Quebec’s Ethics and Religious Cultures Program:  
A Space for Atheists?

Douglas Cote  
Department of Integrated Studies in Education  
McGill University, Montreal

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Abstract

English

In 2008, the Quebec government implemented the new Ethics and Religious Cultures (ERC) program. Although Quebec's education system had become secular and linguistically divided in 1997, the school boards were given a five year grace period during which they would replace the former religious and moral instruction courses. The new program was promoted as giving all worldviews a fair and equal opportunity while still adhering to Quebec's religious heritage.

This thesis examines the space created by Quebec's secular Ethics and Religious Cultures program for atheism as a legitimate worldview. The research accomplishes this by creating an in-depth curricular analysis of the ERC program, while also exploring the term secularism, the prejudice atheism has endured through time, and the historical difficulties Canada had secularizing its once religious education systems.

It is hoped this study helps inform educators of the importance of including atheism as a legitimate worldview and also helps develop a clearer understanding of secularism, atheism, and the distinctions between them. Although the ERC program requires teachers to adopt a professional stance of impartiality, this thesis argues that the program allows teachers to sidestep the conversation about atheism completely, or worse, help reciprocate the negative connotations of an atheistic worldview.
Français

En 2008, le Gouvernement du Québec a mis en place le nouveau programme Éthique et culture religieuse (ECR). En 1997, malgré que le Québec soit devenu une province laïque et distinguée en matière de langue, les commissions scolaires se sont fait allouer une période de 5 ans pour se conformer et remplacer leur programme de religion et d’enseignement moral. Ce nouveau programme avait pour but de présenter équitablement toutes les religions, tout en s’harmonisant avec l’héritage religieux du Québec.

Cette thèse présente l’athéisme, décrite dans le programme Éthique et culture religieuse, comme étant une vision mondiale légitime. En premier lieu, une analyse approfondie du curriculum du programme ECR a été réalisée, suivi d’une revue du terme laïque, pour ensuite étudier les préjudices subis par l’athéisme au fil du temps. Finalement, un regard est mis sur les difficultés rencontrées à travers le Canada tout au long du processus de modification des programmes d’éducation, autrefois basés sur la religion, vers des programmes d’éducation laïques.

Cette étude a pour but d’informer les éducateurs sur l’importance de considérer l’athéisme comme étant une vision mondiale légitime, ainsi que d’acquérir une meilleure compréhension de la laïcité et de l’athéisme, de même que relever les distinctions entre ces deux termes. Bien que le programme ECR exige des éducateurs une impartialité selon les normes professionnelles, cette étude soulève la possibilité des éducateurs d’éviter toute discussion avec les élèves concernant l’athéxcisme, ou encore de leur présenter une image négative ou erronée face à l’athéisme.
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Chapter 1 – Introduction

It is an interesting and demonstrable fact, that all children are atheists and were religion not inculcated into their minds, they would remain so. (Rose, 1861, para. 32)

Famed feminist and atheist, Ernestine Rose (1861), viewed children as natural non-believers because if belief in gods was innate, much like our five human senses, there would be no need for it to be taught. According to Rose (1861) “[t]here is no religion in human nature, nor human nature in religion. It is purely artificial, the result of education” (para. 32). I was not raised in a religious household, nor had any conversations about religion with my family, but I felt a necessity to believe in a higher power. Without any formal religious education, I developed religious ideas, such as heaven and God. I infer that these thoughts came from the culture that surrounded me and the public schools I attended. Despite being enrolled in the “Moral” section of the Catholic, Protestant and Moral Values options, provided in the Eastern Townships School Board, it still felt like Christian traditions were taught, as Christianity was the normative lens in which all curricula was filtered (Schlosser, 2003). I cannot recall a time where living morally without God was ever discussed, nor were atheists such as Richard Feynman, Stephen Hawking or Che Guevara introduced as people of positive influence because of their beliefs, or lack thereof. Atheism and agnosticism simply did not exist in my school experience in the 1990's.

While in my undergrad, there were two approaches to pedagogy, Eurocentric and Culturally Responsive, that stood out as possible reasons as to why my elementary and High School education never reflected my own future worldviews. First, the Eurocentric approach to pedagogy and curriculum is one that “reinforces the status quo, makes
students passive and content, encourages them to acquiescently accept the dominant ideologies, political and economic arrangements, and prevailing myths and paradigms used to rationalize and justify the current and political structure (Banks, 1991, p. 130). In short, students are to assimilate to their teachers' ideologies and the norms of the dominant culture, “as opposed to being instructed in a manner that allows their background and experiences to be utilized as a springboard for creating new knowledge” (Martisko, 2012, p. 3). Grant and Lea (2001) explain that the multicultural education that Quebec offered in the late 1990’s was insufficient in addressing the influx of diverse students and that “minority students continued to feel alienated from the school system” (p. 177). This could have been one possibility of why my own worldviews were never addressed in class. The second possibility could have been that teachers were using a culturally responsive pedagogy. This is when teachers use cultural knowledge, prior experiences, and their students' diverse ethnicities to make learning more effective and relevant for their students (Gay, 2002). In culturally responsive classrooms, “teachers express and articulate the value of the backgrounds of each of their students and understand that their beliefs cannot be imposed on their students” (Martisko, 2012, p. 3). It is possible that my teachers engaged in culturally responsive pedagogy, but never included atheistic or agnostic worldviews because they didn't see them reflected in the community. After examining Canada's demography, it would have been unlikely that atheism and agnosticism were not part of my community. Statistics Canada (2011) places the religiously unaffiliated population, also known as “nones”, in 2011 at 23.7%, up from 16% in 2001. In comparison, the Pew Research Center (2015) places “nones” in the United States at 22.8% of the population growing from 16.1% in 2007. Further narrowing of the research to the small town I grew
up in showed that 21% of the community affiliated themselves with no religious connections. With nearly one quarter of North America and my own childhood community having no religious ties, if my teachers were following a culturally responsible pedagogy, why was my educational experience not reflective of this? This has led my research question to be: *From a curriculum analysis, what kind of space does Quebec’s secular “Ethics and Religious Culture” (ERC) program create for atheism as a legitimate worldview?*

Historically speaking, Canada’s education system was “a process of socialization, where the child was introduced and immersed into Christian culture and later integrated into a social structure, instilling in them an appreciation for Christian values and morals” (Datoo, 2016, p. 55). Bramadat and Seljak (2009) describe that Canada’s early identity revolved around ‘Christianization’ and while other religious traditions did occur, they had no influence on the dominant Christian culture. In Quebec, it was the election of Jean Lesage and the Liberal party, in 1960, that overhauled the school systems by following the Parent Commission’s five-volume report, reflecting the values Quebec had developed during the Quiet Revolution (Donkers, 2014). In 1997, Quebec was able to amend Section 93 of the British North American Act that gave constitutional protection to confessional schools, later abolishing religiously aligned schools and replacing them with linguistically aligned ones (Datoo, 2016). When it came to religion in Quebec’s new secular education system, education minister Pauline Marois created a team headed by Jean-Pierre Proulx whose mandate was “to examine the place of religion in schools, to define relevant guidelines, and to propose methods for their implementation” (Quebec, 1999, p. 7). The Proulx report developed five clear recommendations to be followed, if education about religion was to remain in schools:
1) Québec is a liberal democracy that must, in all areas, uphold the principle of fundamental equality of all citizens.

2) Any Québec state policy on the question of religion in schools must be subject to the requirement of egalitarian neutrality.

3) Schools fall under the shared responsibility of parents, civil society, and the state. This partnership aims to provide all children with a well-rounded and high quality education.

4) Children have fundamental interests with respect to education that must be guaranteed by the state. These fundamental interests, in addition to the development of general cognitive skills, are generally translated into the right of children to be properly prepared for their lives as citizens in a liberal democracy. This type of education must include the development of personal autonomy and critical thinking, the capacity to reason, tolerance, an openness to diversity and a sense of belonging to the community.

5) Religion may have a place in schools, as a contribution to the development of the child as a whole person, provided its teaching is organized in a way that is consistent with the principle of fundamental equality of all citizens, and provided it promotes the attainment of the goals identified as necessary for educating citizens and forging the social bond. (Quebec, 1999, p. 20)

In spring 2005, liberal leader Jean Charest passed Bill 95 amending the “Education Act, making it no longer possible to choose, as of July 1st 2008, between Catholic, Protestant or Moral instruction, to be replaced by the new compulsory Ethics and Religious Culture (ERC) program” (Donkers, 2014, p. 18). Quebec’s new Ethics and Religious Culture (ERC) program gave me hope that the Christian and Eurocentric approach would fade, introducing primary and secondary students to multiple worldviews and create greater inclusion of Canada's growing diverse population. After reading the official program, I drew doubts that the document was clear enough to have all worldviews recognized, even with its two main objectives: 1) The Recognition of Others 2) The Pursuit of the Common Good (Ministère de l’Éducation, du Loisir et du Sport, 2008, p. 462). I worried that the new program would still marginalize children who, like me, had no religious beliefs. This led the


focus of my research to be on how specifically the Ethics and Religious Cultures program’s curriculum creates space for atheism to be taught as a legitimate worldview.

Before arguing why atheism and agnosticism should have a strong presence in the ERC program, a firm definition of what they represent should be established. For the purpose of this research, the definition when reading the word “atheist” will be McGowan’s (2013) explicit atheism, that being a person who has consciously chosen not to believe in a God, combined with Baggini’s (2003) and Converse’s (2003) argument that atheism is not only the absence of belief in God’s existence, but a complete denial of anything supernatural. Atheists can be further broken down by labels, much like theists can be separated by religion or sect. A person without a belief in a god may label themselves as a freethinker, skeptic, agnostic or secular humanist, but at the core, they are all atheists (McGowan, 2013). To help decipher between labels, Dale McGowan (2013) properly imagines them in a conversation:

Q: Do you think God exists?
Me: No, I’m an Atheist
Q: But are you absolutely certain?
Me: Of course not. I’m an agnostic.
Q: And do you believe as you do because some authority told you to?
Me: No, I’m a freethinker.
Q: And if there’s no God, don’t you think it’s important for us to take care of each other?
Me: Of course. I’m a Humanist. (p. 21)

This thesis will regularly use the words atheist, “nones”, or non-believers interchangeably. It should also be noted that freethinkers, sceptics, agnostics, and secular humanists are all included under the same atheistic umbrella, unless stated otherwise.
The three main arguments forwarded in this thesis on why atheism deserves a greater presence in the ERC program focus on: 1) population representation, 2) righting historical prejudice, and 3) and contributing to a more ethical society. As stated earlier, Canada’s most recent census (2011) puts non-religious Canadians at 23.7% of the population. This is nearly an 8% increase since the last Canadian census, ten years prior. This ranks non-believers as the second fastest growing demographic in Canada, closely following Islam (Press, 2013). At the time of writing, Canada had completed a 2016 census, but religion was not part of the data gathering, only being admitted as a question every ten years. Even the United States, ranked the most religious industrialized country in the world (Brown, 2009), has seen a large influx of non-believers in recent studies (PEW, 2015). Between 2007 and 2014 the non-believing population grew 6.7%, out-pacing all other affiliated groups (2015). The overall trend of non-believers in North America is increasing. Globally, the Win Gallop International Global Index of Religiosity and Atheism (2012) places a third of the world’s population as being non-religious. What is more interesting is that nearly half of the world’s nations (48%) rank the non-religious as their second largest affiliated group (Pew, 2015).

The ERC program emphasizes Quebec’s own Franco Catholic and Anglo Protestant religious heritage, giving Quebec’s historical Christian traditions a larger focus in the program despite today’s demographic looking very different (Donkers, 2014). Statistics Canada (2011) ranks Catholicism still at a large majority (82%), but it is the non-religious who now rank second in the province. Dale McGowan (2013), PhD and author of Sharing Reality: How to Bring Secularism and Science to an Evolving Religious World believes that this massive Catholic majority is inflated due to Catholicism being “wrapped up so tightly
with their Frenchness that it ends up having literally nothing to do with belief” (p. 248). In other words, McGowan is trying to explain that in French Quebec Culture to be truly French one must also identify as Catholic. Canadian sociologist Reginald Biddy (2007) explains that when Quebec’s regular church attendance was “in the 80%-plus range in the 1960’s, 88% of Quebec residents described themselves as ‘Catholic.’ Today, with regular attendance closer to 20%, no less than 83% continue to identify with Catholicism.” (p. 8). Quebec has the lowest church attendance rate of all of Canada and is also the least religious, at 22%, when asked if they believe in a personal God (McGowan, 2013). Therefore Quebec, at the same time, is the most and least religious province in Canada; culturally Catholic and religiously agnostic (2013). The ERC is meant to reflect on Quebec’s Education Program (QEP) “as an educational process of reflection and questioning, not only with respect to students’ own world-views, their values and those of others, but also with respect to the major issues of living together with differences in modern society” (Donkers, 2014, p. 19). If this is true, and potentially a third of the world, nearly a quarter of Canadians, and possibly two thirds of Quebecers see themselves as non-religious, then in order to comply with the first main objective of the ERC program, “The Recognition of Others”, atheism should be explicitly included in the program.

Historical prejudice is another reason that atheism needs proper allocation in the ERC program. Although the research on how atheists are perceived in Canada is scarce, there has been adequate research done south of the border and around the world on the subject. With the Canadian and American social media world very much tied together, it doesn’t take long to find anti-Islamic, anti-liberal, and, yes, even anti-atheistic rhetoric within Facebook, Twitter and Reddit. In regards to atheism, this negativity towards
nonbelievers is not a new phenomenon, but has been documented by historians as far back as Ancient Greece (Nash, 2003; Edgell, Gerteis, & Hartmann, 2006; Magee, 2011; Gervais, Shariff, & Norenzayan, 2011), which will be further explained in Chapter Six. Atheophobia, the fear of atheists, “leads to the invisibility for many atheists, who find it is best to keep their non beliefs hidden for their own good” (Goodman & Mueller, 2009, p. 58). In one American study, 43% of atheists and agnostics reported experiencing discrimination in the workplace, school, military, social, or family contexts (Cragun, Kosmin, Keysar, Hammer, & Nielsen, 2012). Despite a recent growth in the level of tolerance towards religious diversity, atheists are still polled as one of the least accepted and trusted groups in America (Magee, 2011). This prejudice also seeps into the political sphere with atheists having the least support when running for an elective office (PEW, 2014; PEW, 2012; Jones, 2007). A more recent global study has shown atheist prejudice is apparent in countries with large non-religious populations and that even strict atheists hold animosity towards other non-religious people (Giddings & Dunn, 2016). Much like Islamophobia, “Atheophobia, like all other phobias, thrive in a state of ignorance” (Nash, 2003, p7) and the ERC program needs to educate a generation who will no longer be illiterate towards non-believers.

A final reason why atheism needs to be included in the ERC program is that the program’s second competency “reflects on ethical questions” and a concern of agnostic and atheist groups is that “ethical issues will end up being addressed from the perspective of a particular religion” (Bouchard, 2010, p. 62.). Atheists are burdened with the stereotype of being immoral (Nash, 2003) and the group, Mouvement Laïque Québécois (MLQ), worried that integrating both ethics and religion into one course would imply that all ethics must have direct links to religion, and if a person did not have any religious or spiritual
affiliation, it would reaffirm atheist immorality (Bouchard, 2010). The link between morality and religion has long been debated in Canada. Donkers (2014) explains that the first attempts of creating common schools, which he describes as non-denominational Christian schools, grew large backlash from the church because a godless school would be a gateway to “moral corruption, especially for children and young people from the countryside (Curtis, 2012, p. 302-303). In another instance, the debate between secular schools and morality became so heated, that to have a non-denominational system, teachers had to be certified by a religious leader, proving moral character, to receive their teaching license and could lose their license, if showing immoral behaviour on or off school property (Bernard, 1984). The notion that morality and religion are linked has recently been explored by Nury Vittachi (2014) claiming not only that atheists do not exist through cognitive science, but that a person cannot act morally without the sense of a supernatural being looking over them. A secondary guideline in the ERC program is that students “must demonstrate openness, curiosity and a critical sense in order to weigh different ways of thinking, being and acting or to consider moral references different from their own” (Gouvernement du Québec, 2008, p. 472). Without the inclusion of an atheistic worldview, the students will develop skills to understand morality and ethics through the eyes of different religions, but not from a non-religious perspective.

At the beginning of this research, atheist prejudice was indeed “socially accepted and rife” (Magee, 2011, p. iv) with the mainstream media regularly claiming and sensationalizing so-called “militant atheists” trying to ruin Christmas, rip down the Ten Commandments from public spaces, or remove any remaining essence of God from society. As a researcher, I acknowledge that in the last few years the negative focus on atheism has
seen a shift back towards other visible minorities, mainly immigrants and Islamic cultures. This swing started here in Canada, on a federal level, during the last election with the conversation on “Canadian Values” and Prime Minister, Stephen Harper’s usage of “Old Stock Canadians”; a term which drove identity politics throughout much of the 2015 federal election (Gollom, 2015). Tensions continued to rise when the Conservative government asked Canadians to stand up for their values and report any “barbaric cultural practices” which was a direct reference to perceived Islamic cultures (Keenan, 2015). Examples of Quebec spinning its own provincial anti-Islamic rhetoric can be seen in 2013 when there was a push for a Charter of Quebec Values, that would have banned religious symbols, including the hijab, turbans and burkas for public service workers (CBC News, 2013), and again in 2017, when Quebec passed Bill 62. This Bill saw the banning of face coverings for anyone receiving a public service, such as riding the bus. The Islamic communities felt Bill 62 targeted Muslim women and violated their basic human rights to express their religion freely (Valiante, 2017). The worse of this anti-Islamic action came with a pig’s head being left at a Mosque door and then in 2017, when a gunman entered a house of prayer in Quebec City and killed six worshippers (Balkissooon, 2018). The shooter recently confessed that the media surrounding immigrants and Muslims, coming to the Americas, fueled his actions because he felt terrorist attacks were imminent (Andone, 2018). Moreover, prejudice towards atheists certainly does not compare to President Trump’s era of anti-Muslim propaganda (Blumberg, 2017), but this research still holds importance in order to give children another worldview option. I believe it is important for me to acknowledge that other groups have, in our recent past and presently, been the target of vicious hatred. And, I hope that my fellow citizens (and those who dream of citizenship)
who are victims of prejudice will agree that when we allow for one group to be marginalized and/or demonized, we leave the door open for others to receive the same treatment. When Quebec’s new history textbooks were being written around a “narrative that is focused exclusively on the francophone majority” people fought for a revision that included indigenous and immigrant viewpoints (Shingler, 2017, para. 4). Public pushback towards the textbooks prompted revisions and Quebec’s Community Groups Network to recommend teachers to go beyond the textbooks and use other resources to create a more inclusive curriculum (Johnson, 2017). A possible outcome of this research would be for a similar revision to happen with the ERC program, if evidence shows there is no space for atheism as a legitimate worldview. In sum, this thesis will be an exploration as to whether the ERC program specifically incorporates atheism and to what extent this worldview is being included in existing classrooms. To accomplish this goal, I have structured this thesis into eight chapters.

Chapter Two will discuss the theoretical lenses that the research will be explored through, primarily Critical theory and Shared Reality theory. Critical theory will serve as the guide for the literature review and document/policy analysis in relation to nothing being accidental in text (Sim & Van, 2009) and the importance of analyzing text through the world that spawned it (Said, 1984). Shared Reality theory “provides a theoretical framework from which to understand anti-atheist prejudice by looking at how beliefs are used, regulated, and defended, as a function of the relationships in which they are shared” (Magee, 2011, p. 5).
Chapter Three will explain the qualitative research methodology used in this thesis. The two main components of the research are: 1) a historical/literature analysis of the ERC program, atheist prejudice and the secularization of Canada’s public schools 2) an in depth policy/document analysis of the Ethics and Religious Cultures curriculum.

Chapter Four will explore the paradox of the term secularism. “Rather than being simply an issue of absence of religious belief or affiliation, there are wide varieties of secular expression” (Baker & Smith, 2015, p. 8). Each country manages religion differently depending on their interpretation of the word secularism (Donkers, 2014) and Ahmet Kuru (2007) argues that these distinct interpretations are a result of unique events in each country’s history. This Chapter will examine four different interpretations of secularism around the world. Kuru (2007) describes The United States and France as opposites in secularism, using the terms passive (soft) and assertive (hard) to describe their positions on the word. The United States secularism allows for religion to live in the public sphere and “requires that the secular state play a “passive” role in avoiding the establishment of any religions” (p. 571). France, on the other hand, has an assertive ideology of secularism (laïcité de combat). Here, the state “plays an “assertive” role as the agent of a social engineering project that confines religion to the private domain” (p. 571). The third interpretation is forced secularization under communist rule, where the state demands its citizens to become atheists (Yang, 2004; Froese, 2003). This last interpretation of secularism has given rise to the negative misconception that atheism is directly linked to Soviet style communism (Nash, 2003). The final form of secularism is Quebec’s open secularism where Donkers (2014) explains it as “not so much of the ‘separation of church and state’ but a tradition of the co-operation between the two” (p. 24). Or as the Bouchard-
Taylor report explains it, “[i]n Quebec, secularism allows citizens to express their religious convictions inasmuch as this expression does not infringe other people’s rights and freedoms” (Bouchard & Taylor, 2008, p. 141).

Chapter Five will look at the evolution of how Canada’s public education system slowly became secular. The Chapter will focus on two occurrences in Canada’s history: First, the struggle provinces faced in their effort to develop public, secular education as a result of the church’s belief that secular education would lead to the fall of morality in its population (Higgins, 2011; Bérard, 1984). Second, this Chapter will look at provinces that, in order to have the Church’s consent to develop secular schools, created policies that gave the dominant religions of the time, Catholicism and Protestantism, privileges over all other minority religions.

Chapter Six will take a deeper look at the prejudice atheism has faced throughout history. There will be a brief examination of atheist prejudice found in Ancient Greece, where the first documented atheists were recorded, and then a closer look at modern time prejudice delivered through different policies and in public places. Shared Reality theory will be used to explore a reason why negative connotations have followed atheism throughout history (Magee & Hardin, 2010; Magee, 2011; Anderson & Chen, 2002).

Chapter Seven will look at the ERC program as a whole and be broken into two sections. Section one will explore how the ERC program came into existence with a focus on the criticisms it received from religious and non-religious organizations. Second will be the curriculum/policy analysis examining what place atheism has been given within the
program. Close attention will be given to how the authors worded the text, examining any influences it may have on teacher/ student interpretations.

The final Chapter will be used as the conclusion to the thesis, giving an overall summary of its findings and any considerations for further research that could be done on the given subject.
Chapter 2 - Theoretical Stance

Schools have consequences not only by virtue of what they do teach, but also by virtue what they neglect to teach. What students cannot consider, what they don't know, processes they are unable to use, have consequences for the kinds of lives they lead. (Eisner, 1985, p. 103)

The objective of this Chapter is to create the theoretical foundation that this research has been built upon. It is important for the reader to understand what theorists and theories guided the research in order to minimize subjectivity and the repressing of information due to textual unconsciousness (Culler, 1984). Grounding one's research in prior academic work is beneficial to objectivity, but as Eisner (1991) explains “[h]uman knowledge is a constructed form of experiences and therefore a reflection of mind as well as nature” (p. 7). As I will be analyzing tone, voice, and meaning within the Ethics and Religious Culture program, so should the reader with my own writing. To aid in transparency, this Chapter will be a guide to how I, as the researcher, approached the goal to whether or not the ERC program specifically includes atheism and to what extent this worldview is being treated legitimately. Throughout this Chapter I will explore the different theories and theorists who have influenced my thought through this research. Critical theorists such as Apple, Gatto, and Freire will be introduced along with exploring Shared Reality theory, Christian privilege, and the Hidden and Null curriculum.

Critical Theory

Critical theory plays an important role in this research as it is the overarching guide throughout. Theorists such as Apple, Gatto, and Freire have all influenced my thought and the way I look at the world. Frankfurt school director and theorist Max Horkhemier defines
the goal of Critical theory as the “personal and collective liberation for the oppressed and
the elimination of oppression” (Lyon, 2009, p. 9) by examining a specific individual in
relation to other individuals, groups, classes, and nature (Horkhemier, 1968/1972).
Horkheimer expressed the “need for a society without injustice or conditions without
exploitation and oppression” (Fuchs & Sandoval, 2008, p. 115). In order for this change to
occur, emphasis must be placed on how values and norms are created rather than just
acknowledging what they are (Sim & Van, 2009). Critical theory offers the opportunity to
“identify, and then to challenge and change, the process by which a grossly iniquitous
society uses dominant ideology to convince people this is a normal state of affairs”
(Brookfield, 2005, p. viii). Without understanding the influences social and political powers
have on us, we may be doomed to always live in the same injustices (Apple, 1982). To help
guide my research I will use author and educator Brookfield’s (2005) three core
assumptions of Critical theory:

1. That apparently open, Western democracies are actually highly unequal
societies in which economic inequity, racism, and class discrimination are
empirical realities

2. That the way this state of affairs is reproduced and made to seem normal,
natural, and inevitable (thereby heading off potential challenges to the
system) is through the dissemination of dominant ideology

3. That critical theory attempts to understand this state of affairs as a
necessary prelude to changing it (p. viii)

Relating these assumptions to this research reminds me of Paulo Freire and his idea
of reading the word and the world. Since this research is largely based on literature review
and the critical analysis of the ERC program, I must see reading as studying reality; “reality
as history being made and also making us” (Freire, 1985, p 18). Freire (1985) argues that
“it is impossible to read texts without reading the context of the text, without establishing the relationships between the discourse and the reality which shapes the discourse” (p. 19). Text is not just words, but a compilation of all the history leading to them. When examining text, Critical theory argues that nothing is accidental. Everything that is negated or hidden in the sub-text is actually part of the textual unconscious (Sim & Van, 2009). Sim and Van (2009) describe that “[i]n-depth analysis of texts with very close attention paid to detail resembles the therapist’s function of vigilant ‘listener’ [while] the text becomes something like a ‘patient’” (p. 62). It is my goal to achieve this close relationship between researcher (therapist) and text (patient).

When examining text, we must also consider the power text has over the reader. Text is commonly used to dislodge previous information from the public eye and “[a]s Nietzsche had the perspicacity to see, texts are fundamentally facts of power, not of democratic exchange” (Said, 1984, p. 14). Said (1979) warns that information found in text "can create not only knowledge, but also the very reality they appear to describe" (p. 94). It is the dominant culture that controls the text, and in hand controls reality. If the tone and vocabulary used in the ERC program promotes a sense of othering, then students see that as truth and further strengthens the “us” and “them” mentality. Said’s warnings relate back to the importance of Critical theory and asking questions about “whose knowledge and curriculum are being taught, whose voices are silent, and how the systems of power silence some and make space for other voices to be heard (Lyon, 2009, P. 22).

While understanding that within text there is a complete history that needs uncovering, I must also be critical of my own bias and knowledge. I must be critical when
analyzing text "based on the notion of the unconscious as a hidden or repressed reality that is brought to light only when the analyst interprets the text in the light of the proper code or body of expert knowledge" (Culler, 1984, p. 370). Miller (2017) warns that when “we approach texts with the intent of interpreting them.... we assume that there are ‘hidden or repressed’ realities, and as we look for them, our own knowledge influences how such realities are then interpreted” (p. 24). As a researcher, I must stay conscious of my own biases and history. I must question my findings the same way I question the world in which the text has been written. The next section will explore a theory which may answer the question of why atheism appears to have always been a taboo subject.

**Shared Reality Theory**

Magee (2011) asks why is it that throughout history, the general loathing of atheists has always continued to seem socially accepted. While Chapter Six will take a deeper look into the historical evidence of prejudice towards atheism, this section will explore a possible reason why this has occurred. The first written evidence of prejudice towards atheists occurs in the fifth century B.C.E., and even after countless generations, this prejudice has continued (McGowan, 2013). How is it that the overall tolerance towards religious diversity in America has increased, but Atheists continue to poll as one of the least accepted group in America (2011)? Magee (2011) believes Shared Reality theory “provides a theoretical framework from which to understand anti-atheist prejudice by looking at how beliefs are used, regulated, and defended as a function of the relationships in which they are shared” (p. 5). Beliefs and opinions about the world are commonly constructed based off what others hear and see, and not on physical reality or facts (Festinger, 1950). The
concept of Shared Reality was first introduced by Higgins (1992) as an extension to the “saying-is-believing” effect (Higgins & Rholes, 1978). In general, Shared Reality theory explains that experiences and views are “cognitively realized when they are perceived to be acknowledged, recognized, or otherwise intersubjectively ‘shared’ with others” (Magee & Hardin, 2010, p. 380). Magee (2011) further explains that “Shared Reality theory postulates that both the need to establish and maintain relationships, as well as the need for epistemic understanding, is pursued and met through the mutual achievement of a social-cognitive common ground or ‘shared reality’” (p. 6). With atheism being closely tied to religion, many of these relationships come from within the family domain. Magee’s (2011) research implies that when a person’s religious views are challenged or threatened by atheism, these threats are also directed towards the relationships the religious views are shared “and will be defended to the extent these relationships are perceived to be healthy, stable, and vital” (p. 7). Since religious belief typically develops in a child through parental relationships (Beit-Hallahmi & Argyle, 1997), Shared Reality implies that automatic attitudes are created since a child’s “need to belong and the need to know are achieved through the interpersonal negotiation of Shared Reality” (Felix, 2014, p. 1). Magee (2011) has found that the strength of a parental relationship can predict the level of defense one will show towards their religious belief. If a child is raised in a theist home, they will subconsciously defend their parents religiosity and with atheism being often labeled as immoral, evil, or god hating, (Goodman & Mueller, 2009) even associating with an open atheist may be subconsciously seen as a threat (Magee, 2011) or a disloyal act towards one’s family. Shared Reality theory gives a reason why prejudice towards atheists has continued for millennia. If children tend to adopt the same faith as their parents (Dawkins,
2006; Beit-Hallahmi & Argyle, 1997), and cognitively defend such views based on their parental relationships (Magee, 2011), then it can be inferred that this is an explanation on why negativity towards atheism has continued. In relation to Shared Reality theory and how a thought can become a norm if repeated enough times, the next section will look at the theories of White and Christian Privilege and how they influence Western societies while remaining nearly invisible to the privileged.

**White and Christian Privilege**

The phenomenon of White and Male privilege was popularized by Peggy McIntosh in her 1988 landmark writing, *White privilege and male privilege: A personal account of coming to see correspondences through work in women’s studies*. McIntosh (1989) explains that she “had been taught about racism as something that puts others at a disadvantage, but had been taught not to see one of its corollary aspects, white privilege, which puts ‘her’ at an advantage” (para. 2). Johnson (2006) defines privilege as “exist(ing) when one group has something of value that is denied to others simply because of the groups they belong to, rather than because of anything they’ve done or failed to do” (p. 21). McIntosh created a list of 25 privileges and freedoms “that most Whites often take for granted and erroneously assume other races enjoy the same” (Pappas, 1995, p. 3). Many of McIntosh’s examples of White privilege gives Whites a sense of belonging no matter where they are in the world, but most importantly “keep Whites from having reason to be angry about race and ethnic discrimination” (p. 3). Racial issues of the past continue today, but live in a sense of normality, or as Vargus (2003) explains, “[t]ime has made past racial practices and assumptions invisible to modern eyes” (p. 2). This invisibility of privilege leads Whites to
believe that they are not part of a race, but are the default (Helms, 1992); or as Applebaum writes, “[b]eing white means rarely, or never, having to think about it” (Applebaum, 2005, p. 284). Without critically examining the life of visible minorities, Whites continue to believe the environment they live in is free of racial hostility or discrimination (Schlosser, 2003). Schlosser (2003) explains that “[i]n a similar fashion, Christians are not likely to know (or believe) that the environment is oppressive because that environment has never been oppressive to them for being Christian” (p. 47). Being greatly influenced by McIntosh (1989), Schlosser, in his article Breaking the Scared Taboo, also created a list of 28 privileges people from the Christian religion blindly enjoy (2003). He created this list because he felt it was the dominant religions “responsibility to recognize their power and the accompanying privileges” (p. 47) and he saw the list as a good dialogue starter.

Christian privilege can be linked to this research through teachers struggling to follow the professional stance the ERC program requires. The professional stance, commonly referred to as “neutral impartiality” (Kelly, 1986; Morris, 2011), instructs “that in the interest of fairness to students, teachers do not openly express their personal preferences” (Zaver, 2016, p. 45). I fear that if teachers lose focus on their neutral stance, then the invisibility of Christian privilege will unconsciously creep into the ERC curriculum and school. Before delving into how Christian privilege could ruin dialogue in ERC classrooms and how atheists may be uniquely affected, we will look at two academic sources, Zaver (2016) and Knott (2011), which reiterate the struggles that come with achieving neutral impartiality.
Zaver (2016) argues that while the ERC program is essential to Quebec's education, "... the difficulties in applying the kind of neutrality the Ministry of Education outlines hinder the teacher from fostering a space that is open to the kind of dialogue and openness the ERC curriculum aims to achieve" (p. 48). Zaver sees a contradiction in the ERC program where it asks teachers "... to bracket their own worldviews and perceptions upon entering the classroom while simultaneously asking students to share their perspectives and opinions" (p. 45); an approach that goes against studies that link teacher satisfaction with the ability to feel and act like oneself in the classroom (Schuck, Buchanan, Aubusson, & Russell, 2012). It is also argued that revealing one's religion may show a sense of vulnerability to students and in turn develop a trusting relationship (Applebaum, 1995). Zaver concluded by recommending Kelly's (1986) "committed impartiality" as a more reasonable approach. Committed impartiality "allows the teacher to participate in classroom dialogue, with the understanding that their viewpoint is owned, presented as one of many perspectives, and that spaces for critical thought are encouraged (Zaver, 2016, p. 47). I am not analyzing Zaver's research to debate the ERC's approach to neutrality, but rather showing the difficulties in teacher neutrality when it comes to the program.

Knott's (2011) research set out to ask the question "Are Québec’s teachers and teacher education programs developing a professional stance that allows them to fully comprehend and appropriately teach the new Ethics and Religious Culture program" (p.7)? She wondered if the cultural norms of Quebec's society and, in turn, Quebec's pre-service teachers would "impede the successful implementation of the program that relies so heavily on teachers’ comprehension and adherence to the professional stance" (p. 7). Knott's research outlines the experiences she had as an Ethic, Religious and Cultures
Program university lecturer teaching pre-service teachers. Her observations show that pre-service teachers do struggle when trying to separate themselves from the dialogue. Many pre-service teachers insisted on telling their students their religion claiming “they were part of the class and they needed to model acceptance so why their own religious beliefs shouldn’t be accepted” (p. 82). Knott describes other accounts of teachers and pre-service teachers missing the nail on the head when it came to the ERC’s professional stance, but also showed relief that at times, true reflection and dialogue occurred, breaking down the invisibility of cultural norms and privileges. She concluded by saying “[m]ore training is needed if we are asking teachers to leave behind what they know, what they are comfortable with. Teachers must acknowledge the existence of privilege and the falseness of meritocracy. They need to see the need for change” (p. 81).

To further argue that teachers and pre-service teachers struggle with neutral impartiality, I offer two personal stories. When I worked as a teacher’s assistant, I had the opportunity to lecture a few ERC courses for pre-service teachers. When discussing the ERC’s professional stance and how the teacher should not allow their own personal views be known, the majority of the students disagreed. Most argued that since the program preached acceptance, they should model the students on how to act as a proud Jewish or Catholic person. My reaction to this was similar to Knott’s, in that, I hoped it was “[p]erhaps their youth led them to identify with their students, their desire to be their friends or the fact that they had always been members prevented them from understanding the power they had over their students and the stance prescribed by the program” (p. 82). The second story comes from another group of university students that I had the privilege of being their Teachers Assistant. I felt that this group understood their professional stance better,
but I noticed a reoccurrence when students were developing their LES’s (Learning and Evaluation Situation): the students would choose their own faith (Christianity) as the starting point of the LES and then branch out to the “others” as the lessons continued. The vocabulary used in the LES would also strengthen the sense of othering towards different religions. It was as if the students saw religions outside of their own as exotic. Considering my own lived experiences, I must agree with Knott (2011) and Zaver (2016): the professional stance the ERC program lays out is not easily achieved. This is why I worry Christian privilege will enter the ERC classroom.

If teachers struggle with the professional stance of neutral impartiality, I argue that, unconsciously or not, the Christian culture will take an extra strong leading role in the school and classroom, ruining dialogue and uniquely hurting atheists. Simpson (2008), a researcher on Christian privilege and public education believes that;

> schools, while portrayed as secular institutions are, in actuality, far too generous to the dominance of the Christian faith, often at the expense of religious minorities and non-believers. Schools are not “godless” institutions, but more to the contrary – schools are wholly filled with religion, albeit just one religion, generally speaking, the Christian religion. (p. 2)

> Without reflection, it is difficult to acknowledge one’s own privilege when living inside the dominant culture, making it hard to know when an action or wording of a sentence could actually be marginalizing others. The first problem I can foresee is how dialogue could be broken due to the vocabulary used by teachers. Knott (2011) described that her students from diverse backgrounds in her university class stayed silent during discussions and I believe the same would occur in an elementary or high school setting. If a teacher reveals themselves as part of the dominant culture and uses the term “we” when speaking about culture or religion, consciously or unconsciously, they are marginalizing the
worldviews and practices of students who are not part of the mainstream culture (2011). In similarity to the rest of Quebec’s Education Plan (QEP) the ERC’s program follows three key competencies: reflects on ethical questions, demonstrates an understanding of the phenomenon of religion, and engages in dialogue (Ministère de l’Éducation, du Loisir et du Sport, 2008, p. 462). The program uses the third competency, dialogue, to help pull together the other two. If the tone and voice of teachers marginalizes students, consequently, any chance of possible reflective dialogue would be lost. The second problem I can foresee happening has to do with culturally responsive pedagogy and what happens when the culture is invisible. I have personally heard and read in the past that an explanation some teachers use, be it well intentioned, to try and promote Christian culture is that “all the kids in our school are Christian anyways” or “our school has no diversity”. If teachers were using a culturally responsive pedagogy and a visible minority arrived one day in their school, I would assume they would change their views and actions. But what about the invisible minorities in schools? I understand that colour of the skin does not dictate religion, but I would like to focus on White atheists who may live unwillingly in the shadows of Christian privilege. I am a white male and acknowledge that I have had the luxury of living with Male and White privilege, but because of my whiteness, I am regularly assumed Christian. I admit I have used that to my advantage in the past, but when it comes to my children, I do not want them labeled Christian because of their whiteness. I do not want my child singing *Hark! The Herald Angels Sing* at Christmas time or participating in Operation Christmas Child because my child has been lumped in with the excuse “we have no diversity here.” Operation Christmas Child is where school children fill shoeboxes with gifts unknowing that Christian propaganda will later be added (Hayward & Bartlett, 2017).
Although antidotal, there is evidence of this occurring with an atheist parent in Alberta. In
Alberta, legislation created Bill 10 that requires schools to inform parents when a
conversation or event relating to religion occurs.

58.1(1) A board shall provide notice to a parent of a student where courses,
programs of study or instructional materials, or instruction or exercises,
include subject-matter that deals primarily and explicitly with religion or
human sexuality. (Bill 10, 2014, p. 3)

The child came home singing religious hymns and later the parents found out the class was
taken out caroling for Christmas time. The note informing parents was not sent home
because it was assumed everyone in the class was Christian. I am left to wonder if her child
was a visible minority, would the note have been sent home giving the parents the
opportunity to keep their child at home? Overall, I argue that if neutral impartiality is not
sustained because of the difficulties the ERC's professional stance entails, combined with
how “dominant groups have no idea of how their privilege oppresses others” (Johnson,
2006, p. 69), then Christian and White privilege will, consciously or unconsciously,
negatively impact the ERC classroom. Christian privilege is important to consider when
critically analyzing the ERC curriculum because it can give insights on the tones and voices
used; keeping in mind where the written word has spawned (Said, 1984) and who will be
interpreting it.

The Hidden Curriculum

The Hidden Curriculum was first popularized by Jackson (1968) in his ethnography,
Life in Classrooms. He saw the Hidden Curriculum as the structure of schools training
students “to acquiesce to the norms and expectations of school so that they can be ‘good
workers [in the] factory or office’” (Previna, 2011, p. 8). In Jackson's (1990) own words:
As he learns to live in school our student learns to subjugate his own desires to the will of the teacher and to subdue his own actions in the interest of the common good. He learns to be passive and to acquiesce to the network of rules, regulations and routines in which he is embedded. He learns to tolerate petty frustrations and accept the plans and policies on higher authorities even when their rational is unexplained and their meaning unclear. Like the inhabitants of most other institutions, he learns to shrug and say, "that's the way the ball bounces." (p. 36-37)

Later, theorists such as Vallance (1973), Apple (1981), and more recently Giroux (2006) saw the Hidden Curriculum playing a vital role in sustaining the divisions of social classes within capitalist societies. Previna (2011) summarizes it as schools being "agents of the capitalist system, and the Hidden Curriculum is the mechanism through which schools are able to maintain the current unequal distribution of power, resources, wealth, authority, and privilege across social groups" (p. 9). Apple (1982) warned that the problem with our society was "the way in which systems of domination and exploitation persist and reproduce themselves without being consciously recognized by the people involved" (p. 13). If teachers and students don't critically observe the structures they are part of, then the Hidden Curriculum will continue to reproduce social, cultural, and institutional norms.

John Gatto (1992) takes a grim look at the education system and describes it as a "twelve-year jail sentence where bad habits are the only curriculum truly learned" (p. 19). Through hidden lessons, he believes the structure of schools has been built to producing conformist invalids rather than unique leaders. In Gatto's own words: "[t]his was once a land where every sane person knew how to build a shelter, grow food, and entertain one another. Now we have been rendered permanent children. It's the architects of forced schooling who are responsible for that (1992, p. 100). An example Gatto (1992) uses on how the Hidden Curriculum cripples our children is the bell:
Indeed, the lesson of bells is that no work is worth finishing, so why care too deeply about anything? Years of bells will condition all but the strongest to a world that can no longer offer important work to do. Bells are the secret logic of school time; their logic is inexorable. Bells destroy the past and future, rendering every interval the same as any other, as the abstraction of a map renders every living mountain and river the same, even though they are not. (p. 6)

Gatto (1992) reflects that most of what he taught during his thirty year teaching tenure was actually the Hidden Curriculum. Although as a certified and practicing teacher I admit this is a hard “truth” to accept, what I take from Gatto’s (2009) writings and add to my own lens is his reminder of “what our schools really are: laboratories of experimentation on young minds, drill centers for the habits and attitudes that corporate society demands” (p. xxii).

To relate the Hidden Curriculum to this research and the curriculum analysis it entails, I must follow Apple’s (1993) advice and not think of curriculum as a “thing,” with a possible technical problem, but as a continual process of environmental design. It is important for me, as the researcher, to remember that curriculum is of a political nature and not just a neutral method (Apple, 1995) because when people stop “asking questions about the political nature of curriculum, the social and political norms and values implicitly taught through various forms [become] more hidden” (Foot, 2017. P. 20).

The Null Curriculum

Elliot Eisner (1985) describes schools as teaching three sorts of curriculum: the explicit, the implicit, and the null. The explicit is what schools consciously choose to teach their students. This curriculum is regularly known by parents and children and includes core courses such as mathematics, language arts, physical education and art. The implicit
curriculum is what the students learn, not through formal lessons, but through the values and environment of the school itself. Eisner (1985) describes:

the implicit curriculum of the school is what it teaches because of the kind of place it is. And the school is that kind of place through the ancillary consequences of various approaches to teaching, by the kind of reward system that it uses, by the organizational structure it employs to sustain its existence, by the physical characteristics of the school plant, and by the furniture it uses and the surroundings it creates. (p. 97)

The Null Curriculum is the lessons and subjects that are avoided or absent in the student's education plans. Although it is true that curriculums cannot teach everything, Apple (1993) understood that curriculums are of a political nature and should be analyzed as such. Eisner (1985) argued that “the options students are not afforded, the perspectives they may never know about, much less be able to use, the concepts and skills that are not part of their intellectual repertoire” (p.107) are as important as the explicit lessons taught:

I argue this position because ignorance is not simply a neutral void; it has important effects on the kinds of options one is able to consider, the alternatives one can examine, and the perspectives from which one can view a situation or problem. (p. 97)

Eisner broke down the null curriculum into two dimensions: intellectual processes and subject matter. In short, Eisner believed schools were biased towards different intellectual processes such as visual, auditory, metaphoric, and synesthetic modes of thought (1985). In relation to content, curriculums could see “the exclusion of entire disciplines to the omission of particular bits of information” (Flinders, Noddings, & Thornton, 1986, p. 35). I argue that it is the omission of bits of information that may be the most impactful on young minds. If a biology class omits evolution or a world religions course leaves out atheism, then students lose an entire perspective. Since children are subconsciously trained through the Hidden Curriculum not to question the teacher as an authority figure (Apple, 1993), I
believe that students may see the teacher’s explanation as the only “truth”. Flinders, Noddings and Thornton (1986) add another dimension to the Null Curriculum which could possibly explain why atheism may be left out of the ERC program. They added the dimension of affect which considers elements such as values, attitudes, and emotion. Flinders, Noddings and Thornton (1986) explain that “[t]here are, it would seem, certain feelings and degrees of feeling that we do not want to induce in classrooms. Hence our desire to nullify various feelings guides the selection of content” (p. 36). The stigma surrounding atheism may be enough for it to fall into the Null Curriculum because of the negative emotions and feelings it may bring up with students, teachers, and parents.

Flinders, Noddings and Thornton (1986) warn about using the Null Curriculum as a research concept because of its trivial status. They explain that if a person held the explicit curriculum in one hand and the null in the other, Eisner and others would then argue the real null now represents what is missing from both lists (1986). The advantages of analyzing the Null Curriculum comes from first:

assure[ing] a thorough and deliberative consideration of relevant alternatives for content selection. Second, it encourages us to reexamine goals and selection criteria in light of content. And finally, the null curriculum may be useful in bringing into sharp focus our knowledge of implementation possibilities. (Flinders, Noddings, & Thornton, 1986, p. 40)

Along with these recommendations, I will also critically consider “education’s relationship to economic, political, and cultural power[s]” (Apple, 2004, p. vii) when analyzing what the ERC program has left in the null. Knowing that critical theory argues that everything in text that is hidden, repressed or displaced is not done by accident (Sim & Van, 2009), the goal is to create links between the cultural influences that spawned the ERC program and what has, consciously or unconsciously, been left out.
Self in Relation to the Research Topic

Having grown up in a very white, rural area of Quebec, my exposure to other cultures and faiths was very limited. For much of my childhood, I lived happily in my homogeneous bubble, not knowing the outside world of my small region of Quebec. The passion I developed for expanding my knowledge about the world only developed in my later High School years. This passion expanded into University where I started to explore information more critically, asking questions about who the author was, and what underlining goals there may be. Knowing the importance of divulging any biases an author may have towards their own research, this section will explore my own personal experiences towards the research topic, helping the reader come to their own critical conclusions.

I would not describe my upbringing or family as religious, even though I attended Sunday school for a few years, went to church on Christmas Eve, and celebrated Easter. God or religion was never mentioned in my household. In fact, the only memory I have of my family acknowledging God was my mother telling me people go to heaven when they die. The most consistent connection I had with church was that my best friend mother would take us to Sunday school anytime I spent the weekend with them. If memory serves me correctly my friend and I would plan ahead so we would end up at my place on Sunday mornings to be able to skip church. At the time I had no idea of what religion was. My knowledge of Christianity was limited to the cultural norms that I grew up in: Christmas, Easter, and Sunday school. The only brief memories I have of other faiths in Elementary school was having a Jewish elementary teacher who showed us a dreidel and taught us
songs, but I did not clue into that being another religion or worldview. In my view, Christianity was just the “normal” that surrounded me.

After High school, religion became more of a fascination to me than anything. I loved reading about it, discussing it, and on occasion, joining in on an argument. For a while, many of my romantic relationships involved partners who came from very religious backgrounds. Even though we did not agree on each other's world-views, we bonded on the passion of wanting to know more. Other than constantly reading about different faiths around the world, in my quest for religious knowledge I also choose to study with a Jehovah Witness for a year, believing that would be the best way to study the Bible. It was after a year of studies when I was told they would have to stop since I still did not believe in a higher power.

Oblivious at the time, I realize now that I grew up benefiting, and still do, from Peggy McIntosh’s White privilege (1988). I lived in “the company of people of my race most of the time” (p. 1), I was never seen as an outsider, and when I was taught about national heritage or how civilizations developed, I was told “people of my color made it what it is” (p. 2). I also partly benefit from Schlosser’s Christian privilege (2003). Even though I do not self-identify as Christian, many of the cultural traditions I partake in have a Christian background. Because I am white and live in a predominantly Christian area, I am assumed Christian where ever I go. At times, this can be an annoyance, but for the majority of the time, being assumed Christian in a majority Christian area is a privilege. I assume that if I was a visible minority living in this area, I would be viewed as an outsider triggering any stereotypes that may come along with this assumption.
During my undergrad and currently in my professional life, I have always been careful with which circles I acknowledge my atheistic worldviews. I am not sure if my worries are warranted all the time, but I do fear what some of my co-workers, administrators, or professors may think if they knew I was a non-believer. Many times I have felt more comfortable living in the shadows of Christian privilege than being an outing atheist. Being able to hide my own worldview is another privilege that being white gives me.

As a teacher, I have always been a strict supporter of the Quebec’s Education Programs Teachers’ professional stance. Although I agree difficult to uphold, a teacher’s personal views should not influence or be known to the students. I believe this allows all educational subjects, specifically the ERC program, to be taught from a neutral stance. Treating all worldviews with the same level of importance is the greatest service teachers can do to create a safe and welcoming atmosphere for students. I still find religion to be a most fascinating phenomenon. It intrigues me to know that throughout history there have been countless faiths and worldviews, and to each believer, they soul heartedly believe theirs is the true path. To me, this will always be something worth exploring. As this Chapter has explored the different theories which has grounded this research and influenced my thought, the next Chapter will describe the methodologies that were utilized in order to answer this Thesis’ main question: what kind of space does Quebec’s secular “Ethics and Religious Culture” (ERC) program create for atheism as a legitimate worldview?
Chapter 3 – Methodology

Perhaps the greatest of all pedagogical fallacies is the notion that a person learns only the particular thing he is studying at the time. (Dewey, 1938, p. 48)

The focus of this research is an in-depth critical analysis of Quebec’s Ethics and Religious Cultures Program. In particular, the curriculum will be explored to see whether atheism has been allotted meaningful time to be represented as a legitimate worldview. Although it is difficult to quantify the specific amount of time atheism should be given within the classroom, this research will use the world’s and Quebec’s non-believing population percentage as a rough guideline when comparing the program’s time allocation of different beliefs. When examining the curriculum, the research will be broken down into two steps: step one will be locating all instances where atheism is mentioned. In the case the word atheism is not regularly used, words associated with atheism such as agnosticism, humanism, sceptics, freethinkers, and non-believers will also be considered. Step two will be to analyze the text referencing atheism for tone, structure, and meaning. Sim and Van (2009) explain that nothing is accidental in text and “every indication of what is hidden, repressed or displaced in its structure can be traced back to the ‘textual unconscious’” (p. 62). If it is discovered that atheism is rarely seen in the program, if at all, then it becomes part of Eisner’s (1979) Null Curriculum, where by leaving out information, students are limited in the different approaches to a problem. The question of why it may be left out is further discussed in later Chapters.
When it comes to education about religion and different worldviews, Ralph Thompson (1975) sees today’s curriculum creators and educational philosophers struggling with the same problems Aristotle spoke about in *Politics*:

For at present there is a dispute about its proper tasks: not everyone assumes that the young must learn the same things with a view to virtue or the best life, nor is it clear whether it is more appropriate for education to be addressed to the mind or to the character of the soul... And there is no agreement about what contributes to virtue; for to begin with, not everyone esteems the same virtue, and so it is to be expected that they also disagree about the training for it. (Aristotle & Kruat, 1997, p. 36)

Aristotle makes reference to the difficulties in teaching about virtues when not everyone agrees on which set of morals to live by or how to teach them. Curriculum creators must make hard decisions on what knowledge is prioritized (Thompson, 1975) and the ERC program makes it clear that “Catholicism and Protestantism [are] especially highlighted” (Ministère de l'Éducation, du Loisir et du Sport, 2008, p. 296). Although the program made the decision to prioritize Quebec’s heritage, Thompson (1975) explains that to properly critically analyze a curriculum, one must look at four different validities: psychological, social, philosophical, and subject. These four factors will be taken into consideration when critically analyzing of the ERC curriculum. Thompson’s (1975) psychological validity asks if the curriculum “properly account[s] for human growth and development, learning, individual differences, [and] motivation” (p. 248). Social validity explores if the curriculum takes into account the particular society in which the program was created for. Curriculums must be examined with the consideration of social realities to properly modify content and practices (1975). Philosophical validity ensures that the main purpose of the program remains consistent throughout, leading to “a reasonable conception of the good life” (p. 249). Thompson explains that the success of a society is best measured through
individual happiness and to achieve this schooling must see its purpose, content, and means as a constant triangulation (1975). Finally, subject validity looks at whether or not the program does everything it can to promote “truth”. Thompson wants children to be able to find “...truth in abstract categories of the disciplines” (p. 250). Using Thompson’s four curriculum validities in the curriculum analysis will give a strong understanding of how well the program has been structured. To build on Thompson’s validities, the next section will explore four different curriculum lenses that will influence the research.

When analyzing curriculum, Reid (1992) organizes curriculum theorists into four groups: systematizers, radicals, existentialists and deliberators.

The systematizers view curriculum as a plan or blueprint for activity. The radicals resist curriculum because they see it as a cultural reproduction where certain groups appear to have hegemonic control over what is and is not included. Existentialists view curriculum as a personal experience. They are resistant to curriculum as an institution because they believe in the intensely personal aspect of the nature of education. The deliberators see curriculum as a practical art. They are interested in the social aspect of curriculum and focus on discovering curricular problems, deliberating them, and inventing solutions. (Jones, 2007, p. 65)

For the purpose of this research, each theorist lens will have its own influence on how the curriculum is analyzed. The systematizer’s lens takes the curriculum at face value (Reid 1992). Through my undergrad and now teaching career, professors and administrators have encouraged teachers to see Quebec’s Education Plan (QEP) as the blueprint to all teaching. Personally, I have heard teachers request that both the QEP and ERC programs be more specific in what has to be taught. This has been because some teachers do not feel comfortable teaching about different religions and worldviews and would like something very concrete to follow. The curriculum needs to be viewed through the lens of a
systemizer because teachers may limit their teaching to only what each of the program’s blueprint specifically dictates.

The radical’s lens may be this research’s most important lens. As previously mentioned, everything in text that is either written or left out is not accidental (Sim & Van, 2009). The radical lens considers the culture which wrote it and then examines if that culture has taken any liberties on how it was created. Said (1984) also emphasizes the importance of analyzing text within the context it was written. In this case, Quebec and Canada have historically had concerns and difficulties separating religion, morals, and education from one another (Higgins, 2011; Bérard, 1984). Said (1984) suggests that to properly criticize the written word, the reader must acknowledge the historical, political and social construct in which the words have been produced.

The existentialist lens is taken into consideration not only for the personal impacts of students and parents, but teachers also (Reid 1992). If teachers have a difficult time upholding their professional stance, which both Knott (2011) and Zaver (2016) warn of, then the curriculum may be interpreted differently. Curriculum is influenced by political, cultural and personal concerns (Apple, 1993) and how the worldview is brought into the classroom could depend on its public perception.

Finally the ERC curriculum will be explored through the deliberators lens. If problems do appear in the program, focus must be given to finding solutions. As the three prior lenses act as guides to the curriculum analysis, the deliberator is there to think past the problems and explore how to solve them (Reid, 1992).
Curriculum analysis has been used to better education for the individual and has also helped evolve teaching from a teacher centered approach to a learner centered one (Jeane & Roza, 2014). Reid (1992) explains that “[f]or ideas to have influence, they have to capture public support” (p. 75). He believes that describing curriculum as an institution serving the public is the best way to get public support, and in turn create policy and curricular changes (1992). The best recent example of this is how public pressure has forced the Quebec’s Ministry of Education to reexamine its new History curriculum. This change came after analysis showed that the program mostly ignored indigenous peoples, and vilified the English (Wilton, 2017). With the initial program painting a biased picture of Quebec’s history and forgetting two important contributors to its development, I argue it failed Thompson’s (1975) psychological, social, and subject validity tests. In the recommendations section of Chapter Eight I will use Reid’s advice of treating curriculum as a public service to hopefully find a way to gain public support for any needed changes this research may find.

To help follow Ried’s (1992) four curriculum lenses and Said’s (1984) suggestion on how to analyze text, the second focus of this research is an in depth literature review of the creation of the ERC program, the different interpretations of secularism, atheist prejudice, and the secularization of Canada’s public schools. Chapters four, five, and six help structure the context in which the ERC program was founded by looking at the pertinent literature from both academic sources and media outlets. This research takes a particular interest in the subtext surrounding atheism because of the stigma and marginalization that historically surrounds both the word and worldview (Nash, 2003; Jacoby, 2005; Edgell, Gerteis, & Hartmann, 2006; Jones, 2007; Goodman & Mueller, 2009; Magee, 2011). The
importance of this literature review is to understand the world in which the ERC program has been written, theorizing reasoning towards possible textual unconsciousness in the program.

A limitation of the methodologies is that it relies on teachers following Quebec's curriculum and policies. In a study by Donald Delso (1993), veteran teachers indicated that good teaching practices include adjusting lessons to the needs and interests of their students, compared to average teachers who only teach the subject material. If atheism is not part of the official curriculum and a good teacher sees that it relates to their students, then they may include it. However, if the students have a teacher who strictly follows the curriculum and textbooks chapter by chapter, then knowledge on atheism will be lost if allotted curriculum does not explicitly make its inclusion. If atheism is found to be included in the curriculum, there are still two limitations that can be foreseen. The first is anecdotal, and this concern comes from personal experience and conversations with colleagues. Many seem to believe the ERC course is just a filler in the teacher’s schedule and is regularly ignored if teachers need to catch up in other subjects. The second comes from the literature and notes that teachers may struggle with pedagogical neutrality in the ERC program (Zaver, 2016). Nel Noddings (1993) agreed that education about religion was “central to education” (p. xiii), though she also stressed that for teachers to succeed, they must be “willing to engage in continuous inquiry, and... are committed to pedagogical neutrality” (p. 139). They must present all significant sides of an issue in their full passion and best reasoning” but “avoid claiming any one perspective as true” (p. 122). Zaver (2016) sees the neutral stance teachers are asked to take “difficult to translate into the classroom” because “(n)eutrality is seen to infringe on a teacher’s sense of autonomy and authenticity” (p. 39).
If teachers have a prejudice towards atheism and struggle with professional neutrality, then it would be difficult to confirm if it was being included in the classroom, be it written or not, in the curriculum. This research will try and limit the shortcomings of the methodology by continuing to stay up to date on recent academic and media sources, continuing to create a clear understanding of the perceptions of the ERC program from parents, teachers, and students.
Chapter 4 – The Secular Paradox

As for secularism, which everyone proclaims or demands, it proves to be highly controversial as soon as an attempt is made to clarify the terms of the desired system. (Bouchard & Taylor, 2008, p. 25)

Secularism is a concept that seems to build in sophistication the further it is explored. Throughout the process of my own research, I have found that the complexity of the word evolved to the point where it began to contradict the meaning that I identified with as a Quebecher. Jacques Berlinerblau (2012), author of How to be Secular, outlines:

[s]ecularism [as] a political philosophy concerned with the best way to govern complex religiously pluralistic societies. It aims to strike an extraordinary delicate balance. On the one hand, it wishes to ensure the existence of a stable social order free of religiously themed strife. On the other, it aspires to guarantee citizens as much religious freedom and freedom to be nonreligious as possible. (p. 5)

I infer that Bouchard and Taylor (2008) would agree with Berlinerblau’s definition as they describe Quebec’s “open” form of secularism as a neutral balance between all faiths with the “fundamental... objective of respect for moral equality and freedom of conscience” (p. 141). The definition Bouchard and Taylor (2008) prescribe is the definition I personally always held of the word. It was while examining the Ethics and Religious Cultures program that I became unsure of my own interpretation of the word. Chapter Seven will further examine this, but there seemed to be multiple distinct contrasts between religious and secular thought in the program. This led me to believe that the program may have been implying that “secular” meant non-belief even though Bouchard and Taylor’s (2008) description of secular allows both believers and non-believers to go under Quebec’s open secular umbrella. With further exploration of the word, I quickly realized that this can drastically change depending on what part of the world was focused on. In his book The
Necessity of Secularism, Ronald Lindsay (2014) describes how “secularism has become the ultimate scare word” when people do not give a clear definition of what it means (p. 17). To help understand the different interpretations of the word secular and how each definition has the ability to change popular opinion, this Chapter will explore four different forms of secularism that commonly appeared when researching the word: assertive (hard), passive (soft), forced, and open. Also, at the end of the Chapter, I will infer which definition of the word the ERC program uses and what effects it may have on treating atheism as a legitimate world-view.

Assertive Secularism

The first two approaches of secularisms that will be explored are described as opposites by Ahmet Kuru (2007). Kuru uses the example of France and the United States to help represent the differences between assertive (hard) and passive (soft) secularism. France has taken an assertive (hard) approach to secularism which is often referred to as “laïcité”. With regards to secularism, France embraces itself towards science, reason, state neutrality in regards to religion and “excludes everything that relates to religion, as well as all other particularities, from public life” (Ozcan, 2015, p. 6). France ignores religious, ethnic, and cultural differences and takes pride in everyone being French (Joppke, 2009). However, I must add that some intellectuals, such as Professor of Anthropology Mayanthi Fernando, believe that these rules have historically privilege Christianity over all other faiths (2015). The French government plays an active role in trying to suppress public signs of religious expression into the private sphere in the hopes of a more unified society (Kuru, 2007). All French citizens are granted health, education and social benefits regardless of
their legal status, but “this equality is based on the laic tradition, which enforces strict separation of religion and public life. In other words, one has to conform to this rule in order to benefit from the promised equality” (Ozcan, 2015, p. 9). France has gone as far as banning any visible signs of religion in public schools, including head scarves, the Jewish kippah, and large Christian crosses. In more recent years, France has gone further in limiting public signs of religious expression by putting bans on the niqab and burkini swimwear (Weaver, 2018). There have been a number of attempts to implement laws such as these in Quebec society, but until recently, they have been denied due to a lack of importance to the population or being overturned once brought to the higher courts. Previous Premier, Pauline Marois, proposed the Quebec Charter of Values which would have taken Quebec a step closer to France’s “laïcité” (Flanagin, 2014). The Parti Québécois at the time loosely interpreted Bouchard and Taylor’s (2008) recommendation of prohibiting “magistrates and Crown prosecutors, police officers, prison guards and the president and vice-president of the National Assembly” from wearing religious symbols, to include all public service workers (p. 260). The Bill was largely debated in the provincial election and ended up being one of the reasons behind the Parti Québécois’s loss of power, in 2014 (Patriquin, 2014). In a poll done by L’Actualité, adopting Quebec’s Charter of Values ranked tenth out of eleven options when Quebecers were asked to rank options in order of importance to their lives (Ravary, 2013). Quebec’s Charter of Values Bill died with the Parti Québécois losing the election, but the idea of a more assertive secularism still resonates strong within Quebec politics, most recently with Bill 62. This Bills goal was to ban the wearing of the niqab or burka while receiving municipal services, such as public bus rides, borrowing a book at public libraries, interacting with staff in hospitals, attending
public higher education or picking up children at a public daycares (Steuter-Martin, 2017). The Bill passed legislation with a vote of 66-51 with all opposition parties voting against the Bill, arguing that the ban was not strict enough (Canadian Press, 2018). Both Parti Québécois (PQ) and Coalition Avenir Québec (CAQ) continue to reference, I argue misguidedly, Bouchard and Taylor’s recommendations as proof Quebec needs stronger assertive secular laws. After the Quebec Mosque shootings Charles Taylor spoke out against his original recommendation that people in highly powerful positions be barred from wearing religious symbols. He said the “distinction between officials with coercive power and other public employees was lost in subsequent debates, including the Charter of Values controversy” (Scott, 2018, para. 19). Taylor now sees Bill 62 and the restriction of minority rights as fueling islamophobia instead of fixing it, making reference to how both the anti-burkini campaign in France and Brexit in Britain saw an increase in incidents towards religious minorities (Scott, 2018). Since Bill 62 passed, the Supreme Court has suspended the law twice because of constitutional conflicts. Even though Quebec political parties are fighting for a more assertive secularism, I argue that, other than the misinterpretations of the 2008 report, this is not the open secularism Bouchard and Taylor (2008) described of Quebec.

Passive Secularism

Passive or soft secularism is how Kuru (2007) describes secularism in the United States. Whereas the French Constitution directly states secularism as its official ideology, the United States’ First Amendment reads “Congress shall make no law respecting an
establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof” (U.S. Const. Art. I). Dr. Danielle Haque (2014) describes U.S. secularism:

not simply the absence of religion from the public sphere, but is underwritten by a particularly U.S. Protestant conception of religion that has historically shaped assumptions about what it means to be both religious and secular in the United States. (p. ii)

The United States does limit the appearance of certain religions in its government's sphere, but takes a much more visible leniency when it comes to the Christian faith.

“In God We Trust” appears on all American currency. Many official oaths, including the swearing-in of the President, customarily contain the statement “so help me God” and are often made by placing the left hand on a Bible. Sessions of the U.S. Congress begin with a prayer by a chaplain, and the sessions of the Supreme Court start with the invocation: “God save the United States and this Honorable Court.” (Kuru, 2007, p. 571)

Historically, from the 18th till the late 19th century, secularism in the United States was “perceived as state neutrality towards all Protestant denominations” (p. 91). It was the influx of the Catholic population that prompted the Protestants ruling class to enforce the principle of church-state separation (Hamilton, 1995). Protestants planned on assimilating the Catholics through the school system (Apple, 2004), but as the Catholics started opening new schools, James Blaine proposed a constitutional amendment to disallow funding of religious schools. Although rejected by the Senate, thirty-seven states adopted this policy (Kuru, 2006). Later, when the Mormon religion was gaining power, the Courts took a much more Christian tone when arguing laws. The Court described polygamy as “contrary to the spirit of Christianity, and of the civilization which Christianity has produced in the western world” (Mormon Church v. United States, 136 U.S. 1, 1890). The Supreme Court also referred to the Bible “as a divine revelation” and asked “[w]here can the purest principles of morality be learned so clearly or so perfectly as from the New Testament?” (Vidal v.
Girard’s Executors, 1844). This Protestant hegemony peaked with the Courts declaring the United States as a “Christian Nation” in 1892 (Holy Trinity Church v. U.S., 143 U.S. 457, 1892). The dominance of Protestant rule started to dismantle itself early in the 20th century with three groups contending for power. The first group was the combined force of the Jewish and Catholic religious minorities, the second was social and natural scientists who embraced secularization theory, and the third was professionals such as “professors, teachers, journalists, writers, artists, and businesspeople, who regarded Protestant principles and prohibitions, including Victorian moralism and censorship, as a barrier to their professionalism and social mobility” (Kuru, 2006, p. 99). These groups succeeded in pulling apart the Protestant establishment by secularizing all three levels of education and “lobbying for the appointment of liberal justices” (p. 99). The Scopes Trial of 1925 is a strong example of the changing mindsets of American secular society. On July 10th 1925, John T. Scopes was placed on trial for violating Tennessee's Butler Act. This Act was presented by John Butler who saw Darwin's Origin of Species as dangerous and explained "[t]he teaching of this theory of evolution breaks the hearts of fathers and mothers who give their children the advantages of higher education in which they lose their respect for Christianity and become infidels" (Bernado, 1990, p. 29). The Butler’s Act banned the teaching of evolution in the State of Tennessee. John T. Scopes was placed on trial for teaching this theory, but the trial evolved to become a debate between the sciences and God, with the defense attorney proclaiming “I defy anybody to believe that this is not a religious question” (Kari, 2012, p. 57). The trial became a media frenzy with it being the first trial to have live radio updates and coverage by hundreds of journalists (Smith, 2010),
many frequently ridiculing the antievolution supporters (Bernado, 1990). Edward Kari (2012) described the trial best as:

Far less a conventional legal proceeding than a religious event, the Scopes Trial truly served as a cultural turning point for Fundamentalism and the antievolution movement, purposely placing well known public figures against each other in an epic fight over the role of the Bible in modern American life. It was a battle between Genesis and Darwin, and it would subsequently set the tone for all future arguments of its kind. (p. 57-58)

In the end, Scopes was found guilty of teaching the Theory of Evolution and the Butler Act continued to be enforced until 1967, but the conversation of the wall between Church and State and the fundamentalist powers had deepened. Secularism in the United States had transformed from neutrality towards only Protestant denominations to neutrality towards all monotheist religions (Kuru, 2006). Although it has been argued that this does not include Islam due to recent policies under President Trump’s administration (Zurcher, 2017). The United States’ form of passive secularism on paper adheres to the separation of Church and State and does not force the absences of religion from the public domain, much like France. However, it is not hard to notice the underlining pressures religion has on its public discourse and policy decisions. An example of this is Attorney General Jeff Sessions quoting the Bible to justify a policy that abused immigrants (Joseph, 2018). Sessions stated, “I would cite you to the Apostle Paul and his clear and wise command in Romans 13, to obey the laws of the government because God has ordained them for the purpose of order” (Sessions, 2018). What I personally find more shocking, and is a recent example of the United States’ passive secularism having religious undertones, is instead of arguments being made of Church and State separation, reporters questioned White House press secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders on “where in the Bible it says ‘that it’s moral to take
children away from their mothers?” to which Sanders replied “It is biblical to enforce the law” (Joseph, 2018, para. 12).

**Forced Secularism**

Forced secularism is exactly how it sounds. The government creates laws and policies which threatens any form of public or private belief. Soviet Russia and the Communist Party of China are both prime examples of this forced secularism (Yang, 2004; Froese, 2003). This is also where the misconception that atheism equals communism comes from. As Froese (2003) explains, the “Secularization Experiment conducted by communist regimes in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe was initially inspired by the anti-religious theories of Karl Marx” (p. 2). Vladimir Lenin was greatly influenced by Karl Marx’s anti-religious philosophy, but took it to an extreme. Lenin would often quote Marx’s words that religion “is the Opium of the people”, but he may have misunderstood exactly what Marx was implying (McGowan, 2013). The full quote was “Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people” (Marx, 1843. para. 3). Since opium was frequently used as medicine at the time, it is argued that Marx believed that as long as there was human suffering, people would need religion: “his call wasn’t to strip people of their medicine; rather, to end the suffering that made that medicine necessary in the first place” (McGowan, 2013, p. 123). Either way, Lenin took an extremely strong negative stance on religion, writing:

> Every religious idea, every idea of God, even flirting with the idea of God, is unutterable vileness... vileness of the most dangerous kind, 'contagion' of the most abominable kind. Millions of sins, filthy deeds, acts of violence and physical contagions... are far less dangerous than the subtle, spiritual idea of
a God decked out in the smartest ‘ideological’ costumes... Every defense or justification of the idea of God, even the most refined, the best intentioned, is a justification of reaction. (Conquest, 1968, p. 7)

The Soviet Union’s war on religion and forced atheism saw the destruction of churches, mosques, temples and the execution of over 1-200 religious leaders. School children were also bombarded with anti-religious propaganda, while at the same time being taught “atheist rituals, proselytizers, and a promise of worldly salvation” (Froese, 2004, p. 35).

In 1949, after the Chinese Communist Party took power, atheism became the official doctrine. All religions were now under the vicious rule of militant atheism (Yang, 2004). During the Cultural Revolution, the Communist party embraced the “Four Great Rights” and banished the “Four Olds,” which included Old Customs, Old Culture, Old Habits, and Old Ideas (McGowan, 2013). Any “[r]eligious believers who dared to challenge these policies were mercilessly banished to labor camps, jails, or execution grounds (Yang, 2004, p. 103). Mao Zedong created a paramilitary group called the Red Guards whose role was to spy on schools, villages, parents and teachers, and to hunt down any traces of the “Four Olds”. The Red Guard was responsible for sending Monks, Clergy and others who did not follow the strict new atheistic laws to re-education camps where “[t]housands of people were tortured or killed” (McGowan, 2013, p. 125).

Both Soviet Russia and Communist China have added to the backpack of negative stereotypes that plague atheists. In the United States, during the Cold War era, atheism and secularism became synonymous in an attempt to describe and vilify communist countries. These words still negatively resonate with people in North America and have helped advance the miseducation towards atheists (Nash, 2003). The United States went as far as
adding “In God we Trust” to all their currency and the phrase “Under God” to their Pledge of Allegiance to help distance themselves from the evils of a forced secular society (Kuru, 2006). This retaliatory defense to help promote patriotism in the United States has further entrenched the idea that atheism equates to communist evil. Overall, forced secularism is the complete opposite of a strictly theist society and does not leave any place for religion in the public or private sphere, which both passive and assertive secularisms allow for.

Open Secularism

Open secularism is a balance between assertive and passive secularism. Bouchard and Taylor (2008) describe this form of secularism as one that “recognizes the need of the state to be neutral but...also acknowledges the importance for some people of the spiritual dimension of existence” (p. 140). Open secularism goes against the concept of neutrality among all fronts and “claims that neutrality is a principle applying to institutions, not individuals” (Boucher, 2012, p. 126). Religious and non-religious contributions are welcomed and encouraged in the public sphere in an open secular society, but at the same time, it is recognized that “the state must be a secular one in some sense” (Chambers, 2010, p. 17). In public discourse, “[a]ll citizens are encouraged to make their reasons as accessible as possible to fellow citizens, that is, to invite those who disagree to try and see the situation from your point of view” (p. 20).

Contrary to France, Quebec has slowly evolved towards this open sense of secularism. Bouchard and Taylor (2008) describe Quebec’s secularism as one that:

allows citizens to express their religious convictions inasmuch as this expression does not infringe other people’s rights and freedoms. It is an institutional arrangement that is aimed at protecting rights and freedoms
and not, as in France, a constitutional principle and an identity marker to be defended. The neutrality and separation of the State and the Church are not perceived as ends in themselves but as a means to attain a fundamental twofold objective of respect for moral equality and freedom of conscience. (p. 141)

Quebec’s open secularism embraces and accommodates difference (Donkers, 2014). It puts its emphasis on the “moral ends of secularism, namely freedom of conscience and equality, over the operational principles of secularism, namely separation of church and state and neutrality” (Boucher, 2012, p. 129). Bouchard and Taylor (2008) also point out the importance of combining open secularism with inter-culturalism within Quebec society. Although inter-culturalism has never been officially defined by Quebec, Bouchard and Taylor (2008) recommend that an official document be created to “serve as a frame of reference for the elaboration of policies and programs and would guarantee greater continuity in the government’s approach” (p. 129). Quebec’s dominant French culture has always been leery towards multiculturalism but “Inter-culturalism on the other hand, is a notion that distinguishes between the host culture that deserves protection and the incoming cultures that deserve respect” (Donkers, 2014, p. 25).

Looking at these four interpretations of secularism, it is easy to understand the “wide varieties of secular expression” (Baker & Smith, 2015, p. 8). Kuru (2007) describes each country evolving its own interpretation of the word depending on its own world history and this has created confusion. A paradox is when “a statement or situation that may be true but seems impossible or difficult to understand because it contains two opposite facts or characteristics” (Cambridge Dictionary, 2018). From researching secularism around the world, it seems to me it could have multiple truths. It can mean that a country allows religion in the private sphere, but refuses to let religion into politics or the
public realm. It can mean a country allows certain dominant religions in both the public and private realm and even allows it to influence government policy. It can mean the complete absence of religion and the threat of death to anyone who practices it. And finally, it could also represent a utopia where all religions are seen as equals in public and private spaces and policy is made with the considerations of how each religion will be affected.

When looking at the Ethics and Religious Cultures program, I acknowledge it was supposed to have been written based on an open secularism lens (Donkers, 2014), but I am not confident it achieves this objective. In the official ERC document, the religious and the secular are regularly written about separately, as if they were opposites. On page two of the Secondary Edition of the Quebec Education Program, it reads “[t]he program also takes into account secular expressions and representations of the world and of human beings, which seek to define the meaning and value of human experience outside the realm of religious beliefs and affiliation” (Ministère de l’Éducation, du Loisir et du Sport, 2008, p. 2). Being outside of the realm of religious belief and affiliation is not the open secularism Taylor and Bouchard recommended in *Building a Future* (2008). The secular expression Taylor and Bouchard imagine incorporates both believers and non-believers into a worldview that respects and builds a balance between the two. Since the ERC document separates religion and secularism into two distinct forms of thought, it leads me to believe the definition of secular being used is either assertive or forced secularism. This could mistakenly influence teachers to believe secularism and atheism are interlinked and burden secularism with all of atheisms negative baggage. Lindsay (2014) explains that much of the fear towards secularism comes from people associating it with atheism and “further equat[ing] atheism with the suppression of religion” (p. 17). Depending on the teacher’s personal views of
atheism, creating this mistaken link could consciously or unconsciously create negative biases towards teaching the program. Secularism is not an easy term to decipher and in some sense paradoxical, but it is important to grasp which secularism is being used in the ERC program because of the negative impacts it may have with representing atheism as a legitimate worldview. Chapter Seven will further explore which representations of secularism are being used in the program and its direct or indirect effects towards atheism.
Chapter 5 – **Canada’s Struggle for Secular Education**

“One does not simply walk into secularism”

– Doug Cote imitating Boromir late at night while reading for his thesis

I ask the reader to forgive the above quote, paraphrasing Tolkein’s Lord of the Rings character, Baromir, and the popular “one does not simply ...” meme, that typically denotes an insurmountable struggle. The objective of this Chapter is to give a historical look at one of these seemingly insurmountable struggles; that being the one Canada’s education system had when starting to separate itself from its original religious roots to become the non-denominational set of systems we know today. While I explored the entirety of Canada’s secular educational history for this research, due to length restrictions of this Master’s thesis, this Chapter will focus on two adherent struggles that became quite evident in the following provinces: Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island (P.E.I), New Brunswick, Newfoundland, Alberta and Saskatchewan. The first struggle is that the Church fought profusely to keep God as a direct influence in education fearing that without Him, the moral landscape society was built upon would collapse. The second struggle is that, historically, the Church had power over the population and in response to Government’s fear of losing electoral, the Governments appeased to the Church by granting special privileges to the two majority religions of the time: Catholicism and Protestantism. Specifically, this Chapter is a historical look at the above mentioned provinces’ difficulties, in their earliest attempts, in developing secular public education in relation to these two struggles. In the conclusion of this Chapter, I argue that the privileges received in the past have continued to influence and undermine religious freedom, opened secularism and have also helped reaffirm the
belief that non-believers are immoral. I also infer that through Christian Privilege and Shared Reality Theory, the historical struggles Canada incurred have helped sustain the prejudice atheists feel today and is also a reason as to why, I suspect, atheism is not directly included in the ERC program. Each of the provinces introduced below will discuss its earliest educational history right up until its first attempts to become secularized. The focus will be on how the Church fought to keep God in schools due to moral reasoning and how governments granted special privileges to Catholics and Protestants in fear of losing electoral power.

**Nova Scotia**

Prior to the Free Schools Act of 1864, schools were built by different religious denominations, charitable societies and private organizations (Guildford, 1990). With many loyalists settling in Nova Scotia, one of the main purposes of education was to “create a church-state alliance in which ministers and civil magistrates collaborated to preserve intact religious and political orthodoxy” (Xavier, 1957, p. 64). At this time, the Catholic population was growing in Nova Scotia, but most Catholic children were either enrolled in other denominational schools or none at all (1957). It was Bishop Burke who fought and won the right for Catholic schools to be built, and in 1819, opened a Catholic boys school followed by a Catholic girls school. Before his death, in 1820, he was proud to report that he had saved the Catholic children from the Methodist Schools (1957). A year after his death, Catholic schools would be granted the same provincial funding that all other denominational schools were receiving, and by 1856, the Catholic Church commenced its fight to create a separate school system (1957).
The Free School Act of 1864 was the largest legislative change the school system in Nova Scotia had seen. Conservative leader Charles Tupper was a staunch believer in free education through taxation, but even with his majority government, it took three years to truly implement it (Guildford, 1990). Originally, the Free School Act made no mention of funding separate or denomination schools for Protestants or Catholics. Tupper was “firmly opposed to the idea of separate schools but he knew he had to manoeuver carefully around the issue” (Guildford, 1990, p. 130). The newly elected Conservative party was reliant on keeping the Catholic vote to hold power over the Liberals and although Tupper wanted free non-sectarian education, he still had to appease to the Catholics. He did this by guaranteeing that the Council of Public Instruction “would always contain Roman Catholic representatives and, therefore, Catholic interests would be safeguarded” (Xavier, 1990, p. 69). This was enough for the Archbishop Connolly to support the Bill, but now with representation on the Council, he continued to fight for the protection of Catholic schools and in 1865 Connolly “persuaded the government to amend the Free School Act to recognize the right of denominational schools to receive financial support from the government” (Guildford, 1990, p. 135). Therefore, Catholic schools were included in the Free School Act as long as they prescribed to the Council’s course of study and all devotional education would be limited to these guidelines:

It is ordered that in cases where the parents or guardians of children in actual attendance in any public school or department signify in writing to the trustees their conscientious objection to any portion of such devotional exercises as may be conducted therein under the sanction of the trustees, such devotional exercises shall be either so moderated as not to offend the religious feelings of those so objecting, or shall be held immediately after the time fixed for the close of the daily work of the school; and no children whose parents or guardians signify conscientious objection thereto, shall be required to be present during such devotional exercises. It is legal for pupils in a section with only a few departments, which cannot have, therefore, more...
than one series of grades to meet for devotional exercises in another room than the one in which they are registered for the work of the grade, the arrangement for exchange to be co-ordinated by the principal so that there may be no confusion or loss of time. Separate devotional exercises may thus be held simultaneously to suit the desire of different pupils who during the rest of the day will be in their regularly graded classrooms. (Halifax, 1895, pp. 40-84)

Nova Scotia was in a unique position where, by law, there were no separate schools, but at the same time, the different denominations lived mainly in harmony by following these guidelines (Xavier, 1990).

In the late 1800's, much of the Christian population was in dismay at the lack of their children's “familiarity with the Scriptures and frequent calls were made to establish the Bible as a required text” (Bérard, 1984, p. 52). Clergy proclaimed that the decline in their societies' moral character had come from the younger generation's illiteracy of religious tradition (1984). Tupper's original vision for free schools was not to have religious instruction during school hours. Premier Fielding believed the same, but argued that religion should be left out of schools because “teachers were not capable of instructing all denominations in the Scriptures" (p.52). The Education Review Board considered religious teachings if it was in a non-sectarian manner, but it was argued that any reading of the Bible, even without comment, is sectarian teaching (Wilson, Stamp, 1970). Bérard (1984) explains that the Review Board understood the difficulties in choosing which Bible to teach from; if taught from “the Revised Standard Version, it was anti-Catholic; if the Douai Version, it was anti-Protestant. Concentration on the Old Testament discriminated against the Christian, and on the New Testament against the Jew” (p. 53). It was concluded by the Review Board that "[y]ou cannot read the Bible in school without teaching certain opinions about the Bible as held by different sects" (Wilson, Stamp, 1970, p. 105). The Review Board,
in 1887, proclaimed "it is most unjust to brand all schools as godless in which religion is not taught as a subject of instruction" (Education Review 1, 1887, p. 90) because “most 19th-century Nova Scotian educators were determined that, if religion could not be mentioned during school hours, a religious and moral atmosphere should permeate the institution and the teaching conducted” (Bérard, 1984, p. 53). When the Review Board was accused of choosing material gain over the saving of the immortal soul (Education Review 10, 1896), it was the Attorney-General who stepped in reconfirming that religious education could not work in Nova Scotia’s non-sectarian public education system because “the Roman Catholic is not willing that his children should be taught the Westminster Confession, neither is the Presbyterian or Methodist willing that the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception be instilled in his children: the Baptist will protest against infant baptism, and the Episcopalian will object to Church Democracy” (Bérard, 1984, p. 53).

The argument that secular education corrupted morality continued with the Archbishop of Halifax bluntly stating to the Review Board, “if moral training must be religious and if denominations alone can give that, then let us have denominational schools” (Education Review 17, 1903, p. 65). The Review Board argued that public schools were already of the highest morality and to support that:

In Nova Scotia a teacher could not be licensed unless it had been certified by a minister of religion or two Justices of the Peace that: the moral character of said candidate is good, and such as to justify the Council of Public Instruction in assuming that the said candidate will be disposed as a teacher to inculcate by precept and example a respect for religion and the principles of Christian morality, and the highest regard for truth, justice, love of country, loyalty, humanity, benevolence, sobriety, industry, frugality, chastity, temperance, and all other virtues. (Bérard, 1984, p. 56)
To further show the seriousness the Review Board took towards school morality, the Superintendent of Education held the right to retract any teaching license “upon receiving evidence of immoral behavior [of teachers] on or off school grounds” (p. 56).

With the debate over morality and religious education never ending, it was in 1929 that the Review Board finally gave into the religious powers. A provision to the Free School Act was added so the start of each school day would be allotted 15 minutes for religious instructions provided it was the denominations themselves that developed the course (Xavier, 1990). Prior to this law, religious studies had to occur after school hours, but with this new provision, any school could start their day with religious studies. The Catholic schools took this window of opportunity a little further by opening their school earlier allowing for an entire block of religious studies.

The combination of the Church arguing that morality needs a religious base and the Government trying to appease the Church to keep voters forced Nova Scotia to drift from Tuppens’ original non-sectarian public schools. Politically, the arguments for non-sectarian schools stayed constant and the Review Board continued to take steps reassuring that secular schools would be of the highest morality. This did not matter in the end, as it was the misguided fact that morality needs religion and the power the Church had over its voters allowed them to gain privileges over other minorities.

**Prince Edward Island**

Prior to the Prince Edward Island (P.E.I) Free Education Act of 1852, education was unregulated and underfunded. People on the Island in the mid 1800’s could not read or write and “most leases and petitions were signed with an X” (MacDonald, 2011, p. 63).
George Coles, in 1851, made it his first priority as leader of the government, to fix P.E.I.'s education problems. He had a vision of a free non-denominational education system and by 1852, he had drafted the Free Education Act and with that “stated with pride that the colony was ‘the first place in the British dominions, in which a complete system of free education was established’” (p.52). The Act allowed any district to build a non-denominational school. After the school was built, the Government would provide a paid teacher who had been through teacher training and received a teaching certificate. In 1855, there were 179 schools built and by 1880, the total grew to 400 divided into districts each 3 miles apart (MacDonald, 2011).

In these schools, it was not uncommon for students of both major religions, Protestant and Roman Catholic, to be mixed in the same schoolhouse. The Free Education Act (1852) made no mention of Bible reading, but it was universally accepted and practiced that if there were any reading of the Bible in district schools, it would be done with no explanation or sermon attached to it. This was to make sure a Protestant teacher would not be interpreting the Bible for a Catholic student and vice-versa (Macdonald, 2011). John M. Stark, in 1853, was hired as the Provincial School inspector and overseer of the teachers' training school, also known as the Normal School (McKenna, 1971). His Board of Education, “composed of five Protestants and two Roman Catholics, had unanimously decided to exclude the Bible from the list of books for the Normal School” (Robertson, 1976, p. 9), which created hysteria among the Protestant population. They questioned, “[c]ould the Board ban the Bible from the district schools as it had from the Normal School” (p. 9)?

Protestants across the province gathered for what is called the Great Protestant Meeting (Macdonald, 2011). Protestants:
declared that ‘no education national or otherwise can be good . . . from which the word of God is excluded,’ and resolved to petition the coming session of the Legislature for ‘the introduction of the Scriptures into the public schools.’ The draft petition adopted by the meeting not only demanded that the Bible be included in the list of books used in the Normal School and the district schools, but also that it be introduced on the same basis into the Central Academy, a government grammar school which had opened in Charlottetown in 1836. (Robertson, 1976, p. 10)

The Board of Education reiterated their position that the Bible had never been banned from District Schools, most schools recited the Bible daily, and no students were forced to attend any Bible readings if their parents didn’t desire it. Catholic Bishop MacDonald (1856) wrote, “[i]f the friends of education wish our mixed schools to prosper, their wish can only be realized by allowing those schools to be godless, under the present circumstances of the country” (MacDonald to Board of Education, November 7, 1856). This had no effect and at the next Assembly, the official Opposition to the Government demanded the “Bible be given a legal guarantee of its place in the classroom” (Robertson, 1976, p. 12). The oppositions argued points such as for "education to be useful and safe to the people, [it] should be based on the Christian religion," and "secular education without religious instruction does more harm than good" (PEI Assembly Debates, 1857, p 57-58). George Coles, who was still in power, argued that if Protestants got what they wanted, there would be no safe-guards in place to protect against religious indoctrination (Robertson, 1976). Coles, who began to frighten about losing the next election gave up on his non-sectarian agenda of education and authorized Bible readings each school morning (1976). This action was not enough to hold power and Robertson (1978) explained that the “Tories won the election of 1859 largely because of the reaction of militant Protestants to an apparent attempt...to exclude Bible-reading from religiously-mixed public schools” (p. 30). The newly elected conservatives, in a year’s time, introduced the Bible Clause, which read:
The introduction of the Bible, to be read in the Central Academy, and in all the public schools of this Island, of every grade, receiving support from the public Treasury, is hereby authorized, and the Teachers are hereby required to open the school on each school-day, with the reading of the sacred Scriptures by those children whose parents or guardians desire it, without comment, explanation, or remark thereupon by the Teachers; but no children shall be required to attend during such reading aforesaid, unless desired by their parents or guardians. (Robertson, 1976, p. 22)

The Conservatives did not create new denominational schools, but ended up keeping the same rights the Bible and people had prior to all the protests. Also, “the new law did not increase the use of the Bible as a text book throughout the schools of the province” (McGuigan, 1924, p. 109). Even though nothing had really changed, Protestants were split down the middle in their emotions. Some saw it as a win since everything was now written in law (Macdonald, 2011), but many others who pushed for real sermonizing of the Bible were unhappy. Presbyterian Minister J. Allan wrote:

Indeed the fault which I find in our present system is, that nothing more than a godless secular education is contemplated. In a few schools and in a very few only the Bible is read; but no instruction can be given from it, no catechism can be taught, no gospel lesson enforced. The Bible which it is read, is merely regarded as a book of learning for the child to read, the worst use to which the Bible can be applied, because calculated to make it a book of settled aversion to him for the future. (McGuigan, 1924, pp. 109-110)

When the Education Act was planning on being revised in 1868, the controversy over religion in schools resurfaced. At the time, P.E.I. had government funded public schools, and non-government funded Private Catholic and Protestant schools (McGuigan, 1924). It was a Catholic Bishop of Charlottetown who asked the House of Assembly to change the funding laws to help fund their schools (1924). This brought up the discussion of creating separate schools on the Island. Both Catholics and Protestants had their own views on the subject; “Catholics petitioned for separate schools while the Protestants had
petitioned that public money be spent only on the public schools of the Province” (p.145).

The Education committee stated in its report:

As a general rule, the Education imparted in our schools is secular; but, in some few schools throughout Queen's County, sectarian books have for many years back been used with the knowledge of at least some members of the Board of Education. (MaGuigan. 1924, p. 144)

P.E.I. represents a province where to get its free, non-denomination school system, it had to be very careful balancing between not upsetting the Church and creating their envisioned system. Even though the Government acknowledged the Bible was being taught in their schools, they wanted to make sure, on paper, the schools were secular. To continue this balancing act, the final version of the Education Act of 1877 labeled all schools non-sectarian, but the Bible was to be read daily, without sermonizing, by teachers, with the option of students opting out (1924). This is just another example of how Canadian provinces privileged the two majority religions in its initial creation of their so-called secular education system.

**New Brunswick**

In the early 1800's, the provincial government helped fund the creation of elementary and high schools while paying for the teacher salaries. By 1858, the Government was struggling to support public common schools, parish schools and private religious schools, so it decided to start charging fees for attendance. This forced many poor parents to keep their children home because the fees were too high (Provincial Archives of New Brunswick, 2018).
George Edwin King joined legislation with the goal of fixing New Brunswick's education system. His vision was one of a non-sectarian, meaning no relation to a specific religion, universal, publicly funded elementary system (Acheson, 2003). In 1871, the Common School Act was passed which:

meant a number of benefits for the citizens of New Brunswick: education was provided free of charge, new school districts were established, new schools were built and the system for issuing teachers' certificates was improved. The new schools were open to all children, regardless of their mother tongue, religion, gender and - most important of all - their family's economic situation. (Provincial Archives of New Brunswick, 2018, para. 8)

The Act was well intentioned, but quickly faced backlash since it was to replace any denomination schools with public ones, it did not allow the presence of any religious teachings, symbols, pictures, or emblems during school hours and for the first time, members of the religious order had to attend the same teacher training school as everyone else if they wanted to teach. To make things worse, if parents wanted to send their children to private Catholic schools they were to be taxed twice, once for each school (Synder & Lambert, 2006).

The Roman Catholic Church went to Ottawa with claims the new Common School Act (1871) infringed on their rights protected under Section 93 of the BNA Act (British North American Act). It was ruled by the Supreme Court that even though the Catholic schools physically existed prior to joining Confederation, they had no official existence in provincial law, therefore could not be protected under Section 93 (Bushnell, 2014). New Brunswick's Conservative members of parliament went to fellow Conservative Prime Minister Sir John A. Macdonald with the same request, but were turned down because Macdonald did not want to upset the Protestant Orange Order, who opposed separate
schools, and could influence the upcoming election heavily (Synder & Lambert, 2006). The Catholic Church’s next strategy was to try and have funded separate schools created. After much debate, now Premier, George King warned the assembly:

not to yield for the sake of peace, that under the cloak of repeal church endowment was sought. Beware of compromise; accept none. There is no half-way house between religious equality and separate schools. If our privileges are given away today they are given for all time. (King, 1874, p. 122)

As the debate closed, the Catholic Church’s amendment lost by a vote of 24 to 12 in the Assembly (MacNaughton, 1947). After another defeat, many Catholics just stopped paying their taxes to the public system, stating it was unfair to have to pay taxes to a school their children didn’t attend (Synder & Lambert, 2006). On January 27th 1875, the Caraquet Riots occurred after an argument at a school board meeting sparked by Acadians losing their right to vote due to not paying taxes. Police were sent to calm things, but events escalated and two people were killed (Provincial Archives of New Brunswick, 2018). With tensions at a high, Premier King reconsidered looking at a proposal from the Catholic Church and soon made amendments to the Common School Act. The Catholic Church would not get their separate schools or ability to sermonize during school hours, but they did gain the right to use the school premises for Catholic instruction after school hours, members of the religious order could now wear religious clothing, and they did not have to attend teacher training school (Synder Lambert, 2006).

New Brunswick is an example of how power was being taken away from the Church, but in the end, the Church was still granted privileges in the secular system. I would also infer that if Prime Minister MacDonald did not fear losing the Protestant vote, he would have granted the Catholic Church separate school status.
Newfoundland

Before Newfoundland officially created their denominational school system in 1874, schools were regularly divided based on Bible teachings. Historically, the overall political and social view of the area was to match the religion of the students' parents to the school they were attending (MacDonald, 1998). Bruce (1956) explains that in relation to the officially formed denominational schools, “Newfoundland was charting a course for herself different from that taken by her sister colonies in the Maritimes” (p. 82). Where as in prior years, Nova Scotia and New Brunswick were withholding government funds for denominational schools and trying to establish free non-sectarian public schools, Newfoundland was taking the route of trying to fund each different sect with their own school boards (1956). As a sign of dissatisfaction, the Saint-John's Gazette posted an excerpt out of the New Brunswick’s Sackville Post (1984) showing the success and support for non-sectarian public education:

The result is gratifying to those who believe that free non-sectarian schools are best calculated to educate all classes of Society, Irrespective of sect, and elevate the people to a common standard of intelligence. The Wesleyans of England... have resolved that all future legislation for primary education at public cost should provide for such education only upon the principle of unsectarian schools under school boards. (p. 2)

Although there was public and legislative support for non-sectarian public education (Bruce, 1956), the 1874 Bill was introduced and completed the final separation of denominational schools (MacDonald, 1998). These schools were to be public to all students, free to its members, and had to respect the conscience clause, “making it unlawful for teachers to give a child religious instruction to which the parents objected” (p. 38). The dividing of funds would be equally split between the Roman Catholics and Protestants, but the Protestant half of the grant would be spilt again between the different Protestant sects.
(Bruce, 1956). To add to this separation, the Education Act of 1903 allowed for amalgamated schools to be formed which meant small denominational schools, either Catholic or part of a Protestant sect, were allowed forming even if the population size did not grant it (MacDonald, 1998). In these schools the teachers were given the right to “either after or before school hours, or during recess, teach religious doctrine to the pupils of their own denomination or to any others who, with their parents’ consent, may be willing to remain” (Education Acts of Newfoundland. 1979, p. 99). This was seen as an important victory towards the teaching of moral and religious education (MacDonald, 1998).

From 1876 till the mid 1900’s, the three major school boards were entirely separate entities, only occasionally coming together with concerns of funding or mutual problems (MacDonald, 1998). When Newfoundland was preparing to join Canada, Term 17 pertaining to education, was included in the Terms of the Union. Term 17 was to ensure the protection of the multiple Denominational School Boards. The original 1948 Term 17 of the Terms of the Union read:

17. In lieu of section ninety-three of the British North America Act, 1867, the following Term shall apply in respect of the Province of Newfoundland: In and for the Province of Newfoundland the Legislature shall have exclusive authority to make laws in relation to education, but the Legislature will not have authority to make laws prejudicially affecting any right or privilege with respect to denominational schools, common (amalgamated) schools, or denominational colleges, that any class or classes of persons have by law in Newfoundland at the date of Union, and out of public funds of the Province of Newfoundland provided for education. (Terms of the Union, 1948, Term 17)

In the 1990’s, critics of the denominational system were gaining a voice by arguing, “the system was expensive, ineffective, and discriminated against residents who did not belong to one of the recognized denominations” (Higgins, 2011, para. 1). Supporters argued
“the denominational system helped to cultivate spirituality and morality in a secular world while strengthening community integrity; they also stressed that the churches’ right to educate was entrenched in Newfoundland’s Terms of Union with Canada” (para. 1). At this time, public funds were trying to support seven different denominations divided into twenty-seven school boards within four school systems (Demont & Sullivan 2003). Roman Catholic, Pentecostal, Seventh Day Adventist, each had their own system and there was a fourth integrated one which included Anglican, Salvation Army, United Church and Presbyterian (Young, Levin, & Wallin, 2006). In 1984, the Newfoundland-Labrador Human Rights Association sent a letter to the Minister of Justice explaining that denominational schools were in fact hurting religious freedoms:

The greatest single threat to equality of religion and freedom of worship [in the province] is the restrictive nature of the denominational educational system. It is recommended that a second alternative be available for students who are not of faiths which benefit from a special constitutional privilege, or that denominational schools be prohibited from discriminating on the basis of religion. (Higgins, 2011, para. 4)

Complaints from the Human Rights Association, Teachers’ Association, and the Royal Commission on Employment and Unemployment were enough for the Government to appoint a Royal Commission of Inquiry into the Education system in 1990. The conclusion after two years of research, hearings, and surveys was that there should be a single education system that:

involves the formal integration of all faiths and the development of policies and practices which would involve all citizens in schooling and school governance. At stake is not only the moral direction of the school system, but the basic quality of education for all our children. (Higgins, 2011, para. 8)

With the Royal Commission’s recommendation of creating a single interdenominational school system, the Government spent the next years preparing a restructure (Young, Levin,
& Wallin, 2006). In 1994, the Government presented a plan entitled *Adjusting the Course* that would have seen the creation of a unified inter-denominational education system that would have incorporated all the separate denominations (Higgins, 2011). Although the Government passed the proposal to amend Term 17, the Church had it successfully overturned at the Supreme Court level with the ruling of “the province did not have the right to abolish separate denominational schools and that unidenominational schools could not be closed without consent from denominational committees” (para. 11).

In 1997, Premier Tobin called a referendum on the newly proposed amendment to Term 17, which would this time “establish a non-denominational education system and remove entirely the Churches’ rights to administer education in the province” (para, 12). With 73% of voters voting yes to the amendment, the Federal Government granted the newly revised Term 17, which now read:

17. (1) In lieu of section ninety-three of the Constitution Act, 1867, this Term shall apply in respect of the Province of Newfoundland and Labrador:

(2) In and for the Province of Newfoundland and Labrador, the Legislature shall have exclusive authority to make laws in relation to education but shall provide for courses in religion that are not specific to a religious denomination.

(3) Religious observances shall be permitted in a school where requested by parents. (Terms of the Union, 1948, Term 17)

Along with dismantling the denominational system, the province also created larger school districts, reduced the number of operational schools, and made it so school board members would now be voted in by the public instead of being chosen by the Church (Higgins, 2011).

The first school year for the new non-denominational system occurred in 1998 and has continued that way till present time. Newfoundland is an example of how the influence
of Church and the argument of morality needing a connection to religion can drastically affect a school system. Although the province officially dismantled denominational schools, the Church still held onto the privilege of having religious observations permitted where parents granted it, meaning if a region has a majority religion, sermonizing in the schools can occur; oppressing minorities.

**Alberta and Saskatchewan**

In the early 1800’s, in the area then known as Rupert’s Land and now known as Alberta and Saskatchewan, it was the Hudson Bay Company who encouraged and organized education mainly for its own employees’ children. They provided teachers, but “also encouraged all religious denominations to establish churches and schools in the west and provided financial assistance to both Anglians and Roman Catholics alike” (Mackay & Firmin, 2008, p. 66). Although the first official religious-operated schools in the area were founded in 1859 (Phillips, 1957), it was the adoption of the 1875 North-West Territories Act that allowed the creation of denominational and separate schools. The majority religion of most regions created their own denomination schools (Lawr & Gidney, 1973), while Section 11 of the North-West Territories Act (1875) gave rise to separate schools, and the foundational protection Alberta’s and Saskatchewan’s separate schools still hold today. Section 11 reads:

> that the minority of the rate-payers therein, whether Protestant or Roman Catholic, may establish separate schools therein, and that, in such latter case, the rate-payers establishing such Protestant or Roman Catholic separate schools shall be liable only to assessments of such rates as they may impose upon themselves in respect thereof. (1875)
In the early 1880’s, both the Catholic and Protestant population were very even in size and through these years, the Council of Education of the North-West Territories adopted a dual-denominational system of education, much like what was being used in Quebec. In the next ten years, population would play a large role in Alberta’s and Saskatchewan’s education system. Even though, in 1884, the Education Council included thirteen Protestants and two Catholics, it was a unanimous vote to adopt a dual-denominational system (Poelzer, 1975). By 1891, the split in population grew to 13,008 Roman Catholics and 44,086 Protestants because of the popularity of the railroad. The same council of 1884 who supported Quebec’s dual-denominational system would turn against it seven years later in 1892. Dr. Toombs (1962) explains that before the railroad completion, Protestants of the region were preparing for a Roman Catholic majority because:

[i]f this was to be the situation, then the Protestants, like their compatriots in Quebec, wanted to protect themselves under a dual system, and the Roman Catholics were just as anxious to have their schools under the control of a Catholic dominated central authority. (p. 156)

Poelzer (1975) explains that when the majority was in the Catholics favour, minority rights were always respected when it came to education by giving the minority control of their own schools, but “[a]s Protestants became a majority and gradually grew to be a strong majority, every opportunity was taken to pass ordinances that took from the Catholic minority every right that just a few years prior Protestants themselves has asked for” (p. 7).

In 1901, four years before Alberta and Saskatchewan joined Confederation, the Ordinance of North-West Territories was passed. Education had now become split between non-denominational common schools run by the Government, and religious run separate
schools. Chapter 29 of this legislation, called the School Ordinance, had sections specifically written to protect religious minorities’ rights. While Section 41 protected religious minority rights to build separate schools, it is Section 137 that influenced the education system the most, in my opinion. Part one of Section 137 gave strict guidelines on how religious instruction would be handled in schools, while Section 2 gave the secular common schools the right to commence each school day with the Lord’s Prayer. This legislation from 1901 is still used today as protection for reciting the Lord’s Prayer in public secular common schools in both provinces (Zabjek, 2005).

Religious instruction 137: No religious instruction except as hereinafter provided shall be permitted in the school of any district from the opening of such school until one half hour previous to its closing in the afternoon after which time any such instruction permitted or desired by the board may be given.

Time for the Lord’s prayer (2): It shall however be permissible for the board of any district to direct that the school be opened by the recitation of the Lord’s Prayer. (Section 137, 1901)

When Alberta and Saskatchewan were preparing to join Canada, Catholics and Protestants pressured the government to keep the protections they recently received through the Ordinance of the North-West Territories. When joining Confederation, certain aspects of the 1901 Ordinance would be included in the Saskatchewan and Alberta Acts. Section 17 of the Alberta and Saskatchewan Act specifically protected Chapter 29 and 30 of the Ordinance of the North-West Territories:

Nothing in any such law shall prejudicially affect any right or privilege with respect to separate schools which any class of persons have at the date of the passing of this Act, under the terms of chapters 29 and 30 of the Ordinances of the North-west Territories, passed in the year 1901, or with respect to religious instruction in any public or separate school as provided for in the said ordinances. (The Alberta Act, Section 17, 1905)
Since joining Confederation, little has changed regarding religion and religious education. In the 1990's, both provinces gave power to the school boards in how much religious instruction could be given and at the same time gave students the right to opt out of said education:

Alberta:
50 (1) A board may
(a) prescribe religious instruction to be offered to its students;
(b) prescribe religious exercises for its students;
(c) prescribe patriotic instruction to be offered to its students;
(d) prescribe patriotic exercises for its students;
(e) permit persons other than teachers to provide religious instruction to its students.

(2) Where a teacher or other person providing religious or patriotic instruction receives a written request signed by a parent of a student that the student be excluded from religious or patriotic instruction or exercises, or both, the teacher or other person shall permit the student
(a) to leave the classroom or place where the instruction or exercises are taking place for the duration of the instruction or exercises, or
(b) to remain in the classroom or place without taking part in the instruction or exercises. (School Act, 2017)

Saskatchewan:
182 (1) Religious instruction, as authorized by the board of education of a school division with respect to any of the schools in its jurisdiction, may be given in that school division for a period not exceeding two and one-half hours per week.

(3) Subject to subsection (4), the board of education may direct that the exercises preceding the regular daily program of instruction of the school be opened by the reading or reciting, without comment or explanation, of the Lord's Prayer or a passage selected from Bible readings that have been prescribed for the purpose by the minister.

(4) Where a parent or the guardian of a pupil so requests, the pupil is to be excused from participating in the opening exercises described in subsection (3). (Education act, 1995)
Alberta and Saskatchewan are strong examples of how Catholics and Protestants attained privileges during the developments of Canada's secular education system. Historically, these rights were to help protect religious minority groups, but the only two recognized religions were Catholicism and Protestantism. The privileges attained a hundred years ago are still in effect today, with some public school boards still arguing their right to start the school day with a morning prayer.

**Final Thoughts**

While exploring the histories of these provinces, it is clear the education system did not become secular without consequences. Provinces wanted free, non-sectarian education, but to reach this, they risked losing their own political power, forcing governments to cautiously work around it and in the end, give majority religions privileges. The Church regularly used the argument that secular education would be the downfall of morality. To counter this, provinces made measures to guarantee teachers were of the highest morality, but the Church did not sway from their judgment. This mentality survives today with “immoral” still being a word closely associated with atheism (Nash, 2003), and social media posts blaming societal problems on the exclusion of God from schools. The Church successfully demonized non-sectarian education and beliefs, and I argue that through Shared Reality theory, these misconceptions of morality and secular education have subconsciously trickled down through the generations.

A step provinces took to help sway the religious population’s opinion was arguing that denominational schools were in fact an attack on religious freedoms, and in comparison, a non-sectarian approach would be fairer to all faiths. This stance worked well
on a political level, but did not help influencing the Church. What helped calm the resistance governments faced from the Catholic and Protestant churches was granting these religions different privileges. Although, the provinces became secular on paper, I argue the privileges received actually helped solidify the Catholic and Protestant influence on the education system. A privilege that was regularly given to the Church was the ability to sermonize or perform religious acts as long as children had the right not to participate. I believe that the act of asking a child to leave is not a step towards religious freedom, but a form of othering. Othering described by Yiannis Gabriel (2012) is the process of “casting a group, an individual or an object into the role of the ‘other’ and establishing one’s own identity through opposition to and, frequently, vilification of this Other” (Para. 1). By asking a group of students to leave a ceremony that the majority attends further strengthens the Self and Other mentality. Said (1978) and Tyson (2006) explain that the Self is the familiar, the moral, the privileged whereas the Other is strange, demonic and not fully human. Schools that defended performing religious acts as fair because they gave the option to opt out are now losing battles in the Canadian court system. In Zylberberg v. Sudbury Board of Education (Director) (1988), 65 O.R. (2d) 641, the court explained that even though there was an exemption clause in place for students not to attend Morning Prayer, that did not mean their freedom of conscience and religion was not infringed upon. Having the option of opting out of a religious ceremony or Morning Prayer forces a child to choose whether or not to out themselves as outside of the norm. The Court added:

the right to be excused from class, or to be exempted from participating, does not overcome the infringement of the Charter freedom of conscience and religion by the mandated religious exercises. On the contrary, the exemption provision imposes a penalty on pupils from religious minorities who utilize it by stigmatizing them as non-conformists and setting them apart from their fellow students who are members of the dominant religion. In our opinion,
the conclusion is inescapable that the exemption provision fails to mitigate
the infringement of freedom of conscience and religion by s. 28(1).

(Zylberberg v. Sudbury Board of Education, 1988, p. 656)

The Courts are clear that giving the option of opting out is still an infringement on
students’ rights, but things get more complicated in Alberta and Saskatchewan. In these
provinces, the schools’ right to give religious instruction and start the school day with
prayer is in their Constitution. Constitutional rights cannot be taken away easily and even
though the Courts agree prayer in public schools goes against the Canadian Charter
(Oliphant, 2015), “[o]ne part of the Constitution cannot abrogate another part of the

The privileges given to these provinces more than a century ago still influence the
education system today. These privileges have not only undermined religious freedom and
open secularism, but have helped normalize Christian Privilege and demonize the faithless.
Shared Reality theory gives a framework on how arguments used generations ago still
resonate today, continuing to keep Christian Privilege a norm, atheism a taboo and
reciprocating a general mistrust towards secularism. What Lindsay (2014) finds interesting
about the religious right historically opposing secularism “is that secularism, properly
understood, is the best protection religious believers have, particularly in a society they no
longer control. Secularism protects freedom of conscience, including freedom of religion; it
doesn’t threaten it” (p. 17). Now that we have developed a sense of how historically Canada
dealt with secularism, the next Chapter in this thesis will explore the perception atheism
has had publically and politically from the first documented atheists in ancient Europe to
today.
Chapter 6 – Atheist Prejudice Through Time

The fool says in his heart, “There is no God.” They are corrupt, their deeds are vile; there is no one who does good. (Psalm’s 14:1, NIV)

The goal of this Chapter is to show the depth of prejudice towards atheism, both historically and presently. The fear and loathing of people without belief is not a new phenomenon, but some argue is entrenched into our human core. Geneticist author Dean Hamer (2004) explains that atheism is un-natural and that spirituality is actually predisposed into our human genes. In his book, The God Gene, he explains that it is in our human nature to have an inclination towards religious and spiritual faith. Surprisingly, Dan Dennett and Richard Dawkins, both staunch atheists, roughly agree with Hamer's conclusion that there is a natural side to spiritual belief. Dennett (2006) sees theology as biology, something that has helped humans survive through their time here. Children have this innate willingness to believe whatever their parents say, but “[o]nce the information superhighway between parent and child is established by genetic evolution, it is ready to be used—or abused” (p. 130). This relates back to Shared Reality theory and how ideas are extremely hard to break when they are coming from your closest allies, your parents. This Chapter helps argue that through Shared Reality theory, atheists have always struggled to be accepted and open discussions on atheism are taboo. The uncertainty that is felt when an atheist speaks about non-belief in a public forum is not because of any recent events, but years of general mistrust that has permeated human nature. This Chapter is broken up into three sections, each looking at prejudice towards atheism. First is an exploration of how the first self-proclaimed non-believers were treated in ancient Europe. Second is a look at
atheist prejudice within Western countries (Canada, USA, and Europe) and, in conclusion, the world.

**Ancient Atheism**

As early as 130,000 years ago, there has been evidence of supernatural belief represented in ritualized burials by Neanderthals, but it takes up to recorded history before we see evidence of nonbelievers in society (McGowan, 2013). This certainly does not mean that there were no sceptics before recorded history, but only that they left no evidence of their opinions. The treatments of nonbelievers before written history is debatable, but after this, there are written accounts of how nonbelievers were perceived. I refrain from using the word atheist at this time and instead replace it with nonbeliever because *atheos*, meaning “godless one”, in ancient Greece and Rome, referred to “anyone who held religiously unorthodox opinions” (p. 73). Being called *atheos* in ancient times meant that it was assumed that the person believed in gods, but not the cultural dominant ones (2013). For example, Socrates was certainly not an atheist because of his spiritual beliefs, but his suggestions that the gods of Athens were not the true gods were radical enough for a majority of Athenian jurors to sentence him to death (Stone, 1988). It can be argued that the first documented atheist of European origin, by today’s definition, did not appear until fifth century Greece with Diagoras of Melos, who is “often dubbed ‘the first atheist’” (McGowan, 2013 p. 74). Diagoras of Melos got himself into trouble numerous times because he was quite vocal as a poet and philosopher about his non-belief. One time, Diagoras was traveling on one of many ships belonging to a fleet when they encountered a storm. The crewmen on his ship believed the gods were angry because they were
transporting a godless man. This led “Diagoras to wonder out loud if each of the other ships fighting the storm had its own Diagoras onboard” (p. 74). Diagoras tried to explain that the storm could not only be because of him, since there were many other ships in the same situation. In 415 BCE, when Athens slaughtered and burned his home island of Melos, “Diagoras publicly cited the lack of divine retribution against Athens’ immoral act as proof that no gods existed” (p. 74). Diagoras was imprisoned for this claim, and would have been executed, if not for a generous bribe offered to the Athenian officials. Diagoras was also known for debating with believers and in one of his famous stories, a theist friend of his pointed:

out an expensive display of votive gifts and said, 'You think the gods have no care for man? Why, you can see from all these votive pictures here how many people have escaped the fury of storms at sea by praying to the gods who have brought them safe to harbor.' To which Diagoras replied, 'Yes, indeed, but where are the pictures of all those who suffered shipwreck and perished in the waves? (Hecht, 2003, p. 9-10)

Diagoras always had an answer to his critics, and one day finally received a bounty on his head for chopping up a statue of Hercules to help cook his turnips. Diagoras was never captured, but instead fled to Corinth where the rest of his life is silenced in historical writings (McGowan, 2013).

Many atheistic writers of the Greco-Roman world had their work destroyed and have been silenced from the history books, if it was not for the Roman philosopher Cicero. In his essay called On the Nature of the Gods, he mentions the names of three prominent atheists and agnostics of the Greco-Roman time period, including Diagoras, who were all “still spoken of in shocked whispers during this time” (McGowan, 2013, p. 77). In a time when philosophy and intellect were encouraged, the atheist voice was still silenced and
feared. Cicero gives evidence to how the atheist voice was silenced at this time when he writes:

Do the gods exist or do they not? It is difficult, you will say, to deny that they exist. I would agree, if we were arguing the matter in a public assembly, but in a private discussion of this kind it is a perfectly easy to do so. (p. 78)

If Cicero felt confident in questioning the gods in private discussions, but would deny these questions in a public setting, I argue that much of the population in that area felt the same. Between the fall of Rome (fifth century), and the start of the Renaissance (fifteenth century), finding any writings done by atheists is challenging. This is because the “Christian church was as much a political force as a religious one. Any challenges to orthodoxy during that time wasn’t just considered blasphemy, but was also a kind of political treason that often separated heads from bodies” (p. 79). The Inquisition was a 600-year campaign where the Catholic Church tried to destroy any “unorthodox beliefs and practices by use of interrogation, torture, and even execution” (p. 87). Execution is a permanent form of silencing a person’s voice, but the fear of being accused as an atheist or having unorthodox beliefs would have kept a person’s voice silent and private. There has been little change in the attitude towards atheists in the last 1500 years and the following sections will explore how today’s world perceives them.

**Atheism in the Western world**

In 2014, the Pew Research Center found that 53% of Americans believed it is necessary to believe in God to be moral. In American society, religion has become a precondition to living a moral life, whereas atheists, living without God, have become marginalized for their beliefs (Jacoby, 2004). Atheophobia is the term used to describe the
fear people have towards atheists. Education professor and author Robert Nash (2003) goes further by describing atheophobia as “the fear and loathing of atheists that permeate American culture” (p.4). Nash (2003) is a University professor who speaks about how his atheistic students feel “stigmatized for their lack of belief in a god or gods” (p. 3). Many of his students believe that they are the last minority group on their campus “and in their local towns, that it is still fashionable to hate” (p. 3). In Nash’s article, he also explains that he does not live in the Bible belt or the American South, but in the liberal city of Burlington, Vermont. In Nash’s Religion and Spirituality course, he explains that throughout the semester, most of his students proudly come out as a believer in some sort of God or higher spirit “but few, if any, students will summon up the courage to admit outright that they are genuine non-believers or atheists” (p. 5). Atheists sometimes fear that by just saying they are a non-believer, they are somehow insulting the religious (2003). When an atheist outs themselves, often they are automatically labeled as immoral, evil, or god hating (Goodman & Mueller, 2009). When Nash asked his class to think of words which described atheists in today’s society, some of the words the class came up with were “wounded,” “communist,” “satanic,” “immoral,” “empty,” and “God-haters” (Nash, 2003). Goodman and Mueller (2009) explain that atheophobia forces many atheists to keep their non-belief a secret, which silences their voice in the workplace and social life. Many atheists try to hide their own identity by calling themselves secular humanists, but Nash (2003) warns against this because some Christian conservatives have started describing them as “anti-church, pagan, naturalistic, relativistic, and hedonistic. They believe that secular humanists are out to dismantle organized religion piece by piece, and they start[ed] by expunging any traces of its presence in public schools” (p. 9).
Prejudice towards atheists within the United States goes further than just fear and mistrust. The United States have laws and policies which keep atheists from holding office in eight states. Arkansas, Maryland, Mississippi, North and South Carolina, Pennsylvania, Tennessee and Texas are all states that have laws in their Constitution which don’t allow people of non-belief to hold office (Schwarz, 2014). Although many of these states claim not to enforce these laws, it does not change the fact that these laws still exist and have not been amended. Many of these states’ constitutional laws are quite specific in what they are meant to do. South Carolina’s law simply states “No person who denies the existence of a Supreme Being shall hold any office under this constitution” (2014). Texas law seems very liberal and progressive until the last line. Article 1, Section 4 of the Texas Constitution reads:

No religious test shall ever be required as a qualification to any office, or public trust, in this state; nor shall anyone be excluded from holding office on account of his religious sentiments, provided he acknowledges the existence of a supreme being. (Article one, Section 4)

Texas will allow any person to hold office as long as they acknowledge there is a higher power. Even states which do not have direct laws against atheists still show signs of indirect discrimination. A 2012 Pew report found that 43% of Americans would not vote for an openly atheist candidate. Also, in 2008, voters were asked who they would rather see as President and atheists came in last (Jones, 2007). Out of a list of candidates who the pollsters thought would be controversial, the poll showed that Americans had less of a problem voting for a presidential candidate who was Jewish, a woman, Hispanic, Mormon, someone married for the third time, a 72 year-old, or a homosexual rather than an atheist (2007). Interesting enough, President Donald Trump is two of those things. To add to the pile of discrimination atheist feels, it is also documented that atheistic parents have a
reduced chance of attaining custody of their children due to their non-belief. In 1992, poet, Percy Shelley was denied custody of his two children after his wife died because the “Lord Chancellor reasoned: Shelley endorsed atheism and sexual freedom, and would teach his children the same values” (Volokh, 2006, p. 633). The Courts in Europe and America, over the years, have demanded multiple times that parents attend regular church services as a prerequisite to attaining custody (2006). Often stating “it is certainly to the best interests of [the child] to receive regular and systematic spiritual training” (p.635). I would also like to bring attention to the Boy Scouts of America and Canada, who after nearly a hundred years, have finally lifted their ban on openly gay scouts and leaders in 2013 and 2015. In another inclusive gesture, the programs have also recently started allowing girls and transgender boys to participate (Chokshi, 2017). This leaves only one group still prohibited from joining its ranks: atheists. The Scouts Oath requires its members to proclaim “I will do my best to do my duty to God” and unless an atheist keeps his or her non-belief a secret, they will not be welcomed (Mehta, 2017). Finally, Nash (2003) explains that an open atheist educator risks losing their chances of receiving a teaching job and also claims that it is “unlikely that an outspoken atheist with a penchant to go public would ever secure a presidency in any of the 100 most prestigious institutions in the United States” (p. 2). Even though the majority of these examples come south of the border, I can relate to these pressures. I have been in staff rooms where teachers openly talk about their church gatherings with the principals, and I would never let it slip that I am an atheist. When applying to work for a private school, I knew going in that the majority of the staff was religious and I certainly would have never talked about my non-belief. As far as they knew, I was just as religious as everyone else, using my unwarranted Christian privilege to my advantage.
Atheism around the world

It is not only in the United States where atheists must be mindful of their actions. Many countries around the world have much harsher punishments towards non-believers. In 2013, the International Humanist and Ethical Union published their Freedom of Thought Report revealing just how much non-believers are mistreated around the world. The report found that 13 countries can sentence a person to death for expressing atheistic thoughts (IHEU, 2013). Since this report was published, Saudi Arabia can now be added to this list. Article 1 of the Saudi Arabia’s New Terrorism “law prohibits ‘Calling for atheist thought in any form, or calling into question the fundamentals of the Islamic religion on which this country is based’” (IHEU, 2014, p. 1). This new law in Saudi Arabia could be considered surprising since they have been recently elected to sit on the United Nations Human Rights Council (IHEU, 2014). The IHEU (2013) report continues to explain that in 39 countries, people who show thoughts or acts of atheism may be given prison sentences. Within these 39 countries, 6 of them are the western countries of Iceland, Denmark, New Zealand, Poland, Germany, and Greece (IHEU, 2013). This information shows that atheists must not only be careful of what they say in the public sphere in the United States, but also have to be careful around the world. Before we think Canada is immune to these sorts of laws, Canada’s Criminal Code has held a blasphemous libel law prohibiting people from offending the Christian Religion since 1892. This has been a relatively unused law with the last person convicted of being an atheist occurring in Toronto and was sentenced to 60 days in jail in 1927. And the last time someone was charged, not convicted, was a theatre owner trying to show the satire film Monty Python’s Life of Bryan in 1980 (Breakenridge, 2018). In recent news, the Liberals proposed changes to Bill C-51 that will finally abolish the 125
year old Blasphemy Law here in Canada.

Atheophobia forces many atheists to keep their non-beliefs a secret, making education about atheism, in a safe place, an urgency (Goodman & Mueller, 2009). The goal of this Chapter was to help show how mistrust and negativity towards non-believers have not been a localized problem, but something that permeates human nature. Throughout the Chapters so far, we have explored how secularism is not an easy coined term, how Canada’s education history has vivified and misinformed the public about non-believers and secular education, and now, how prejudice towards atheists has been consistent in human history. From these points I argue two things: First is the importance of having education about atheistic worldviews. Children need to break from the misinformation that haunts non-believers and understand what it really means to live without a belief in a god. Second is that a possible reason that atheism is being neglected in the ERC program is that people are consciously or unconsciously uncomfortable talking about it. Between the research I have read and personal conversations I have had, I infer that teachers may have an easier time talking and educating about religions rather than atheism because of the long standing unease that comes with the subject. Chapter Seven examines the Ethics and Religious Cultures program, looking at its creation and then critically analyzing its curriculum to see just where atheism stands.
Chapter 7 – The ERC Program and its Curriculum Analysis

Nonrecognition or misrecognition can inflict harm, can be a form of oppression, imprisoning someone in a false, distorted, and reduced mode of being. (Taylor, 1992, p. 25)

This final Chapter will first give a brief explanation of how the Ethics and Religious Cultures program was developed and will also look at criticisms the program received from both religious and non-religious sources. Lastly, this Chapter will include the curriculum analysis of the ERC program. This analysis will focus on how atheism is identified in the program and what opportunities it has at being taught as a legitimate worldview.

Overview of the ERC program

In 1997, Quebec was successful at amending the Constitution Act, dismantling the rights Catholics and Protestants held over denominational schools. The confessional schools were restructured using linguistic separation, with Catholic schools becoming French and Protestant schools becoming English (Ministère de l’Éducation, du Loisir et du Sport, 2008). Prior to 2005, schools continued allowing parents to choose between three religious course options: Catholic Religious and Moral Instruction, Protestant Religious and Moral Education, or Moral Education. While some critics wanted religious education completely pulled from the school system, the Education Commission, with agreement on “what the Proulx report called open secularism” (Bouchard & Taylor, 2008, p. 140) decided on a program:

that allows students to acquire the knowledge necessary to understand the religious phenomenon and its expressions in Québec and elsewhere and to develop the skills necessary for cohabitation in the context of a diversified society. (p. 141)
Another intention of the program was to “broaden the religious culture of young people, while fostering an understanding of Quebec culture shaped, notably by Catholic and Protestant traditions” (Comité sur les Affaires Religieuses, 2006, p. 41). Although there would be a focus on traditional Quebec culture, the program was constructed to respect the “freedom of conscience and of religion of the students, the parents, and the school staff... without favouring any particular religious or secular perspective” (p. 5). With this in mind, the Government announced its plans to replace the religiously aligned courses for a more inclusive program called Ethics and Religious Cultures program. With the “notwithstanding clause” ending in 2007, the program had to be ready to be implemented for the 2008 school year (Knott, 2011). The program had to be written and tested within two years and therefore, a large team was allocated to form its creation. As the program was being written, advisory committees were created composed of “forty teachers and pedagogical consultants, representative of all the administrative regions of Québec including the private and Anglophone sectors” (p. 37). In addition, a team of twenty “university experts in ethics, religion, cultural diversity, history and philosophy contributed about fifteen days of consultation” (p. 37). A draft of the program was completed and tested in eight schools across Canada.

The new program was officially distributed to all schools across Quebec for the start of the 2008 school year. The program was finalized with two overarching goals: 1) The Recognition of others 2) The Pursuit of the Common Good. The recognition of others was based off the principle that all “people possess equal value and dignity” (Ministère de l’Éducation, du Loisir et du Sport, 2008, p. 296). Understanding ourselves and the shared
values we have with other worldviews around us helps in building a “common culture that takes diversity into account” (p. 296). Pursuit of the common good is not just looking at what the majority wants, but being able to take into account the needs of each individual. It “presupposes that people from different backgrounds can agree responsibly to take on challenges inherent to life in society” (p. 296). The ERC program also follows the Quebec Education Plan’s strategy of developing competencies throughout each cycle. The ERC’s competencies are: 1) Reflects on ethical questions. 2) Demonstrates an understanding of the phenomenon of religion 3) Engages in dialogue (2008). The latter is what brings the other two competencies together and is the fundamental glue of the entire program. Students are to develop the skills to “conduct a reflective process in order to organize their thinking, express their point of view while being attentive to others' views, and use relevant resources and appropriate means for developing or examining a point of view” (p. 320). I feel Michael Donkers (2014) sums up the program well when writing:

> the aims and objectives of the program aim to reinforce the vision of the Québec Education Program (QEP) as an educational process of reflection and questioning, not only with respect to students' own world-views, their values and those of others, but also with respect to the major issues of living together with differences in modern society. (p. 19)

The ERC curriculum and policies clearly show that the program is geared towards “promoting the development of attitudes of tolerance, respect and openness, [and] preparing them to live in a pluralist and democratic society” (Ministère de l’Éducation, du Loisir et du Sport, 2008, p. 293). However, “it is also possible nonetheless to draw evidence from the curriculum itself that the program is attempting, to some extent, to superimpose a particular view of religion/religions on pupils (Donkers, 2014, p.34). To keep in line with Quebec’s intercultural traditions, the ERC program takes “a special look at Quebec’s
religious heritage” (Ministère de l’Éducation, du Loisir et du Sport, 2008, p. 296) which Knott (2011) argues “would be a mistake to think this choice was anything but political” (p. 51). Both Catholicism and Protestantism are given prominence throughout the program (Ministère de l’Éducation, du Loisir et du Sport, 2008). The program’s teacher guidelines give a clear indication where each worldview sits on its ladder of importance. When creating Learning and Evaluation Situations (LES), Christianity sits at the top, needing to be covered throughout the entire year of every cycle. Judaism and Native Spirituality are covered on a number of occasions each year of a cycle and Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism are covered a few times within a cycle. Finally, “other religions are covered over the course of a cycle, depending on the reality and the needs of the class” (p. 341). Knott (2011) explains that teachers and pre-service teachers show confusion from this hierarchical system with some thinking they cannot teach about a different religion unless they have a student who identifies with it in their classroom. I acknowledge that the program’s goal is not to indoctrinate students into a particular faith and that the protection of Quebec’s heritage has always come first in politics and policies, but I also equate this as a form of Christian Privilege inside the classroom. This ladder of religious hierarchy places a large amount of pressure on the teacher and their professional stance in creating an inclusive classroom where all worldviews are seen as equals. As Knott (2011) explains, teaching the program properly comes down to the teacher’s own ability to understand the core principles. Already detailed in Chapter Two, I fear that teachers could lose focus of their professional stance and, consciously or unconsciously, fall back on teaching whichever belief or non-belief they are most comfortable with. If the teacher’s professional stance crumbles, so does the enriched dialogue that holds the ERC program together. Although I
have already explored the importance and difficulties in maintaining the professional
stance the ERC requires in Chapter Two, I must reiterate just how crucial this stance is to
achieving the two overarching goals of the program: 1) The Recognition of others 2) The
Pursuit of the Common Good. A lot of the program relies on the quality of the teacher and if
“[s]tudents are encouraged to open themselves to the world and to develop their ability to
act with others” teachers must not allow their own biases to enter the classroom (Ministère

Criticism of the program

Quebec’s Ethics and Religious Cultures program has faced staunch criticism since its
implementation into the school system. In its first year of being implemented, 1300 parents
requested the removal of their children from the program (Bouchard, 2010). Religious
groups felt that the religious content of the course was not sufficient and, at times, insulting
to the Catholic religion, whereas secular groups preferred to have seen the religious aspect
of the program taken completely out (Boudreau, 2011). One vocal person who opposed the
program was Cardinal Marc Ouellet. In an article called Vita e Pensiero, he clearly states his
objections:

It would be extremely naïve to believe that a cultural approach to the
teaching of religions will produce new little Quebecers who are pluralists,
experts in inter-religious relations and impartially critical towards all beliefs.
The least that can be said is that the thirst for spiritual values will hardly be
quenched and the tyranny of relativism will render the transmission of our
religious heritage even more difficult....This law does not serve the common
good and its imposition will be perceived as a violation of citizens’ religious
liberties. It would be unreasonable to retain it as it was originally decreed,
because it would lead to a strict secular legalism that would exclude religion
from the public sphere [translation]. (2008)
Ouellet’s objections to the ERC program echo some of the same, in my opinion, misinformed fears seen in Chapter Five, which outlined details regarding the shift to secularism in many of the provinces’ educational systems. The primary concern of agnostics and atheist groups was that “ethical issues will end up being addressed from the perspective of a particular religion” (Bouchard, 2010, p. 62.). The group, Mouvement Laïque Québécois (MLQ), warned that combining religion and ethics “suggests that ethical behaviour cannot be developed unless it is tied to a religious belief and that a person who has no religion is necessarily amoral or immoral [translation]” (MLQ Press Conference, 2008). The MLQ’s solution to the problem was removing the religious aspect of the course completely, but as Bouchard (2010) explained:

\[\text{[it is crucial for the study of ethics and world-views to inform each other. An education in ethics would be incomplete if it were cut off from the study of expressions of meaning and ways of living associated with religious experience. (p. 62)}\]

Bouchard is correct in his sentiment, but I will refer back to Knott (2011) where she explains that it is the teachers’ responsibility to properly interpret the core principles of the ERC program, and if this interpretation is flawed, then confusion of morals and ethics may ensue non-religious students. With the prior two sections developing a strong sense of how the program was created and the criticisms it received, the next section will inspect the program’s curriculum for direct links to atheism.

**Atheism in the program**

In the primary edition of the Ethics and Religious Cultures program, there is no direct mention of the word atheism or any words associated with it such as freethinker, skeptic, agnostic or humanist. In the secondary edition of the program, the word atheism is
surprisingly mentioned only once. It is written in Secondary Cycle Two under the theme: Existential Questions “The existence of the divine - Critiques and denunciations: atheism, the idea of religious alienation in the works of Marx, Freud and Sartre, the idea of the death of God in the work of Nietzsche, etc” (Ministère de l’Éducation, du Loisir et du Sport, 2008, p. 505). In this section, the program guides teachers to, “[d]raw upon sacred or philosophical texts in order to help students understand various answers to questions concerning the existence of the divine, the meaning of life and death, and the nature of human beings” (p. 504). While reading these guidelines, I was eager to see how the program would bring in a non-believer’s opinion. As a child, the only answers I received in school on questions dealing with life and death or on the nature of humans were religiously influenced. It was not until much later in my life that I read the likes of freethinkers such as John Dewey, Richard Feynman, and Carl Sagan. Even though atheism is only directly mentioned once in the program, I felt relieved that it had at least made it. Disappointingly though, as I read further, the program gives guidelines on how to include atheism when engaging in the conversation. The program highlights atheism as the “denunciation” of the existence of the divine (p. 505). Denunciation or condemnation of something is a very strong word choice for the program to use as its first and only direct mentioning of atheism. I feel if the teacher used that sort of vocabulary in the classroom, it may alienate atheists from engaging in conversation. Many atheists do not condemn the existence of God, they merely lack any belief in one, much like how many believers lack belief in Thor or Zeus. To further this negative connotation towards atheists, the program gives examples of who to talk about: “atheism, the idea of religious alienation in the works of Marx, Freud and Sartre, the idea of the death of God in the work of Nietzsche, etc.” (p. 505). The atheists the program has
chosen to highlight take a very militant approach to the idea of God. If this is the first time
the program is directly mentioning atheism, I do not believe they are the best options to
opening up students’ minds to the idea of living without God or superstition. I worry
teachers may simply only quote Karl Marx saying “Religion is the sigh of the oppressed
creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is
the opium of the people” and not explore the meaning behind the statement much like
Chapter Four did (Marx, 1843. para. 3). The same could be said with Jean-Paul Sartre
calling religion “a simple fact that one must struggle against” (Charmé, 2000, p. 2) or Freud
writing “I regard myself as one of the most dangerous enemies of religion” (Personal letter
to Marie Bonaparte, April, 26 1926). The main goals of the ERC program are the
“Recognition of Others” and the “Pursuit of the Common Good” and if teachers only show
examples of militant atheists, then atheism, as a worldview, will seem like a threat to the
equal dignity for all and the pursuit of the common good. As Said (1979) warns, text
becomes reality, and if this is the only direct mention of atheism in the program, I argue it
does more harm than good for the acknowledgement of atheism being a legitimate
worldview. To highlight atheism as the direct condemnation of religion and God in an
atmosphere where Christian tradition is still dominant (Knott, 2011) will only silence the
atheist voice further in the classroom and reciprocate the negative stereotypes
surrounding the worldview.

Secularism as Atheism

As explored in Chapter Four, secularism is a word with many interpretations. With
reference to the use of the word, I had a hard time acknowledging which definition was
being used primarily in the ERC program: Assertive, Passive, Forced, or Open. While searching through both the Primary and Secondary versions of the program, the word “secular” was located 15 separate times. The majority of the uses were to create a distinct separation between religious and secular forms of art. I believe it is quite clear that when the program refers to secular and religious art, it is making reference to sacred versus secular forms of art (Preston, 2010). Where “secular art [is] defined as art that has no religious reference points and is, in fact, oblivious to organized religion” (Martinique, 2006, para. 5). It seems logical to interpret the word secular in these cases as a strict separation from religion or an assertive or forced sense of secularism.

In the other cases where secular is being used, it still seems like it is being used as an opposite of religious thought.

OTHER REPRESENTATIONS OF THE WORLD AND OF HUMAN BEINGS: The program also takes into account secular expressions and representations of the world and of human beings, which seek to define the meaning and value of human experience outside the realm of religious beliefs and affiliation. (Ministère de l'Éducation, du Loisir et du Sport, 2008, p. 296)

In this case, “secular expression” seems to mean atheistic expression since it is outside the “realm of religious belief and affiliation” (p. 296). Once again, this seems to represent an assertive or forced sense of secularism. If this was Bouchard’s and Taylor’s (2008) open secularism, then secular expression would include embracing and compromising with religious belief in a person’s representation of the world.

In the next case where the word is used, I have an easier time deciphering which sense of secularism is being used.

REPRESENTATIONS OF THE WORLD AND OF HUMAN BEINGS: Critical reflection on ethical questions involves using resources that may be varied.
In this way, people give meaning to their decisions and their actions based on the belief systems or representations of the world and of human beings that are important to them. The program takes these representations—both religious and secular—into account. (Ministère de l’Éducation, du Loisir et du Sport, 2008, p. 295)

In this case, the program is making reference to ethical questions and how it will take both religious and secular expressions into account. My first indication was once again that secular meant atheistic expression, but it could also imply open secular expression. I argue this because the main goals of the ERC program would embrace an open secular approach to reflecting on ethical questions. An open secular approach would be where you took all religious expressions into consideration without allowing one religion to be privileged over another. Therefore, you could look at ethical questions through the lens of individual religions and then look at it through Taylor and Bouchard’s (2008) vision of Quebec’s open secularism. The negative drawback to this interpretation would be that a true atheistic viewpoint, with zero religious influence, would not be included.

If the program is using the word secular to replace non-belief or atheism, then the program acknowledges that atheism should be considered and spoken about within the program, although I am still not confident that this is the case. Why would the program use secular to define non-belief multiple times and then use the word atheism in the section “The Existence of the Divine”? Sim and Van (2009) may argue that the changing of the word for this section was not only accidental, but part of some sort of larger sub-text. It is possible that since this section seems to argue against the existence of God, the program writers may have used the word “atheism” subconsciously to apply all the negative stereotypes that go along with the word. This way, the students may refrain from making personal connections with the information; increasing the likelihood the children would
maintain the existence of God as a positive influence. The same could be asked as to why the program may have used the term secular to imply non-belief in its other sections? Perhaps the program was trying to distance itself from the stigmas that come with the word atheism. By referring to it as just secular thought, people who have very harsh opinions about atheists may be more inept to dialogue on the subject. This could have been the program’s conscious or unconscious decision to try and make dialoguing about non-belief more acceptable to the public’s eye, considering the different criticisms it received from religious sources.

Finally, I maintain that the program implies that secular expression means non-religious or atheistic expression. I believe the reasoning the program used the word atheism separately in one section was either a conscious or unconscious decision to influence the tone of different topics. If I am wrong, and the program does imply Taylor and Bouchard’s (2008) open secular expression, then it must be reminded that not all atheists also identify as open secularists. Hence the atheist voice, the one that wants total freedom from religion, would only be mentioned in the section “The Existence of the Divine”, which I have previously argued only reaffirms negative connotations towards the worldview. The next section of this Chapter explores what happens to atheism as a worldview if teachers decide to only bring it up when the program specifically dictates it.

**Atheists in the Null**

When looking at Quebec’s demographics, the non-believing community is not a small share of the province. According to McGowan (2013) and Biddy (2007), Quebec is in a very unique position where even though 82% of the population identifies with
Catholicism, only 22% of the population admits to believing in a personal God. While the ERC program makes it quite clear that it privileges Quebec's religious heritage and that "[t]he historical and cultural importance of Catholicism and Protestantism is especially highlighted" (Ministère de l'Éducation, du Loisir et du Sport, 2008, p. 296), why is there so little in the program acknowledging people living without a belief in God? The ERC program also gives direct attention to Judaism, Islam, Buddhism and Hinduism, but the non-religious, even as Quebec's second largest affiliated group, are placed loosely in the "others" category. If, for arguments sake, the secular used in the program does not imply atheism, then from analyzing the program, atheism and non-believers seem to take a seat in the Null Curriculum. I believe that Eisner (1985) and Apple (1993) would agree that a possible reason for atheism not specifically being included in the program is that the curriculum is of a political nature and Quebec, who is proud of its religious heritage, consciously or unconsciously, and doesn’t want situations or problems solved from an atheistic mindset. Since the Hidden Curriculum helps teach students to see their teacher's words as truth (Apple, 1993), if atheism is never brought up in a positive light, then students will never consider it as an option. Flinders, Noddings and Thorton (1986) acknowledge that there are certain feelings and ideas that curriculums just don’t want introduced into the classrooms and I believe the stigmas attached to atheism keeps it out altogether. The only way to start breaking down these stigmas is to have comfortable safe dialogues in the classroom, which the ERC does encourage. The problem is, if a teacher strictly follows the guidelines of the program, can this safe environment be created, if the only time atheism is recognized is when it condemns God?
So what space is there for atheism?

To balance out the sense of negativity in previous paragraphs, this section will be more of a positive outlook on the program and the space atheism has within. As Knott (2011) explains, the success of the program depends on how the teacher interprets, not just the program, but their own professional stance. A lot of faith is put into the professionalism of the teacher. The teacher has to properly understand that their professional stance requires them to be “discreet and respectful, and to not promote their own beliefs and points of view” (Ministère de l’Éducation, du Loisir et du Sport, 2008, p. 459). Although difficult to achieve (Zaver, 2016; Knott, 2011), if done properly, the classroom can flourish in ethical dialogues between different cultures, faiths, beliefs and non-beliefs. The program is designed to create this type of atmosphere, but it is the teacher’s duty to implement it. To help create this safe space for atheists, the teacher could use their professional judgment on when and where to bring in atheistic viewpoints and thoughts. They could choose to explore more positive atheistic role models such as Charles Darwin, or Richard Feynman, whose goals were not to abolish religion, but to see the world through a more skeptical lens. And when the ERC program in Cycle two explores “The Existence of the Divine”, the teacher could take their students deeper into the understanding behind Marx, and Freud and go back in history to the first skeptics who questioned the idea of God. The program is open enough that if the teacher wanted to include atheism and ideas freethought throughout the year, they may do so. The section of the program that allows teachers to bring in any worldview outside of religion directly follows the section which instructs that any religion can be covered if the teacher sees fit. The program reads, “cultural expressions and expressions derived from representations of
the world and of human beings that reflect the meaning and value of human experience outside of religious beliefs and affiliation are addressed during the cycle” (Ministère de l'Éducation, du Loisir et du Sport, 2008, p. 341). The combination of these two sections allows for any worldview, religious or not, to have a chance to be included in the program. At first glance, I believed this line was reserved for spiritualism, but looking closer, this line could incorporate any worldviews outside of religious belief, such as; marxism, scientology, humanism, flat earthers, agnosticism, and of course atheism. The reason I did not include this section as a specific mention of atheism is that its goal is to allow teachers the ability to bring in any belief systems around the world, to make sure no one was left out. This in no way requires teachers to explore atheism like the program does with other belief systems. What it does require, is for the teacher to mention a worldview outside the realm of religion once in a cycle. On a positive note, by the ERC program adding this section it gives teachers the opportunity to explore atheism as a legitimate worldview alongside Christianity, Judaism, Native spirituality, Islam, Buddhism and Hinduism. Contrarily, the teacher could misunderstand their professional stance, teach from their own point of view, and only explore exactly what the program dictates and when. When reaching the section about belief systems outside of the realm of religion, the teacher could talk about spiritualism or agnosticism once somewhere in a two or three year cycle, and still be in accordance with the program's required teachings. I certainly do not believe a religious or atheist teacher would purposely create a bias in the classroom, but I do think teachers unconscious choices and vocabulary can alienate and make students feel uncomfortable expressing themselves.
In summary, and most importantly, the program only officially mentions atheism once, and depending on how the teacher approaches the subject, I feel it may cause more harm than good, since the curriculum relates atheism to denunciation of God and historical figures who militantly condemned the idea of God. Secondly, the program seems to imply that secularism equals non-belief, even though that goes against the recommendations of the Bouchard and Taylor report. Finally, the program is open enough in its wording that if the teacher wanted to explore atheism throughout the year they could do so, but the same could be said if a teacher wanted to mask all atheistic thought. A lot of the power is placed with the professionalism of the teacher and their understanding of their professional stance. As a teacher who still remembers his pre-service teaching colleagues, I am not positive of how many I would trust with this responsibility.
Chapter 8 – Conclusion

If man is to survive, he will have learned to take a delight in the essential differences between men and between cultures. He will learn that differences in ideas and attitudes are a delight, part of life’s exciting variety, not something to fear. – Gene Roddenberry (Creator of the TV series “Star Trek”)

The goal of this research was to answer the question: what kind of space does Quebec’s secular “Ethics and Religious Culture” (ERC) program create for atheism as a legitimate worldview? In the last Chapter, we discovered that the ERC program doesn’t explicitly give atheism very much space at all and the space that is given, depending on the teacher’s approach, may not be a positive influence on the worldview. The good news for atheism is that the program’s approach is open enough that if a teacher feels the need to explore atheism, they have the power to make professional judgments on when and where to add in the worldview. This leaves the final answer to this research’s main question up to each individual ERC teacher and classroom.

Hopefully this thesis has succeeded in showing why atheism deserves space in the program as a legitimate worldview through: 1) population representation, 2) righting historical prejudice, and 3) contributing to a more ethical society. To highlight the main points; Chapter One showed that globally, the non-religious community is nearly a third of the population, and in Quebec, non-believers are the second largest affiliation after Catholics. To ignore these numbers would be very discrediting to all non-religious worldviews. Chapters Five and Six explored the difficulties and blatant struggles atheists and non-believers have had historically and demonstrated how these challenges still exist
today. I truly believe that through Shared Reality theory, the stigmas attached to atheism will never change unless a new generation is shown what it really means to live without God. Finally, I believe educating children about atheism will contribute to a more ethical society and the overall common good. With Quebec’s open secularism, all worldviews have a place for dialogue. If the atheist voice is routinely shunned and regarded as God hating, they will never be given an equal chance at the discussion table. I have said this before, but the beauty of open secularism is that both believers and non-believers can be part of an open secular society. However, if prejudice towards atheism continues, non-believers will be left out. Children deserve the opportunity to explore all the different possibilities of how to view the world and life. If one viewpoint is left out, then that is the curriculum’s political bias dictating the student’s beliefs. Not representing an entire worldview is a form of oppression; “recognition is a basic need” (Boucher, 2003, p 1).

**Recommendations for future research**

I can imagine this research moving in two different directions for future considerations. First, I would like to adapt this research’s question from *what kind of space does Quebec’s secular “Ethics and Religious Culture” (ERC) program create for atheism as a legitimate worldview?* to, *what space do teachers give atheism as a legitimate worldview in Quebec’s Secular “Ethics and Religious Cultures” (ERC) program?* Since this research acknowledged that a lot of what is chosen in the program is based on the teacher’s professional judgements, it would be logical to try and figure out what these choices are. Interviewing individual ERC teachers would be the only way to actually explore how often atheistic worldviews are considered in the program. The research could also branch out
and discover how often other marginalized faiths are talked about, such as Islam. By interviewing individual teachers, more research could also be done on the ERC’s professional stance. As Zaver (2016) and Knott (2011) explain, staying true to the ERC’s professional stance is not a simple task and can be confusing at times. By interviewing teachers already in the field, the research could paint a picture of how teachers interpret their stance and how it is put into practice.

The other direction I could see this research going is exploring how teachers, who self-identify as atheists, perceive and teach the ERC program. I would like to ask these teachers their perceptions of the program and also how they cope with achieving their own professional stance. Since it is recognized that Quebec’s Christian heritage still influences the public school system, it would be interesting to see how atheist teachers perceive their own presence in the system. In my experience, teachers show little shyness in implying they are Christian in staffrooms and I would like to ask if atheist teachers would feel the same comfort exposing their own worldviews. If atheist teachers felt defensive about their own beliefs, then I wonder if this would trickle down to the students in the classroom.

For both of these future recommendations, I feel the best way to achieve the research would be through a virtual ethnography of either ERC or atheist teachers. To have a large enough sample pool, the research would have to be in a virtual space. To my knowledge, there are no statistics of what population of the teacher profession are atheists or one location where a researcher could go and gather self-identifying atheists for interviews. The best way to achieve these research goals would be to create a virtual space for ERC or atheist teachers to come together and safely explore their own ideas.
Final personal thoughts and recommendations

The Quebec education system puts a lot of faith into the teacher's professionalism when dealing with the Ethics and Religious cultures program. The key glue that holds the program from falling apart is its professional stance and reliance on teachers to follow it. The confidence I have in teachers following the professional stance is shaky at best. This shakiness comes from my own personal experiences, being an undergrad in the elementary education program, seeing colleagues teach the program, listening to pre-service teachers interpret their stance, and reading Knott's (2011) and Zaver's (2016) research. In a graduating class of about forty, I would not trust a quarter of them with treating atheism as a legitimate worldview. I also know of good teachers who just don't seem to grasp what their professional stance entails. This is most recognizable during Christmas time. Teacher's curriculums morph into Christmas themes and when questioned, their response is “If they don't celebrate it at home, then where else are they going to get it?” I believe that some teachers unconsciously lead with their hearts while their critical thinking disappears.

The recommendation I will put forward to the Ethics and Religious Cultures program is to be more specific with what is actually required to teach. It is quite clear on how often Christianity should be in the conversation, but leaving atheism up to the teacher’s professional judgment does not give me confidence. Atheism has been demonized for so long that I wonder how uncomfortable the topic is for some teachers. The fear of parent backlash may be enough to limit any conversations about atheism in the classroom. When the new Quebec History curriculum was first revealed, criticism grew of how the program largely ignored indigenous contributions and how the English were mainly
observed as villains towards the French (Wilton, 2017). The “history offered in this curriculum focuses very narrowly on the French-Canadian nation, its heritage and its aspirations as interpreted by the authors of the curriculum. Other Quebecers are not part of this story” (Laville & Dagenais, 2016. para. 5). What I find interesting is that one very controversial aspect of Quebec’s dark history was not specifically included into the program: Quebec’s residential schools. When critics asked why residential schools were not part of the program, Pascal Ouellet, a spokesperson for the Ministry of Education responded, “The compulsory programs do not prescribe any specific knowledge that must be acquired concerning residential schools. However, the programs give teachers enough flexibility regarding the historical knowledge that may be taught “(Rowe, 2015, para. 9). This reminds me of how I feel atheism was prescribed into the ERC program. It is not directly in the program, but the program is open enough for teachers to add it. The criticisms and pushback towards the Secondary history program largely worked as the Quebec Government took steps to replace the history textbooks with a version that better reflects Quebec’s minorities and officially mentions residential schools (Shingler, 2017 & Shingler, 2018). It is possible that if there was enough support from critics and the atheist community, the Ministry of Education could make changes to the ERC program.

Finally, I think it is crucial that Faculties of Education take the proper time in defining and exploring the teacher’s professional stance, with their pre-service teachers. While understanding their stance, pre-service teachers must also acknowledge Christian and White Privilege, and the effect the Hidden and Null curriculum have on students. Professors and lecturers are limited by time with educating pre-service teachers on critical thinking. The writings of Apple, Eisner, Gatto, and Freire can be driven only so far into the
heads of pre-service teachers. At one point, it is the pre-service teachers themselves that are responsible for further developing their critical minds.
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