celie like when you think about someone **writing letters to God**, you think that **they're praying to Him** and asking for Him like with His help for Him to do something to change your life. and she never, not once asks, please help me out, this is how my life is. I need your help to change it. I thought that was interesting because **she does believe in God. she says that she always thinks of God when things get bad, but she never asks Him for help.**
26	Cynthia	um I thought it was weird how Celie said Shug is singing a song called "a good man is hard to find." yeah I didn't know if maybe that was foreshadowing something or whatever but um--

Hannah, at the teacher's prompting, shared with her small group discussion partners an observation she had made in her journal the night before about the "Dear God" sections of *The Color Purple.* She reasoned that "when you think about someone writing letters to God, you think that they're praying to Him and asking for Him like with His help." She found it odd that in her letters to God, Celie "never asks Him for help." As such, Hannah drew on her own religious resources to "identify strangeness" (Rainey, 2017, p. 63) in Walker's text. Celie's prayers to God were unusual for Hannah, and she felt comfortable enough with both her teacher and her classmates to offer this observation.

Hannah's willingness to share this personal connection to the text was not an accidental event. Not only was Hannah's comment made at the explicit invitation of her teacher ("you brought up a good point in your journal about asking God"), it is clear in his reflection that this "remarkable" moment occurred on the heels of earlier work in which the teacher himself foregrounded religious themes and conversation in the classroom earlier in the school year. He wrote the following in his reflection on this discussion.

Teacher Commentary Excerpt 4: Mr. Jordan's Reflection

Hannah makes a remarkable comment about how the character in *The Color Purple* writes letters to God but "never, not once, asks Him 'Please help me out.'" This is a special moment because of Hannah's background. Her parents moved to America just before she was born. **She grew up speaking Spanish in a Catholic home** and English in school. When we first

started reading the American Literature stories at the beginning of class, **religion was one of the main "controversial" topics we covered**. **While Hannah would write very profound insights about Catholicism and how it was related to the literature, she was hesitant to express these ideas in the discussion.** This moment shows Hannah being comfortable enough with a group of her peers to make this connection verbally between her beliefs/culture and the literature. This was not just a teachable moment for my students; it was a teachable moment for me as well. **This ability to talk about these issues** is probably one of the most successful aspects on this video.

Mr. Jordan clearly valued the role of religious literacy as the ability to speak productively about religious topics in a public setting. He celebrated how Hannah's "ability to talk about these issues" was "one of the most successful aspects" of the lesson. We see here that this moment did not just happen to occur, but rather was the result of the teacher's interest in engaging his students in "controversial topics" as well as his attentiveness to Hannah's own engagement with these conversations in her reader-responses journaling.

As important as this moment was for Hannah and the teacher in this discussion, it is unclear in the data if it was appreciated in the same way by her classmates, or even by Hannah herself. It is possible that Cynthia's reference to "A Good Man is Hard to Find" was an indirect way of taking up Hannah's theme of religion, given that Flannery O'Connor's short story of the same name is rife with religious imagery and themes. But it also could have been a change of subject. In either case, however, there was no further mention of religious themes in the remaining six turns in the discussion. We do not have enough evidence to fully understand the impact this moment had on Hannah. Mr. Jordan's racial and religious depiction of her, however, invokes colonializing narratives—deficit characterization of her Spanish-speaking home as well as an othering narrative of her Catholicism as a strange obstacle to her academic learning.

In another discussion, which took place in an 11th grade Honors American Literature class, one group of five students engaged in an exchange that included one student, Jenna, drawing on

her own personal religious assumptions in order to understand the novel. Just prior to the following sequence of talk, Jenna and her classmates were trying to unpack why Dimmesdale would engage in self-mutilation, a practice Collin referred to as "a whole Catholic thing" (turn 106). This was confusing, though, for Jenna who countered, "But I thought he was Puritan." Collin tried to explain his point by saying that Puritans "don't believe in redemption."

Discussion Transcript Excerpt 22: *The Scarlet Letter*

Turn #	Speaker	Talk
118	Jenna	**so did they not believe in Jesus?**
119	Collin	**oh my God, no, yes they do! {Jenna "but--"} they don't believe in redemption.**
120	Jenna	**but Jesus like, Jesus is redemption.**
121	Sunjeev	**no they believe in the concept of Jesus favored the few, and if you if you screwed up, you screwed** up.
122	Jenna	**so Jesus only what? {Sunjeev "yeah"}But the point of Jesus is He saves everyone.**
123	Sunjeev	yeah but that's the thing, that's the--
124	Jenna	**well everyone who deserves to be saved.**
125	Soo	{to Grace} wait what were you gonna say?
126	Grace	I interpreted it a different way, but it's fine. [xx]
127	Collin	no no I didn't, it's it's it's it's not about the base of Christianity, it's about what was it Calvinism? {Jenna: "which one's Calvinism?"} And that theology, {Soo: "yeah"} applied to the Christian faith.
128	Sunjeev	**[Salvation of the] elite, predestination.**
129	Grace	**predestination of the elite.**
130	Collin	it's **a theological philosophy that's applied to all that. S**o I don't know how they did it but… {Teacher arrives}
131	Ms. Janet	so where are you guys at?
132	Jenna	**Christianity versus Puritanism**

In the above stretch of talk shifted from an inquiry into Dimmesdale's religious beliefs and practices to a discussion about Puritan beliefs. Jenna drew on her personal assumptions that "Jesus is redemption" (turns 118, 120) and that "the point of Jesus is he saves everyone" (122), or rather, "everyone who deserves to be saved" (124) to eventually conclude that Christianity and Puritanism were at odds with each other (turn 132). The teacher commented specifically on this moment,

noting that Jenna's willingness to engage the discussion in this way showed that she "felt comfortable enough to ask for clarification in the context of the novel; this is important because she is a student who previously struggled in asking for help, even from me."

In contrast to the above example in which Mr. Jordan and Ms. Janet valued the inclusion of students' religious identities in the discussion, an example from another classroom suggests that sometimes such connections can be considered unsafe and possibly offensive. In this particular 9th grade discussion on *Romeo and Juliet,* students pondered together the tragic ending of the play. In her reflection, the teacher observed how Reuben's and Ben's "differing religious backgrounds" rendered the subject of religion potentially volatile. As students began to argue that the deaths of Romeo and Juliet might possibly not have been tragic, Reuben offered the example that his grandparents will likely die around the same time as each other. Hector took up this conversation by saying the following.

Discussion Transcript Excerpt 23: *Romeo & Juliet*

Turn #	Speaker	Talk
6	Hector	And my grandmother, she's been through five different kinds of cancer, and has had seven or eight turns, of just, you know, cancer and stuff like that, and I, I talked to her not that long ago, and, and we were really close whenever I was younger, and I was talking to her over Spring Break, and uh uh I s-, I asked her, I said, you know, "How you doing?" She's like, "Well, I'm just waiting to pass." You know, because she's hurting, and things like that. And she's, and she's getting older, and she's hurting, and, you know, she's expecting, you know, she, she, she's already gotten past the point of, "Wow, I'm sick!" To the point where, she knows that, when she passes, that she'll be better, and that she'll be happy. **And, you know, she um claims Christianity and claims Christ, and so, what, you know, she, I-I'm guessing she's expecting, you know, that one day she can enter into the Kingdom of Heaven, and live in her glorified body with Christ. So, in the end of the day, I think she'll be happier. Will I be too excited, you know, that she's passed on? No. But I know that I can live happy knowing that she was happy, and that she's going into all eternity with our, you know, Creator.**

7	Martha (Student Discusssion Leader)	Well, like, you're, like, you're, like, you're always, like, uh I feel like we're talking about, like, just, like, death, {some laughter from the class} but, like, you go to funerals and things, like, you hear, like, "Oh, well, like, it was a good thing. It's, he's in a better place, she's in a better place. It was, it was just best that it happened this way, and stuff." But I think that, like, sometimes they were, like, in *Romeo and Juliet*, like, I mean, they both lost the, both families lost their children, I mean, and Juliet, like, was their only child and stuff. They were looking forward to her being married and things. But I mean, they died together because they defied authority, and they, I mean they, it was, [therefore] the best way for them to have gone, because they loved each other they were happy about it {(overlapping) Hector: "Yea, exactly." } and things and, so, like, I hope I'm not offending anybody, I don't want to, but, I mean, it's just when you hear a phrase like, "They're in a better place, it's the best thing that could happen to them," and stuff, I just thought about that while you were talking.

As Hector's story of his grandmother developed, he drew increasingly on his and his grandmother's Christian identities to elaborate his main point, that death need not be considered tragic so long as one "claims Christ." The fact that his grandmother does so is what gains her access to the "Kingdom of Heaven," to "go into eternity with our, you know, creator." Although he began his turn with descriptions of her beliefs ("she claims Christianity"; "she's expecting") he ended his turn indicating his own assumptions. By saying "she's going into all eternity with our, you know, creator," his use of "our" indicated either that he and his grandmother believed in the same "creator," or possibly that he assumed others in the room shared his grandmother's perspective of creator.

It was at this moment that the discussion leader of the day, Martha, changed the subject. Her comment that "you're always, like, uh I feel like we're about, like, just, like death" elicited laughter from her fellow classmates, which could indicate tension resulting from Hector's comment. Martha's own discomfort is evident in her frequent hedging (e.g., "But I think that, like, sometimes they were, like, in *Romeo and Juliet*, like…") as well as attentiveness to her peers'

feelings (e.g., "I hope I'm not offending anybody"). The teacher, in fact, reflected on Martha's sensitive way of responding to Hector's comment , praising Martha for changing the subject.

Teacher Commentary Excerpt 5: Ms. Cheryl's Reflection

[Martha] felt Hector could offend Reuben. These students have differing religious backgrounds, and the student leader changed the topic to a "safer" one so that Reuben, who might be offended, could be more comfortable with the conversation. I was fully prepared to step in; however, Martha took control of the conversation and turned it to a new topic.

Even though it's unclear why Reuben, in particular, could be offended by Hector's comment, this example demonstrates that students' drawing on their personal religious identities can be interpreted by both teachers and fellow classmates as unsafe or offensive. Had Martha not successfully changed the subject, the teacher was "fully prepared to step in."

Religious identities of students was sometime referenced in teacher commentaries, even in portfolios with discussions that made no mention of religion. The dataset included seven portfolios in which religion was addressed in the teacher commentaries. In one portfolio in which a Ms. Maple facilitated a conversation about *Of Mice and Men,* the teacher reflected on the way the religious identities of students informed her instruction, writing the following:

Teacher Commentary Excerpt 6: Ms. Maple's Reflection

Two of the students are fundamentalist Christian; six students claim agnosticism, three are Protestant, one is Catholic, one is Mormon. This identifier is relevant in that the moral dilemmas faced by the characters as well as the swearing, discussion of the characters seeking out prostitutes, and implications tied to homosexual behavior could require a degree of sensitivity for the more fundamentalist students.

In this reflection, Ms. Maple assumed that "fundamentalist Christian" students would "require a degree of sensitivity" when interacting with some of the content of the novel. She anticipated specific content to trigger these students, i.e., swearing, prostitution, homosexuality. It is unclear however if these assumptions are based on prior experiences in which these students

took issue with these specific themes or if Ms. Maple was assuming complications due to her own impressions of what "fundamentalist" means. It is also unclear if the religious identities she mentioned were self-designations or her own labels. Either way, it is possible that "sensitivity" not only included talking around the moral issues she named in the reflection, but it's also possible her attention to religious identities another effect, that is, students were careful not to talk about religion.

Similarly, in a discussion about *Othello*, Mr. Ward set a goal of engaging students in conversation about "the other." He noted that "Most of my students strongly self-identify as Christian; several are Muslim." His students' general religious identifications were important, particularly for this lesson on "How do I approach the 'other'" because "My students who are not White, wealthy, straight, or Christian often feel like they do not fit in, and perceive a lack of tolerance." Religion was not an explicit topic in this discussion, however.

5.3.1 Section Summary

Personal connections to literary texts in ELA classes have been an emphasis in scholarship for nearly a century (Rosenblatt, 1978; Beach & Meyers, 2000). Furthermore, as religion gains more prominence within English Education research, students' religious identities are considered as much a resource as any other cultural identifiers and can be seen as a particularly effective resource in ELA classrooms (Rackley, 2014; Skerrett, 2014). Students' religious identities, however, were only occasionally used as resources for personal connections to texts in NBPTS ELA discussions. In many cases, teachers found these instances to be productive. In the case of Hannah, the teacher engaged in sustained efforts to foster confidence in Hannah to share her religious connections to the texts with her fellow classmates. He considered it a significant victory

not only for Hannah when she finally shared briefly her reflection on prayer in *The Color Purple*, but also an important opportunity for her classmates. Jenny's case was also discussed as a particularly unusual but important learning moment for her when she probed her fellow classmates for more information about the religious themes in *The Scarlet Letter*.

However, religious identities can also be construed as a threat. Several studies in recent years have examined the challenges some religious identities can pose to the pluralistic space of the English classroom (Hadley & Fassbender, 2019; Juzwik & McKenzie, 2015; Olshefski, 2021; Weyand & Juzwik, 2020). In the case of Hector, the way he drew on his religious identity to connect to the theme of death in *Romeo and Juliet* was considered by his teacher and his classmates Martha and Reuben to be potentially offensive. Given the fact that these instances occurred briefly in only a few NBPTS ELA discussions, it is possible that this hesitancy toward the role of personal religious identities in the classroom is far more widespread than we can say conclusively.

5.4 Reading Religion in the World

The fourth way in which religious literacy functioned in the NBPTS English language arts discussions was to support reflection on the role religion itself can, does, or should play in society and culture. Many conversations in English language arts education today have emphasized the importance of reading not only "the word" but also "the world" (Appleman, 2015; Freire & Macedo) For example when scholars argue for the teaching of literary theory, they do so with the expectation that students will learn not only how to apply, say, a feminist reading to The Great Gatsby but also to examine the way gender structures and influences their own experiences, family dynamics, and social context.

In the 10th grade discussion on *The Kite Runner*, students at one point shifted their attention to the relationship between religion and culture. The student discussion leader Elisa asked her fellow classmates: "Why does Assef have the right to gang up on Hassan and Amir, does it have to do with society, or like their religion?" The question invited students not only to consider the role of religion in the characters' motivations but also to reflect on the relationship between society and religion in general.

Discussion Transcript Excerpt 24: *The Kite Runner*

Turn #	Speaker	Talk
46	Shannon	I mean **it kind of has to do with their religion because Assef is a Pashtun, and so is Amir. So Assef doesn't like the fact that Amir is hanging out with a Hazara.**
47	Kristen	**And society is based off of their religion, like the Pashtuns don't like the Hazaras.**
48	Shannon	They're kind of expecting to have problems.
49	Sarah	I just, kind of just realized that society, the community is like two in one basically. Like, **well what society is based on is the religion, is why it's like separate like it is.**

Although the majority of this discussion relied on religious literacy to support a deeper understanding of the text, Shannon, Kristen and Sarah also directed their attention in this exchange to religion in the real world, albeit a foreign "other" world. Sarah's and Kristen's comments –that "society is based off of their religion"—suggests the assumption that societies based on religion are foreign or other ("*their* religion"). What's more, Shannon asserted that such a relationship between religion and society is "expecting to have problems." In this way, the concept of religion itself became the object of study, if only briefly.

While a discussion among American students about the relationship between Afghan society and religion may be safer for students to engage in by virtue of it not impinging on their the question of America's fraught relationship between religion and culture, the following

discussion illustrates the challenges that can arise when discussions of religion strike a personal nerve. In this 11th Grade AP Language and Composition class, students had prepared by reading *Persepolis* by Marjane Sartrapi as well as Federalist Paper No. 10 by James Madison. The discussion provided did not include any mention of Sartrapi's text but rather focused on distinct American issues. In the Federalist Paper No. 10, Madison warns his readers against the country splitting into factions, which many of the students took as an apt description of the political divide in the country, perhaps most illustrated in politics around abortion.

Discussion Transcript Excerpt 25: Federalist Paper No. 10

Turn #	Speaker	Talk
23	Grace	Um (.) I think what Tom said, I have to respectfully disagree about that. {some laughter from class} Because um he says that Democrats are using [abortion] as a power source, **but I think that a great majority of Republican ideals about the situation of abortion are based on Christian theology, and which is using the Bible as a crutch** to use against abortion which, essentially, isn't that the same thing? **Whereas, um due to, like, the separation of Church and State, you're not supposed to bring religion into politics.** {chatter from class}
24	Lilly	I respectfully disagree!
25	Ms. Nancy	{overlapping} But we're gonna move on and [xx] [xx].
26	Tom	{overlapping} Where's, where does separation of State. There's no, there's nothing in the Constitution that says, um, "Separation of Church and State." You think the First Amendment says that, but it doesn't in the Constitution.
27	Grace	I didn't say the first amendment said that. {loud chatter from class}
28	Tom	Well, what did you say the Constitution [xx] [xx] {laughter from class}
29	Sherri	Thank you, Grace!
30	Ms. Nancy	Thank you for being respectful.

In this sequence, Grace challenged a comment Tom had made about a political party (Democrats) as simply using abortion as a way to accumulate power. She argued that "a great majority" of the Republican position on abortion "are based on Christian theology," which she described as "using the Bible as a crutch." And she concludes that "separation of Church and State"

precludes the practice of bringing "religion into politics." Several students at this point in the discussion erupted in talk, while the teacher tried to maintain order. Ultimately, according to the reflection, the teacher was pleased with this conversation, despite its volatility. In fact, she noted that an "aspect of the seminar I will not change is allowing students to bring in current controversial issues." She observed that students reported "that this was the first seminar they participated in without much teacher interruption. In the future, I hope to find a way to balance not interrupting while also ensuring some of the marginalized voices are heard."

In another 10th grade English class, the subject of religion became the object of focus, this time in a more extended exchange. The students were discussing the ethics of euthanasia after having read a text called *Euthanasia and the Right to Die* by Renee Rebman, a text that lays out the pro and con perspectives on the issue while also discussing unanswered questions and providing readers with several resources for further study.

Discussion Transcript Excerpt 26: Euthanasia

Turn #	Speaker	Talk
59	Ms. Theresa	This brings up a really important point. Rosa is torn, because this is a very difficult topic, alright. Why do you think it's so difficult, why is this such a "controversial" issue?
60	Elizabeth	**I think it has a lot to do with religion**. Because, like, on ethical appeal that have, that were in the articles were that, like, they said that it was **morally wrong and it was a sin,** because people who believe in that don't believe that you should just throw life away like that.
61	Ms. Theresa	Okay, alright. So**, religion makes it complicated?** Why is religion an, a complicated part of this?
62	Anita	Because some people think that euthanasia is murder, right? And some people think **that murder is sin.** {"Okay." T078} And people believe that you go to Hell.
63	Ms. Theresa	Okay, **so if you have a belief in Hell, that's going to guide your choices in life. Yes.**
64	Elizabeth	And also. It's, like, l-l-losing hope, like, in, **religion's, like, when you lose hope, you lose faith in the people you love, so it's, like, going against what you believe in, never to lose hope.**

| 65 | Rosa | Well, it also has to do with, like, **sure it's, like, religion, but also the way our mind knows, like, from what's right and from what's wrong.** |
| 66 | Elsa | More, like, ethical. |

Here students discussed the different ways in which religion might influence people's perspectives on euthanasia. Elizabeth, in response to the teacher's question of why euthanasia is such a controversial issue, noted that "I think it has a lot to do with religion" because for some people "it was a sin" to "just throw away life like that." Anita elaborated in turn 62 saying that "some people think that murder is a sin" and consequently "you go to Hell" if you engage in euthanasia. Summarizing the two students' arguments, the teacher observed that "if you have a belief in Hell, that's going to guide your choices in life." Elizabeth elaborated on the role of religion in beliefs about euthanasia further in turn 64, observing that religion can also involve faith, belief and hope, that euthanasia implies one has lost "faith in the people you love," that it's "going against what you believe, never to lose hope." Rosa and Elsa, on the other hand, offered an alternative perspective on the role of religion in determining support or opposition to euthanasia, noting that "our mind knows like, from what's right and from what's wrong" and that, as Elsa said the question is "more, like, ethical." In this discussion students have drawn on a text to "read the world" by appealing to religion in determining the ethics of euthanasia. The discussion turned from a discussion of euthanasia to a discussion of the ways in which religion helps people determine right or wrong.

Religion became an object of focus in another discussion. In an 12th grade AP class, students examined "The Story of the Good Little Boy," by Mark Twain. In preparation for the discussion, Kelcey – the student facilitating the discussion that day – assigned her fellow students discussion questions that specifically centered the text's theme of religion including the following:

"Why is the repetition of the word Sunday-school significant?" "What do you think Twain is trying to say about following the rules?" and "What [do] you think Twain's views were on religion?" In the sequence of talk below, the subject of religion becomes the focus.

Discussion Transcript Excerpt 27: "The Story of the Good Little Boy"

Turn #	Speaker	Talk
52	Midori	**Going off what Jen said, I also felt like he was trying to implement, like, how religion, it, it's very strict itself and you try to live, like, your life through the good morals that you learn, but I feel like he was trying what Jen meant by saying he was looking for, like, things he could fix or yea um I felt like it was, like, a religious persecution, kind of. That's the role of religion for him.**
53	Kelcey	**Like, saying that religion's only there to tell people what they're doing wrong and that's, like, how they think of things that they're doing.** That's what I, kind of, got from it, that it was, like, kind of, looking down on the whole, like, system.
54	Midori	Yep.
55	Jin	And I feel like he just keeps doing the right thing but for all the wrong reasons. Like, he's going around and, like, trying to fix things and help people just so that he feels good about himself. He's not really genuinely, like, generous, he doesn't actually want to help them.
56	Kelcey	Um do they ever, yea, do they ever, kind of, go in depth in the story and explain why he wants to be so good other than the point where he just wants to be good?
57	Austin	That's the point it that it seems silly, **I think as Twain was not just, like, atheist, cause he's, like, glaringly anti-religious. It seems, it seems like he's just trying to, I don't wanna just be mean when I say this, but he's trying to say that people who follow religion are um just following it because it's what they're told to do. They're not following it because they think about what they're doing, they just do it, because it's what they're told to do.**
58	Ms. Lois	So, so, instead of, like, generally, internally, internalized doing these things out of genuine sincerity. Is that what you're saying? Um.

| 59 | Jeffrey | I was going to, I'm going to agree with Austin um just a lot of it was um a lot about, like, there's no point. Like, you wonder why he's doing all this stuff and then it's, it's, sort of, like, um what he's trying to make this, like, **reference to religion**, like, he's doing all the things that are good, but there's, but there's no, necessarily not a point and it, when there was a point, like, when he's, like, helping the, the blind man uh, like, up, he wants the blessing, he doesn't want to, like, help the blind man and when he's not gonna get a blessing. And um when he's, like, doing all these good things, it's not for the right reason, and I feel like that's what he's saying. We should do it for the good of benefitting others, not for the, like, future benefit of yourself. **Which I think he thinks is, kind of, related to religion. Like, religion you're helping everybody so that you get salvation in the end and it's not just doing good.** Like, and I think he thinks that there should be, like, reference between, like, you helping everyone so that everyone's happy, not you helping everyone so that you get a reward eventually. I feel like **that's what he's thinking religion's, kind of, playing on.** |

Although students were discussing what the text suggested about Mark Twain's argument about religion, the discussion of religion also extended to the real world as students experienced it. Midori observed how religion "is very strict itself and you try to live, like, your life through the good morals," but it all ends up being oppressive ("a religious persecution"). Although she softened her critique here by ending her turn with "That's the role of religion for him," and thus not necessarily her own opinion, Midori's explanation of religion could easily extend to students with religious or non-religious identities in the room. Kelcey, building off of Midori's point, asserted that "religion's only there to tell people what they're doing wrong" noting, again at the end of her turn, that "it [the story] was looking down on the whole, like, system." Austin acknowledged in his turn how the discussion may have been as much about Twain's perspective on religion as it was about religion itself: "I don't wanna just be mean when I say this, but he's trying to say that people who follow religion are um just following it because it's what they're told to do." Thus, the subject of religion itself had became the focus of the conversation.

This discussion revealed the intersection between social worlds and the academic context in which the literature discussion is occurring. When Austin qualified his turn by saying "I don't wanna just be mean," he slipped out of academic talk to take note of the identities of people in the room. It was here that the teacher chimed in, clarifying that the kind of religion Twain was criticizing was not to be confused with the religion people practice "out of genuine sincerity." Jeffrey responded by saying, "We should do it for the good of benefitting others, not for the, like, future benefit of yourself." He maintained, however, that Twain's perspective was a critique of religion in general, not just a certain way of practicing it. "I feel like that's what he's thinking religion's, kind of, playing on." Such a conversation about the affordances and limitations of certain approaches to religion is possible especially when religion is part of the explicit or implicit message of the text, as was the case in Twain's story, but also when students are invited to discuss it, which Kelcey did explicitly through her prompt.

In another discussion in which students took the themes in *Waiting for Godot* to address the range of religious beliefs people can hold about God as well as religious beliefs during the time of the play. Although a student was the one to raise the question about the religious theme in the play, it was the teacher who prompted her to ask the question in the first place.

Discussion Transcript Excerpt 28: *Waiting for Godot*

Turn #	Speaker	Talk
13	Charlotte	Didi and Gogo are waiting around for Godot and they mention a couple of times that, like, "Oh and when Godot gets here we'll be saved," or something, and um also, Gogo mentions a lot about how **he's in hell** and time has stopped and, "This is a hell for me," and I think that (.) they're, kind of, waiting for this idea of, like, "We will be saved, we will be brought away from this misery, this, like, limbo hell place where nothing has any meaning," and I think that, kind of, shows if you, you know, they're looking, they're looking towards something and, like, waiting for **this idea of, of redemption** and something to change and um I think that shows more of an existentialism, like, idea. Edna, I think your card is burning.

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14	Edna	Can I ask? {"Go ahead." T055} Okay. Mr. _____ gave me this card and I think it's relevant now so I'm going to ask my question. {laughter from speaker and a few other students} No, like, now. That, okay, so, obviously in *Waiting for Godot* the whole point is that they're waiting for Godot. {laughter and applause from class} That's not what the card says alright. **Alright, so, Beckett claims that Godot is not supposed to represent God, so who do you think, like, who or what do you think Didi and Gogo are waiting for? Like, what or who do you think Godot is supposed to represent?**
15	Jason	Well, when we first started reading this, I looked at the cover, and I thought, **"Wow, Godot. God," it's pretty obvious. Nice symbolism there, great way covering it up with two extra letters.** {laughter from class} No. But, after reading it I thought well, this Beckett guy, when he was telling people that, he was just being like all writers do and saying, "Oh I just write for the fun of it." But after reading it, I see that **Godot isn't really supposed to represent God because not all people extrapolate from just God** so, Godot is supposed to represent more than God, just meaning and purpose in general. They're always waiting for some larger meaning and everything they do is just, some way to kill time while that's coming.
16	Andy	Um I think there's definitely that existentialist feeling from Godot um, like, Jason said, **not all people are waiting on God, but I think they're waiting on something.** Um and I think that the two characters are waiting um I mean, they're waiting for Godot, but, like, we saw in the scene where they all fell down, um only one of those characters got up with the help of any of the others. Um they kept trying to help each other up and it didn't work um and eventually they had to just get up on their own. Um and I think that, kind of, symbolizes, like, if these two characters actually made a decision and followed through with it, they would probably go somewhere, but they don't cause they're waiting on Godot. So, that's definitely, kind of, an existentialist idea.
17	Alena	Okay, um **I think that it's definitely commenting on religion in this point because um in the fifties when it was written, a lot of people were starting to question what they actually believed and I think this was, like, I don't know**, I thought that "Waiting for Godot" was just, like, a comment on it, like, maybe, just maybe, it doesn't mean anything to believe anything. Maybe you're just wasting your life waiting for something, not that it will get any better without it. I think it's just showing that with it, you're stuck. I don't know, maybe that's what Beckett thought. I don't know. I just thought that it was, kind of, obvious that he was trying to symbolize that **they're waiting on something higher than them that they can't do anything about and that they're not getting anywhere.** That's what [I thought anyways].

Similar to the discussion of Twain's short story above, the play *Waiting for Godot* has often been analyzed for its complicated relationship to religious themes and symbolism. Charlotte's references to hell and redemption in turn 13 seem to be the catalyst for Edna to raise the subject of God explicitly in the discussion.

The students in this excerpt drew on the play's themes to prompt a discussion about diversity of beliefs and ways of languaging those beliefs. In response to Edna's question ("What is Godot supposed to represent?"), Jason observed that after having assumed that the play was clearly about God, he came to the conclusion that since "not all people extrapolate from God" Godot must represent "meaning and purpose in general." As such, Jason drew on a form of religious literacy, an awareness of religious or non-religious belief systems, to make sense of the text. It might seem obvious to some, but Jason's observation that "not all people extrapolate from God" is a claim that rests on religious assumptions and beliefs about who or what God is, and what kind of language is appropriate to describe it (for some, God and "meaning and purpose in general" are similar concepts). Hence Andy's qualifier: "not all people are waiting on God, but I think they're waiting on something." Alena, perhaps most explicitly, traces the existentialist perspective on God in the play back to its historical context. She asserts that "it's definitely commenting on religion in this point because um in the fifties when it was written, a lot of people were starting to question what they actually believed." She noted how they are "waiting on something higher than them."

5.4.1 Section Summary

NBPTS ELA discussions often engaged students in real world inquiries, inviting students to take what they are reading in the word to apply it to the world (Appleman, 2015; Freire &

Macedo, 1983). At times students spent moments in the discussion to offer analyses, observations, and reflections on how religion functions and ought to function in society. Students studying *The Kite Runner* drew on the themes of the novel to discuss the limitations of societies that are based on religion. A discussion of "The Story of the Good Little Boy" served as both a discussion of Twain's message about religion as well as a reflective back-and-forth on the ways sincerity and motivation can play a role in the effects of religion. A discussion of the Federalist Paper No. 10 by James Madison gave way to a debate about religious factions in American democracy, inviting students to explicitly discuss the way factions and ideologies in America today align with religious affiliations. A discussion of the symbolism of Godot in *Waiting for Godot* allowed students to draw their attention to the different ways people have of determining ultimate meanings, resulting in the important acknowledgement that not all people refer to ultimate meaning as "God."

These discussions provide the richest examples of students' engaging in critical inquiry (Beach et al. 2015; Fecho, 2004) in which the broader Christian world in which they live is the object of inquiry. This extends beyond the cultural studies approach recommended by Moore (2010) which insists on a neutral approach to instruction about religion. In these examples, students not only speak *about* religion but they also engage in the process of evaluating its affordances and limitations, negotiating the role of its presence in their own social contexts. Like the other examples, these excerpts do not reflect the extent to which ELA students can or have engaged in such critical inquiries of religion in their contexts.

6.0 Conclusion

When left unexamined, our deepest religious ideas sometimes stand in the way of our understanding each other; when discussed, the watery surface provides a slightly more level field, because no matter how briefly, all of our students' religious ideas float atop the ocean of possibilities (Schweber, 2015 p. 59).

The previous chapter provided an overview of the role religion played in ELA instruction by examining the ways students and teachers talked about religion in literature discussion data submitted by 101 teachers seeking and successfully obtaining National Board certification. Initial analyses helped to establish an overall picture of which religions and religious traditions were represented in the dataset as well as how they were represented.

Rymes' approach to classroom discourse guided further examination of specific portfolios which included talk about religion that reflected pedagogical significance for ELA instruction. The four different ELA pedagogical functions of talk about religion were as follows: 1) comprehending or appreciating religious contexts or references reflected in a text; 2) employing a religious lens through which to interpret a text; 3) supporting personal religious connections to a text; and 4) examining religion in the world based on themes from a text. Examples of the four different functions of religious literacy are not to be taken as exemplary, but rather serve as sightings at the surface level indicating activity beneath. They also afford further discussion of possibilities for the future.

The goal of this final chapter is to provide a discussion of the way the findings speak to and are spoken to by scholarship on religious literacy, critical literacy, and literary literacy in ELA.

This study provides two particularly important avenues for discussion. First, this study's picture of the role religion has played in National Board-certified teachers' literary discussions invites discussion of the ways in which religious diversity within multicultural education is or ought to be reflected in the field of ELA instruction. Second, the four functions of religious literacy in ELA instruction motivates further efforts to integrate the scholarly conversations about religious literacy, critical literacy and literary literacy in ELA instruction. I elaborate on these implications below.

6.1 Discussion of Findings

Simone Schweber compared religion in the classroom to fish swimming under water. It always exists, but it does not always "make it to the surface, where we teach" (p. 59). Recommending that teachers "fish below the surface," Schweber argued teachers ought to try boldly and consistently to raise religious subject matter to students' attention, both for the sake of students with religious identities and those without. For Schweber, and many religious literacy scholars (e.g., Moore, 2007; Soules, 2019) such religiously-conscious instruction is a form of teaching for social justice (James et al. 2014). It can affirm students with religious identities; it can raise awareness for students who are unfamiliar with certain religious identities. It strengthens our democracy, and it fosters dialogue amidst pluralism. However, the findings from this analysis reveal the need for further reflection and examination of the role discussions about religion ought to play in literary literacy in ELA.

According to the quantitative data on the representation of religion in literary discussions, talk about religion is recurrent, but it is not substantial. I say recurrent, because across 101

portfolios of teachers seeking National Board certification, nearly half (45%) included at least one religious reference. At the same time, more than half of the discussions that included stretches of talk about religion lasted three or fewer turns long before the conversation moved onto something else. Like Schweber's (2015) analogy of religiously-infused ideas as fish below the surface of classroom activities, the occurrence of religion in these discussions was like fish leaping above the surface—remarkable, perhaps, but fleeting.

However, examining sightings of religious literacy in the context of literary discussions may be less about quantity, and more about the "quality of conversation about the category of religion and religious belief itself" (Dinham, 2014, p. 14). Scholarship on multicultural education and religious literacy both indicate that talk around religion should reflect diverse religious perspectives (Moore, 2010, p. 4), or the understanding that religions are complex and culturally embedded. Overall, diversity of religions and religious subject matter were not widely represented in National Board ELA teacher's teaching portfolios. And when religious subject matter was addressed within the context of a particular religion, the religion represented across the dataset was overwhelmingly Christian. Furthermore, the vast majority of references to religion were also de-contextualized and unspecific, as if consensus and agreement around them were already assumed.

The lack of depth and breadth of religious diversity among NBPTS ELA discussions recalls research calling attention to Christian privilege across all corners of U.S. schooling, from holidays to assessments (Burke & Segall, 2017; see also, Blumenfeld, Joshi, Fairchild, 2009). Like the other domains of schooling in the U.S., literary discussions also evidence the looming specter of Christian privilege and Christonormativity (Ferber, 2011; Joshi, 2020), the assumption that Christian values are or should be the norm. Not only were a large number of clear references to religion Christian but "general references" which alluded to Christian normativity without

explicitly naming it were also prevalent. Students did not have to say "I am speaking about Christianity here," when referring to Christian concepts, but my findings raise the question of whether students even knew they were speaking in Christian terms when they were doing so. This is not only a matter of "religious illiteracy" but, as Juzwik et al. (2019) have argued, it is also an equity issue (p. 2). Similar to what scholars have noted about discourses about race and racism (e.g., Haviland, 2008; Borsheim-Black & Sarigianides, 2019), *not* speaking about religion is one way in which religious dominance and inequities thrive.

Despite the indication of Christian-centric perspectives, substantive and pedagogically significant talk about religion did sometimes occur in the dataset, and these stretches of talk afforded rich insights when examined against the backdrop of critical literacy, religious literacy, and literary literacy in ELA. First, building on scholarship that has attended to the specific disciplinary literacy demands of English education (Juzwik et al., 2019), this study further clarifies how talk about religion, particularly Christianity, in ELA literary discussions can serve goals particular to ELA instruction. Religious literacy is valuable within ELA classrooms not only as it helps to provide necessary background information for understanding texts set in communities with salient religious traditions (Moore, 2010), but it can also be recruited as a critical lens (Appleman, 2015) for the literary reading of texts like *Lord of the Flies* and *The Metamorphosis*, texts not typically associated with strong religious settings. In ELA, students draw on personal and devotional religious experiences to make connections to the literature they are reading (Skerrett, 2014; Juzwik & McKenzie, 2015). And it is not uncommon for teachers to steer conversations that extend beyond to the text to implications regarding religious structures in the real world (Beach & Myers, 2001).

It is also important to consider the ways in which religious literacy learning can be both supported and subverted through these ELA literacy practices. Of course, a classroom of primarily white Christian students reading *The Kite Runner* has clear religious literacy learning opportunities in that it can "shorten the distance" (Louie, 2005) between students' cultures and beliefs and the different Islamic beliefs and social arrangements in Afghanistan. At the same time, even though personal identification with multicultural texts can result in empathy and deeper understanding of similarities across cultures, it can just as easily result in the erasure of cultural meanings, and the dismissal of social injustices and inequities (Lewis, 2000). Whether students are engaging with religion of a different culture, are invited to draw from their own religious experiences, tasked with analyzing a text through a religious literary lens, or prompted to generate text-based claims about religion in society, students run the risk of resorting to devotional experiences with religion. Avoiding these risks requires explicit and ongoing instruction.

Critical literacy work in ELA research, in particular conversations about antiracist teaching, provides an instructive parallel to take the conversation from religious literacy in support of ELA learning, to ELA learning in support of religious literacy. Skerrett (2011) noted how the common reliance on "incidental talk" to address issues of racism is "ineffective as a strategy for meeting antiracist goals" (Borsheim-Black & Sarigianides, 2019, p. 23). What is necessary in meeting antiracist teaching goals is strategic and sustained instruction. Religion likely finds it way into ELA classrooms through such "incidental talk," and the quality of the conversation that ensues will not always reflect the values of religious literacy. When considering Moore's (2010) three primary assumptions about religion as dynamic, internally diverse, and culturally embedded, many instances of talk about religion will likely reflect the opposite, that religion is monolithic, fixed and a-cultural.

6.2 Implications for Teaching

In order to enrich the conversation about strategic and sustained instruction in ELA settings about religion, I propose a framework for engaging religion critically in the same way Appleman (2015) has suggested engaging volatile issues like socioeconomic status, gender disparities, colonialism through critical theory. I call it a *critical religious literacies framework,* and I argue that it is an approach to teaching about religion in ELA contexts that can simultaneously support religious, disciplinary and critical literacies through literature analysis. By adapting scholarship from religious studies and critical theory, the framework invites students to look at texts with an attention to the ways in which religion plays a role in resisting or reinforcing systems of oppression.

In Appleman's literary analysis approach to teaching high school English, ELA teachers supply students with multiple literary lenses through which to critically examine texts. It is expected that students might disagree with some lenses, and students are by no means expected to adopt the lenses are their new belief system. The goal, rather, is to provide students with explicit instruction about the assumptions and methodologies informing different approaches to texts. Thus, if teachers are already providing students with opportunities to try on Marxist, Feminist, Queer, and Critical Race theories for examining texts, it is also appropriate that they could provide students with a Critical Religious Literacy framework.

To support the teaching of literary theory at the secondary level, Appleman created theory cards, providing teachers with language to introduce students to the basics of each theory. These include essential questions, central concerns, critical assumptions, and what to do. In a Critical Religious Literacy framework, I propose that readers approach a text, asking how the text characterizes the experiences and perspectives of people in connection to religions, be they within

or between religious communities, or at the intersections between religion and public spaces. Their primary concerns are religion, pluralism, secularism, and cultural conflicts. Drawing on a combination of religious literacy scholarship (i.e., Moore, 2007, 2010) and critical conversations around power and privilege within religious studies (Joshi, 2020; West, 2010), I recommend that the critical assumptions readers adopt include the following: 1) Religions are internally diverse (Moore, 2010): two people growing up in the same religious community can experience that religion in vastly differently ways. 2) Religions are dynamic and change (Moore, 2010) over time: Religious communities are made up of individual humans in constant struggle and dialogue around the meaning and significance of issues they find important– this dialogue contributes to ever-changing and evolving ideologies and perspectives. 3) Religions are culturally embedded (Moore, 2010): Religious practices and beliefs shape and are shaped by the cultures they inhabit. 4) Religions wield enormous social power and are responsible for both perpetuating and disrupting inequities and social injustices within society (Jones, 2020; Joshi, 2020; West, 2010. 5) Avoiding conversations about these facts about religions in public contexts (like public schools) can result in both the marginalization of religious practitioners as well as the silent endorsement of religiously supported inequities (Dávila, 2015).

Whereas a cultural studies approach to religious literacy explicitly resists "devotional" understandings of religion (Moore, 2010; Soules, 2019), ELA literary discussions invite students to bring "their whole selves" into the classroom (Skerrett, 2014a) which inherently involves students' personal identities. If devotional religious identities matter to a student, ELA classrooms that otherwise rely on reader-response methods and personal connections to a text would be inconsistent were they to preclude any discussion of "devotional" religious meaning making. Furthermore, as many teachers engage in decolonizing literacy instruction with the purpose of de-

centering dominant and hegemonic social structures (Vasquez et al. 2019), the neutral and academic approach to talking about religion resembles the same ineffective approaches critiqued in anti-racist pedagogies. A critical religious literacies approach thus takes Moore's recommendations, but allows for both personal connections as well as critical attention to power and privilege within religious frameworks.

When readers approach texts through a critical religious literacies framework, they identify the who, when and the where of religions depicted in a text. They examine the way internal diversity, dynamism, and cultural embeddedness of religion helps to create conditions of power and privilege. For example, when reading *The Kite Runner* a reader using this lens might note that the primary conflict facing Amir, the protagonist, is the role of the Muslim faith in the atrocities and beauty he has witnessed in his life. On one hand is his father, who seems to have given up his faith but who also is a figure of democracy and liberalism in Amir's life. And on the other is Assef, whose faith is his central justification for wielding unchecked power over others deemed unclean. Assef's negotiation of religion eventually leads him to play a significant role in the Taliban. Amir's faith struggle eventually builds to a climax in which he negotiates his own balance between the two extremes in his life. The following quote was after Amir recovered in the hospital after being brutally beaten by Assef.

> I see now Baba was wrong, there is a God, there always has been. I see Him here, in the eyes of the people in this corridor of desperation. This is the real house of God, this is where those who have lost God will find Him, not the white masjid with its bright diamond lights and towering minarets. (Hosseini, 2003, p. 346)

Here Amir shares an epiphany, that both his father and Assef were wrong about God. For Amir, he discovers in this hospital corridor that God need not inevitably lead to violence and social

inequities, perhaps a claim both Baba and Assef might agree. Rather, Amir discovers that God can be found in the "corridor of desperation." Importantly, in a Critical Religious Literacies framework, the goal is not to evaluate which version of Islam—i.e., Baba's, Amir's, or Assef's—is the most correct. Rather, readers from this perspective examine clues for how orientations for or against religion can be used to justify or resist particular power structures.

Further, readers could also consider the way the author's experiences with religions may have shaped their relationship to the religious practices and beliefs depicted in the text. How does Hosseini's own identity as a secular Muslim play into the novel's depiction of religion? Further, students could be asked to consider their own understandings or experiences with Islam and how they may have informed their interpretations of the text.

A Critical Religious Literacy approach is perhaps best illustrated in two recent studies by Denise Davila. In an empirical study of a 6th grade classroom engaging a variety of religiously infused texts, Davila and Volz (2017) illustrated how students managed to take post-colonialist assumptions to disrupt us/Other discourses within and about religion in these texts. Contrary to what many teachers and scholars might assume about the nature of such a lesson (e.g., see Davila, 2015), Davila and Volz noted that students were able to engage in these conversations without offending one another or marginalizing people of religious faith.

Davila and Epstein (2019) also provide a lesson exemplifying a Critical Literacy Approach in English Language Arts. They provide a fresh way to frame YA literature in the Holocaust in order to emphasize competing roles of Christianity in both resisting and reflecting systems of oppression that led to the mass murder of Jews and "gay people, priests, gypsies, people with mental or physical disabilities, communists, trade unionists, Jehovah's Witnesses, anarchists, Poles and other Slavic peoples, and resistance fighters" (Ridley, 2017, cited in Davila and Epstein,

2019, p. 152). Drawing on three texts, *Hitler Youth*, *Pink Triangle,* and *The Faithful Spy*, Davila and Epstein identified the ways Christian beliefs and scriptures were used by Nazis to justify their white, Christian, cis-heteronormative, ableist, supremacy. For example, Davila and Epstein noted the following:

> When Adolf Hitler became Germany's chancellor in 1933, he made a public promise that his leadership would, "take Christianity, as the basis of our collective morality, and the family as the nucleus of our Volk and state", and exclaimed, "May God Almighty take our work into his grace, give true form to our will, bless our insight." (Steigmann-Gall, 2003, cited in Davila & Epstein, 2019, p. 148)

This is a clear historical example of one way religion was recruited to sustain systemic oppression. Hitler himself leveraged Christian identities in war-torn Germany to mobilize the Third Reich's rise to power.

At the same time, Christian beliefs and scriptures were used to mobilize resistance against the Nazis, most evident perhaps in *A Faithful Spy*'s account of Deitrich Bonhoeffer's plot to assassinate Hitler. Bonhoeffer was heavily influenced by liberal Christian conversations that occurred at Union Seminary and was inspired to reflect on the ways he could conceive of Christianity as a liberating force in Germany. The graphic novel illustrates the internal diversity of Christianity during this period of time, showing how Christians drew on their faith both to embrace and reject Hitler's rise to power. Bonhoeffer himself drew on his own Christian beliefs to negotiate his duty as a Christian who believed in the moral commandment against murdering but also the moral imperative to "love they neighbor."

Davila & Epstein (2019) also drew the texts into the present day to reflect on the ways in which competing Christian narratives can be invoked for and against LGBTQ+ inclusion. They

note how the Trump-Pence administration enacted policies stigmatizing queer youth were applauded by the religious Right "under the guise of Christianity." Since 2019, the religious Right has managed to square responses to racial unrest, natural disasters caused by climate change and the global pandemic by citing Christian values. At the same time, other Christian have embraced Jesus' moral imperative to "love thy neighbor" in order to respond to the nation's crises in far different ways.

6.3 Implications for Research

One aim of religious literacy is the ability to engage in "an improved quality of conversation about the category of religion and religious belief itself" (p. 21). This study has illustrated that ELA teachers can work to improve the quality of talk about religion in ways that not only support religious literacy but also disciplinary literacies in ELA. It also motivates scholars at the intersections of ELA scholarship, religious literacy, and critical literacy to develop frameworks and approaches for discussing religion in ways that are critical and disciplinarily productive. Further research is necessary to take up where this project leaves off.

The anonymized data analyzed in this study precluded any investigation of the relationship between location and approach to discussions about religion in the classroom. Demographic data suggests that religious attitudes vary in somewhat predictable ways across the country (e.g., Jones 2014), and it is reasonable to assume that areas with a high concentration of one or another religious affiliation might evidence different ways of engaging instruction around religion in the English Classroom. This study is unable to locate the geographic location in which discussions

about religion in ELA classes took place. Given the current tensions and polarity we are witnessing in recent months about the role of critical theory in classrooms, further research is warranted to examine how instruction about religion in ELA classrooms varies across school environments in the United States —public vs. private; rural vs. urban vs. suburban; south vs. north. Furthermore, unearthing the patterns around race and socio-economic status and approaches to religion could help identify particular pressure points in our pluralistic democracy.

Another limitation in this data is that the 15-minute videos provided only a snapshot of classroom activity and were snapshots curated by the teacher submitted as evidence of Accomplished Teaching according to NBPTS standards. This places two constraints on the data. The first is the limited instructional context we are afforded with such videos. In order to examine religious literacy learning in a classroom, it would be beneficial to have multiple time points in a single classroom to compare. This would allow further theorization about empirical discourse characteristics of "improved quality" (Dinham, 2014, p. 21).

In addition to examining talk about religion at multiple data points in a single classroom, further study of religion in multiple data types would also be instructive for scholars researching religion's role in ELA classrooms. There is likely much more religious activity occurring in any classroom than video data can record. In the case of Hannah, for example, her teacher noted that she wrote about religion multiple times in her journal before she ever got the courage to speak about it in a small group discussion setting. Private literacy practices, like reader's-writer's notebooks or reflection journals are likely to include much more personal connections between texts and religion among students who identify as religious (Reyes, 2009). Triangulating written, discourse, and interview data would allow a much richer examination of what is said and left unsaid about religion in class discussions. Interviews with teachers about their interpretation of

talk about religion will help to ensure that "improved quality" of religious conversation is informed by both religious literacy scholars as well as ELA professionals.

Qualitative studies partnering with teachers would also address another limitation in this dataset, that a large portion of talk about religion was incidental and not the result of strategic and sustained instruction about religious literacy. The present study does not address how sustained and strategic instruction around religion in an ELA classroom might look. Nor does it provide a clear picture of how such instruction shapes religious and disciplinary literacy learning. More research efforts designed in collaboration with ELA teachers are necessary in order to provide effective and theoretically sound strategies for drawing out religious conversations in ELA class. Researchers can look to Dávila & Volz (2017) and Damico & Hall (2015) as excellent examples of collaborations with teacher scholars that provide practical instructional strategies for supporting disciplinary and religious literacies that are critically conscious. Especially as religious and political polarity continues to grow, the intersecting fields of critical literacy, religious literacy and disciplinary literacy will require fresh data to respond to current needs.

6.4 Conclusion

To conclude, I return to Schweber's analogy of religion as fish below the surface. Her argument is that inviting religion to the surface of classroom discussion "helps us see each other more clearly" and it "helps us see ourselves, with surprising clarity, too." If this sentiment sounded challenging in 2015, it seems absolutely daunting in 2021. But never has it been more vital. Since then, we have witnessed heightened political polarity during the Trump presidency, #MeToo, "cancel culture," COVID-19, racial protests, mask protests, plots to kidnap governors, Q-anon, a

Capitol insurrection, hybrid teaching, two presidential impeachments, litigation of Critical Race Theory in k-12 schooling—all nation-wide crises that have intersections with religious beliefs and ideologies. If there was ever a time to hold systematic and sustained critical conversations about the role religion can play in resisting and reinforcing systems of oppression, now is it. As scholarship has taken seriously the unique position ELA teachers find themselves – teachers of language, yes, but also teachers of communicative competence working toward futures marked by social justice and equity— it is important that ELA teachers feel equipped to engage with the complex literacies shaping the world, including religious ones.

Appendix A Classroom Map

T113OFMICANDMEN :Class Discussion/ Location??/Teacher Demo: White Female /Text: Of Mice and Men

Cam *

St 12

T*

St 1

St 11

St 2

St 10

St 3

St 9

St 4

St 8

St 5

St 7

St 6
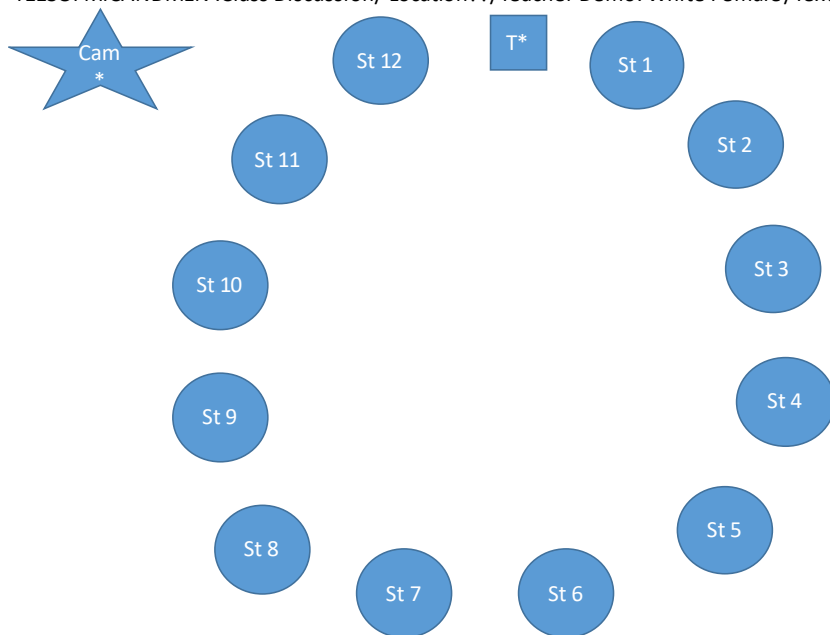
Appendix B Analytic Memo

Sample Analytic Memo for T050ATLAS542SCARLET

Discussion Transcript
How do students and teachers discussion religion?

In Grade 11 discussion of Scarlet Letter students (in pirate costumes) discuss symbolism and themes-- the first group discusses why the forest was so "evil" or scary, but at the same time such a sanctuary for Hester and Dimmesdale. The teacher prompts them to think about why in Puritan society that would be the case. The second group discusses the symbolism of Pearl as the devil being drawn to the letter A (sin) but also mentioned that Dimmesdale's death may be a punishment from God ("I know this is kind of like, a little spiritual or whatever, but like he was being punished" [...] "so God was like, punishing him then. {St 6 AF "in front of the public"} in front of everyone so everyone knew that he really had sinned, so and that's kind of the ultimate punishment is death."). Teacher brings up the election day sermon and student talk about how it would be about being true to yourself, but one student mentions that Being authentic to yourself "doesn't really sound like too puritan"; Teacher says " i mean it really had to do with with this idea of being human and sin. Um and how that related to the puritanical way of life. so they thought it was really moving for him to be like, you know perhaps you are a sinner, but God recognizes this, and blah blah blah. but like {St 8 IF "because everyone sins."} yeah and however, he was saying like, you have to try to lead a better life and all this stuff. and so, it was kind of it was kind of interesting for him to be saying that cause he just had this experience where he was, and he was finally kind of forgiving himself for his sins. or at least finally be able to admit it so. um, it was like a very powerful speech though, and everyone blesses each other." The final and third group holds a discussion about "Christianity versus puritanism" discussing extremism, the similarities between Catholicism and Dimmesdale's religious practice of beating himself and puritan "theological philosophy" of redemption (Jesus favored the few and if you screwed up you screwed up) "I dont know how they did it but they did it"

Teacher Commentary
How does the teacher reflect on religion's relationship to their instructional goals, planning, and educational practice?

Teacher created questions that asked "everyone to think on a higher level of blooms taxonomy but also addressed comprehension. Students can be seen going through this process in all groups, specifically in the 3rd group when the girl with red hair asked and they discussed the basics of Puritan religion. Even though the concepts had been covered in History, she felt comfortable enough to ask for clarification in the context of the novel; this is important because she is a student who previously struggled in asking for help, even from me." Referring to the girl who said "But the point of Jesus is that he saves everyone." About this group the teacher writes: "they were able to present very interesting connections between Puritan society, religions, and additional readings we did previously." Of the second group, the teacher notes that "the girl in the

far right hand corner, moved the US from India in 1995. While her religious and moral beliefs often leave her feeling unconnected, it is clear that she was making connections to her classmates through her feeling about the characters actions in the book.". "The students had also read DH Lawrence's short story about Nathaniel Hawthorne and had read additional short stories about Puritan Society. I did this so students could gain a better understanding of Puritan society and life." Teacher cites the most successful moment as the first group's discussion of the forest symbolism: "They also did a great job answering my question which challenged their concept of the private/public arenas in Puritan's society."

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