



# Finding a Place for the Religious and Spiritual Lives of Young Children and Their Families

## An Anti-Bias Approach

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**Tomas (4.5 years old):** My dog died yesterday.

**Martha (5 years old):** Did he go to heaven?

**Tomas:** What? No, she got rein . . . reincarnated! She will come back as a snake.

**Martha:** I don't think that can really happen.

Later, Carla, Tomas and Martha's teacher, cautiously shares this conversation with families at pickup. Some express fascination, but several share concerns. One stated firmly, "We are not OK with you talking about these things at school."

**R**eligion and spirituality are areas of identity that early childhood teachers often feel uncomfortable or uncertain talking about. And yet, we frequently hear children's big questions about the meaning of life and their wonderings about matters of faith: Who made the world? What happens when I die? Who made the first person on earth? What is God? These questions reflect children's everyday observations and the cultural messages they receive about the metaphysical world.

Spirituality involves going beyond the self in search of "connectedness, meaning, purpose and contribution" (Benson, Roehlkepartain, & Rude 2003, 205). Nell Noddings, an education scholar who has focused on philosophy, adds, "Religion is a specific way of exercising that spirituality that usually requires an institutional affiliation" (Halford 1998, 28). In this article, we explore the relevance and complexities of recognizing spirituality and religion in our work with children and families. First, we explore our field's reluctance to embrace religion in early childhood anti-bias and equity efforts. Next, we consider how this area of identity plays an integral role in development and culture. Finally, we share how religion and spirituality enter the classroom and provide strategies drawing on the frameworks of religious literacy and anti-bias education for discussing these topics with children. Throughout the article, we share brief examples drawn from our decades in early childhood education.

## Why spirituality and religion are often avoided

Why do we view children's questions about spirituality and religion with trepidation? Because they are connected to our most fundamental individual and family values, we might feel that spirituality and religion are forbidden topics in education. Social norms often silence conversations about potentially divisive topics; maybe we are uncomfortable engaging

with families—and even colleagues—about beliefs that may draw out deeply passionate responses. Some teachers believe—or accept—that children's observations and questions on these topics should be left solely to families. Families may view spirituality as integral to socializing and connecting their child to their community, or they may even wish to keep these values private.

## No matter how we feel, children bring questions about spirituality and religion into the classroom, and we have to decide how to respond.

As educators, our fears might reflect a lack of knowledge about the faith traditions we may encounter in the classroom—or they might be grounded in uncertainty about our own spiritual identities and stories. Another possibility is that certainty about our faith may make it difficult for us to be open and understanding toward other belief systems. Regardless of their knowledge, beliefs, and values, some educators may be concerned about the constitutional separation of "church" and state espoused by constitutional law. These concerns often lead to a kind of paralysis on the part of the educator, because we confuse *practicing* a religion with *acknowledging* and *talking about* religion (AAR Religion in the Schools Task Force 2010). From a social justice perspective, religious identity may be difficult to acknowledge when these beliefs and their cultural interpretations come into conflict with an anti-bias commitment to the visibility of *all* families. Or, some educators may find they are so focused on resisting the ways that Christmas and other Christian traditions can so easily dominate life in the classroom that they miss the diversity and subtlety of other religious perspectives.

No matter how we feel, children bring questions about spirituality and religion into the classroom, and we have to decide how to respond. Not responding is still a potent response that can lead to misinformation and feelings of invisibility. So how do we react when a preschooler spontaneously starts a prayer circle in the classroom or lists Jesus along with Gandhi and Ellen Ochoa as her heroes? Thinking more broadly, how can we create meaningful relationships with

children and families if we are ignoring an aspect of their identities that can be central to who they are in the world? This is particularly important for families from marginalized groups, such as people of color, indigenous peoples, and families from immigrant or refugee backgrounds, who may turn to religion and spirituality as a way to affirm purpose and to counter bias and oppression (Abo-Zena & Rana 2015). There is a great deal we can do—even in publicly funded settings—without breaching constitutional boundaries by proselytizing or being biased in favor of or against any particular religious or spiritual perspective.

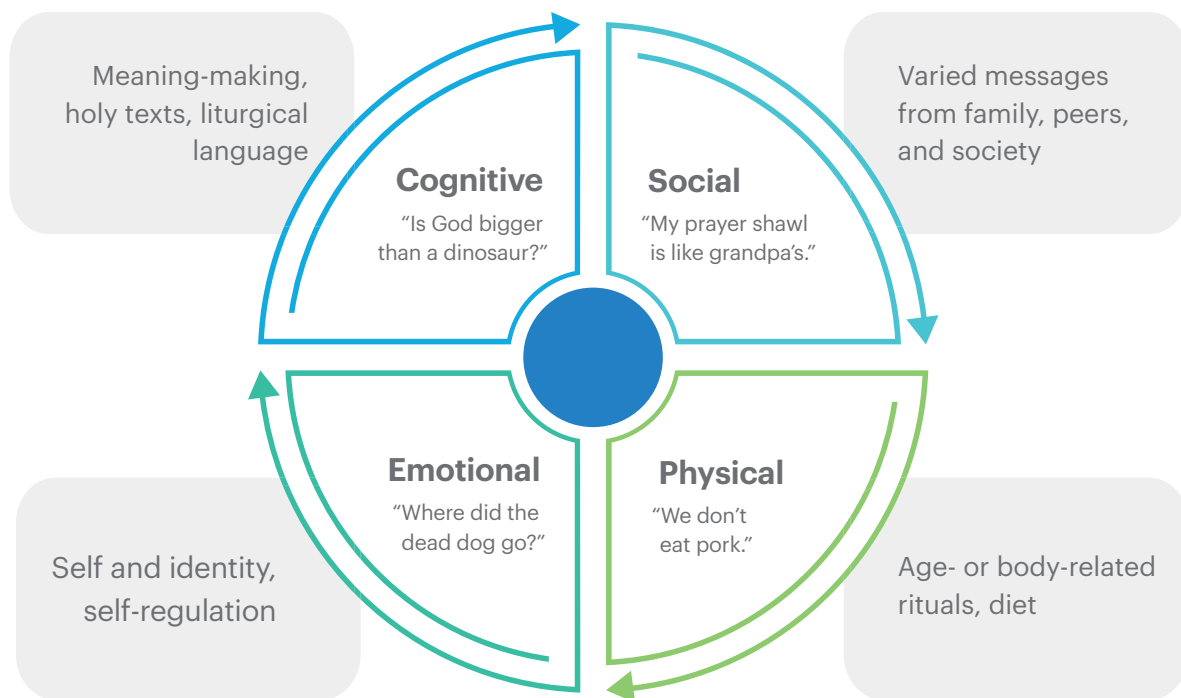
## The significance to learning and development

After classifying a rock as “living” on the living/nonliving worksheet and having the answer marked as wrong, a Native American first-grader internalizes the message that what he knows at home is not considered knowing at school.

Like other experiences or beliefs, spiritual and religious practices inform students’ cultural knowledge. When teachers do not engage or are unprepared to recognize children’s cultural knowledge, they may challenge learning in the classroom, as in the example of the child and the rock.

In her book *Black Ants and Buddhists: Thinking Critically and Teaching Differently in the Primary Grades*, teacher Mary Cowhey (2006) offers another example. A crisis arose in her classroom when young children discovered ants in the snack area. While most students scurried and began stomping on the ants, the typically soft-spoken Som-Jet “opened his hands in a pleading gesture and raised his voice. ‘No! Do not kill them! They are living things! Black ants do not bite people!’” (Cowhey 2006, 4). Som-Jet’s intervention led to critical classroom conversations about the value of life, Buddhist beliefs, and comparisons with other faith traditions. Because Cowhey was willing to engage the children in deep explorations of different faiths, Som-Jet—and all of the other children—had their points of view validated. They also learned a great deal about others’ belief systems. But in classrooms across the United States, students may feel either validated or silenced because of how their beliefs (or their lack of faith or faith traditions) align with practices in school.

Spiritual experiences have implications for many aspects of development and learning across the life span, particularly during early childhood. The figure below shows how spirituality impacts children across cognitive, social, emotional, and physical domains, and how it may enter into the early childhood classroom.



Spirituality/Religion and Interlocking Developmental Domains



Ways of thinking are socially situated, and the particular context of children’s spiritual experiences privileges certain types of learning and development along each of these developmental domains. Young children develop empathy for others—including ants—and develop affinities through religious behaviors: “My prayer shawl looks like grandpa’s.” Cognitively, children learn through their interactions with holy texts, perhaps acquiring a liturgical language, and through sacred stories.

## Young children are immersed in the trajectories of their own religious communities, and many have windows into the beliefs of others.

Bridging cognitive and emotional domains, children try to make meaning through posing their own metaphysical questions: “Where did the dead bird go?” Young children consider their own identities as they relate to others, and they learn how to regulate themselves. The physical domain includes practices (e.g., baptisms, circumcisions), bodily movements during prayer, and norms and restrictions about food and drink (e.g., “We don’t eat meat,” “I helped cook

our Seder meal”). Young children are immersed in the trajectories of their own religious communities, and many have windows into the practices and beliefs of others in their broader communities.

Consider Barbara, a Jewish kindergartner who, while sitting at the snack table, suddenly said, “Everyone who is Jewish raise your hand” (Paley 2000, 29). What do Barbara’s impromptu survey and her preoccupation with her religious self-label and those of the people around her reflect about her sense of belonging? How may her experiences outside of school related to being Jewish affect her learning and development? Although Barbara was exploring her own religious identity and was affiliating with others she saw as similar, she did not realize how her behavior could result in others feeling left out. Interventions to promote religious literacy, discussed in the next section, may help to include all learners in the community.

## Religious literacy and anti-bias goals

Young children are immersed in messages about religion—both positive and negative. This immersion includes the secularization of Christianity (the dominant religion in the United States) through holiday decorations and commercialization, despite superficial attempts to include other faiths. Educators often implicitly normalize Christian beliefs when referencing character and morality in schools, contributing to a “hidden curriculum” that assumes shared meanings around concepts like “God.” Misinformation about other religions, or voids in their depictions, contributes to erasure, bias, and stereotypes. In educational settings, the omission of spirituality and religion limits our ability to reflect children’s lives in the curriculum and to authentically engage families. Keeping these identities invisible constrains our ability to respond to bias, stereotyping, and misinformation. Using an anti-bias lens, we view spirituality and religion as integral to many people’s cultures and identities, both deeply personal and central to community belonging.

We believe educators should support the development of children’s *religious literacy*. This is defined as “the ability to discern and analyze the fundamental intersections of religion and social/political/cultural

life through multiple lenses” (Moore 2015, 4). In contrast, *religious illiteracy* leads to seeing religion solely as dogma without attention to context or culture. Variations within one religious tradition, or similarities among religions, are not acknowledged. Religious illiteracy diminishes respect for diversity, feeds stereotypes, and can result in religious extremism.

As both anti-bias educators and spirituality educators, we have applied a religious literacy lens to the four goals of anti-bias education (Derman-Sparks & Edwards 2010, 3–6):

1. *Affirming identity*: Spirituality and religion are integral to many people’s personal and social identities and are closely intertwined with family culture and child-rearing practices. We cannot ask children or families to leave out an essential part of who they are when they walk into the classroom. For instance, Ingrid, a 5-year-old with speech impediments, typically became more articulate when she talked about her family’s church activities—a significant part of her life outside of school.
2. *Embracing diversity*: Families have different beliefs, and an anti-bias approach seeks to develop empathy. Even if something is not important to one person, it may be important to others. Religious diversity provides an opportunity to consider the similarities and differences in our beliefs and how they are practiced and celebrated. For example, most world religions have guidelines for what is considered just treatment or moral behavior, though they may vary in the details.
3. *Seeking justice*: Religious illiteracy creates stereotypes (e.g., all Christians celebrate Christmas in the same way, all Jews keep kosher) rather than seeing religious practices as diverse and dynamic. Some children may be aware of unjust issues in the news related to religion (e.g., attacks on places of worship) and bring their questions into the classroom. Their ideas may come in the form of misinformation they heard through media or adults. For instance, a kindergartner asked one of her classmates, “Why is your mom wearing a scarf on her head? Is she a terrorist?” We can help children recognize when people are stereotyped or treated unfairly due to ignorance and bias against their religion.

4. *Taking action*: Once children are able to recognize biased statements or when others are bullied because of what they believe or how they dress, we can develop caring communities that empower them to speak out and address bias. As adults, we can create classroom agreements and center policies that are inclusive of spiritual and religious identities. For example, one early childhood center created a gift-giving policy that encouraged families to express their appreciation and affection through children’s handmade cards in order to minimize both religious and socioeconomic marginalization.



## Strategies for outside and inside the classroom

Guided by this framework of anti-bias education and religious literacy, the following strategies offer starting points for early childhood educators to stop fearing spirituality in the classroom.

### Be an intentional teacher

As teachers, we need to begin by reflecting on our own spiritual experiences, biases, knowledge bases, and identities. Regardless of our beliefs, we should consider how these views could impact daily interactions, including our facilitation of classroom and family conversations. We should each ask ourselves, What do I share about my religious views with the children and families in my classroom? How can I be authentic and transparent with families while

also modeling respect for different beliefs? What are the boundaries between personal religious beliefs and professional responsibilities?

These questions include several complex considerations about how we view spirituality and religion in relation to who we are in the world. For instance, John's (coauthor) history with religion includes rejecting some of his family's Christian traditions. He realized this experience led to a difficulty in understanding how many families view religious beliefs as absolute, not as personal choices. On reflection, he has been able to use this realization to be more empathetic to the profound dilemmas some families face in being open to aspects of diversity.

## Finding out about families' beliefs and identities fosters a culture of openness and learning together.

If I have visible markers of religious beliefs, such as wearing a hijab, cross, or yarmulke, how will I respond to children's inevitable questions? Some teachers feel pressured to self-censor their religious identities. For instance, a teacher who was absent from school because she was observing a Jewish High Holiday felt unable to share this information in response to children's curiosity. The result was less authenticity for the teacher in the classroom and a missed opportunity to cultivate diverse relationships with families.

### Acknowledge religious funds of knowledge

Children come to school with beliefs, ideas, and practices about religion and spirituality that they have already acquired implicitly and explicitly from their families and communities. Teachers can acknowledge these religious *funds of knowledge* (Moll et al. 1992) as a significant contributor to developing relationships and building culturally responsive curriculum.

We find that the Community Cultural Wealth model (Yosso 2005) provides a helpful framework for examining how spirituality can be critical to understanding families and their strengths. This model highlights six types of capital that families have (in

addition to financial resources). Here, we show how each type of capital offers a new lens on each person's spiritual identity.

- › *Aspirational capital*—My faith gives me hope to succeed.
- › *Linguistic capital*—My faith gives me access to texts and language for understanding and expressing spiritual concepts.
- › *Family capital*—My faith offers my family shared values, purpose, and meaning.
- › *Social capital*—My faith community connects me to a network of resources.
- › *Navigational capital*—My faith helps me to navigate school policies and other institutional systems.
- › *Resistant capital*—My faith helps me resist negative images about identity.

Teachers can recognize and build on these individual, family, and community assets in support of children's development. The separation of religion and the schools does not preclude teachers from learning about, and even connecting families to, community networks that reflect their particular faiths. As coauthors, we recognize how the faith traditions of our families of origin provided important strengths in our educational experiences. For instance, Debbie's (coauthor) mom, a Chinese immigrant, was introduced to Catholicism as a young child. This provided her with a community and an entry point to a new culture. Debbie found her mom's lifelong faith and belief system to be a resource for parenting, ethics, and support through challenging times.

### Create curriculum with mirrors and windows

We use the metaphor of mirrors and windows (Style 1988; Bishop 1990) to think about the role of religious and spiritual identities in the curriculum. The materials (such as books, dolls, and posters) and activities in the classroom should reflect—or mirror—the demographics of the families, including their spiritual beliefs. When children see characters and images in books and other materials that look like them and their families, it builds their confidence and sense of self. When children do not see themselves, they may wonder, Is there something wrong with me? Where do I fit in? Mirrors could also include

cultural traditions like oral storytelling. In a preschool program with primarily Somali families, for example, the teachers invited parents to informally tell stories in Somali, with partial English interpretation, that included references to Islamic values and practices.

To build children's knowledge and understanding, the curriculum should also provide a window to religious diversity that the children and their families might not encounter every day. Books open windows to new experiences, ideas, and people. For example, provide children with books about Hinduism and Hindu culture, even if you do not know any Hindu families or people in your community. When we provide our children with mirrors and windows, children notice similarities and differences. A teacher used the book *Hats of Faith*, by Medeia Cohan, to discuss how many people share the practice of covering their heads in different ways to show love for God, reminding children that belief in "God" is not universal. Stress multiple perspectives and go beyond a single story of what a Muslim, Jew, Sikh, or other religious observer looks or acts like.

### **Encourage children to be curious and ask questions**

Children will be curious about spirituality and religion when they see that adults pay attention to their feelings and words. For example, when Maria mentioned she got a new dress for Easter, teachers modeled being curious and asked Maria about her family celebration. Children's observations and questions may arise at unexpected times or may be provoked intentionally. For instance, if a child sees a synagogue on a community walk and asks, "What's that big star?," the teacher's role is to create the space for conversations and to then develop longer-term experiences based on the children's questions, knowledge, and development. In a kindergarten classroom at an urban university, the teachers listened to the children's questions about spirituality and religion, had discussions with families, and eventually developed a two-month study on beliefs that involved children interviewing a local priest, a Muslim chaplain, a rabbi, and an atheist about their beliefs (Mardell & Abo-Zena 2010). Teachers engaged families in the curriculum by sharing what was happening on

an ongoing basis. After witnessing the curriculum, a parent said, "If kids can talk about religion and different beliefs, I should be able to too."

### **Develop your religious literacy**

Finding out about families' beliefs and identities, including agnosticism and atheism, and listening to their questions fosters a culture of openness and learning together. Family and community members can be resources and experts on different religious experiences. Educators and schools have a responsibility to become informed about different religious practices. For instance, in one school, Muslim parents discovered that their children had been served pork in the school cafeteria and had been given candy rewards that contained pork products. Instead of accepting responsibility, the school chastised the parents for not noting the dietary restriction on the intake form. In a society as diverse as ours, some missteps are inevitable, but we hope educators will take such moments as opportunities to demonstrate a willingness to listen, learn, and find workable solutions.

### **Children's Books on Religion**

- *Buddha at Bedtime: Tales of Love and Wisdom for You to Read with Your Child to Enchant, Enlighten and Inspire*, by Dharmachari Nagaraja (2008)
- *Ganesha's Sweet Tooth*, by Sanjay Patel and Emily Haynes (2015)
- *Golden Domes and Silver Lanterns: A Muslim Book of Colors*, by Hena Khan, illus. by Mehrdokht Amini (2012)
- *Hats of Faith*, by Medeia Cohan, illus. by Sarah Walsh (2017)
- *Many Ways: How Families Practice Their Beliefs and Religions*, by Shelley Rotner and Sheila M. Kelly (2006)
- *The Way to Start a Day*, by Byrd Baylor, illus. by Peter Parnall (1978)
- *Yaffa and Fatima: Shalom, Salaam*, by Fawzia Gilani-Williams, illus. by Chiara Fedele (2017)

## Allow for conflicting views and embrace complexity

Discussing and being responsive to spirituality and religion can bring up differing and even controversial viewpoints. These viewpoints can lead to conflicts among colleagues, families, and children. Many differences, such as dietary restrictions, can be easily accommodated through inclusive policies. But what happens when values in one faith are opposed to values in another, or to your overall social justice mission? In these cases, administrators and educators can turn to *third space* problem-solving, “where people in conflict, through a distinct process of communication, reach agreement that goes beyond their initial positions . . . [and] draw on the creativity and openness of both parties” (Derman-Sparks, LeeKeenan, & Nimmo 2015, 118).

The goal in third space problem-solving is to go beyond either/or dichotomous thinking (in which one belief is right and the other is wrong) to embrace complexity. When children or families ask teachers questions, teachers often feel they need to give immediate and correct answers. In anti-bias work, we should feel able to say, “There is more than one way to think about it” or “It depends . . .” When we need time to think and get more information, we should acknowledge that: “That’s a good question. Let’s think more about it and we can talk again.” Early childhood programs are prime places to learn how to have challenging and courageous conversations, how to disagree, and how to cooperate and solve problems together (LeeKeenan & Nimmo 2016).

In some situations, such as beliefs about gender and sexuality, it may not be possible to fully reconcile a family’s religious views with a program’s commitment to anti-bias education. While there are nonnegotiables when it comes to creating an anti-bias community where all families are visible and valued, we believe that most conflicts can at least be opportunities for learning and exchange if respectful relationships have been established.

## Conclusion

No one said it was easy to find a place for religious and spiritual identities in our work. Indeed, one of the reasons we authors came together to focus on religious identity was because we each saw a rocky terrain with no clear pathway to negotiate the territory. Similar to anti-bias efforts across other social identities, we need to be ready for the ambiguity and wonder of human behavior. We acknowledge that religion and spirituality cannot be understood without recognizing the ways in which it intersects with race, ethnicity, gender, indigenous and immigrant status, and other social and historical factors. We see the urgency for change in the recent rise in Islamophobia and anti-Semitism, and in the targeting of places of worship across religions (FBI Uniform Crime Reporting Program 2018). We also see the enormous potential to engage families more authentically, to honor young children’s spiritual lives, and to take a stand against injustice.

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