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The Hereford Mappa Mundi (c. 1300) at Hereford Cathedral, UK, which shows the history, geography and destiny of humanity as it was understood in Christian Europe in the late 13th and early 14th centuries. Photo: David Winn-Morgan/Shutterstock.com

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ABSTRACT: This paper questions how competent physical and human geographers are at handling religion when they encounter it in passing. It specifically asks whether religious illiteracy is a problem in geographical education in the UK. It suggests that, despite significant advances in geographical scholarship on religion this century, this progress is yet to translate routinely into textbooks. These tend to repeat outdated claims about a supposed conflict between science and religion, and hinder the creation of inclusive and diverse classrooms by implying that students who belong to faith communities cannot be serious geographers. Using the example of water management in the Columbia River catchment/watershed and Indigenous communities and religious beliefs, the paper goes on to show why this matters in geographical education.

Keywords: diversity, religious illiteracy, Indigenous issues, Columbia River Treaty, geography of religion

Religious illiteracy in geographical education

There is a growing literature on religious il/literacy. The impetus for it has been concern among US educators about the social implications of a lack understanding about religion in US society since the Al-Qaeda attacks on 11 September 2001. Moore (2014) defines religious illiteracy as an inability 'to discern and analyze the fundamental intersections of religion and social/political/cultural life through multiple lenses' (pp. 379–80). In a much-cited book, she argues that 'The consequences of this religious illiteracy are significant and include fuelling the culture wars, curtailing historical and cultural understanding, and promoting religious and racial bigotry' (Moore, 2007, p. 3).

Is religious illiteracy a problem in geography? Some have claimed so. In an influential intervention, Kong (2001) identifies significant work by geographers on religion but argues that mainstream cultural geography has paid little to scant attention to it. Yorgason and della Dora (2009) have described religion as 'the last terra incognita' in geography (p. 631). In the fullest discussion on the topic, Reinhard Henkel (2011) asks, provocatively, 'Are geographers religiously unmusical?' Examining the German and Anglophone literatures, he argues that, despite a history of engagement with the subject, geographies of religion have remained marginal in human geography. He suggests three reasons for this: the influence of the secularisation thesis, the methodological challenges of studying religion with its truth claims, and a 'general shyness or a reluctance towards religion' among geographers personally (Henkel, 2011, p. 393).

Nonetheless, since Kong's intervention there has been considerable growth in the output and scope of work by geographers on religion. This includes but goes beyond traditional topics such as mapping the distributions of religious believers (Halfacree, 2005) or unbelievers (Warf, 2015), and exploring notions of sacred space in both institutional (Brauch *et al*., 2008) and everyday (Holloway, 2003) settings. In political geography the 11 September 2001 attacks and their aftermath prompted a surge of research into the geopolitics of Christianity (Megoran, 2006; Gerhardt, 2008; Dittmer and Sturm, 2010) and Islam (West, 2006; Hamdan, 2016), and austerity a decade later occasioned social geographers to explore the role of religion in motivating protest (Cloke *et al*., 2016) and anti-poverty voluntarism (Denning, 2021). A thoughtful dialogue has begun on the topic that Henkel identified as a particular factor in religious illiteracy among geographers, positionality and research methods (Denning *et al*., 2022; Johnsen and Fitzpatrick, 2022). Some geographers have drawn on theology to inform geographical theorisation, for example Sidaway's

(2023) use of Islamic scholarship to move 'beyond the decolonial', Hulme's (2009) rethinking of responses to climate change, and Megoran's (2010) engagement with Christian traditions of non-violent political theology to advance a peace agenda in geography. Finally, two monumental reference works – Brunn's (2015) 3,900-page, five-volume *The Changing World Religion Map* and Kong *et al.*'s (2025) 1,700-page *Handbook of the Geographies of Religion* are ample evidence of the burgeoning scholarship on geographies of religion.

Despite this progress, this flowering of academic scholarship has yet to be thoroughly translated into the textbooks we use in teaching. I examine two textbooks aimed at first-year undergraduates, one each from physical and human geography. I have selected them not only because they are superb introductions that I rely on for my own first-year teaching, but primarily because they are discipline-shaping texts and so how they handle religion has wider significance.

The first is Joseph Holden's (2017a) *Introduction to Physical Geography and the Environment*. Now in its fourth edition, its 26 chapters present a comprehensive introduction to Earth and climate systems. The team of 21 contributors that Holden has assembled have produced a clearly written and beautifully illustrated book that is a joy to teach from.

Unfortunately, its introductory chapter, 'Approaching physical geography', is problematic. Near the start an opening discussion of 'Physical geography before 1800' begins by praising Greek and Roman geographers, naming Aristotle and Eratosthenes. It then claims that 'Between the time of the Roman Empire and the sixteenth century, European science progressed very slowly. Often scholars rejected anything that seemed to go against the teachings of the Christian Church' (Holden, 2017b, p. 5). In contrast, it claims, 'Arab geographers' and 'Islamic writers' in the 'Middle East' 'were pioneering fieldwork whereby observations were given precedence' (p. 5).

The discussion goes on to say that the 15th- and 16th-century European voyages of exploration 'had begun to overturn traditional views of those thought to be authority figures' including 'leaders of the Christian Church' (Holden, 2017b, p. 5). The chapter proceeds to claim that with evolutionary theories 'came the undermining of traditional religious opinions' and that Auguste Comte's positivism sought to 'stick to what we can observe and measure and ensure science was separated from religious explanations for phenomena' (p. 10).

Advances in our understanding of the history of science over recent decades offer serious objections to this narrative. To start with the last point, Comte was the founder of a bizarre religion, 'The Religion of Mankind', based on the now discredited 'science' of phrenology with its sinister links to racial eugenics. But crucially, as we shall explore in detail later, the hypothesis of a simple conflict between science and the church is not supported by contemporary historians of science.

Holden's historical geography of religion is not without flaws. People did not call themselves 'Europeans' before the 15th century (Lewis and Wigen, 1997, p. 25) and the term 'Middle East' was established in the 20th century. Holden's account risks being geographically anachronistic in that it attempts to impose a framework of contemporary civilisational geopolitics onto a very different moment. This move allows the text to set up a stark dualism between a 'Europe' that is coterminous with the 'Christian church' and a 'Middle East' that is 'Islamic', effectively using the latter as a stick to beat the former. But that is far from our best current understanding. The transmission of Greek and Roman scientific knowledge into Arabic was largely done by Arabic-speaking Christian scholars (that is, members of the 'Christian church' that the account disparages) who made significant contributions to what some scholars have called 'Islamicate' culture, meaning the multicultural and multi-religious factors inherent in forming the Abbasid culture to which Holden is apparently referring (Griffith, 2016). This discussion accords to Moore's description of religious illiteracy as lacking 'a basic understanding of the history, central texts (where applicable), beliefs, practices and contemporary manifestations of several of the world's religious traditions as they arose out of and continue to be shaped by particular social, historical and cultural contexts' (Moore, 2014, p. 380).

Alastair Bonnett's (2023) short and extremely engaging book *What is Geography?* is the key opening reference in the UK Government's most recent subject report on geography in school-age education (Ofsted, 2023), and the Geographical Association (GA) uses it to define what geography is (GA, 2026). This indicates its importance in shaping the discipline. It is a different type of text to Holden's. Now in its second edition, described as a 'personal statement' about what geography is, it opens with a reflection on the famous Apollo 17 'Blue Marble' photograph, which Bonnett describes as 'a portrait of a modern, interdependent, geographical consciousness' (p. 2). Reflecting his 'fascination with the diverse traditions and historical origins of geography', Bonnett is better attuned than Holden to the intertwining of religious and geographical knowledge over time. He quotes the first words of the Bible, Genesis chapter 1, as an example of making sense of the existence of the world: 'In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth'. Recognising that 'Within medieval Europe rational geographical questions were […] pursued, often

Is religious illiteracy a problem in geographical education?

through the evaluation of observation and data', Bonnett's more sophisticated reflection on what counts as geographical knowledge leads him to insist that 'we have to move away from the notion that the Earth's story was once told in *purely* mythical and religious terms before undergoing a secular revolution' (Bonnett, 2023, p. 10).

With a better handle on recent scholarship of the history of geographical science, Bonnett avoids the pitfalls of religious illiteracy that mar Holden's account of the discipline's origins. Nonetheless, he claims that '[r]eligious explanations of the Earth's creation have been supplemented and, in the modern era, replaced by the conviction that the environment may be understood as a set of natural systems bound by natural laws' (Bonnett, 2023, p. 40). This suggests that the function of Biblical texts such as Genesis 1 was to provide a scientific account of how God created the Earth, and it no longer convinces geographers in this regard. However, mainstream Biblical interpretation of Genesis 1 sees it as indicating that, in contrast to alternative contemporary accounts of the world's origins being in the violent machinations of warring rival gods, an all-powerful and loving God created an ordered, rational and good universe (Robinson, 2024). This continues to inform the work of many scientists – including some of those on the Apollo programme where Bonnett's book begins. On Christmas Eve 1968, the Apollo 8 mission was orbiting the moon when crew member William Anders snapped the iconic 'Earthrise' photograph. The crew then transmitted a Christmas message back to Earth where roughly one billion people, one in four of Earth's population, heard it live. The crew read from Genesis 1, 'In the beginning, God created the heaven and the Earth' (Muir-Harmony, 2020). If 'religious explanations of the Earth's creation have been … replaced' (Bonnett, 2023, p. 40) no one passed that memo on to NASA.

In summary, Holden's otherwise excellent book presents us with the myth of a conflict between the Christian church and science. Bonnett's has a more nuanced understanding of the intersections between the two, but nonetheless could be read to imply that religion was once important to geographers but is no longer so. I suggest that each of these can be seen as an example of religious illiteracy in geographical education, and in the remaining two sections of this paper I explore in turn why each of these matters.

Reconnecting histories of geographical science and religion

Holden's uncritical reprise of the Christian church versus geographical science conflict narrative at the opening of his textbook matters primarily because it introduces students to an understanding of geography that is not supported by our best current understanding of the discipline. In a book debunking this and similar myths, historian of science Michael Shank (2009) writes that 'The crude concept of the Middle Ages as a millennium of stagnation brought on by Christianity has largely disappeared among scholars familiar with the period' (p. 20) but it unfortunately remains vigorous among some populisers of science, perhaps because they rely uncritically on their predecessors. An example is Carl Sagan's (1981) hugely influential book that accompanied his groundbreaking TV series *Cosmos*. In a scientific timeline for the world, Sagan (1981) left the millennium between 500 and 1500 blank with the label 'poignant lost opportunity for the human species' (p. 335). In one of the few explicitly atheist accounts of geographical science, Barney Warf (2015) repeats this, claiming that 'For a millennium, Christianity greatly retarded European scientific thought' (p. 2216). It is this 'conflict hypothesis' that Holden repeats uncritically to his undergraduate readers right at the start of his book.

The conflict hypothesis was invented in the late 19th century by polemicists with a strong anti-Catholic/papacy bent, as Protestantism, Eastern Orthodoxy and Islam were largely exempted from the critique (Spencer, 2023, p. 3). It has long been abandoned by 'serious scholarship in the history of science', which has revealed an 'extraordinarily rich and complex relationship between science and religion in the past' (Brooke, 2014, p. 6). A key contribution was Pierre Duhem's early 20th-century ten-volume history of medieval science that located the origins of modern science in the 13th century. Much subsequent work has built on this (Spencer, 2023).

In a whistle-stop tour of some of the accomplishments that Duhem's and subsequent research points to, Shank (2009) mentions the use of camera obscura to view solar eclipses, solving the problem of primary and secondary rainbows, the development of mathematical analysis to theorise ways of measuring motion including impetus theory to explain projectile motion and unceasing rotation of stars, and work on the rotation of Earth. This research was conducted by Catholic clergy under the patronage of the papacy: 'If the medieval church had intended to suppress the inquiry into nature, it must have been completely powerless, for it utterly failed to reach its goal', he concludes (Shank, 2009, p. 29).

Many of these areas of research – taught in universities including Oxford as 'mathematical geography' (Withers and Mayhew, 2002) – are particularly relevant to our discipline. Taking an example that is local to me, the eighth-century scholar and monk, Bede, based in a monastery at

Jarrow in northern England, significantly advanced our understanding of the tides and demonstrated their connection to the moon's orbit. In an early demonstration of the scientific method that would be recognisable to any scholar today, he began by posing the problem of how and why tides occur, then consulted the widest variety of sources available, proposed a thesis, conducted a number of experiments (asking other monasteries to provide comparative studies of tide levels and times), and used these results to test his hypothesis (Benison, 2000). Chapman (2013) adds further examples. Advancing the newly devised technology of clockwork, Richard of Wallingford, the Abbot at St Albans, built a sophisticated working model of the universe. Similarly, Europe developed a rich tradition of 'scientific cartography' with very accurate and detailed navigational maps of the Mediterranean, Baltic and other seas (Chapman, 2013). The Middle Ages had a 'rich intellectual culture', he concludes, and the idea of a conflict between science and the church holding it back is a 'pervasive and grotesque myth' (p. 65).

Where this geographical and scientific scholarship flowered is also important. Whereas early medieval science such as Bede's took place in monasteries, in time '[t]he medieval period gave birth to the university' (Shank, 2009, p. 21). Developed from 1200 CE with the active support of the papacy, by 1500 there were about 60 universities in Europe. Tutors were highly trained priests, but only a minority of students studied theology, which was seen as advanced (masters) level subject. About a third of the curriculum was the study of the natural world/mathematical geography. These universities gave the science that developed as a fusion of Greco-Roman, Christian and later Arabic thought its first permanent home: by 1500 it is estimated that a quarter of a million students in German universities alone had been exposed to the subject (Shank, 2009). Spencer (2023) argues that the concept of universities as legal corporations in Christian Europe facilitated the decentralisation and independence of intellectual activity, which helped protect it from the whims of rulers and benefactors. It is ironic that all but one of the 21 contributors to Holden's book (2017) work at European universities, yet in recycling the conflict hypothesis Holden misses the origin of the very institution that enabled the production of his textbook.

It is not clear why Holden uncritically reproduces an idea that has been so widely discredited. The first edition of Holden's textbook (2005) had the attacks on the medieval Christian Church that the present edition (Holden, 2017b) has, but less on the relationship between science and Islam. This stark contrast with 'Europe' was introduced later: the second edition (2008) dismisses 'European geographical work' as 'trivial' in comparison with 'Islamic writers of the Middle Ages' (p. 5). Spencer (2023) observes that Islamic contributions to science are sometimes recognised, albeit superficially, by polemicists who were keen to weaponise them against Christianity (especially Catholicism), and Holden's account risks reprising that polemical move. This could have been avoided by consulting the vast literature on the history and philosophy of science, but unfortunately not a single academic reference is provided in support of any of the claims in this section across all four editions.

The book instead resonates with older ideas advanced by populisers of science such as Carl Sagan. In the introduction to their 700-page volume on medieval science, Shank and Lindberg (2013) excoriate the ignorance represented by Sagan's infamous timeline that Holden's narrative mirrors. 'The timeline reflected not the state of knowledge', they argue, 'but Sagan's own "poignant lost opportunity" to consult the library of Cornell University, where he taught. In it, Sagan would have discovered large volumes devoted to the medieval history of his own field' (Shank and Lindberg, 2013, p. 10). This should be a salutary comment to us as geographers, too. If we are going to stray into the history of geographical science – as we ought to – then it matters that we teach our undergraduates the best understanding of the history of science that we can, by leaning on the best current scholarship.

River catchments and decolonising geography

The second problem with religious illiteracy in geographical education is that the implication that religious understandings of Earth have been replaced reduces our ability to train geographers to be aware of the rights of Indigenous and other marginalised peoples. This can be seen in relation to how large-scale river management planning in the Columbia River catchment has harmed Indigenous peoples by being blind to the religious significance they attach to sustainable catchment management.

In 1948, the city of Vanport, outside present-day Portland, Oregon, was entirely destroyed by a flood. City officials failed to issue an evacuation order because engineering inspections suggested the dikes would hold (Podany, 2016); however, they made the mistake of focusing on the dikes, not the whole river system. Geographers have thus advanced the concept of river catchment (or watershed in North America) as a more useful way to look at fluvial systems. An understanding of the catchment system allows us to predict total outputs of water and sediment through the main channel and thus predict whether dikes will hold and rivers will flood.

Is religious illiteracy a problem in geographical education?

Using this geographical vision to prevent a repeat of the disaster, and recognising that at 668,217 square kilometres (258,000 square miles), the Columbia basin transcends the artificial boundary running along the 49th parallel (see Figure 1), in 1961 the US and Canadian authorities signed the Columbia River Treaty (CRT). This constructed three large dams in British Columbia (Canada) and one in Montana (USA). By preventing further disastrous flooding and providing plenteous hydroelectricity, the CRT was hailed as 'a landmark in international river development' (Sewell, 1964). However, there were also losers, chiefly Indigenous/First Nations people of the Columbia River catchment. The Syilx Okanagan people live in the upper part of the catchment, on what is now the Canadian side. Their whole way of life has historically been linked to the sockeye (Pacific red) salmon (*Oncorhynchus nerka*), their major food source. The sockeye is also central to the Syilx Okanagan's religious beliefs. They hold that 'the big river' is sacred and Coyete, a divinity, first brought sockeye to it. Like the river itself, sockeye salmon are seen as sacred relatives: to be fished as food, but to be treated with dignity. The Syilx have fished them, sustainably, since time immemorial, understanding local river catchment management and the importance of not over-fishing.

The CRT devastated local ecosystems and threatened Syilx existence. Upstream salmon migration was blocked, downstream migration was hampered by dangerous turbines and decreased river velocities, and staple food sources such as plankton were killed by changes in water levels. All this led to near extinction of the sockeye in many parts of the river. Furthermore, sacred sites were submerged under reservoirs. After decades of struggle for their rights, legal changes have occurred. In the landmark 2014 Tsilhqot'in case, the Supreme Court of Canada established that aboriginal rights and title can no longer be legally ignored and that First Nations must be involved at a strategic level in decisions that impact their territories. Courts have forced the government to involve Indigenous peoples in renegotiating the CRT (Baltutis and Moore, 2020).

One result of this has been the development of 'Collaborative Watershed Governance', the Government of British Columbia working with Indigenous communities to sustainably manage

Figure 1: *The location of the Columbia River basin in Canada and the USA.*

local watersheds (Simms *et al*., 2016). Measures such as the opening of new salmon hatcheries and the construction of channels around the dams for migratory salmon to bypass the deadly turbines, have been successful in enhancing local ecosystems, reviving salmon numbers, and preserving Indigenous ways of life (Government of British Columbia, 2023).

The Syilx word for these activities is '*snxa?l'iwlem*', translated as 'honouring the sacredness of the river'. The 2014 Okanagan 'Syilx Water Declaration' states that 'The Okanagan Nation has accepted the unique responsibility bestowed upon us by the Creator to serve for all time as protectors of the lands and waters in our territories, so that all living things return to us regenerated' (Syilx Okanagan Nation Alliance, 2023). As Yi-Fu Tuan – the consummate geographer who moved between European, Middle Eastern and East Asian religious and geographical worldviews – documents in *The Hydrologic Cycle and the Wisdom of God* (1968), previous generations of geographers had a better understanding than we do today about this belief in divine involvement in the water cycle and a sense that this enjoined upon humans responsibility for the proper stewardship of Earth that the Creator has entrusted to our care. Our collective religious illiteracy in forgetting this has had disastrous consequences for Indigenous peoples in the impact of geographical-led modernist development projects. By inculcating a higher degree of religious literacy, we need to ensure that our textbooks help the next generations of geographers to avoid making the same mistakes.

Conclusion

Religious illiteracy is the lack of a basic understanding about key aspects of world religions and how they intersect with broader historical and cultural contexts. Looking at two important geography textbooks, this article suggests that both exhibit aspects of religious illiteracy either by perpetuating the now discredited 'myth of the medieval church's opposition to science' (Shank, 2009, p. 18) or, more subtly, by implying that present-day geographical science has superseded religion.

This matters for four reasons. First, we ought to help students think critically about popular myths by cultivating the best possible understanding of the history of geographical science. Second, religious illiteracy has led to modernist geographical development projects that have had disastrous impacts on Indigenous peoples. Third, it hinders efforts to decolonise the discipline. Fourth and finally, 'religion and belief' are protected characteristics in the 2010 UK Equalities Act, yet implying that intelligent, modern geographers cannot hold religious faith prevents the creation of inclusive, diverse and equal classrooms as it risks marginalising and belittling students in a classroom who do belong to a faith and/or Indigenous community.

The geography of religion is a vibrant field, but this has yet to be translated into the textbooks that will shape the next generation of geographers. There are recent signs of progress: the latest edition of *Introducing Human Geographies* has chapters on topics including 'religion', 'spectral geography' and 'spiritual activism and postsecularity' (Dombroski *et al*., 2024). This is a welcome start, but further work is needed to promote a more religiously literate geographical classroom.

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Is religious illiteracy a problem in geographical education?

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