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# The Routledge Handbook of Religious Literacy, Pluralism, and Global Engagement

Edited by Chris Seiple and Dennis R. Hoover



# THE ROUTLEDGE HANDBOOK OF RELIGIOUS LITERACY, PLURALISM, AND GLOBAL ENGAGEMENT

This pioneering handbook proposes an approach to pluralism that is relational, principled, and non-relativistic, going beyond banal calls for mere “tolerance.”

The growing religious diversity within societies around the world presents both challenges and opportunities. A degree of competition between deeply held religious/worldview perspectives is natural and inevitable, yet at the same time the world urgently needs engagement and partnership across lines of difference. None of the world’s most pressing problems can be solved by any single actor, and as such it is not a question of *if* but *when* you partner with an individual or institution that does not think, act, or believe as you do. The authors argue that *religious literacy*—defined as a dynamic combination of competencies and skills, continuously refined through real-world cross-cultural engagement—is vital to building societies and states of neighborly solidarity and civic fairness.

Through examination, reflection, and case studies across multiple faith traditions and professional fields, this handbook equips scholars and students, as well as policymakers and practitioners, to assess, analyze, and act collaboratively in a world of deep diversity.

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*Chris Seiple and Dennis R. Hoover*



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**We dedicate this book to anyone who wants to thoughtfully and practically engage the world's greatest challenges, and who embraces the opportunities of working with others who do not think, believe, or act as they do.**



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# Introduction



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# 1

## RETHINKING RELIGIOUS LITERACY AND PLURALISM

Crossing cultures, making covenants,  
and engaging globally

*Chris Seiple and Dennis R. Hoover*

It was never our intention to go to Pakistan. But one day, in the fall of 2003, the Institute for Global Engagement (IGE), where we both worked and are still affiliated, received a guest who asked: “I don’t know what you do—I think you build bridges—but how would you like to travel to Peshawar, Pakistan, and engage the newly elected Chief Minister of the Northwest Frontier Province?”<sup>1</sup> It would have been easy to say no. IGE was only three years old. As a think-and-do-tank, IGE was busy building new educational programs while also building relationships that would eventually yield forums across Asia on religion and the rule of law, security, and citizenship. And we had just founded *The Review of Faith & International Affairs*, a first-of-its-kind journal published quarterly by Routledge.

Chris sought some advice. Early in 2004, Chris had lunch with Akbar Ahmed, the longtime Ibn Khaldun Chair of Islamic Studies and Professor of International Relations at American University. When asked how to think about this opportunity to expand IGE’s work to Pakistan, particularly the area along the Afghanistan border between Peshawar and Bannu where he had served as a Pakistani civil servant, Akbar replied: “I’ve been a Pashtun for 3,000 years, a Muslim for 1,400, and a Pakistani for 57.”

Akbar’s point was succinct and profound. Akbar knew who he was. He was fluent in his culture, his faith, and his country—across time and space. Were we literate in who we were, much less the peoples of the Northwest Frontier, and their faith traditions? Could we understand ourselves, and could we muster the will and skills to truly understand the Pashtun-Muslim people of Pakistan?

Akbar was saying that to engage the Pashtun-Muslim culture in Northwest Pakistan successfully—that is, to develop and implement sustainable projects, together—we would need much more than good intentions, much more than surface level familiarity with the country. As with any engagement, we would have to review motivations and interests, ours, and theirs. We had to think through what we thought about ourselves, and what we believed about engaging a people and culture so different than our own. We also had to think about those people and their



culture, and how they understood themselves, *and*, how they understood engaging a people and culture so different than their own. And then, as a result, we had to think through what goals we might develop and implement with them.

We had the *will* to develop a deepening competency about ourselves, the Pashtuns, and what we might do together, but, frankly, we did not have the *skills*. In his first meeting with the Chief Minister of the Northwest Frontier Province, Chris found himself asking: “Why do you do what you do?” The Chief Minister responded: “I believe that the Creator will hold me accountable for the way I govern my people.” Chris did not expect that answer, let alone concurring that he believed the same thing too (even though he also knew that he had serious theological and political differences with the Chief Minister). But there Chris was: Totally unprepared to evaluate, negotiate, and/or communicate the moment, because he did not have the skills to be competent in himself, the other, and what might be done together.

And so began a learning process that continues to this day. Chris eventually made several trips to Pakistan, making many friends, with whom IGE subsequently worked on various innovative projects (e.g., a fellows program at the University of Science and Technology in Bannu). This process of partnership took place faster because both parties sought to know their own faith and culture at their richest and deepest best, and enough about the other’s faith and culture to demonstrate genuine respect (not merely “tolerance”) for the essence of the other’s identity. This respect was for each other’s inherent dignity, and genuinely held beliefs (while not implying any blanket endorsement of the other’s beliefs). Across different ethnic and political cultures, as well as irreconcilable theological differences, they learned how to agree to disagree, agreeably, and therefore how to work together, practically.

This model and mindset, encouraged by similar experiences in other countries, set the organizing pattern for IGE’s work in its early years, and continues to guide its work in challenging contexts around the world—China, Vietnam, Laos, Myanmar, Uzbekistan, Northern Iraq, and parts of Northern and Eastern Africa—as well as its Center for Women, Faith and Leadership, which ensures that gender is an integral dimension of IGE’s engagement in each place. In each of these situations, the key has always been the same: Seeking first to understand the essence of one’s own, as well as the other’s, identity before engaging to create a relationship capable of discovering common values, and common interests, pursuant a common project.

IGE did not use phrases like “cross-cultural religious literacy” and “covenantal pluralism” to describe what it was doing and why, but, in reflection, these concepts capture the core of IGE’s ethos and methodology. As we have come to define it, cross-cultural religious literacy is a set of skills (evaluation, negotiation, and communication) rooted in a set of competencies (in understanding oneself, understanding the religious “other,” and understanding the context of potential collaboration). These competencies and skills contribute to, and are refined by, practical experiences of mutual engagement, embodied and lived in specific contexts. Cross-cultural religious literacy is a means toward the ends of “covenantal pluralism.” The philosophy of covenantal pluralism calls both for a constitutional order of equal rights and responsibilities and for cultural norms of engaging, respecting, and protecting the other (albeit *without* necessarily conceding moral equivalence to all the beliefs and behaviors of others).

As our writings and conferences suggest, across IGE’s first 20 years, we constantly assessed and analyzed ourselves, as well as our potential partners and their context, and continue to do so, before applying ideas developed together.<sup>2</sup> We have also sought to equip others worldwide, of any religion or no religion, to similarly consider and include religion—in their academic disciplines and professional sectors—understanding that religion can potentially be, depending on the context, a tremendous force for good, or ill.

## **Global context and the need for religious literacy**

Scholarly specialists in religious studies have of course long argued for the value of education about comparative religion. But it wasn't until after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, that a broader sense of urgency about religious literacy began to take root. Moreover, the processes of globalization—and reactions to those processes—over the ensuing two decades have only further heightened the need for cross-cultural religious literacy across virtually every sector of society and governance, domestically and transnationally.

Globalization is many things, but it seems to have two primary, sometimes countervailing, effects. First, and most practically, globalization creates or exacerbates problems that can only be solved through broad-based partnership. Today's interrelated global challenges—from trade to terrorism, climate change to counterproliferation, development to deterrence, and health(care) to human rights—demand different perspectives, as well as different partnerships among individuals and institutions that will not share the same faith background or worldview orientation. We believe that in a world where no global challenge can be solved by a single state or non-state actor, it is not a question of *if* but *when* you partner with an individual or institution that does not think, act, or believe as you do.

In other words, no matter our different spiritual epistemologies and/or ethical frameworks, it is in our collective self-interest to find a way to work together. Which is also to say—consciously or sub-consciously—each of us will possess a different point of moral departure that de facto exercises a philosophy of the other in building practical partnerships. Our global engagement pursuant to our self-interest cannot help but reflect what we believe about someone else, a needed partner, who doesn't believe as we do.

Globalization's second effect is its constant impact on identity. The continuous transfer of information and increase in mobility accelerated by globalization inevitably challenge how we understand and conceive of ourselves, the other, and the world. In the best of circumstances, encounter and principled engagement with different religious and philosophical frameworks strengthen our identity as we consider teachings and thinking that, despite differences, can anchor our spiritual/moral identity in the other (i.e., the Golden Rule).

But we also know that information can be manipulated to play upon and/or create real and alleged threats to our identity. Much too often, sadly, people cannot live out their identity because their beliefs are construed as a threat. Annually since 2007 the Pew Research Center has been measuring government restrictions on religion around the world. In 2018, religious restrictions reached an all-time high (Pew Research Center 2020). The total number of countries with “high” or “very high” levels of government restrictions also increased, rising from 52 in 2017 to 56 in 2018. Pew also reports an index of social hostilities involving religion. In 2018 this index was down slightly—but only after having reached an all-time high in 2017.

Given such repression and hostility it is perhaps not surprising that our world is now experiencing the most displaced people since World War II. According to the United Nations, over 80 million people have been displaced from their home (UNHCR 2020). Too often, people are fleeing conflict where religion has seemingly been used to validate the power of one group (often the ethno-religious majority) against another (usually ethno-religious minorities) (Theodorou 2014; see also Falk 2019 and Seiple 2016).

These two combined and countervailing effects of globalization—a need for partnership when we are unwilling (no will) and/or unable (no skills) to partner because of (perceived) threats to our respective identities—yield a world of conceptual, geographic, and spiritual dis-

ruption and dislocation. It is hard to work together when our identity is defined against, and/or as under threat from, the other. Inevitably, people suffer, ask why, and yearn for meaning.

Globally, religion remains a pervasive force, one that can be used for good and bad. As such, the stakes for cross-cultural religious literacy, and *illiteracy*, are high. As Stephen Prothero, a leader in the field of religious literacy, has written: “religious illiteracy is more dangerous because religion is the most volatile constituent of culture, because religion has been, in addition to one of the greatest forces for good in world history, one of the greatest forces for evil” (Prothero 2007, 17).

### The emerging field of religious literacy

In the American context, the field of religious literacy crossed a threshold of public awareness in 2007, with the publication of several key books. The most widely cited is the *New York Times* bestselling *Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know About Religion—But Doesn't*, by Prothero. Prothero wrote *Religious Literacy* “to produce citizens who know enough about Christianity and the world’s religions to participate meaningfully—on both the left and the right—in religiously inflected public debates.” His was not a favoritism of Christianity but simply a naming of a fact: Various understandings of Christianity played an instrumental role in the founding and evolution of the United States. One cannot, Prothero argued, be a fully engaged citizen of the US unless one is functionally literate about its history, a history which Biblical diction and theological doctrine played a vital part in shaping (and still do). Prothero defined religious literacy as “the ability to understand and use in one’s day-to-day life the basic building blocks of religious traditions—key terms, symbols, doctrines, practices, sayings characters, metaphors, and narratives” (Prothero 2007, 12).

Diane Moore—another leader in the emergent field of religious literacy—agrees that facts about religion are important, and that they should be taught in America’s public schools (also for the sake of citizenship). But she felt it imperative to stress that facts about religion do not exist in isolation. They should be situated and understood in context. For example, an understanding of suffering is instrumental to the Christian faith; but that understanding, and how it shapes eventual application, will likely differ according to the socio-cultural and historical contexts of whether the group of believers is part of the ethnic majority or minority (e.g., white and black churches in America). Moreover, these contexts also had to be taught, and how they were taught must be given conscious and ongoing reflection.

In her 2007 book, *Overcoming Religious Illiteracy: A Cultural Studies Approach to the Study of Religion in Secondary Education*, Moore made a threefold case for the multi-disciplinary approach of cultural studies and its effort to name the relevant lenses, situated facts, and inherent biases. This holistic approach (Moore 2007, 5) assumes that:

- “[W]ithout a basic understanding of the beliefs, symbols, literature, and practices related to the world’s religious traditions, much of history and culture is rendered incomprehensible. Religion has always been and continues to be woven into the fabric of cultures and civilizations in ways that are inextricable. The failure to recognize this fact impoverishes our understanding of human experience and sends the false message that religion is primarily an individual as opposed to a social phenomenon.”
- “[R]eligious worldviews provide alternative frameworks from which to critique normative cultural assumptions. ... [T]he study of religion can serve to enhance rather than thwart critical thinking and cultural imagination regarding human agency and capacity.”
- “[K]nowledge of the basic tenets and structures of the world’s religions is essential to a functioning democracy in our increasingly pluralistic age.”

Moore (2007, 56) went on to define religious literacy as

the ability to discern and analyze the fundamental intersections of religion and social/political/cultural life through multiple lenses. Specifically, a religiously literate person will possess 1) a basic understanding of the history, central texts, 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; and 2) the ability to discern and explore the religious dimensions of political, social, and cultural expressions across time and place ... This understanding of religious literacy emphasizes a method of inquiry more than specific content knowledge, though familiarity with historical manifestations is an important foundation for understanding the intersections of religion with other dimensions of human social life.

These influential writings set the pattern for what followed in the emerging field of religious literacy: An American K-12 emphasis on understanding the other, but not necessarily the (role of) self during engagement of the other. For example, also in 2007, the First Amendment Center published *Finding Common Ground: A First Amendment Guide to Religion and Public Schools* (Haynes and Thomas 2007). They argued that general education is woefully incomplete without imparting at least basic knowledge of religion, and they challenged the widespread misunderstanding of the Constitutional separation of church and state as somehow barring teaching *about* religion (from a nonsectarian point of view).

In 2010 the American Academy of Religion (AAR) issued its *Guidelines for Teaching about Religion in K-12 Public Schools in the United States*. Produced by an AAR task force chaired by Diane Moore, the *Guidelines* articulated the rationale for religious literacy education as follows: "Illiteracy regarding religion 1) is widespread, 2) fuels prejudice and antagonism, and 3) can be diminished by teaching about religion in public schools using a non-devotional, academic perspective, called religious studies" (AAR Religion in the Schools Task Force 2010). Building on this achievement, in 2011 Moore began laying the groundwork for a Religious Literacy Project based at Harvard Divinity School.

In 2015, Adam Dinham and Matthew Francis published their edited book, *Religious Literacy in Policy and Practice*, in which they argued (Dinham and Francis 2015, 257, 266, 270) that religious literacy "is a stretchy, fluid concept that is variously configured and applied in terms of the context in which it happens ... [R]eligious literacy is necessarily a non-didactic idea that must be adapted as appropriate to the specific environment." They further concluded that

religious literacy lies in having the knowledge about at least some religious traditions, and an awareness of and ability to find out about others. Its purpose is to avoid stereotypes, engage, respect, and learn from others, and build good relations across difference. *In this it is a civic endeavor rather than a religious one, and seeks to support a strong multifaith society, that is inclusive of people from all faith traditions and none, within a context that is largely suspicious and anxious about religion and belief.*

[emphasis added]

Accordingly, religious literacy "is best understood as a framework to be worked out in context. In this sense, it is better to talk of religious literacies in the plural than literacy in the singular."

Also in 2015, Moore founded the Religious Literacy Project at Harvard Divinity School, which among other things has sought to apply religious literacy in various professional fields, running symposia on topic areas such as media and entertainment, journalism, immigration ser-

vices, and humanitarian action. For example, a 2017 study with Oxfam looked at the religious literacy of faith-based relief and development NGOs (Gingerich et al. 2017). Moore also added the consideration of “power and powerlessness” to her method for exploring religious literacy, suggesting that questions had to be asked about “which perspectives are politically and socially prominent,” and why (Moore 2015).

In 2017, the US National Council for Social Studies, through the support of the AAR and the Religious Freedom Center, added religious studies to its “C3 Framework for Social Studies State Standards” (National Council for Social Studies 2017). Reflecting on this Framework, Religious Freedom Center Director (at the time) Charles Haynes remarked:

Religious literacy is critical for sustaining the American experiment in religious liberty and diversity. Only by educating students about religions and beliefs in ways that are constitutionally and academically sound can the United States continue to build one nation out of many cultures and faiths.

(National Council for Social Studies n.d.)

In 2018 the emerging field of religious literacy began to consider global application, as well as the role of the one seeking religious literacy about the other. The Religious Freedom Center’s Benjamin Marcus, for example, warned against a linguistic mirror-imaging of the religious other while engaging him/her. Marcus (2018) noted that “Americans read the world fluently using their own religious language, but many are incapable of understanding the language of the religious other in public life.” To truly understand and respect the other “requires the ability to parse religious language and to analyze how individuals and communities value each component with their religious identities.”

Religious literacy education has also begun to expand beyond K-12 to address higher education. Douglas Jacobsen and Rhonda Hustedt Jacobsen pointed the way in their important 2012 book, *No Longer Invisible: Religion in University Education*. One example of the growing interest in religious literacy at the university level came in January of 2018, when Chris taught “Cross-Cultural Religious Literacy & Leadership in an Age of Partnership” for the first time at the University of Washington’s Jackson School of International Studies. This class resulted from Chris’ experiences at IGE as well as a “Bridging the Gap” grant from the Carnegie Endowment meant to help the academy become more relevant to policymakers. Through this class, and his work with the Templeton Religion Trust, Chris began to apply his global experiences through building a broader framework of religious literacy: i.e., beginning with the self, then the other, while focusing on the skills necessary to do something together (See Seiple 2018a, 2018b). In March 2019, the University of Washington Board of Regents unanimously approved “Cross-Cultural Religious Literacy” as a graduate certificate.<sup>3</sup>

The recognition of religious literacy as a priority in higher education took another step forward in November 2019, when the AAR published its “Religious Literacy Guidelines: What U.S. College Graduates Need to Know about Religion.” Echoing the catalytic work of Diane Moore, who co-chaired the report, the AAR (2019) states:

Religious literacy helps us understand ourselves, one another, and the world in which we live. It includes the abilities to:

- Discern accurate and credible knowledge about diverse religious traditions and expressions;
- Recognize the internal diversity within religious traditions;

- Understand how religions have shaped—and are shaped by—the experiences and histories of individuals, communities, nations, and regions;
- Interpret how religious expressions make use of cultural symbols and artistic representations of their times and contexts;
- Distinguish confessional or prescriptive statements made by religions from descriptive or analytical statements.

Later, in Appendix B of the guidelines, the AAR, taking more notice of the person seeking to engage the religious other, defined religious literacy as

the ability to discern and analyze the role of religion in personal, social, political, professional, and cultural life. Religious literacy fosters the skills and knowledge that enable graduates to participate—in informed ways—in civic and community life; to work effectively and collaboratively in diverse contexts; to think reflectively about commitments to themselves and others; and to cultivate self-awareness.

In October 2020, Moore also launched the Master of Religion and Public Life degree program at Harvard Divinity School to “advance the public understanding of religion in service of a just world at peace.”<sup>4</sup>

## **Implications**

By way of summary thus far, there are several dimensions to “religious literacy” in its fullest sense. The first is recognition of the implicit difference between diversity and pluralism. Diversity is the presence of difference. It is side-by-side tolerance. Diana Eck, director of the Harvard Pluralism Project, writes:

Pluralism is not diversity alone, but the energetic engagement with diversity. Diversity can and has meant the creation of religious ghettos with little traffic between or among them. Today, religious diversity is a given, but pluralism is not a given; it is an achievement.

(Eck n.d.)

The second key element, accordingly, is engagement. If we want to move beyond tolerance, we will need the will and skills to engage. Engagement requires an understanding of the other’s motivations and interests, and some self-awareness of one’s own. Engaging a religious actor is no different than engaging a secular one—the process still requires an understanding of what you and the other party seek, and why. “Religious literacy” at the least is a tool for understanding the religious other. Certainly, Prothero, Moore, and Marcus, among others, would begin there.

But, it is also true that most writers would agree that context is at the heart of “religious literacy” as a means to understanding, if not application. Judgment and flexibility are therefore vital characteristics, as individuals, situations, and contexts vary. (Flexibility is also important because, as the above survey indicates, religious literacy itself is an evolving concept.) And if religious literacy is context-dependent, then it is inevitably also about *relationships*. Such extrapolative logic suggests that the religious literacy necessary to engage the other requires multi-level and multi-directional understanding—including understanding of the situation and place, and, understanding of oneself, as one comes into relationship with the other and the place.

Religious literacy, therefore, is relational even as it implicitly, given the many unknowns, demands a humble approach in its desire to cross from mere tolerance of diversity to proactive and nonrelativistic pluralism, through mutual engagement. In fact, it is a civic responsibility. In his discussion of “deep pluralism,” William Connolly (2005, 64–65) writes:

In the ideal case each faith thereby *embeds* the religious virtue of hospitality and the civic virtue of presumptive generosity into its relational practices. It inserts relational modesty into its ritual practices to amplify one side of its own faith—the injunction to practice hospitality toward other faiths coexisting with it—and to curtail pressures within it to repress or marginalize other faiths. To participate in the public realm does not now require you to leave your faith at home in the interests of secular reason (or one of its surrogates); it involves mixing into the relational practice of faith itself a preliminary readiness to negotiate with presumptive generosity and forbearance in those numerous situations where recourse to the porous rules of commonality across faiths, public procedure, reason, or deliberation are insufficient to the issue at hand.

Negotiation of such an ethos of pluralism, first, honors the embedded character of faith; second, gives expression to a fugitive element of care, hospitality, or love for differences simmering in most faiths; third, secures specific faiths against persecution; and, fourth, offers the best opportunity for diverse faiths to coexist without violence while supporting the civic conditions of common governance. It does not issue in a simple universalism in which one image of transcendence sets the standard everywhere or in a cultural relativism in which one faith prevails here and another there. It is neither universalism nor relativism in the simple mode of each. It is deep pluralism.

Such an interconnected web of relationships between and among religious (and non-religious) people requires, as Connolly emphasizes, the skill of negotiation. Negotiation, however, begins with the skill of evaluation (i.e., the capacity to assess and analyze the various dynamics at play); and commences and ends with the skill of communication (how something is said, or not said, is often more important than what is said). This web of relationships also requires, as Connolly suggests, the best of one’s values, as well as a keen understanding of the power dynamics at play (which can result in violence, if not managed properly).

Certainly, this has been our experience in our work with IGE over the years. We always found good people everywhere, engaging according to the best of their faith and conscience, and as a civic responsibility, living out the values of charity, hospitality, and respect toward the (religious) other. But it is also true that we always found contentious issues that invariably pointed back to the local power dynamic between the ethnic and/or religious majority and the ethnic and/or religious minorities. For example, access to education, worship, and good development were often part and parcel of the majority–minority power relationship. A holistic approach to religious literacy requires situated knowledge—a knowledge that is not only academic but also contextual and relational.

Of course, such dynamics are part of the human condition. James C. Scott’s important scholarship on the history of the people of upland Southeast Asia provides vivid examples of such majority–minority power relations. In *The Art of Not Being Governed*, Scott (2009, 13, 19, 20, 27, 155, 158, 337) writes:

The attempt to bring the periphery into line is read by representatives of the sponsoring state as providing civilization and progress—where progress is, in turn, read as the intrusive propagation of the linguistic, agricultural, and religious practices of the

dominant ethnic group: the Han, the Kinh, the Burman, the Thai. ... In the pre-colonial period, the resistance can be seen in a cultural refusal of lowland patterns and in the flight of lowlanders seeking refuge in the hills. ... The hills, however, are not simply a space of political resistance but also a zone of cultural refusal. ... Treatment of lowland cultures and societies as self-contained entities (for example, “Thai civilization,” “Chinese culture”) replicates the unreflective structure of scholarship and, in doing so, adopts the hermetic view of culture that lowland elites themselves wish to project. The fact is that hill and valley societies have to be read against each other to make any sense. ... *The religious “frontier” beyond which orthodoxy could not easily be imposed was therefore not so much a place or defined border as it was a relation to power—that varying margin at which state power faded appreciably ... Religious identity in this case is a self-selected boundary-making device designed to emphasize political and social difference ...* The valley imagination has its history wrong. Hill peoples are not pre-anything. In fact, they are better understood as post-irrigated rice, postsedentary, postsubject, and perhaps even postliterate. They represent, in the longue durée, a reactive and purposeful statelessness of peoples who have adapted to a world of states while remaining outside their firm grasp.

[emphasis added]

Nuanced understandings of power dynamics (including racial dynamics), and how they impact local self-understanding, are essential to meaningful mutual engagement. Put differently, Scott’s description of lowland and highland Southeast Asia suggests the kind of questions that a holistic approach to religious literacy must ask of the context, and the potential partners involved, ever appreciating the situated knowledge, as well as one’s own self-understanding, and the interaction between them. In short: It’s complicated, fluid, and evolving.

### **From academic to cross-cultural religious literacy: competencies and skills**

Cross-cultural religious literacy demands that one be reflective about one’s philosophy/theology of the other, toward practical and positive engagement in a multi-faith, globalizing world that will require multi-faith partners to serve the common good. Put simply, we must first understand ourselves (a personal competency), then understand others as they understand themselves (a comparative competency), and then understand the nature and requirements of leadership in crossing cultural and religious barriers for the sake of practical collaboration, which tends to yield civic solidarity (a collaborative competency).

Moreover, it is important to recognize that these competencies are not linear and, in fact, feed from and help form each other. Indeed, one often only begins to discover self through the engagement of the other. In our experience, the other is not necessarily met initially out of altruistic desire, but often out of the practical self-interest of a common challenge. It is the human condition that the heart follows the hands of hard work, before the head finally agrees. Stereotypes are sometimes only overcome through the humanizing of work together.

### ***Personal Competency***

To have “personal competency” is to understand one’s *own* moral, epistemological, and spiritual framework—to include one’s own (holy) texts (and/or oral traditions) and what they say about engaging the other. It also includes understanding how and why one’s own character develops, and deepens. As noted above, traditional religious literacy literature often under-emphasizes the



self as a starting point, if it is included at all. As Lenn Goodman (2014, 1, 3) astutely observes, self-knowledge is essential to authentic engagement and dialogue.

[Fruitful dialogue demands] knowing something about who we are ourselves, what we believe and care about, and how what is other *actually is other*. Without the discipline of self-knowledge to complement our curiosity, interest collapses into mere projection and conjecture ... The self-knowledge that pluralism demands is hard won. It means coming to peace with oneself, reconciling one's heritage with one's personal outlook and existential insights, and integrating oneself in a community even as one differentiates oneself from it ... Tolerance is the minimum demand of pluralism in any healthy society. Religious tolerance does not mean homogenizing. Pluralism preserves differences. What it asks for is respect.

### ***Comparative Competency***

To have “comparative competency” is to understand the moral, epistemological, and spiritual framework of one's neighbor *as s/he does*, and what that framework says about engaging the other. This dimension of religious literacy includes the range of topics that would typically be covered in a religious studies course in comparative religion. However, we would also stress the crucial importance of developing an understanding of the *lived religion* of the religious other, in a particular place. Put another way, what are the thresholds in the moral framework of the other that allow one to *belong* to a particular group and/or place? In asking this question, we are especially mindful that the things that are genuinely meaningful in one's walk of faith do not necessarily comport precisely with that religion's official doctrines.

### ***Collaborative Competency***

By “collaborative competency” we mean holistic knowledge of the particular place where multiple actors (individuals or organizations, state and non-state) with different moral frameworks, usually informed by different religions, meet in order to consider working together to accomplish a specific task. Collaborative competency is understanding the spiritual, ethnic, and/or organizational cultures relevant to the process of partnership, i.e., developing and implementing a project or program together. A collaborative competency takes place when different individuals/institutions move from side-by-side tolerance (diversity), to self- and other-awareness, to mutual engagement (the heart of a healthy kind of pluralism). Crossing into the context of the other always respects the lived reality of a particular place, situating the partnership and resulting projects within the spiritual, secular, ethnic, and organizational cultures of the partners involved, while also recognizing the power dynamics that are present.

The prepared movement toward another is the moment of application. And that moment of crossing toward the other is not only engagement, but also leadership, as both parties will have to fashion shared goals and methods that can accomplish the task at hand, and speak to the various government and civil society stakeholders (some, even many, of whom will not be religious).

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However, in addition to the above competencies, engagement and leadership also require specific *skills*—skills informed by historical experience and precedents of multi-faith endeavors. If there is a will to learn how to think conceptually about this process, then there must also be skills that train about what to do in specific contexts. These skills not only help build personal,

comparative, and collaborative competencies, they are transferrable to any vocation, or location. They are critical to the process of assessing and analyzing within the three competencies, to include their combined application. Based on our global engagement experience, there are three basic skill sets that are particularly helpful in any situation: Evaluation, negotiation, and communication.

### ***Evaluation***

The evaluation process takes specific account of self, as well as the other, according to the context in which the relevant parties are seeking to implement their shared goals. Evaluation understands that the role of religion takes place simultaneously—internally, and externally—along the same continuum: As one analytic factor among many, to a force that can have tremendous impact for good or ill. Internally, evaluation considers one's own character and beliefs, especially one's concept of the other, as well as unknown biases. Externally, evaluation seeks to accurately name and understand the role of religion in a given, multi-layered context, pursuant pro-social effect.

### ***Negotiation***

As one evaluates self, other, and the context of application, one prepares to engage cross-culturally, i.e., to build and lead the necessary partnerships. At every step of this process, negotiation takes place, internally, and externally. Internally, one cannot help but (re)consider one's own identity through the encounter of different beliefs, cultures, and peoples. Meanwhile, externally, there is a job to do. How well that gets done, at some point, is a reflection of the internal process, as well as one's capacity to engage respectfully. Negotiation involves mutual listening and understanding, which, in turn, lead to sustainable action. Communication is the key.

### ***Communication***

Communication is verbal and non-verbal, as well as written and/or visual. These communications take place across social-cultural-religious and geo-political identities. Communication becomes that much more important in places where things like shame, respect, and family often have a serious and long-standing role. Imperatively, communication begins with listening: Within one's own organization, within one's own country, and within the local social-cultural-religious context (from the capital to the province). An elicitive and empathetic ear is crucial to an ethic of engagement that results in trust, trust that leads to tangible results, together.

## **Cross-cultural religious literacy as a means to covenantal pluralism**

Cross-cultural religious literacy is developed through a process of mutual engagement between actors (state or non-state) of different religious and non-religious worldviews. It is a multi-dimensional and practical concept of "literacy" rooted in an understanding of self, the other's self-understanding, and the objectives at hand in a specific cultural context. But cross-cultural religious literacy is not an end unto itself. Rather it is part of a broader theory of positive social change. In contrast to a religious "literacy" that is only a general knowledge of "facts" about the religions of others, cross-cultural religious literacy is a set of competencies and skills oriented to a normative framework for robust pluralism. A merely technical and utilitarian knowledge of religion will not somehow automatically support greater social flourishing and pluralistic

peace. Indeed it is quite possible to combine factual knowledge of religion with illiberal, anti-pluralist sentiment. Familiarity can, unfortunately, breed contempt rather than solidarity. Ours is an era of “democratic recession” (Lovelace 2020) fueled in large part by a religious nationalism that defines the ethno-religious majority against ethno-religious minorities (usually as scapegoats).

As such it is important to place the task of improving religious literacy within a broader vision for a form of pluralism that is up to the challenge of our times. We need to be able to answer a basic teleological question: What is cross-cultural religious literacy *for*?

The answer we propose is this: *Covenantal pluralism*. Cross-cultural religious literacy is a vital means of making progress toward the ideal end-state of covenantal pluralism.

“Covenantal pluralism” is an original phrase, first developed by Chris in his work with the Templeton Religion Trust in 2017. However, the ideas are not entirely new. In fact, there are many historical precedents. (One 17th-century example is Roger Williams, who founded Rhode Island on a “covenant of peaceable neighborhood” that cherished freedom of conscience; see Seiple 2012.)

The phrase “covenantal pluralism” is designed to catalyze new and needed conversations about the world we live in. Covenantal pluralism embodies the humility, patience, empathy, and responsibility to engage, respect, and protect the other—albeit without necessarily lending moral equivalency to the beliefs and behaviors of others (see Chapter 2 of this *Handbook*; see also Stewart, Seiple, and Hoover 2020; Joustra 2020; Joustra 2021). A pluralism that is “covenantal” is richer and more resilient because it is relational—that is, it is not merely a transactional contract (although relationships often do begin with, and strategies are rooted in, contracts). Covenants, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks (2002, 150–151) tells us, are

a bond, not of interest or advantage, but of belonging ... [A covenant is] where we develop the grammar and syntax of reciprocity, where we help others and they help us without calculations of relative advantage—where trust is born ... Covenants are beginnings, acts of moral engagement. They are couched in broad terms whose precise meaning is the subject of ongoing debate but which stand as touchstones, ideas, reference points against which policies and practices are judged. What we need now is not a contract bringing into being a global political structure, but rather a covenant framing our shared vision for the future of humanity.

Accordingly, the concept of covenantal pluralism assumes a holistic top-down and bottom-up approach: It seeks a constitutional framework of equal rights and responsibilities for all citizens under the rule of law (the top-down), as well as a supportive cultural context (the bottom-up), of which religion is often a significant factor.

Cross-cultural religious literacy, then, is not merely a kind of technical expertise, nor merely an attribute of a good general education. Rather it is a set of competencies and skills situated within, and oriented to, a normative vision for robust pluralism. Defined in this way, religious literacy is relevant to much more than just polite “interfaith dialogues” among clergy and theologians. The practice of cross-cultural religious literacy, guided by covenantal pluralism, increases the likelihood that people of profoundly different points of moral and religious departure will nevertheless engage across differences and contribute in practical ways to the common good.

As we will discuss in the next chapter (which we co-authored with W. Christopher Stewart), covenantal pluralism moves beyond mere side-by-side “tolerance” and instead calls for a mutual engagement that builds mutual respect and mutual reliance, yielding resiliency. It is a secular

covenant of global neighborliness, one with a balanced emphasis on both the *rules* and *relationships* necessary to live peacefully and productively in a world of deep differences.

## Conclusion

We believe the time is ripe for this *Routledge Handbook of Religious Literacy, Pluralism, and Global Engagement*. The field of religious literacy has expanded and matured; yet is still young enough such that there is ongoing constructive debate and refinement of concepts, diction, approaches, and priorities. In this *Handbook* we highlight a broad range of leading thinkers and practitioners in the realm of religious literacy. And in the process, we trust that greater clarity will result regarding the purpose and mutually reinforcing dimensions of cross-cultural religious literacy.

Regarding the purpose of cross-cultural religious literacy, this *Handbook* includes in-depth consideration of the assumptions that shape the contexts within which religious literacy is potentially relevant. Much of the extant literature and discourse assumes that religious literacy will have straightforwardly pro-social purposes and effects—enhancing freedom of conscience and bolstering citizenship and the rule of law, such that peace and democracy deepen and expand. But this *Handbook* aims to add clarity regarding the realities of deep diversity (the presence of difference) and covenantal pluralism (the mutually respectful engagement of difference) to which the theory and praxis of religious literacy should be oriented.

Second, the *Handbook* includes in-depth consideration of the means of engagement, through which each and all can work toward the ends of covenantal pluralism. Specifically, the *Handbook* contributors reflect on the skills necessary—evaluation, negotiation, and communication—to become competent in self, the other, and the particular context of joint implementation. These chapters present research findings and case studies from around the world, as well as practical lessons learned and personal reflections from practitioners.

We have organized the *Handbook* into three major sections, corresponding to three foundational questions:

- (1) What is religious literacy for?
- (2) Who needs it?
- (3) Where can it make a meaningful difference?

Section 1 addresses the normative contexts within which “religious literacy” is situated. Contributors to this section seek and explore the contributions of multiple religious/philosophical traditions to covenantal pluralist norms, aspirations, and practices. This section features reflections from a range of world religions as well as a secular humanist contribution. Due to space constraints, the section is of course far from a comprehensive collection of perspectives from all the world’s myriad forms of spiritual and communal expression and practice. However, the section demonstrates the potential for people coming from starkly different points of moral and epistemological departure to nevertheless arrive at a basic consensus on the pluralist purposes of cross-cultural religious literacy. These purposes are ultimately civic in nature, not religious; it’s about living well with (irreconcilable) difference, not ethereal aspirations toward religious convergence.

Section 2 then turns to the question of who can, and should, develop cross-cultural religious literacy pursuant to the cultivation of covenantal pluralism. The section features chapters examining the practical application of cross-cultural religious literacy to a wide range of disciplines and professional sectors. Taken together, the chapters in this section demonstrate that religious

literacy is relevant to every vocation and location. This section also makes clear that in an ever more globalized economy, cross-cultural religious literacy is not only the right thing to do, but also something that is in everyone's enlightened self-interest.

Finally, Section 3 examines the practical problem-solving (or at least problem-mitigating) potential of cross-cultural religious literacy. It offers a diverse selection of case studies of contemporary conflicts and controversies from around the world, as well as personal reflections from leading practitioners of multi-faith engagement. Section 3 demonstrates the real-time relevance of cross-cultural religious literacy and covenantal pluralism even in highly fraught contexts. The authors in most of these chapters share from their own direct personal experiences, bringing their lessons learned about the will and skill to competently and covenantally engage diversity, that is, to build pluralism rooted in relationships, respect, and rules.

As such, this *Handbook* is a combination of scholarship and story, theory and tangibility, that presents its chapters in full awareness that we and our authors do not have all the answers. But our hope is that our readers will join us in wrestling with these issues as we seek new diction and new deeds for a world struggling to live, peacefully and constructively, with its deepest differences.

## Notes

- 1 The Northwest Frontier Province was renamed as the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province in 2010.
- 2 For example, publications by IGE staff over its first 20 years include Seiple 2004; Seiple and Hoover 2004; White 2008; Thames, Seiple, and Rowe 2009; Daugherty 2011; Hoover and Johnston 2012; Seiple, Hoover, and Otis 2013; Hoover 2014; and many other policy briefings. For more, please see: <https://globalengage.org/publications>.
- 3 See <https://jsis.washington.edu/religion/international-policy-institute/>.
- 4 See <https://hds.harvard.edu/academics/degree-programs/mrpl-program>.

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## PART I

# What is religious literacy *for*?

Philosophical and religious perspectives  
on covenantal pluralism





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## 2

# COVENANTAL PLURALISM

## Toward a world of peaceable neighborhoods

*W. Christopher Stewart, Chris Seiple, and Dennis R. Hoover*

Having made covenant of peaceable neighborhood with the sachems and natives round about us, and having, in a sense of God's merciful providence unto me in my distress, called the place PROVIDENCE, I desired it might be for a shelter for persons distressed for conscience.

—Roger Williams, 1636<sup>1</sup>

Our world is increasingly beset by problems of violent extremism, religious and ethnic nationalism, cultural polarization, scapegoating of minorities, and other divisive trends. According to the Pew Research Center (2018), 83% of the world's population now live under conditions where there are high levels of government restrictions on religion and/or high social hostilities involving religion. Pew also reports that 11% of governments around the world use "nationalist rhetoric against members of a particular religious group." Given these figures it's perhaps not surprising that the world is now experiencing the highest number of refugees since World War II. Right-wing cultural populism, left-wing secularist extremism, anti-immigrant hostility, and religious and ideological tribalism are on the rise in numerous nations around the globe. Freedom House warns that liberal democracy itself is receding. According to their annual tracking, 2019 marked the 14th consecutive year of declines in global freedom (Repucci 2020).

The persistent and inevitable fact of deep diversity lies at the heart of these challenges. "Tolerance" of such diversity is noble and necessary—as far as it goes. But it is increasingly evident that tolerance alone is not sufficient as a pathway to solutions for the complex struggles we face. Problems of this nature and magnitude will not be overcome simply through earnest calls for everyone to "co-exist" and "celebrate diversity." We will need more than pluralism-lite. That is, in a world of deep difference we need a normative philosophy of pluralism that does more than paper over the challenges of diversity with bumper-sticker slogans of tolerance.<sup>2</sup>

In this chapter we provide an introductory overview of a richer concept of pluralism called *covenantal pluralism* (Stewart 2018; Seiple 2018a; Seiple 2018b), which has been developed over the last few years at the Templeton Religion Trust.<sup>3</sup> The philosophy of covenantal pluralism reaches beyond banal appeals for peaceful coexistence and instead points to a robust, relational, and non-relativistic paradigm for living together, peacefully and productively, in the context of our deepest differences. Covenantal pluralism offers a holistic vision of citizenship that emphasizes both legal equality and neighborly solidarity. That is, it calls both for a constitutional order

characterized by equal rights and responsibilities *and* a culture of engagement characterized by relationships of mutual respect and protection.

This vision of pluralism is, to be sure, ambitious. The covenantal-pluralist paradigm describes an ideal end-state featuring mutually reinforcing legal structures and social norms. Yet, we maintain that covenantal pluralism is not just a theoretical abstraction or utopian speculation. It is not merely a figment of a political philosopher's imagination, ahistorical and unconnected with real-world conditions and religious teachings. Rather, the covenantal-pluralist paradigm we propose is a realistic socio-political aspiration, one with relevance, appeal, and precedents across the world's many religious/worldview traditions.

As such, in what follows we begin not with a formal theory of covenantal pluralism (as important as that is), but rather with a brief historical illustration of covenantal-pluralist values in practice. We do so via the case of Roger Williams (1603–1683), perhaps the most important nonconformist ever to be kicked out of Puritan Massachusetts. Williams would go on to found Rhode Island on principles of robust pluralism, freedom of conscience, and cross-cultural respect. He championed these principles not in spite of his own Christian faith but because of it—and he applied them not just with other Christians, nor just with those from Abrahamic faith traditions, but also with those from Native American religious traditions. While the 17th-century Rhode Island experience was of course not a perfect representation of such principles, it is nevertheless an important and instructive example, even if in embryonic form, of a civic order self-consciously seeking to be a place where people of radically divergent religious/worldview perspectives could live together constructively and cooperatively—as both a function of their respective faith traditions (the right thing to do), and their common need for stability (the self-interested thing to do).

Following this introductory illustration, we outline in more detail the concept of covenantal pluralism that informs the Templeton Religion Trust's Covenantal Pluralism Initiative. First, we discuss the pitfalls of approaching “pluralism” as if it is synonymous with mere relativistic tolerance, breezy ecumenism, or an eclectic syncretism. Second, we provide a brief overview of how the resurgent salience of religion in global public life since the end of the Cold War has catalyzed a proliferation of theories of pluralism. Third, we elaborate on what precisely is (and is not) meant by the modifier “covenantal,” and what key conditions enable covenantal pluralism. Finally we conclude with some reflections on the global applicability and adaptability of the covenantal-pluralist vision.

### **A most flourishing civil state: The example of Roger Williams and a “covenant of peaceable neighborhood”**

In American mythology Puritans crossed the Atlantic for “religious freedom,” but in fact they did not actually want to live within a regime of religious liberty for all (an environment that Holland had to a significant extent already offered them). Indeed John Winthrop was quite clear in what he sought: “a place of Cohabitation and Consortship under a due form of Government both civil and ecclesiastical” (Gaustad 1999, 23). As one Massachusetts minister put it, the colony would “endeavor after Theocracy as near as might be to what was the glory of Israel” (quoted in Barry 2012, 169). As theocracies go, Massachusetts may have been relatively soft. But it would not have looked that way to the Baptists who were outlawed, the Quakers who were hung, and the “witches” who were executed on the Puritans' watch.

Williams dissented from the ruling political theology in numerous ways. He believed, among other things, that the churches in Massachusetts should be separate from the Church of England, that church and public officials should not swear an oath to God, that the King of England had

no right to give away the land of the Native Americans, and that tax money should not be given to ministers. Above all Williams believed in freedom of conscience—and that the well-being of both religion and the state ultimately depended on it.<sup>4</sup>

By 1636 the Boston magistrates had had enough of the nonconformist Williams and decided to banish him to England. Williams fled, eventually settling among his Native American friends at the headwaters of Narragansett Bay, where he paid them for the land on which he lived. He called the place Providence because he “made covenant of peaceable neighborhood with the sachems [leaders] and natives round about us” and had “a sense of God’s merciful providence unto me in my distress.”<sup>5</sup> Williams hoped the new colony might provide “shelter for persons distressed for conscience” (quoted in Barry 2012, 220).

His model was not only remarkably inclusive for his 17th-century context, but also expansive, as he envisioned it extending beyond his own colony. He wrote, “It is the will and command of *God*, that (since the coming of his Sonne the *Lord Jesus*) a *permission* of the most *Paganish, Jewish, Turkish, or Antichristian consciences and worships*, bee granted to *all men* in all *Nations and Countries*” (quoted in Rowley 2017, 69). At the same time, however, he was no anarchist. He understood the need for stability and security of the state, and envisioned that, under the right conditions, liberty and security would work together hand in hand. Williams summed it up this way in a January 1655 letter to the city of Providence:

It has fallen sometimes that both Papists and Protestants, Jews and Turks may be embarked on one ship. Upon which supposal I do affirm, that all the liberty of conscience that ever I pleaded for turns upon these two hinges, that none of the Papists, Protestants, Jews, or Turks be forced to come to the ship’s prayers or worship, nor secondly, [be] compelled from their own particular prayers or worship, if they practice any. I further add, that I never denied that notwithstanding this liberty, the commander of the ship ought to command the ship’s course, yea, and also to command that justice, peace, and sobriety be kept and practiced, both among the seamen and the passengers.

(quoted in Davis 2008, 278)

In other words, those with political authority had no right to tell citizens how to believe (which Williams denounced as “soul rape”), even as there was a requirement for citizens to exercise their right to believe, and live out that belief, responsibly. He held that forced worship “stinks in the nostrils of God” (June 22, 1670 letter to Major John Mason, as quoted by Barry 2012, 336) and leads inevitably to civil unrest, whereas liberty of conscience leads to true citizen solidarity and loyalty. Accordingly, the Rhode Island Charter of 1663 confidently declared that the colony would “hold forth a livlie experiment, that a most flourishing civill state may stand and best be maintained ... with a full libertie in religious concernments” (see Seiple and Hoover 2004, vii).<sup>6</sup>

Crucially, Williams was not a political pluralist because he held his religious beliefs less confidently than the Puritan theocrats held theirs. His religious convictions and political intuitions were deeply rooted in his understanding of the Bible. Williams scholar John Barry (2012, 225) notes that

hardly a single paragraph in any letter [by Williams] fails to mention God. Faith, longing for God, and knowledge of Scripture are ingrained in his writing ... His life revolved around seeking God; that search informed the way he thought, the way he wrote, what he did each day.

Historian Matthew Rowley (2017, 68) notes similarly that across six volumes of collected works and two volumes of correspondence, Williams “rarely goes a paragraph without citing from, alluding to, or making an inference from scripture or theology.”

In fact, Williams shared many of the Puritans’ theological doctrines (Davis 2008) but came to starkly different conclusions about religious pluralism and political order. As Miroslav Volf (2015, 151–152) concludes, both Williams and John Winthrop “were religious exclusivists. Yet Winthrop’s religious exclusivism led to political exclusivism, and Williams’s to political pluralism.” Three examples illustrate how Williams was simultaneously a religious exclusivist theologically but a pluralist socio-politically.

The first example is Williams’ attitudes toward and relationship with Native Americans. On the one hand, Williams believed firmly in the truth of the Christian gospel and in a mandate and duty to evangelize—to actively seek converts. But on the other hand, he did not translate his views on the Great Commission into a posture of generalized disrespect of Native Americans. Williams insisted that “Nature knows no difference between Europeans and Americans in blood, birth, bodies, &c., God having of one blood made all mankind” (Gaustad 1999, 28). He also refused to share his faith with the Native Americans until he learned their language. Barry (2012, 157) explains that Williams “believed that one could not become a Christian without a full understanding of what Christianity meant, and he refrained from any efforts to convert Indians until his fluency in their language was adequate to explain Christ’s message.”

The second example is Williams’ attitudes and policies toward Quakers. Theologically, Williams stood with other Puritans regarding Quakers—that is, he despised them (Barry 2012). He argued that Quakers “preached not Christ Jesus but Themselves,” and that their teachings were an abomination (Gaustad 1999, 183). Yet Williams never let these serious theological differences translate into political persecution of Quakers. Unlike in Massachusetts, Quakers were welcomed in Rhode Island. He also debated Quakers respectfully. For instance, his written summary of the Quakers’ theological position was not contested by the Quakers (Barry 2012).

A third example is an episode demonstrating how Williams’ commitment to freedom of conscience was in some cases strong enough to trump even pervasively patriarchal norms. Two years after the 1636 founding of Rhode Island, Joshua and Jane Verin, next door neighbors to Roger and Mary Williams, stopped attending church, held in the Williams’ home. Jane wanted to attend but Joshua forbade it. It became a communal concern, however, according to the covenant to which all had agreed. In the end the community kept its covenant to itself and its members; Jane Verin continued to attend church—without her husband, or his approval (Eberle 2004).

A great deal more could be said about Williams, of course, but the above sketch should suffice to make clear that Williams’ ideas about freedom of conscience and “peaceable neighborhood” were a kind of foreshadow of the philosophy we are today referring to as covenantal pluralism. We would even go so far as to say that Williams’ vision was “exceptional.” However, by “exceptional” we do not mean to suggest any of the triumphalist meanings that are oftentimes part and parcel of the rhetoric of “American exceptionalism” (Hoover 2014). In our view, Williams’ 17th-century version of covenantal pluralism was exceptional not because it captured something uniquely “American,” but because it was an exceptionally *early* articulation of a paradigm that remains globally relevant and practically achievable today in diverse cultural contexts.

Williams blazed a path that—unfortunately, to judge by the current state of the American political culture and institutions—the United States has struggled to follow in its pursuit of a “more perfect union.” Consider, for example, the Pew Research Center’s two global indices of restrictions on religion, one of which measures government restrictions on religion and the other social hostilities involving religion (Pew 2018). The United States does not rank in

the “low” tier on either of these indices. Rather, the United States—along with several other Western liberal democracies—ranks in the middle of the pack. Moreover there are numerous non-Western countries, from every Global South region, with similar or *lower* levels of religious restrictions and hostilities as the United States. The upshot is this: All countries, regardless of geography or GDP, face ongoing choices about the path they will take in dealing with the challenges and opportunities presented by religious/worldview diversity.

Further, a covenantal-pluralist path is not necessarily a “new” or uncharted one. Indeed there may be ample signposts already embedded in diverse cultures and historical experiences worldwide. For instance, a famous example from India’s history is the Mughal emperor Akbar (1542–1605), who is renowned for the benevolent approach he took to religious diversity. As A.L. Basham (1954, 482) argued,

[Akbar] fully realized that the Empire could only stand on the basis of complete toleration. All religious tests and disabilities were abolished, including the hated poll-tax on unbelievers. Rajput princes and other Hindus were given high offices of state, without conversion to Islam ... If the policy of the greatest of India’s Muslim rulers had been continued by his successors, her history might have been very different.

Pluralist precedents can of course be found in more recent Indian history as well—including in India’s 1949 constitution<sup>7</sup>—but unfortunately they are often overshadowed by India’s contemporary challenges of religious violence and religious nationalism.

Put simply, answering the call to covenantal pluralism may in some contexts be more a matter of *rediscovery* than *discovery*, of *restoration* rather than *revolution*. Regardless, however, the path of covenantal pluralism is indeed a demanding one to tread. For starters, covenantal pluralism requires a thick skin—that is, a comfort level with disagreement and difference that goes beyond mere “tolerance.”

### **Why tolerance is not enough**

In our fast-globalizing world of ever-growing diversity, “tolerance” is certainly necessary as a general norm of civility. And there are important international human rights documents dedicated to defending tolerance, such as the UN Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief. Still, tolerance, in and of itself, is not sufficient for the challenge of living well with deep diversity. Indeed, minimalist and uncritical versions of “tolerance” can actually run counter to genuinely authentic and sustainable pluralism. The problems are threefold.

First, to frame the imperative in terms of granting “tolerance” can suggest a posture of privilege, even condescension. No one wants merely to be “tolerated,” as if their presence is only grudgingly and tenuously accepted within the socio-political order. We “tolerate” things we are hoping to get rid of as soon as the opportunity arises, such as back pain or toothaches. Instead, all people want to feel that their equal standing and inherent human dignity are universally respected. This kind of empathetic egalitarianism is, moreover, vital to social flourishing, especially in a democracy. George Washington acknowledged as much in his famous August 18, 1790 letter to the Hebrew Congregation in Newport, Rhode Island:

All possess alike liberty of conscience and immunities of citizenship. It is now no more that toleration is spoken of, as if it was by the indulgence of one class of people, that another enjoyed the exercise of their inherent natural rights.<sup>8</sup>

A second difficulty in platitudinous appeals for “tolerance” is that they can reveal an alarming degree of religious illiteracy. An undifferentiated ideology of tolerance can at times be indicative of oversimplified, if not outright naïve, assumptions regarding the very nature of religion and religious differences. Any serious study of religious traditions and comprehensive worldviews immediately brings into sharp relief the realities of deep diversity. All religions are not the same; some disagreements are irreconcilable.

A prominent scholar who has long made the case for facing multi-faith realities with eyes wide open is Stephen Prothero, author of *God is Not One* (Prothero 2010a). In an interview with *Religion Dispatches* about the book, Prothero (2010b) concisely summarized the problem of religiously illiterate tolerance:

[In graduate school] I repeatedly heard from professors that all religions were different paths up the same mountain. That sentiment never made any sense to me. I had Jewish and Muslim and Christian and atheist friends, and none of us was under the illusion that we agreed with each other. [...] The main argument [of *God is not One*] is that the world’s religions are climbing different mountains with very different tools and techniques. One perspective that new atheists and liberal multiculturalists share is that all religions are essentially the same (false and poisonous on the one hand, and true and beautiful on the other). I think this view is dangerous, disrespectful, and untrue. Christians do not go on the hajj to Mecca, and Muslims do not affirm the doctrine of the Trinity. Moreover, going on the hajj is not peripheral to Muslims—in fact it is one of Islam’s Five Pillars. And the belief that Jesus is the Son of God is not inessential to Christians—in fact it stands at the heart of the Christian gospel. [...] The bottom line? Tolerance is an empty virtue if you don’t even understand what you are tolerating.

The third and arguably most significant problem with mere tolerance is that it is too easily coupled with *indifference*. Sir John Templeton, founder of the Templeton Religion Trust, was acutely aware that much of what passes for “tolerance” can be rather flimsy. He believed strongly that human progress in all areas, including religion, depends in large part on *constructive competition*—that is, respectfully *engaging* differences, not dismissively ignoring them. Sir John wrote that

Tolerance may be a divine virtue, but it could also become a vehicle for apathy. Millions of people are thoroughly tolerant toward diverse religions, but rarely do such people go down in history as creators, benefactors, or leaders of progress. [...] Should we not desire to have our neighbour share insights and try to convey to us the brilliant light that has transformed his life—the fire in his soul? Why settle for a least-common-denominator type of religion based on tolerance alone? More than tolerance, we need constructive competition. When persons on fire for a great gospel compete lovingly to give their finest treasures to each other, will not everyone benefit?

(Templeton 2000, 122–123)

In their 2016 book *Living with Difference: How to Build Community in a Divided World*, Adam Seligman, Rachel Wasserfall, and David Montgomery argue that contemporary pieties of tolerance often treat religious differences as though they are matters of mere aesthetic preference—and consequently *not* matters requiring principled engagement.

We continually deny difference rather than engaging with it, so much so that non-engagement is the very stuff of our social life. In a certain sense, denying difference

by relegating it to the aesthetic or trivial is itself a form of indifference toward what is other and different. By framing our difference from the other's position, or action, in terms of tastes or triviality, we exempt ourselves from engaging with it and can maintain an attitude of indifference. [...] [Such approaches] are in fact less than tolerant, because they actually disengage from difference rather than attempt to come to terms with it. They are perhaps nothing more than a way to elide the whole problem of difference in modern society rather than realize it.

(Seligman, Wasserfall, and Montgomery 2016, 8–9)

In short, a “tolerance” that amounts to little more than apathy and crude relativism is insufficient to meet the challenges of our times.

### **The “return” of religion and the need for pluralist theory**

An important background condition that helps explain the enduring popularity of cheap bumper-sticker “tolerance” is the lingering cultural power of secularization theory, along with its methodological implications, especially within the academy. Secularization theory's core premise was that modernity undermines religion culturally and epistemologically—that is, in modern conditions, religion is either abandoned entirely or is radically privatized and relegated to the psychological, cultural, and political margins. “Tolerance” toward religious faith and practice of any sort is a natural outgrowth of pervasive popular assumptions about the ineluctably receding significance of religion.

The irony is that most social scientists no longer subscribe to secularization theory. A prominent case in point is the late Peter Berger, an eminent sociologist whose early work helped elevate secularization theory to near-paradigmatic status. In the 1990s, however, Berger famously renounced his adherence to secularization theory, and began arguing that a theory of pluralization should decisively displace secularization theory as the paradigm for understanding contemporary religion.

In *The Many Altars of Modernity: Toward a Paradigm for Religion in a Pluralist Age*, Berger (2014) argued that modernization does not necessarily result in the decline of religion, but it does mean that more people than ever before must live amidst cacophonously competing beliefs, values, and lifestyles. This need not and should not be conceived as strictly a “Western” phenomenon. Global South contexts are experiencing pluralization as well, especially in the wake of increasing urbanization and migration. The process of pluralization necessarily forces the modern person into more-frequent encounters with deep differences. For some this can be a source of anxiety and irritation.<sup>9</sup> It can be interpreted as undermining epistemic and moral certainty, forcing matters that might otherwise have remained in the background of consciousness instead to be dealt with in the foreground. Globalization and technological change accelerate these dynamics and can foster feelings of spiritual and psychological dislocation.

Berger also discussed two commonplace but highly problematic strategies for dealing with the modern predicament: Fundamentalism and relativism. A fundamentalist, according to Berger, is someone who attempts to restore moral/epistemic certainty through various social and political means. At the opposite extreme, a relativist is one who makes an ideology out of moral equivalence, non-judgmentalism, and “tolerance.” With the poles so defined—the former as dangerous and the latter as vacuous—Berger (2014, 15) argued for “the maintenance and legitimation of the middle ground between fundamentalism and relativism.” Berger rightly (in our view) suggests that this happy middle ground will be a form of pluralism.



But any argument for “pluralism” must immediately confront a significant terminological problem. Namely, in the context of religion today, the word “pluralism” is most often used in ways that are synonymous with relativism. In both scholarly and popular discourse, when “pluralism” is invoked without specific qualifiers, the default meaning usually attributed to the word is that of relativism. This is the “we’re all climbing the same mountain” attitude of breezy equivalence that Stephen Prothero (2010b) rightly dismisses as “pretend pluralism.”

The question, then, is this: What is *real* pluralism? And how should we qualify it, if the word “pluralism” on its own is, at best, ambiguous?

### The many faces of pluralism

For a fleeting moment in the immediate post-Cold War period there was heady optimism about the “end of history”—the global triumph of liberalism and its constitutive attributes of individualism, rationalism, legalism, proceduralism, etc. But the gods refused to die, and particularistic identities roared back into prominence, sometimes violently. The future quickly became one not of universalization of liberal order but of cultural and political balkanization. Theorists from both the “left” and “right” have increasingly recognized the need to articulate a philosophy of pluralism that corresponds better to empirical facts on the ground, and that has better prospects for normative coherence and functional consensus across deep global diversity.

The result has been a highly creative and intellectually productive profusion of pluralist theories, particularly in the last ten years. The many faces of pluralist thought in the literature today include, for example:

- Confident pluralism (Inazu 2016; Keller and Inazu 2020);
- Courageous pluralism (Patel 2020; Patel 2018; Patel 2016; Geis 2020);
- Pragmatic pluralism (L. Patton 2018; L. Patton 2006);
- Deep/agonistic pluralism (Connolly 2005);
- Principled/civic/structural pluralism (Carlson-Thies 2018; Chaplin 2016; Skillen 1994; Monsma 1992; Soper, den Dulk, and Monsma 2016)
- Inclusive pluralism (Marsden 2015);
- “Principled distance” (or “Indian model”) pluralism (Bhargava 2012);
- “Religious harmony”/regulated pluralism (Neo 2020);
- “Political secularism” pluralism (Mackure and Taylor 2011; Taylor 2010);
- “Difference” pluralism (Mahmood 2016; Shakman Hurd 2015);
- “Living together differently” pluralism (Seligman, Wasserfall, and Montgomery 2016);
- “Encounter of commitments” pluralism (Eck n.d.; Eck 2020) ;
- “Global public square” pluralism (Guinness 2013);
- And more.

The array of contemporary pluralisms is itself pluralistic in several respects. For example, some brands of pluralism have long and formidable philosophical pedigrees whereas others are of more recent vintage. Some are more preoccupied with the structural and positive law dimensions of robust pluralism—the constitutional and statutory “rules of the game” for fairness across all religious and secular worldviews—whereas others are more attuned to the cultural, relational, emotional, and spiritual dimensions of living with deep differences. Some focus more on applicability in Western liberal democracy (particularly the United States) whereas others take a more abstractly universal or non-Western approach. Some take a broad view of the degree of consensus—political and/or theological—that is possible and desirable under pluralistic conditions,

whereas others envision a minimalist, “thinner” consensus. (For a comparison of many of the different streams of contemporary pluralist thought, see Joustra 2020.)

However, some key commonalities across most of these pluralisms are that they eschew simplistic relativism, approach the challenges of diversity with realism but not fatalism, and envision a positive pluralism that calls not for mere side-by-side, arms-length coexistence but for a principled engagement across religious and worldview divides. Take for example the theory of “deep pluralism” developed by political theorist William E. Connolly. Connolly argues that a degree of conflict and competition is inherent to the human condition, but it is still possible for these inevitable tensions to have peaceful, productive, prosocial effects. According to Connolly, a realistic-yet-positive pluralism

does not issue in a simple universalism in which one image of transcendence sets the standard everywhere or in a cultural relativism in which one faith prevails here and another there. It is neither universalism nor relativism in the simple mode of each. It is deep pluralism. A pluralism that periodically must be defended militantly against this or that drive to religio-state Unitarianism. The public ethos of pluralism pursued here, again, solicits the active cultivation of pluralist virtues by each faith and the negotiation of a positive ethos of engagement between them.

(Connolly 2005, 64–65)

Diana Eck, director of the Harvard Pluralism Project, also underscores the importance of principled engagement across faith/worldview lines. In her call for a “new paradigm of pluralism,” Eck (n.d.) argues that:

Pluralism is not diversity alone, but the energetic engagement with diversity. Diversity can and has meant the creation of religious ghettos with little traffic between or among them. Today, religious diversity is a given, but pluralism is not a given; it is an achievement. Mere diversity without real encounter and relationship will yield increasing tensions in our societies. . . . The new paradigm of pluralism does not require us to leave our identities and our commitments behind, for pluralism is the encounter of commitments. It means holding our deepest differences, even our religious differences, not in isolation, but in relationship to one another.

We concur with Eck, but would add that new diction can be helpful, indeed even necessary, in conveying new perspectives and nuances. Again, nowadays the word “pluralism” is very often *not* used to signify a non-relativistic encounter of commitments, but rather a simple relativism typically promoted alongside bumper-sticker clichés of multiculturalism (Sacks 2007). As such, we believe it is useful to attach a modifier to the word “pluralism” that signals clearly from the outset that what is intended is something distinctly richer and more engaged than casually relativistic tolerance. We suggest that the modifier that most compellingly invites this more nuanced take on pluralism is *covenantal*.

### **What covenantal pluralism is ... and isn't**

In our view the central virtue of the word “covenant” is that it evokes an easily understood, holistic vision that emphasizes not only *rules*, as important as those are, but also *relationships*. By contrast to a pluralism that is strictly “contractual” (or transactional), a covenantal pluralism is one that entails a deeper sense of moral solemnity and significance, and assumes an indefinite

time horizon. A “contract” is a quintessentially conditional relationship governed by rational rules, violation of which nullifies the relationship. But a “covenant” endures beyond specific conflicts and beyond episodic departures from norms. It involves a more fluid relationship between rules and grace. Framing robust pluralism in this way is particularly resonant beyond the West, where many cultures are in practice far more communitarian than contractarian (Sacks 2002; Sacks 2007).

The concept of covenantal pluralism is simultaneously about “top-down” legal and policy parameters and “bottom-up” cultural norms and practices. A world of covenantal pluralism is characterized both by a constitutional order of equal rights and responsibilities and by a culture of reciprocal commitment to engaging, respecting, and protecting the other—albeit *without* necessarily conceding equal veracity or moral equivalence to the beliefs and behaviors of others. The envisioned end-state is neither a thin-soup ecumenism nor vague syncretism, but rather a positive, practical, non-relativistic pluralism. It is a paradigm of civic fairness and human solidarity, a covenant of global neighborliness that is intended to bend but not break under the pressure of diversity.

We use the “covenant” concept here in its secular sense, one accessible to people of any religion or no religion. To be sure, various religious traditions—in particular those within the Abrahamic faiths of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—use the word “covenant” in theologically particularist ways within their respective intra-faith contexts. But in the context of *pluralism*, the word “covenant” is used in a much different sense, one explicitly cognizant of the myriad forms of faith/worldview diversity around the world.<sup>10</sup> Our usage is analogous to the inclusive way “covenant” is invoked in some international human rights treaties, such as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Liberties; or, even, a homeowner’s association of different families and beliefs who agree that everyone in their neighborhood should be governed by common rules.

Jonathan Sacks, author of the 2002 book *The Dignity of Difference* and former Chief Rabbi of the United Kingdom, has long thought about the meaning of the term “covenant,” its spiritual origin, and its secular application on behalf of all faiths and none:

Covenants are about the larger groupings in and through which we develop identity. They are about the “We” in which I discover the “I.” Covenantal relationships are those sustained by trust. [...] Covenant is a bond, not of interest or advantage, but of belonging. [...] [A covenant is] where we develop the grammar and syntax of reciprocity, where we help others and they help us without calculations of relative advantage—where trust is born.

(Sacks 2002, 150–151)

He explains further that:

[A covenant] reminds us that we are guardians of the past for the sake of the future. It extends our horizons to the chain of generations of which we are a part. [...] Covenants are beginnings, acts of moral engagement. They are couched in broad terms whose precise meaning is the subject of ongoing debate but which stand as touchstones, ideas, reference points against which policies and practices are judged.

(Sacks 2002, 203)

In short, a pluralism that is covenantal is holistic (simultaneously “top-down” and “bottom-up”) and long-term, characterized by mutual reliance and, as a result, resilience.

Furthermore, we argue that covenantal pluralism is more *genuinely plural*—that is, more inclusive of the actual extent of diversity that exists—and consequently more likely to be received and perceived as normatively *legitimate* at the local level. There is room at the table of covenantal pluralism for a genuinely robust diversity of actors to engage one another. The invitees are not just an unrepresentative sample that consists only of self-selected cosmopolitans. Instead there is a more realistic range—secular to religious, fundamentalist to modernist, Western to Eastern, and so on. This is a pluralism that requires a humble posture of openness to people who make exclusive truth claims, who are deeply embedded in communities with particularistic identities and guarded boundaries, whose beliefs and practices are not as “negotiable” as consumer-market choices (J. Patton 2018). Covenantal Pluralism is inclusive of the exclusive.

There are, to be sure, limits; some religious (and ideological) actors may be so thoroughly illiberal and anti-pluralist that there simply isn’t a conversation to be had. Still, it is entirely possible, and indeed common, for some faith communities to retain internal beliefs and practices that are “fundamentalist” or “orthodox,” and yet be pluralists in civic and political life (Volf 2015; Volf 2011; Yang 2014). The key is whether such communities embrace the spirit of covenantal pluralism and its parameters—which include, for example, respecting the right of individuals to opt-out of their community without fear of violence, and respecting the equal prerogatives of other communities with different internal practices (Hoover 2016).

A pluralism of this covenantal sort is neither easy nor natural for most people. It is not the path of least resistance. Once established, however, it holds realistic promise as a path for negotiating diversity in a way that advances both spiritual development and social flourishing. The philosophy of covenantal pluralism echoes a central tenet of the theory of social change espoused by Sir John Templeton, who firmly believed that “progress comes from constructive competition” (Templeton 1998, 122)—that is, competition conducted *in a certain spirit* (loving and friendly) and *under the right conditions* (free and fair). Sir John held that constructive competition and principled engagement across differences are necessary to avoid stagnation and catalyze progress in religion and society. The benefits include broader and deeper understanding of spiritual realities, expanded social dividends and social capital associated with religious faith and practice at their best, and greater overall vitality and dynamism of religious expression.

### **Constituting covenantal pluralism**

We find it useful to conceptualize the key constitutive dimensions of covenantal pluralism in terms of “conditions of possibility”—that is, the enabling conditions that are individually necessary and jointly sufficient for a healthy and sustainable form of robust pluralism to exist.<sup>11</sup> These conditions can be grouped into several major categories.

The first is *freedom of religion and belief* (FoRB), which includes two dimensions: (a) Free exercise of religion/freedom of conscience, and (b) equal treatment of religions/worldviews. Our definition of FoRB in the context of covenantal pluralism is shaped by Article 18 of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR).

Article 18. Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship, and observance.

In fact the history of the drafting and negotiation of this text by a highly diverse drafting committee could itself be seen as a case study of covenantal pluralism (Glendon 2001; Brink 2003.)

The committee's deliberations revealed considerable effort to make the text acceptable across very diverse political systems and cultures. One of the most influential framers of the UDHR, China's P.C. Chang, defended these principles against the charge that they are somehow narrowly "Western" (Glendon 2001, 142).

A foundational premise of covenantal pluralism is that the impulse to spirituality and the yearning to seek answers about transcendence is universal. Any systemic repression or discrimination interfering with this expression therefore goes against the grain of human nature, and will very likely contribute to social and political instability (Seiple and Hoover 2012; Seiple and Hoover 2013). A sustainable environment of covenantal pluralism requires robust protections for the freedom to explore the nature of ultimate reality, interrogate one's own beliefs about transcendent/spiritual realities, organize (or reorganize) one's life in accordance with one's discoveries, freely associate (or disassociate) with others in the collective pursuit of truth about transcendent and ultimate realities, and freely express one's core convictions in the public square—albeit in a way consistent with the requirements of public order and the equal rights of others.

However, FoRB alone does not exhaust the conditions of possibility needed for covenantal pluralism in its fullest sense. Codifying legal protections for religious freedom is vitally important yet not the same as achieving covenantal pluralism. Covenantal pluralism presupposes not only the "rules" that should govern a regime of religious freedom but also the relational norms within which rules have (or fail to have) any actual purchase. In other words, in the absence of any "covenantal" relationships and/or commitments that transcend religious and worldview divides, it is unlikely that sound rules for religious freedom will be discerned in the first place. And even if some proposed rules are logically "correct," when large segments of the population do not share any covenantal solidarity or fellow feeling, they are apt to just dismiss such rules out of hand.

A second category of enabling conditions is *religious literacy*. As noted above, religious illiteracy is widespread and contributes to an enfeebled public understanding of pluralism. What we mean by religious literacy is more than just general knowledge sufficient to pass a quiz on "world religions." Instead we mean a religious literacy that includes awareness of real-world cross-cultural contexts, along with skills to engage such contexts. An apt analogy here is the contrast between proficiency in abstract math vs. mathematical literacy, the latter of which requires real-world problem-solving skills.

Religious literacy in this application-ready sense has at least three dimensions. To be religiously literate one needs to have a working understanding of (a) *one's own* belief system or faith tradition, especially what it says about (engaging) persons outside that tradition, (b) *one's neighbor's* moral, epistemological, and spiritual framework, and what that framework says about engaging the other, and (c) the historical and contemporary particulars of the specific contexts in which multi-faith collaborations may (or may not) be advisable—that is, the spiritual, ethnic, and/or organizational cultures relevant to developing and implementing a project or program collaboratively.

Finally, a third set of enabling conditions, closely related to the second, is the embodiment and expression of *virtues* that a positive ethos of non-relativistic pluralism requires. Covenantal pluralism is hard work, and there is no retirement age. It promises no utopia, no end of history. The global business of living together with our differences is ongoing, and it is the duty of each generation to bequeath it to the next, and teach the virtues that make it possible. As such, covenantal pluralism requires a praxis and continual cultivation of the character traits needed for robust, sustained engagement between people of different religions/worldviews—foremost, virtues such as humility, empathy, patience, and courage, combined with fairness, reciprocity, cooperativeness, self-critique, and self-correction.

The wider the underlying divides, the more vital such virtues become. The politics of pluralism do not always conform to a simple script (Brink 2012) with a happy ending of “common ground.” The real world of engaging across deep difference is riskier, and messier. Usually *some* common ground will be identified and strengthened, but there will also be cases in which disagreements will merely be defined in greater detail. To live peacefully and amicably with these less-than-tidy realities—to “agree to disagree, agreeably” wherever possible—requires a maturity of character. Such dialogical virtues are crucial to what Sir John Templeton meant by “humility in theology.” Sir John argued that progress in the context of religion depends in large part on a respectful manner of engagement of those with whom one disagrees (Herrmann 2004).

Key to this requisite disposition is mutual respect. As Lenn Goodman (2014, 1) argues in *Religious Pluralism and Values in the Public Sphere*, “Religious tolerance does not mean homogenizing. Pluralism preserves differences. What it asks for is respect.” Respect values the essence of the other’s identity, without sacrificing the substance of one’s own. In other words, “respecting” the other does not necessarily lend moral equivalence to any and every belief. Indeed, to feign agreement when profound issues are actually in dispute can be a form of disrespect. Respect simply means that everyone should respect the inherent dignity of every human, including the innate liberty of conscience of the other even if the conclusions drawn are different from one’s own. Pluralism is, after all, the inevitable result of liberty of conscience.

Consequently, within a society characterized by covenantal pluralism, the kinds of bridges built between religions are better described as *multi-faith* than “interfaith.” “Multi-faith” more clearly signals the existence of irreconcilable theological differences between and among faiths and worldviews. These differences need not be foregrounded in every conversation or project, but in some contexts acknowledgment and principled engagement of such differences is important to, at a minimum, demonstrate respect for the essence of someone else’s identity. And, in our experience, once that moment arrives, the practical collaboration accelerates afterwards.

The word “interfaith,” by contrast, tends to suggest a blending of theologies. Too easily, interfaith dialogues steer clear of or (worse) effectively water down deep differences. While interfaith dialogues can helpfully highlight shared values, too often they end up focusing on banal commonalities rather than leveraging the contrasts between the rich and to some degree divergent traditions at the table. Discovering common beliefs and values only has meaning when the richness of the different points of moral departure are also understood.

## **Conclusion**

In the history of social theory there is no shortage of pessimism regarding the effects of deep religious diversity and contestation on a society. Lack of moral/epistemological uniformity has often been feared as a source of political instability and social pathology. The philosophy of covenantal pluralism takes a more nuanced view, one that is conditionally optimistic about the possibility of living, and living *well*, with our differences.

In contrast to the sometimes thin rhetoric of tolerance, the concept of covenantal pluralism acknowledges the complex challenges presented by deep diversity and offers a holistic conception of the structures and norms that are conducive to fairness and flourishing for all, even amidst stark differences in theologies, values, and lifestyles. Covenantal pluralism

- Calls forth and is nurtured by common virtues indigenous to each tradition (e.g., humility, empathy, patience), encouraging self-reflection regarding theological/worldview differences and what one’s holy scriptures and ethics say about engaging the other;

- Seeks a level playing field where all people—of any religion, or none—are treated with equal respect;
- Leverages our difference, guided by the idea that the best solutions to the problems we face emerge most effectively amidst contrast and the competition of ideas, always in the interest of the common good;
- Pursues the equal opportunity for everyone to propose their beliefs and behavior without imposing them on others;
- Supports an inclusive notion of citizenship (including those who make exclusive truth claims) that is good for society and the state; and,
- Results in the integration of the non-majority, not its assimilation, never insisting that minorities must think and act exactly like the majority.

Unfortunately, in many nations today—including even some of those that rhetorically trumpet religious liberty and diversity—covenantal pluralism remains a path not (fully) taken. Yet signposts for this path abound; precedents and potentialities of covenantal pluralism exist the world over. Further, the (re)discovery of covenantal pluralism is, we contend, not only the right thing to do in terms of universal moral ideals, but also a realistic strategy for progress toward a society's enlightened self-interest. To the extent any nation follows (or recovers) the historically narrower, typically less traveled path of covenantal pluralism, it will redound to the long-term benefit of both religion and state. But when a people or state choose the historically wider, much more traveled path of "Puritanical" (whether fundamentalist or secularist) uniformity, there is less hope for the well-being of all citizens, all neighbors. Cultivating a context of covenantal pluralism increases the likelihood that people of profoundly different points of religious and epistemological departure nevertheless engage one another across their differences in a spirited way, and contribute to a peaceable neighborhood for all.

## Notes

- 1 Quoted in Barry 2012, 220.
- 2 In the increasingly commonplace "COEXIST" and "TOLERANCE" bumper stickers, each letter is artfully rendered as a symbol of a different group or concept. In the "COEXIST" bumper sticker, typically the "C" is the Islamic crescent, the "O" is a peace sign, the "E" is a gender symbol, the "X" is a Star of David, dot of the "I" is a pagan pentagram, the "S" is a yin-yang symbol, and the "T" is a Christian cross. The "TOLERANCE" version—which for good measure includes the tagline "Believe in it"—adds Native American and Baha'i symbols, and even a nod to science (the last "e" is Einstein's formula  $e=mc^2$ ).
- 3 The Templeton Religion Trust (<https://templetonreligiontrust.org/>), headquartered in The Bahamas, is a global charitable trust established by Sir John Templeton (d. 2008) to support research and public engagement worldwide at the intersection of theology, philosophy, and the sciences, and to promote human flourishing by funding projects in the areas of individual freedom, free markets, character development, and through its support of the Templeton Prize.
- 4 Portions of this section are adapted from Seiple 2012.
- 5 It's worth noting that the theme of neighborliness would emerge in powerfully analogous ways centuries later in the thought of Halford John Mackinder, who argued in early 1919 as he tried to influence the Versailles Peace Treaty: "That grand old word neighbor has fallen almost into desuetude. It is for neighborliness that the world today calls aloud ... Let us recover possession of ourselves, lest we become the mere slaves of the world's geography ... Neighborliness or fraternal duty to those who are our fellow-dwellers, is the only sure foundation of a happy citizenship" (Mackinder 1919).
- 6 Williams's ideas about religious tolerance influenced John Locke, who in turn was a major influence on key founders of the United States. For an illuminating comparison of Williams, Locke, and Hobbes, see Bejan 2017.

- 7 For related resources see Singha 2017.
- 8 For the full text of this letter see the Founders Online section of the National Archives website: <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/05-06-02-0135>.
- 9 However it is important not to assume a clean binary contrast between pre-modern conditions of taken-for-granted religious “fate” and modern conditions of uncertainty and “choice.” As Robert Hefner (2016, 16) has argued, it is a mistake to “see all premodern actors as inhabiting densely religious worlds in which the natural and supernatural are so interwoven that there is little room for uncertainty or agnostic doubt.” See also Douglas (1970) on the “myth of the pious primitive.”
- 10 While there are insights that can be drawn from particularist covenantal theologies and applied generically *by analogy*, the philosophy of covenantal pluralism is secular.
- 11 The notion of “conditions of possibility” is adapted from the thought of German philosopher Immanuel Kant, who changed the course of philosophy in the West by focusing not on whether it is possible for humanity to know anything at all but rather on the conditions of possibility for human knowledge.

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# 3

## COVENANTAL PLURALISM

### Perspectives from Jewish history and thought

*David Saperstein*

Core elements of Judaism are rooted in forms of covenant. Precursors of aspects of the covenantal pluralism on which this book focuses have long been reflected in Jewish history, tradition, and law. Likewise, lessons of Jewish history offer insights into other important aspects of this book, including the evolution of religious literacy and the strengths, as well as the limitations, of toleration.

Ideas relevant to the concepts of covenantal pluralism include a number of essential Jewish values and historical lessons either of universal application to all people, including those of varied religions, or of Jewish legal guidance to the interactions between Jew and non-Jew. Among them are:<sup>1</sup>

1. The infinite value of each person, rooted in the belief that every human being is created in the Divine image (Genesis 1:27),<sup>2</sup> that all of us have the spark of the Divine within.
2. The fundamental equality of all people (connected with the above concept of the value and dignity of all humanity). These equality concepts are rooted as well in the stories interpreting or commenting on the Bible (commentaries referred to as the *midrash* or *aggada*) that ask: Why are we all descended from one couple in the stories of the Bible? Why was Adam made from the dust of the four corners of the Earth (Rashi, Genesis 2:7)? So none of us can claim that the merit of our ancestors was greater than anyone else's (*Mishnah Sanhedrin* 4:5). We are all equal before God; we are all truly brothers and sisters. "Have we not all one parent?" asks Malachi, "Has not one God created us?" (*Malachi* 2:10). Or as a text in an influential medieval *aggadic* compilation observes: "I call Heaven and Earth to witness that whether one be Gentile or Jew, man or woman, slave or free man, the divine spirit rests on each in accordance with his deeds" (*Yalkut Shimoni*, Judges, Sec. 42).
3. Freedom of choice as inhering in the human condition, one of Judaism's most significant contributions to Western thought and, of course, a foundational belief associated with freedom of conscience and freedom of religion. Jewish thought embraced none of the limitations of the Greek fates or Calvinist predestination or even Catholic ideas of original sin, but rather, "I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse. Therefore choose life that you and your descendants may live" (Deuteronomy 30:19). As the authoritative medieval scholar Moses Maimonides, known by his acronym as the Rambam, wrote:

Free will is granted to every person ... the human species has become unique in the world in that it can know of itself ... what is good and what is evil, and in that it can do whatever it wishes ... so did the Creator desire that a person should be possessed of free will ... for this reason is a man judged according to his own actions. (Mishneh Torah, Teshuvah 5:1–4).

4. The biblical laws reflecting the treatment of the *ger*, the “stranger,” or the *ger toshav*, the “resident alien,” and the Talmudic idea of *mipnai darchai shalom*—that wherever Jews and non-Jews live together, the *ger* should be ensured the same civil protections and social benefits as the Jew, that the Jew and the non-Jew should raise and administer charity together, visit their sick, and ensure burial of their dead for “the sake of the ways of peace” (*Mishnah Gittin* 5:8). (The word *shalom* (peace) conveyed more than the absence of strife—but comes from the root meaning “to make whole,” or “to heal.”)

Indeed, the mandate to care for, love, and treat the stranger as our own is the most commonly repeated commandment in the Bible. The words from the Holiness Code are clear: “The stranger who resides with you shall be to you as one of your citizens; you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I the LORD am your God” (Lev. 19:34). Even in regard to distributing to the various tribes the Promised Land itself, Ezekiel asserts God’s care for the non-citizen in terms that speak to the global migrant crisis the world faces today: “the strangers who reside among you, who have begotten children among you. You shall treat them as Israelite citizens; they shall receive allotments along with you among the tribes of Israel. You shall give the stranger an allotment within the tribe where he resides—declares the Lord God” (Ezekiel 22–24).

Out of these ideas flowed, over the centuries, a number of conclusions directly relevant to our topic.

Foremost was the belief that there is not only one path to God. Sometimes this was addressed in terms of discussions of access to salvation, or heaven or the “world to come.” In other strands of the tradition, which were more uncertain about life after death and held that doing good in this world is to be done for its own sake, it was expressed in terms of the moral status of equally ethical people who held differing theological beliefs. Is an ethical person who is not Jewish and believes in God morally equal to ethical, God-believing Jews? Does someone who rejects a belief in God but is equally ethical have the same moral status as a God believer, whether in this world or in the world to come?

One can believe that other religions are wrong in many regards yet still affirm what is valid. As Brandeis University Professor Reuven Kimelman has written on the subject of truth in religion and the importance of recognizing that no religion holds all truths and many may embody some truths:

The alternative is a principled pluralism, not relativism. It opposes relativism as it opposes absolutism. It affirms the human capacity for making truth claims. One can even legitimately claim the greater truth of one’s religion. Having more truth, however, is not tantamount to having all the truth. That, only God, blessed be He, has. As religious people, we trust only God to have the whole truth, as the Qur’an says (3:159): “God loves those who trust in Him.”

Awareness of the pluralism of truth safeguards against exaggerated claims and religious smugness. It allows for the existence of competing visions of the truth where there is a commonality of goals and a commitment to grow in truth.

(Kimelman 2020)

Early on, the Jewish tradition argued that as a result of God's covenant with all of humanity (the so-called Noahide covenant), any person who believed in the one God and followed the Noahide laws or strove to be like Noah—a righteous person in their generation (Genesis 6:9)—could reach heaven.<sup>3</sup> Maimonides, the authoritative medieval scholar, wrote: “Any who accepts upon themselves and carefully observes the Seven Commandments is of the Righteous of the Nations of the World and has a portion in the World to Come (*Mishnah Torah Melakhim* 8:11). The 13th-century French halachic scholar Menachem Meiri noted: “Those among the heathens of our ancient days who observe the seven Noahide precepts ... enjoy the same rights as Jews” (Bezalel Ashkenazi, *Shittah Mekubbetzet*, (1761), 28a).

Normative strands of Jewish thought concluded that people who might come to those ethical positions via another religion have their own path to salvation. As the late Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks says in *The Dignity of Difference*, “one God, creator of diversity, commands us to honor his creation by respecting diversity” (Sacks 2002, 200). During the Mishnaic era, an era that includes when Jesus of Nazareth taught, the tradition affirmed that “The righteous of all nations have a share in the world to come” (*Tosefta, Sanhedrin* 13:1; *Babylonian Talmud. Sanhedrin* 105a). By the Middle Ages, a number of key authorities (albeit not all) had settled clearly on applying this to Islam and Christianity. The Rambam, while critical of Muslim and Christian efforts to convert Jews, observed:

It is beyond the human mind to fathom the designs of our Creator, for our ways are not God's ways, neither are our thoughts His. All these matters relating to Jesus of Nazareth, and Muhammad who came after him, only served ... to prepare the whole world to worship God with one accord, as it is written “For then will I turn to the peoples a pure language, that they all call upon the name of the Lord to serve Him with one consent” (Zephaniah 3:9).

(Mishneh Torah Laws of Kings and Wars 11:4)

One relevant strand (albeit there were significant differences of opinion on this point) of the understanding of the Noahide laws was that obtaining salvation did not require a belief in the one God (albeit idol worship was specifically precluded). The influential 18th-century German Orthodox Jewish philosopher, Moses Mendelssohn, who sought to reconcile “age of reason” and traditional Jewish philosophies, argued that the ethical person of any or no religious belief, who found morality and ethics by way of reason alone, could also find a path to salvation.<sup>4</sup> In modern times, particularly but not exclusively in the non-Orthodox streams, more have embraced this interpretation of the “righteous of all nations” as being measured by ethical behavior alone without reference to theological beliefs, thereby bringing in those of non-monotheistic religions or those of no religion (see for example Greenberg 1997a and Greenberg 1997b). Rabbi Irving (Yitz) Greenberg, a modern Orthodox rabbi, makes a particularly interesting argument suggesting that when a person chooses to act ethically and compassionately, we may see in their moral choices their entering into a covenantal relation with God, whatever their own theological beliefs might be.<sup>5</sup>

These beliefs provide one of a number of factors as to why Judaism never became a proselytizing religion. They also embody a perspective on the validity and constructive influence of other religions that make it easier to participate in a covenant based on and honoring the pluralistic nature of the diverse religions of the world.

### **Interfaith dialogue, cooperation, and religious literacy**

Ours is an extraordinary moment for multifaith or interfaith relations (terms used interchangeably in this essay).<sup>6</sup> Never in the history of the world has there been this degree of interfaith

dialogue, interfaith structures and institutions, and interfaith cooperative endeavors. Among the goals of such endeavors are ensuring protections, as recognized in international law, of religious freedom for all; making all societies safe for minority faith communities, so often victimized by discrimination and hate crimes; and, more positively, developing cooperative endeavors to work together to create a fairer, more just, and more compassionate world based on a shared understanding of the common good.

Effective multifaith engagement requires religious literacy both in one's own religion and about other religions. In terms of one's own religion, Judaism established the first known form of universal education—at least for boys (albeit in pre-modern times it was common for girls to be taught at home to read and write). The Talmud recounts the remarkable story of Joshua ben Gamla in creating such a system:

**Truly, that man is remembered for the good, and his name is Yehoshua ben Gamla. If not for him the Torah would have been forgotten from the Jewish people. Initially, whoever had a father would have his father teach him Torah, and whoever did not have a father would not learn Torah** at all.<sup>7</sup> ...

When the Sages saw that not everyone was capable of teaching their children and Torah study was declining, **they instituted an ordinance that teachers of children should be established in Jerusalem. ... But still ... whoever did not have a father, he did not ascend and learn.** Therefore, the Sages **instituted an ordinance that teachers of children should be established in one city in each and every region [pelekh]. And they brought the students in at the age of sixteen and at the age of seventeen ...**

This state of affairs continued **until Yehoshua ben Gamla came and instituted an ordinance that teachers of children should be established in each and every province and in each and every town, and they would bring the children in to learn at the age of six and at the age of seven.**

(Sefaria, Babylonian Talmud ((B.T.)) Baba Batra 21a)<sup>8</sup>

The universal application of this requirement to all boys was explicit in the requirement to ensure boys who were poor were educated. This mandate was reflected, for example, in the Talmudic admonition to “take care with the poor children for from them Torah will issue forth” (B.T. Nedarim 81a).

But this literacy of one's own faith rarely extended to literacy in other religions among people at the grassroots level beyond what was absorbed by exposure in daily life to the majority cultures, legal systems, and religions under whose dominion Jews dwelled. With scholars, however, at different times and different places, there were degrees of formal literacy regarding other faith communities and traditions. Throughout history, Jews and Judaism confronted and engaged with ideas of surrounding civilizations and their philosophies, including those derived from religion—not only as a function of who they were as a people and culture that highly prized education, but also as a people who were always among the minority populations of a given place.

The groundbreaking legal historian David Daube did pioneering work in describing the interaction of ideas of Judaism with ideas in the New Testament (Daube 1956) and with the laws and philosophies of ancient Greece and Rome (Daube 1944; Daube 1949). So too, the interaction, during varied periods over the past 2,000 years of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, and the mutual influences on each other. Consider the influence of Islamic thought in the 11–13th centuries in bringing Greek philosophy to the attention of great Jewish scholars and thinkers and how familiarity with Greek thinkers among scholars in both these religions in turn brought

these ideas to Catholic thinkers and scholars. This cross-fertilization greatly enriched each of these faith traditions.

Meaningful interactions required, self-evidently, a degree of religious literacy among scholars not only with their own tradition but of the other religious traditions. Such literacy is, indeed, indispensable to bridging gaps between varied religious communities, seeking the shalom among all the peoples of a particular place. Yet, as the introductory chapter notes, religious literacy, at many times in history, could also lead to tensions, conflicts, and public disputations over core ideas, beliefs, and practices rather than providing deeper understanding, appreciation, and comity. Often, such tensions arise over the alienating otherness of religions that seemed most different or strange: Not just with old rivalries between well-established religions but frequently with newer religions that spring up and which often face discrimination and persecution. Yet, ironically, the closer the ideas are between two religions, the greater the danger for potential strife. For example, as Mormonism took root in 19th century America, it developed a theology similar to, but distinct from, normative Christianity. The theology and its teachings regarding core issues of family and marriage (e.g., different views on polygamy as a legitimate expression of marriage and family) evoked the most intense opposition. Or: Jews and Christians and Muslims do not fight over Mecca because it is not relevant to Jewish or Christian thought other than respect for its role to Muslims. Offering such respect for the Holy City of Islam's role in Muslim thought and life requires no change in Christian or Jewish theology or ritual. But precisely because it is so special to each tradition, the role that Jerusalem plays to the three faiths has been the source of strife for centuries.

To take another example in more detail: In the aftermath of 9/11, we saw multifaith efforts expand along a forked path—one the direction of this book, towards broad multifaith coalitions of Western, Eastern, and indigenous traditions, both theistic and non-theistic; the other, continuing a more in-depth focus first on Christians and Jews but now actively engaging Muslims, developed under the rubric: *The Children of Abraham*.

On the one hand, as Prof. Marc Saperstein has written:<sup>9</sup>

there is much for us to discover in Abraham, beyond a common ancestor, which links us together. There is Abraham the monotheist who discovered the one true God, Creator of the world with all its diversity; Abraham the iconoclast who physically destroyed the idols of his society in order to demonstrate their futility; Abraham the man whose faith was so strong that he was willing to leave behind his home in a great civilization to make a new home in an unknown backwater land; Abraham whose trust was so strong that he was willing offer as a sacrifice what was most precious to him in the world; ... Abraham who challenged God's justice in God's decision to destroy righteous and wicked alike in Sodom; Abraham whose sons Isaac and Ishmael, who, after their separation, come together to bury their father in the ancestral plot.

On the other hand, the three traditions' understanding of Abraham also sharply divided the three faiths. The Jewish focus on Abraham and Isaac, in contrast to the Muslim focus on Abraham and Ishmael. So too the Muslim belief that Ishmael not Isaac was the one Abraham took to be bound on Mt. Moriah. The Jewish understanding of the covenant was forged out of the verses in Genesis describing the circumcision of Abraham (which also holds a special place in Muslim thought), which for Jews was seen as the central sign of an eternal covenant ensuring the Jewish people will hold a special place in God's plan. Where Jews (through Isaac) and Muslims (through Ishmael) see their physical descent from Abraham, Christians emphasize their spiritual descent. As Paul in his "Epistle to the Romans" (Romans 4:2–4) argues, the first expression of this, 13

years before the circumcision and God's promise to Abraham, occurs in Genesis 15:5–6 as a reward for Abraham's expression of faith in God—a view in which this faith plays the central role as Abraham anticipates the Christianity to come. However, for some in the new faith that became Christianity, a theology of supersessionism evolved, in which the Christian covenant of salvation through Christ replaces the Jewish covenant. This theological assertion—while more nuanced among some Christian denominations (or even, among some Christian faith communities including Roman Catholicism, which believes that both covenants continue)—has caused intense strife and pain for Jews over the centuries. Beyond Christian–Jewish relations, this thread still resonates with tensions over the issue of proselytization in the context of multifaith relations.

Remembering the historical impact of such differences is to caution that the differences that the covenantal pluralism at the heart of this book argues must be honored will not automatically result in the respect, comity, and cooperation that is our mutually desired outcome. It will require patient nurturing, rooted in a deeper, richer, and more nuanced religious literacy, and infused with a sense of a Buberian I–Thou<sup>10</sup> relation with our counterparts of other faith communities—exactly the values inherent in relations sought in covenantal pluralism.

And, of course, those who focus primarily on the interaction of the Abrahamic communities must always be conscious, as Marc Saperstein (2004) cautions us, that: “this emphasis on the potential kinship among the “children of Abraham”—Jews, Christians, and Muslims—leaves billions of human beings who do not recognize Abraham, who may never have heard of Abraham, beyond the pale.” This book is an important contribution to a broader understanding of a covenantal pluralism for all faith traditions, one which embraces, as did classical Jewish thought, the meaning of metaphorically sharing common ancestors in Adam and Eve—and thereby the larger human family.

To lift up one more urgent contemporary challenge exemplified by these interfaith dynamics: Where competition, tensions, and/or strife do arise among religions today, we often see adherents of one faith identifying and lifting up in the other's sacred text those verses, ideas, and formulations that are supremacist, that seek to diminish the value of other religions and deny their legitimacy, and that seek to repress or justify violence against those that differ. Just focusing narrowly on such verses, argumentation, and verbal agitation, without the context provided by later authoritative scholars' interpretation and application of such texts, may lead to grave misunderstandings of the others' faiths. And haters between religions today are experts in lifting up the most contentious verses in the texts of religions. Such texts frighten them who, in turn, use the texts, often with intentionality, to frighten others.

What must also be studied is the historic context of these verses and the way that, subsequently, the normative authorities of those traditions interpreted and applied those lines. Our partners' explanations about such language must be received with openness, with a willingness to learn of how it was interpreted, adapted, and applied by those later authorities as well as how such provocative texts relate to other textual verses with countervailing meanings. Of course, cross-cultural religious literacy (CCRL) calls for such an approach, according to its “comparative competency,” which asks us to understand the other's faith as the other does, including what that faith says about engaging people of our religion/worldview.

The “personal competency” of understanding one's own faith, and what it says about engaging the other, which CCRL requires, must also entail honesty in recognizing troubling provisions in our own sacred texts. We must acknowledge the existence of oppressive rules and patronizing attitudes in those texts towards other faith communities, and of demeaning or hurtful language, past or present, aimed at a dialogical partner, for which we must accept accountability. There are too many instances where such texts in our own traditions were indeed used with malice and antagonism to harm, to oppress, to persecute, to inflict violence against other religions, and for this we must take responsibility.



For example, in the aftermath of the Holocaust, the Roman Catholic Church, and a number of Protestant denominations, have held themselves accountable for complicity in not standing against, as well as encouraging, the age old antisemitism that provided, at a minimum, a fertile field in which the seeds of the anti-Jewish racism of the Nazi regime could flourish. So too, in the United States and Europe, a number of faith communities have held themselves accountable for the centuries of African slavery. Above all, both sides must be committed to eschewing the use of hurtful texts to engender hate against another religion, and, where applicable, to accept that the other's problematic older texts do not necessarily represent current understanding or practice of that faith. And we must be willing to challenge those in our own faith communities who continue to use such texts to divide.

Increased religious literacy and broader historical and sociological knowledge between and among faith communities can help provide wisdom in how we go about the work spurred by the vision of covenantal pluralism. Faith specific versus multifaith approaches to the challenges we face are complementary—and such wisdom is required to sort out when each can be most effectively utilized. We will not always succeed and must recognize that forging successful inter-faith cooperation is a long process. But in our setbacks, as with our achievements, together we learn invaluable lessons that can guide our communities and our nations as they struggle to become more just and compassionate, more tolerant and free.

What then is called for in terms of multifaith relations at this moment in history? The central thesis of the book is how much more intellectual richness and effectiveness in terms of interfaith comity and cooperation a covenantal pluralism approach provides. The competencies and skills of cross-cultural religious literacy take us beyond merely achieving communal or societal tolerance of various religions. But before completely dismissing the possibilities of “tolerance” as a societal good to strive for, the experience of Jewish communities over the centuries, which rarely experienced toleration, provides a picture of the significant value it can, in fact, provide.

### Different varieties of tolerance

In the important opening essays of this book, laying out the key themes of religious freedom and covenantal pluralism, the authors spend some time in criticizing the concept of religious tolerance. While acknowledging that “‘tolerance’ is certainly necessary as a general norm of civility,” tolerance, they argue, can be condescending, lack any need for or motivation to develop religious literacy, and is too easily coupled with indifference and with a view that religious differences are a matter of simple preference and not of deep abiding principle, faith, and identity.

In making the argument, they appear to limit the kind of tolerance they are talking about. They use modifying terms of their own and of others they quote, such as “platitudinous appeals for ‘tolerance,’” “contemporary pieties of tolerance,” “minimalist and uncritical versions of tolerance,” “vacuous, apathetic tolerance,” “undifferentiated ideology of tolerance,” and “the sometimes thin rhetoric of tolerance.” And they conclude the section with: “In short, a ‘tolerance’ that amounts to little more than apathy and crude relativism is insufficient to meet the challenges of our times.” Their assessment is certainly accurate regarding the limited forms of tolerance they describe, but more fulsome and robust forms of tolerance have had, and continue to have, a range of positive aspects and impacts that are acknowledged comparatively briefly.

Meant to provoke a deeper conversation about the understanding and engagement of neighbors (in the same way that “multi-faith” is juxtaposed with “interfaith”), the framing of “tolerance” nevertheless diminishes a rich word with a robust history; a word that first must take

place before one can actually understand and engage the other in mutual respect and comity, as cross-cultural religious literacy seeks to do.

I fully acknowledge the limitation of tolerance and strongly affirm the strong positive characteristics and impact that, in contrast, the covenantal pluralism that is at the heart of this book can provide. But I suspect that in requiring a significant commitment of time, intellectual engagement, personal and social interaction, and programmatic resources, covenantal pluralism may well present the best of multifaith relations and interactions, yet never become the societal norm of the way, in real life, most people and even many religious groups will interact with each other. Tolerance as “a general norm of civility” may indeed be far more common and may be indispensable to the wellbeing of religion in general and minority communities in particular.

The full opening paragraph in the tolerance section of the second chapter alludes to that potential.

In our fast-globalizing world of ever-growing diversity, “tolerance” is certainly necessary as a general norm of civility. And there are important international human rights documents dedicated to defending tolerance, such as the UN Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief. Still, tolerance, in and of itself, is not sufficient for the challenge of living well with deep diversity.

At the same time, I agree with that paragraph’s conclusion: “Indeed, minimalist and uncritical versions of ‘tolerance’ can actually run counter to genuinely authentic and sustainable pluralism.”

Let me illustrate the kind of positive impact to which I allude, using a few moments in Jewish history where the community experienced relative tolerance and, in more detail, the Jewish experience in America.<sup>11</sup> While it is hard to think of any pre-Age of Reason country that embraced norms that today we would fully equate with robust religious freedom, there are (all-too-rare) examples of periods of pluralistic and tolerant societies that manifested social cohesion despite religious diversity with varied sects of a dominant religion and with other religions. Just consider the Jewish experience in: Alexandria, Egypt 200 BCE to 100 CE; the episodic flourishing of Jewish life in Babylonia for hundreds of years from 300 to 1000 CE; the so-called “Golden Age of Spain” (in Granada and Caliph Abd al Rahman II’s Cordoba, epitomized by Hasdai Ibn Shaprut and Shmuel Hanagid); and 17th-century Amsterdam—all of which saw Jewish life flourish even as Jews contributed substantially to the general society. All are examples of the history of “tolerance”—examples that, as I understand them, the editors seek to build on through “covenantal pluralism.”

As to the US, Eastern European and Russian Jews poured into the United States in the 40-year period from 1880–1920. They were widely regarded by many Americans as foreigners, as the “other”—dirty and ignorant immigrants who were draining the resources of this country and hurting real Americans. They experienced a mix of tolerance, harassment, and discrimination. Earlier generations of Western European Jewish immigrants from Britain and Germany were too often regarded as money hungry financiers who were manipulating the country at the expense of the average American. They experienced greater tolerance, but prejudice was still keenly felt. From Henry Ford to Charles Lindbergh to the Ku Klux Klan, these various images were affirmed and circulated.

After the Holocaust and World War II, things began to change. Public educational standards continued to rise, which correlated with declines in rates of those holding racist or antisemitic attitudes; increasing numbers of Americans, spurred by the G.I. Bill, became college educated; and Jews were assimilating and even intermarrying at increasing rates. In houses of worship and

“Sunday” schools, courses in comparative religion became more common; and in a number of our public schools there were increases in civic education classes that might include education “about” various American religions (respecting the Supreme Court’s understanding of the Establishment Clause’s bar on teaching the truth of any or all religion in public schools). All these changes were complemented with general information about varied religions being conveyed in books, movies, art, and music. The percentages of those holding antisemitic views began to fall steadily and continued throughout the 20th century, declining by over 50%. As levels of education for Americans generally flattened out at that point, so did the fall of antisemitic attitudes, which have held in the 12% range in the past two decades (Anti-Defamation League 2020).<sup>12</sup>

Even with the significant decline in such rates, however, still some 30–40 million Americans have continued to hold antisemitic attitudes and beliefs. Yet only a very small number acted on them. The confluence of changing attitudes about Jews as well as the civil rights movement’s impact in changing many Americans’ views about African Americans drove expressions of such racist and antisemitic views increasingly underground or to the sidelines of American public life. There evolved a feeling that you could not make it in American public life if you openly expressed antisemitic or racist views. Public expressions of antisemitism, and increasingly so of racism, were steadily pushed to the margins of America’s academia, media, entertainment, and religious life.

A vivid personal experience: In 1976, I invited all six Democratic candidates for the presidency to meet with the presidents and board chairs of major Jewish organizations at the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism, which I directed for more than 40 years. Three were well-known to the American Jewish community and readily accepted: Sens. Mo Udall, Henry (Scoop) Jackson, and Frank Church. So did two others, California Governor Jerry Brown—and former Georgia Governor Jimmy Carter in his first meeting with national Jewish leaders. To our surprise, however, so did former Alabama Governor George Wallace (the most successful racist politician in the US in the 1960s and 1970s) engaging in another presidential run. He gave a memorable talk. Clearly recognizing that he could not win a national run for president if he held onto his racist, and antisemitic, views that still worked among some segments of the American populace, Wallace offered a public apology for things he had said about Jews and tried to qualify some of what he had said and done regarding African Americans. While he didn’t convince anyone in the room, it was an insightful affirmation to the beginnings of a shift in attitudes. Unfortunately, as more recent events testify, we still have a long way to go.

Or take one other statistic: For decades, when American voters were asked whether they would prefer a Catholic, Jew, Protestant, Evangelical Protestant, Mormon, Muslim, or atheist for President of the US, Jews and Catholics routinely ranked below Protestants. By 2010, there had been a startling shift with more voters favoring a Jew and then a Catholic over a mainline or evangelical president or one of any other religion (McCarthy 2019). Those numbers have held for a decade now.

So yes, there are still millions of Americans holding antisemitic attitudes. They are found among elements on the left and the far right, from where most of the violent manifestations of antisemitism emanate. Events during the past few years, from the massacre at Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh in 2018 and other sites of worship, to the message of “Camp Auschwitz” on shirts worn by protestors during the attack on the Capitol on January 6, 2021 and t-shirts reading “6MWE” (six million weren’t enough) worn by some of those right-wing groups on other occasions, to the significant increase in antisemitic memes on social media, all reflect the persistence of antisemitism in America—and similarly across the globe. But the post-WWII era marked a period where Jews moved from the peripheries of American society (still

facing quotas at many universities, corporations, neighborhoods, and country clubs) to the very centers of American political, professional, economic life, enjoying more rights, more freedoms, more opportunities—and yes more acceptance and more tolerance—than they had ever known in any Diaspora community in Jewish history. Tolerance—even among millions who held negative views of Jews—was one indispensable dynamic of what made that possible.

What I am suggesting, then, is that we not think of there being two poles of multifaith interactions, one consisting of the weak tolerance described in the essay, the other the robust covenantal pluralism so richly lifted up in this book. Rather, there is a continuum, a spectrum of forms of interaction both within the rubric of tolerance and within that of pluralism, which connect along a broad spectrum.

Before delving into the strengths of covenantal pluralism, we need to return to the discussion of Judaism's position on covenants to set the context for the broader discussion.

### **Judaism's view on covenants and covenantal pluralism**

How then does this connect with Judaism's view of covenants?

When we think of covenants in the Jewish tradition, we think first and foremost of the covenant at Sinai—a central source of Jewish law, theology, and identity. That was fundamentally a particularist covenant between God and the Jewish people, incorporating the belief that all the Jews at Sinai stood in constructive agency for all the generations of Jews to come. In traditional Jewish thought, the foundational documents of Jewish law found in the Bible and the Talmud flowed from the encounter at Sinai between God and the Jewish people. Although particularist in its essence, the covenant involved a number of laws requiring concern for non-Jews, and provided ideas accessible to non-Jews as well as to Jews. Take, for example, the moral laws such as the Ten Commandments or the social laws such as feeding the hungry or treating the stranger as ourselves—hence the concept that the people who accepted the ethical monotheism that flowed from the covenant at Sinai could be “a light to the nations” (Isaiah 49:6), bringing the universal moral messages embodied in the covenant to all.

But there were other important covenants in the Bible. First is the covenant that God made with Abraham, prior to Sinai, the meaning of which was interpreted differently by Jews, by Christians, and by Muslims as discussed above.

Second is the Noahide covenant, made prior to Abraham, also alluded to above, which, as understood in the rabbinic tradition, is considered binding on all humankind, asserting the proposition that there are certain fundamental moral laws that are basic to any civilized society. The seven so-called Noahide Laws derived by Talmudic rabbis from the story of Noah, included prohibitions against murder, robbery, blasphemy, idolatry, sexual crimes, and eating the flesh of a living animal, as well as the requirement that every community establish courts of justice. (*Sanhedrin* 56a–60b, *Tosefta*, *Avodah Zara* 8:4–8, *Mishneh Torah*, *Melakhim* 8:10–10:12).

Out of the story of Noah, Noah stands in agency for all humanity in a covenant with God after the flood, hence the requirement of all people and societies, discussed above, to abide by the seven laws—a kind of Divinely ordained early Geneva Convention for moral people and moral nations. Out of this story comes, as well, an understanding of the consequence of God's terms of the contract, which is not to destroy the world again (Genesis 8:21–22). If it will be destroyed, it will be because of what humanity does or fails to do: Thus the protection of the environment, God's creation, affirmed by the assertion that “*L'Adonai haaretz um'lo'ah*, the Earth is the Eternal's and the fullness thereof” (Psalm 24:1). It is a universal obligation, founded on the recognition that what we own, we own in a trust relation with God, the terms of which require all humanity to protect the corpus of that trust.<sup>13</sup>

Third, not strictly in the form of a covenant but following up the universal themes of Judaism discussed in the opening section of the essay are the moral messages in the prophets, strongly affirming God's concern for all people, nations, and religions. The prophets of Israel had many messages aimed at chastening, goading, and inspiring the people of Israel and their leaders. But many of their themes were messages for or about humankind: Jonah's lesson of God's concern for the morality of all nations and the well-being of all peoples even Assyria, Israel's bitter enemy. So, too, the universalist prophecies of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Amos, and Micah, "Thus God will judge among the nations and arbitrate for the many peoples" (Isaiah 2:4). On this foundation of a universalist ethic and vision of the world, and of God's dominion over all, emerges the biblical and post-biblical ethic of peace and justice for all the nations of the world.

### **Covenantal pluralism**

Rabbi Sacks lifts up vividly the power of a covenantal approach to embracing the dignity of difference among the world's religious communities. A number of his observations and arguments have been cited in other essays in this book including the opening essays discussed above. Relations embracing the dignity of difference are, in his analysis, in contrast to "fundamentalism, [which] like imperialism, is the attempt to impose a single way of life on our plural world. It is the Tower of Babel of our time" (Sacks 2002, 201).

A word about terminology: I often argued in my speeches as the US Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom (2015–2017) that care should be used to differentiate between extremists and fundamentalists. Some use the terms "fundamentalist" and "extremist" interchangeably, as do quotes in this section. I think it more helpful to differentiate between the two. It shouldn't matter how fundamentalist or liberal a person's or groups' interpretations are of their religious theology or texts. Rather we must act to constrain and delegitimize extremists who would use, in the name of their religion, coercive power to impose their religious views on others.

In our enthusiastic focus on interfaith cooperation, we must not lose sight that we all have challenges we must face on our own, within our own faith communities, and there are times working for even shared goals can best be done by a single faith community. This awareness is perhaps most relevant to resolving contentious theological disputes in our own traditions, often with significant impact beyond our own community.<sup>14</sup> (Not least, for example, in our efforts to constrain and delegitimize extremist interpretations that distort the authentic range of interpretation of our religious traditions.) In combatting violent extremist ideas in one religious community, when proponents of non-violent and more tolerant expressions of that religion are embraced by other faith groups or work cooperatively with them—such efforts are often used by extremists to undercut the legitimacy of such proponents. Extremists will argue that such interfaith cooperation or international cooperative endeavors are indications of both an inauthentic syncretism with other religions and subjugation to "foreign" interests, which are portrayed as a danger to the well-being of the community in which these debates are taking place. Thoughtful strategies and tactics need to be employed in such situations.

One of the strengths of the covenantal pluralism approach to religious freedom and religious cooperation is that it is, at its core, a repudiation of such extremist approaches. This is an important part of what a genuine covenantal pluralism requires. Explaining the nature of covenant and how it contrasts with other forms of interaction between communities where economic, political, or military power is used to impose ideas on others, Rabbi Sacks writes:

If ... I can force you to do what I want, then I have secured my freedom at the cost of yours ... Covenant is the attempt to create partnership without dominance or submission ... Covenant exists because we are different and seek to preserve that difference even as we come together to bring our several gifts to the common good.

(Sacks 2002, 202–203)

These issues of coercion raise complicated and competing values around the issue of proselytization and conversion, whether in dialogue, or in cooperative endeavors. You cannot have a covenantal collaboration based on mutual respect, on an embrace of the dignity of difference without a clear commitment to eschew proselytizing as a condition of such engagement. I say this fully recognizing that this clear line that should not be crossed creates a paradox and complex dilemmas, for some groups believe they can never ignore their religious obligation to bring the truth of their religion to others. And in the act of educating partners from other religions about your own religion, you are meeting the need (and, for some, the religious obligation) to share your religion with others. But I would suggest that to use such multifaith fora as we have been discussing for the purposes, and with the intent, of converting other participants is an inherent failure to respect the core values of covenantal pluralism. This should be true between religious groups committed to mutual respect and cooperation.

When religious communities can, in fact, create a genuine sense of a covenantal pluralism, where we can work together cooperatively with respect and trust, in our vast numbers we can often achieve things none of us can achieve alone. When we act together effectively, at its best, it can be a geometric increase in what we do singly. And in our engagement and openness to hear and learn, in enhancing our cross-cultural religious literacy—we enrich ourselves not only in learning about others (including those with whom our lack of understanding had long bred mistrust and alienation), but, paradoxically, in our exchanges, where we must explain clearly our own traditions to others and test our long-held assumptions by the new perspectives we encounter in others and the questions they ask of us, we deepen and sharpen our understanding of our own faith traditions.

Among the varied outcomes of covenantal pluralism are hopes for a more just society and a more peaceful and better world. As Rabbi Sacks writes in *The Home We Build Together*:

What then is society? It is where we set aside all considerations of wealth and power and value people for what they are and what they give. It is where Jew and Christian, Muslim and Hindu, Buddhist and Sikh, can come together, bound by their commonalities, enlarged by their differences. It is where we join in civil conversation about the kind of society we wish to create for the sake of our grandchildren not yet born. It is where we share an overarching identity, a first language of citizenship, despite our different second languages of ethnicity or faith. It is where strangers can become friends. It is not a vehicle of salvation, but it is the most effective form yet devised for respectful coexistence. Society is the home we build together when we bring our several gifts to the common good.

(Sacks 2009, 240)

Or as Rabbi Greenberg, has urged:

We have not yet grasped the richness of God's covenantal pluralism. Pluralism means more than accepting or even affirming the other. It entails recognizing the blessing in

the other's existence, because it balances one's own position, because it brings all of us closer to the ultimate goal. Even when we are right in our position, the other who contradicts our position may be our corrective or our check against going to excess.

(Greenberg 1997b, 434)

This, above all, is the power of covenantal pluralism. Such a covenantal pluralism is the process that helps transform ideas, engagement, and cooperation into a society functioning at its best. And in the very act of meeting and sharing and dialoguing and working together in the spirit of covenantal pluralism to bridge humanity's divides and enhance cooperation for the common good, we are modeling the kind of world of which we dream and which we strive to create.

## Notes

- 1 For a more detailed examination of such universal aspects of the Jewish tradition, see Saperstein 2008 and Saperstein 2019.
- 2 All biblical quotations from the Hebrew Scriptures are taken from the 1999 *JPS Hebrew-English Tanakh* translation (Jewish Publication Society 1991).
- 3 See also Novak 1998, 149–174. For a description of the Noahide laws, see section below on “Judaism’s View on Covenants and Covenantal Pluralism.”
- 4 For a fuller discussion of this thread in the Jewish tradition as well as Mendelssohn’s views, see Katz 1961, chapter XIV.
- 5 Rabbi Greenberg writes: “If your behavior consistently upholds the image of God, the life and dignity of human beings, then your actions bespeak a connection/relationship with the God in whose image these humans are. If you regularly violate or mistreat the image of God, then your actions show that you do not know or fear God, whatever verbal statements you make about God and religion” (private email to the author, March 19, 2021).
- 6 I recognize and affirm the book’s important distinction between “interfaith” and “multifaith.” Over the past century, however, the term “interfaith” has been used as to encompass characteristics of both these terms as used in this book including in quotations cited in this chapter. So for the purposes of this essay the two terms will be used interchangeably, their meaning inferred from the context.
- 7 This and other talmudic quotations are taken from a translation done by Sefaria—a service that offers a translation of traditional Hebrew and Aramaic texts, which fills in the often overly concise, poetic, and ambiguous literal translation (the bolded wording) with clarifying language based on consensus understandings of what the literal language is saying (the unbolded wording).
- 8 It is interesting to note that in Western society the next real system of universal education for children evolved during the time of the Puritans who believed they were the new children of Israel, guided to a Promised Land after entering into a covenant with God (the Mayflower Compact) to establish a new biblical order modeled after that of the ancient Jewish communities. For many decades in the 17th century, most of the laws of the New England colonies carried biblical citations. Knowledge of Hebrew brought with it knowledge of post-biblical Jewish texts as well, such as the Talmud. As Cotton Mather once preached in regard to the justification of the system of universal education established in Massachusetts: “The reader knows that in every town among the Jews, there was a school, whereat children were taught the reading of the law; and if there were any town destitute of a school, the men of the place did stand excommunicate, until one were erected” (Mather 1820, 7).
- 9 This section draws heavily on an unpublished speech given at the Chautauqua Institution by the distinguished Jewish historian Prof. Marc Saperstein on August 16, 2004.
- 10 Drawn from Buber’s 1923 book *I and Thou*, Buber posits that “relationship” is central to the human condition. At the heart of a human’s interaction with others, with God, with the world about them is moving beyond an “I-It” relation that objectifies those with whom we engage, to an “I-Thou” relationship that is rooted in our relationship with God, but can be manifested in our relations with others. The I-Thou relation offers up the potential for emotional fullness, spiritual meaningfulness, and an embrace of the whole being of the “other” that transcends the I-It relation. This idea is frequently infused into Buber’s writings on other subjects. For a discussion of how Buber’s philosophy, including the I-Thou relation, was applied to his views on community and dialogue including interfaith relations. See Saperstein 1973, Chapter 3.

- 11 For a related discussion, see Saperstein 2020.
- 12 Since 1964, the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) has regularly surveyed antisemitic attitudes in the United States. In the original 1964 poll, the ADL found that 29 percent of Americans believed in six or more common stereotypes about Jews (out of 11 stereotypes they were asked about). This percentage has declined significantly since 1964, with the majority of ADL's surveys over the past 25 years indicating that between 11 and 14 percent of Americans harbor antisemitic attitudes. The January 2020 survey finds that 11 percent of American adults believe in six or more of the 11 stereotypes. For more information, see Anti-Defamation League 2020.
- 13 See, for example, Pope Francis 2015, Chapter Two, Section II, Paragraph 67. See also United States Conference of Catholic Bishops n.d., Merritt 2010, and Saperstein 1998, 115.
- 14 In contemporary Jewish life, Orthodox Jews face a limitation on the subject of interfaith discourse due to the admonition of the leading Modern Orthodox scholar of the 20th Century in the United States, Rav Joseph Soloveitchik. In response to questions raised by Vatican II that would result in the 1965 publication of *Nostra Aetate*, which redefined the relations of Catholics and Jews, rejecting unequivocally the accusation of deicide that had plagued Jews for centuries and affirming the eternal nature of the covenant with God and the Jewish people, a repudiation of supersessionism, in 1964, Soloveitchik wrote an essay called "Confrontation" in which he laid out the limits of interfaith dialogue (Soloveitchik, 1964). In 1966, it was adopted by the Rabbinical Council of America confining such dialogue and cooperation to "universal problems" that are "economic, social, scientific, and ethical but rejecting dialogue on "faith, religious law, doctrine and ritual" (Korn 2005). Such an approach would seriously constrain (but not make impossible) multifaith engagement in the spirit of covenantal pluralism. Some segments of the Orthodox Jewish community hold to this position. This limited approach to dialogue was never accepted by non-Orthodox Jews and in recent years, even Orthodox leaders and scholars have engaged in, or suggested the propriety of, such discussions, so long as they are teaching about such beliefs and not debating the merits of those beliefs (Korn 2005). Such a standard would resonate with the engagement envisioned in covenantal pluralistic approach.

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## 4

# FRATELLI TUTTI, LESSONS LEARNED FROM INTERRELIGIOUS ACTION, AND THE CATHOLIC CHURCH

*Maryann Cusimano Love*

“*Fratelli Tutti!*” With these words, Saint Francis of Assisi addressed his brothers and sisters and proposed to them a way of life ... [which] calls for a love that transcends the barriers of geography and distance, and declares blessed all those who love the other “as much when he is far away from him as when he is with him.” In his simple and direct way, Saint Francis expressed the essence of fraternal openness that allows us to acknowledge, appreciate, and love each person, regardless of physical proximity, where he or she was born or lives.

(Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, 2020, 1)

In order to be able to witness to Christ fruitfully, Christians must be united to those [non-Christian] people (*gentes*) in esteem and love. They must take part in their cultural and social life through the various dealings and occupations of human life. They must be familiar with their national and religious traditions; with joy and reverence they must discover the seeds of the word hidden in these traditions ... Just as Christ searched the hearts of people and led them to the divine by truly human contacts, so his disciples, deeply imbued with the Spirit of Christ, should know the human persons among whom they live and associate with. In this way, through sincere and patient dialogue, they will learn what treasures the bountiful God has distributed among the nations.

(Vatican II, *Ad Gentes*, 1965, 11)

Cooperate or die. We have more people and more countries, in more close connection, than ever before in human history. We must build better means of cooperating than ever before. We need to scale up and speed up our cooperative processes, to keep pace with the scale and speed of the global problems we face. We urgently need new models, plural, of cooperation.

(Cusimano Love 2020)

## The stakes: Brothers and sisters in a warzone

The Central African Republic (CAR) was embroiled in war when Pope Francis visited in 2015. Fighting was ongoing among 14 paramilitary groups from North and South, divided along ethnic and religious identity lines. Muslim, Christian, and Indigenous affiliated armed actors had so far killed over 6,000 people and displaced one quarter of the population. The septuagenarian Pope Francis quipped to his pilot that if the war made it too unsafe to land the papal plane in CAR, the pilot should just give Pope Francis a parachute.

Despite the violence across sectarian lines, Pope Francis visited the Koudoukou Mosque, which was housing many Muslim internally displaced persons (IDPs), in the middle of a siege zone, where 15,000 Muslims were surrounded by Christian militias. French peacekeepers in CAR told Pope Francis that the security situation was so explosive that they would not be able to adequately protect him. After entering the mosque, removing his shoes, and bowing to mecca, the Pope said “Salaam” to the IDPs and Muslims inside the mosque, noting “Christians and Muslims are brothers and sisters.” The Pope also visited the Catholic Cathedral in Bangai, to mark the Jubilee Year. Usually held every 25 years, Pope Francis called an extraordinary Jubilee Year. He urged all in CAR to lay down their arms and arm themselves instead with justice, authentic peace, love, and mercy, and reminded all that the Jubilee Year was a time of mercy and forgiveness. A Vatican media officer, noting the Pope’s schedule of visits to the mosque, Cathedral, and IDP camp, announced that there would be a press conference afterwards “if all are alive.”

The Pope’s visit was not “drive by” diplomacy. He had been asked by local religious peace-builders to come, to aid their efforts at interreligious dialogue and action. Catholic Archbishop Dieudonné Nzapalainga led the Interreligious Platform, with Imam Omar Kobine Layama and Protestant Pastor Nicolas Guérékoyame Gbangou. While CAR’s fragile state imploded, religious institutions still retained widespread respect in CAR. Archbishop Dieudonné Nzapalainga told me they were urging the Pope to visit because they wanted to leverage the media attention and the public spotlight on CAR generated by a papal visit to further local peace efforts, to bring transparency, accountability, and pressure to bear on the armed actors to stop the violence.

Pope Francis modeled his visit to engage Muslims and Christians in CAR on St. Francis of Assisi’s outreach to the Sultan in 1291, also during a period of conflict, the Crusades. The Pope’s visit was well received in CAR. A spokesperson for Muslim IDPs noted, “We are very proud to welcome him. The pope is not only for the Christians, he is a servant of God for all Central Africans” (Sherwood 2015).

Similarly, Pope Francis visited Iraq in 2021 in hopes of repairing and strengthening interfaith and intercommunal relations after the destruction and division caused by ISIS. Where ISIS used sectarian and identity differences to divide and conquer, Pope Francis raised up these differences as strengths of a resilient society.

The religious, cultural and ethnic diversity, that has been a hallmark of Iraqi society for millennia, is a precious resource on which to draw, not an obstacle to be eliminated ... Diversity, instead of giving rise to conflict, should lead to harmonious cooperation in the life of society.

(Pope Francis 2021a)

Where ISIS had conducted genocide against minority communities in the Nineveh plains, Pope Francis raised up the value that diverse identities bring to society.

As I look out at you, I can see the cultural and religious diversity of the people of Qaraqosh, and this shows something of the beauty that this entire region holds out to the future. Your presence here is a reminder that beauty is not monochrome, but shines forth in variety and difference.

(Pope Francis 2021b)

The Pope was highlighting an insight of the Iraqi language, where locals do not use the word “minority” but instead discuss “component” groups, a recognition of how diverse groups build up society.

In his historic meeting with Pope Francis, the Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, a revered Shiite leader, echoed the trip’s theme of “We are all brothers.” After the first ever meeting between a Pope and a Grand Ayatollah, Sistani issued an official statement that Christians in Iraq “should live like all Iraqis, in security and peace and with full constitutional rights.” Rather than a negative idea of tolerance, he spoke of the positive obligation of care and protection, noting the “role that the religious authority plays in protecting them, and others who have also suffered injustice and harm.” Religious leaders from various sects and identity groups underscored the point through an interfaith service in Ur, the birthplace of Abraham, common to the Jewish, Christian, and Islamic faiths (Winfield 2021).

This interfaith message in a predominantly Shiite country where thousands have been murdered in sectarian violence, complemented Pope Francis’ earlier visit with the grand imam of Egypt’s al-Azhar, a key center of learning in Sunni Islam. Together they signed the “Declaration of Human Fraternity,” calling on both Christians and Muslims to embrace religious diversity with freedom and respect.

It is no accident that in the recent Catholic encyclical, *Fratelli Tutti*, Pope Francis uses the same words as in CAR and Iraq to IDPs in the warzone, “we are all brothers and sisters.” He calls for “a new vision of fraternity and social friendship that will not remain at the level of words” (*Fratelli Tutti*, 6), but that will be put into concrete actions for the common good, as exemplified by the ongoing interreligious dialogue and action for peace in CAR and Iraq.

This book examines a model of cooperation, covenantal pluralism, with its associated methods of cross-cultural religious literacy (CCRL), that parallel Catholic theories and practices of interreligious dialogue and action. In this chapter I will discuss Roman Catholic theology in the context of covenantal pluralism, particularly from the vantage of the recent encyclical *Fratelli Tutti*. I will explore these themes in practice, discussing Catholic lessons learned on the practices of interreligious dialogue and action (IRD/A), as exemplified in a multi-decade learning process examining Catholic efforts at IRD/A, described in part in Catholic Relief Services’ and Caritas Internationalis’ lessons learned for the practice of interreligious action and peacebuilding, made public in *Interreligious Action* (Bamat 2017), and *Advancing Interreligious Peacebuilding* (CRS 2019). I will conclude with suggestions of the promise and perils of covenantal pluralism and CCRL.

## Fratelli Tutti and Vatican II

Pope Francis’ recent encyclical, *Fratelli Tutti*, is a companion piece to his previous encyclical *Laudato Si* (2015). An encyclical is official, authoritative magisterium, a binding form of teaching in the Catholic Church. *Fratelli Tutti* and *Laudato Si* are capstones, drawing together centuries of Catholic teaching, informed by practices, of “encuentro,” engagement, dialogue, and action for the common good, building community across religious, ethnic, and national identities. In *Laudato Si* (LS), Pope Francis urges interreligious action for stewardship of our common home,

inspired by Orthodox Patriarch Bartholomew. *Fratelli Tutti* (FT) was encouraged by Egypt's Grand Imam Ahmad Al-Tayyeb, and it is a deeper discussion of their interreligious action commitment, "Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together." Like covenantal pluralism and CCRL, LS and FT urge moving seriously and systematically beyond mere interreligious "tolerance," into deep, respectful relationships that better serve God and the common good.

In these encyclicals Pope Francis continues the theological themes and processes of the Second Vatican Council, 1962–1965, a period of Church renewal in the face of rapid social, economic, and technological change. The Vatican II process included the participation of representatives from other religions, in respectful dialogue about the challenges and hopes in facing current challenges and discerning the "signs of the times." The resultant Church teachings were addressed to all people of good will (not addressed exclusively to Catholics). The theological themes of Vatican II included robust affirmations that God's love and gifts are present in all people of all faiths and cultures, therefore interreligious and intercultural engagement and action are necessary in order to serve God and to further the common good. FT and LS continue both the processes and the goals of interreligious engagement for peace and the common good expressed in Vatican II. Fans of Vatican II are likewise fans of LS and FT. Critics of Vatican II remain unpersuaded by Pope Francis, LS, and FT.

A deeper examination of Vatican II is beyond the purview of this chapter. But for the average person, some of the most noticeable changes from Vatican II were changes from an internal focus to more open, outward engagement for the Catholic Church. Changes to worship services included use of local languages, art, music, and culture, instead of Latin language and European music, art, and culture. The priest physically moved to face and engage the people, rather than turning his back on the congregation. Lay people became more engaged in church leadership and activities. Institutional structures promoting Justice and Peace were established from the Vatican to dioceses, parishes, and universities worldwide. And teaching on religious freedom and interreligious engagement was transformed. As Pope Francis noted on the 50th anniversary of *Nostra Aetate* (1965), Vatican II's position on relations with other religions, "From indifference and opposition, we've turned to cooperation and goodwill. From enemies and strangers, we've become friends and brothers" (Pope Francis 2015). The title of an influential book puts it more sharply, contending that the Church's relations with other religions moved "From Confrontation to Dialogue" (Dupuis 2002).

Vatican II solidly reinforced religious freedom, the human dignity of people of all faiths, and the value of interreligious engagement and action. Catholics are urged to positive relationships with non-Catholics, in *Nostra Aetate*, to

prudently and lovingly, through dialogue and collaboration with the followers of other religions, and in witness to the Christian life and faith, to acknowledge, preserve and promote the spiritual and moral good, as well as the socio-cultural values found among them.

(NA 2)

These Vatican II teachings presage the concept of covenantal pluralism, seeking robust relationships with others, not mere tolerance. Vatican II had concrete application in the social justice work of the Catholic Church. For example, when Cardinal Hickey, Archbishop of Washington, D.C., was appealing for support for refugees, a critic asked why the Church should use scarce resources to assist non-Catholics. John Carr, longtime Director of the Office of Justice and Peace for the US Conference of Catholic Bishops, recalls Cardinal Hickey's eloquent response. "We

shelter the homeless, educate those hungry for knowledge, and care for the sick, not because they are Catholic, but because we are Catholic. They are Jesus in disguise.”

Prior to Vatican II, interreligious work was often envisioned as “one way traffic.” Missionary work in particular framed the work as converting “pagans.” Today, the relationships among people of different faiths are multidirectional and mutually beneficial, paralleling CCRL’s criteria of personal, comparative, and collaborative cross-cultural competencies. (These are complementary to what Catholic Relief Services and Caritas call the Three B’s, which will be discussed later.)

While these changes were embraced by most Catholics, some traditionalists, then and now, argued that Vatican II moved the Church too far, too fast. Some lament the demise of medieval Christendom, and charge Vatican II with this demise (although the timing of their critique is several centuries off). The most extreme critics call Vatican II illegitimate, and declare all popes since 1962 to be illegitimate. Pope Francis has come under particular fire. Hailing from Latin America rather than Europe, engaging in outreach to other faiths, and critiquing the excesses and inequalities of global capitalism, have attracted particular ire. Urging the Church to be a poor Church for the poor and marginalized, and reaching out across identity groups, is consistent with the life and teaching of Jesus, but it has led some critics to label Pope Francis a communist, a socialist, while some even go so far as to call Pope Francis a heretic who is creating “a church run by Protestants, Islamists, and Jews” (Luxmoore 2020). And that’s just coming from small but vocal groups in Catholic communities!

### ***Fratelli Tutti* and Francis of Assisi**

Rather than shrinking under the criticism, Pope Francis has doubled down on continuing the implementation of the spirit and processes of Vatican II. *Laudato Si* and *Fratelli Tutti* are key in these regards. FT has been criticized as not breaking new ground, of being a sort of “Greatest Hits” which repeats and weaves together statements and themes made by Pope Francis in previous years, from his Abu Dhabi declaration to his addresses at the United Nations, his address to the US Congress, and his remarks at the Koudoukou Mosque in CAR. This is entirely the point. FT weaves together Pope Francis’ teachings over the years. By elevating these into an encyclical, Catholic critics can neither avoid nor disavow them; they are now the official teaching of the Catholic Church. While Pope Francis’ critics may not resonate with the messenger, FT ensures that they cannot easily disregard the message.

When Cardinal Bergoglio of Argentina was elected Pope, he chose the name Francis in order to model his papacy after St. Francis of Assisi, a man of poverty, peace, concern for the planet, and interreligious engagement and action. Pope Francis’ critics interpret the legacy of St. Francis differently; they see a man who engaged Muslims during the Crusades for the express purpose of converting their “heathen” souls. Pope Francis makes clear in the opening paragraphs of FT that he does not share that interpretation. His understanding of St. Francis of Assisi’s approach and contributions eight centuries ago aligns with covenantal pluralism, and is worth citing fully. Interreligious and intercultural dialogue, encounter, and action are not nice pieties at the margins, but they are central to the faith, tangible demonstrations of fidelity to God’s transcendent love beyond borders. Saint Francis of Assisi is a model because his love for others demonstrates the depth of his love of God, which flows unceasing and unperturbed by divides of human identities.

WITHOUT BORDERS 3. There is an episode in the life of Saint Francis that shows his openness of heart, which knew no bounds and transcended differences of origin, nationality, colour or religion. It was his visit to Sultan Malik-el-Kamil, in Egypt,

which entailed considerable hardship, given Francis' poverty, his scarce resources, the great distances to be traveled and their differences of language, culture, and religion. That journey, undertaken at the time of the Crusades, further demonstrated the breadth and grandeur of his love, which sought to embrace everyone. Francis' fidelity to his Lord was commensurate with his love for his brothers and sisters. Unconcerned for the hardships and dangers involved, Francis went to meet the Sultan with the same attitude that he instilled in his disciples: if they found themselves "among the Saracens and other nonbelievers," without renouncing their own identity they were not to "engage in arguments or disputes, but to be subject to every human creature for God's sake." In the context of the times, this was an extraordinary recommendation. We are impressed that some eight hundred years ago Saint Francis urged that all forms of hostility or conflict be avoided and that a humble and fraternal "subjection" be shown to those who did not share his faith. 4. Francis did not wage a war of words aimed at imposing doctrines; he simply spread the love of God. He understood that "God is love and those who abide in love abide in God" (1 Jn 4:16). In this way, he became a father to all and inspired the vision of a fraternal society. Indeed, "only the man who approaches others, not to draw them into his own life, but to help them become ever more fully themselves, can truly be called a father." In the world of that time, bristling with watchtowers and defensive walls ... Francis was able to welcome true peace into his heart and free himself of the desire to wield power over others. He became one of the poor and sought to live in harmony with all. Francis has inspired these pages.

(FT, 3, 4)

To honor this history, Pope Francis released *Fratelli Tutti* on the feast of St. Francis of Assisi. In case anyone should miss the point, he also traveled to the city of Assisi, where he signed the encyclical on the tomb of St. Francis of Assisi, after saying mass in the crypt church of the Basilica of St. Francis of Assisi, with members of the Franciscan orders who are followers of St. Francis of Assisi, while reminding the world that he took the name of Francis in order to follow the example of Saint Francis of Assisi, who served the poor, the planet, and the other/outsider, engaging in interreligious dialogue and action even during dangerous religious conflict.

Building on these themes of deep interreligious engagement, peacebuilding, and healing, the heart of the encyclical is an extended exegesis on the parable of the Good Samaritan, the poster child for interreligious peacebuilding. As a Jesuit, Pope Francis uses the spiritual methods of St. Ignatius Loyola's spiritual exercises. St. Ignatius Loyola was a Spanish nobleman and soldier. Wounded in battle, he had a spiritual conversion while convalescing in Loyola, northern Spain. He recorded his prayer methods, the spiritual exercises, which were adopted and spread by his followers, the Jesuit order. Originally he sought to bring the gospel to Muslims and Jews in Jerusalem, but through this process of spiritual discernment, found God had another plan calling him, to educate and serve the poor in Rome and around the world.

In *Fratelli Tutti*, Pope Francis uses St. Ignatius' method of imaginative contemplative prayer, in which we are asked to imagine the gospel details concretely, as if imagining yourself as part of a movie scene. What do you see, smell, hear, feel, what do the characters and protagonists look like and say? Then imagine yourself present in the scene. What do you observe about the story from this "present at the scene" perspective? Using this Ignatian method, Pope Francis asks "Which of these persons do you identify with?," the injured person abandoned on the side of the road, the robber, the passerby, or the Good Samaritan? He invites us to an awareness of ourselves in all these roles at various moments in our lives, to a deeper understanding that all are our neigh-

bors, not limited by identities or borders, and to a deeper commitment to build a better kind of politics, with a Good Samaritan heart, wide open to the world.

Pope Francis' theory of change is that creating a culture of encounter, of honest dialogue through differences, and common action toward the common good across identities, will create more sustainable social peace. This respectful intercultural and interreligious engagement yields "reciprocal gifts," "a fruitful exchange," and "a better kind of politics," based on more inclusive love that integrates and unites. FT embraces a vision of integration and inclusion of differences, rather than assimilation and/or nationalist and populist exclusion, similar to covenantal pluralism. FT notes that just peace can only be built with expanded participation among people from different religious and cultural identities, including those previously marginalized. He cites the interreligious and intercultural peacebuilding work of the Church around the world, noting lessons learned by the Bishops of South Korea, for example, that true peace "can be achieved only when we strive for justice through dialogue, pursuing reconciliation and mutual development" (FT, 214).

Released during the pandemic, the encyclical has not garnered as much attention as its companion teaching, *Laudato Si*. Perversely, in a just peace document which devotes over 100 pages and 288 endnotes exploring the principles and practices of just peace, social cohesion, and intercultural dialogue and action for the common good, most media attention focused on 1.5 pages at the end of the encyclical (and particularly one footnote) on just war tradition, whether there are ever any circumstances in which states can morally wage just wars. The encyclical restates what all Popes in the last century have said, quoting St. John XXIII that "it no longer makes sense to maintain that war is a fit instrument with which to repair the violation of justice" (FT, 260). While just war tradition remains a possibility in theory, in practice no wars fought today meet the strict moral criteria of just war tradition.

Every war leaves our world worse than it was before ... Let us not remain mired in theoretical discussions, but touch the wounded flesh of the victims. Let us look once more at all those civilians whose killing was considered "collateral damage." Let us ask the victims themselves. Let us think of the refugees and displaced, those who suffered the effects of atomic radiation or chemical attacks, the mothers who lost their children, and the boys and girls maimed or deprived of their childhood. Let us hear the true stories of these victims of violence, look at reality through their eyes, and listen with an open heart to the stories they tell. In this way, we will be able to grasp the abyss of evil at the heart of war. Nor will it trouble us to be deemed naive for choosing peace.  
(FT, 261)

It is not coincidental that Pope Francis emphasizes just peace, and de-emphasizes just war, immediately before he concludes the encyclical with an endorsement of the role of diverse religious actors in building peace. For those, including Catholic politicians fomenting identity politics, looking for a scintilla of papal justification for new crusades, they will find none here. Pope Francis restates what the Church has lived and taught for decades: You can't kill your way to peace. Ignoring or stripping away differences brings conflict, not peace. Paths to peace require robust and respectful engagement of the other. Diverse religious actors can effectively work together to usher in more just, sustainable peace. *Fratelli Tutti* concludes with a return to the commitment, with the Grand Imam Ahmad Al-Tayyeb, to appeal for peace, justice, and fraternity.

### **The backstory: Demographics and intra and inter religious dialogue**

Catholic principles on just peace across ethnic, racial, national, and religious lines, have their roots in practice, within the Church as well as in external relations. The Catholic Church is not



a national church. Its 1.3 billion followers live in every country in the world, and are members of diverse cultures, ethnicities, nations, races, and vocations. Catholics live even in the hermit kingdom of North Korea. Even in Saudi Arabia, where the Sunni faith is mandated by the state, there are over a million Catholics in the kingdom. As I note in my book *Global Issues* (Love 2020), data show that geographically, most of the major religions never left the cradle where they were born. Most Hindus live in India, most Buddhists live in Asia, etc. The exception is Christianity, and particularly the largest single sect in the world, Catholicism, who are most threatened in their “cradle,” but are more evenly dispersed across geographic regions.

Immediately, Jesus and his first followers spread the faith beyond Jews in his home region, to Romans, Samaritans, Greeks, Africans, and Asians. Catholicism predates the sovereign state by over 1,600 years. Because Catholicism is not a national church, not aligned with any sovereign state, nation, or tribe, Catholic believers and institutions have had to hone skills of encounter, dialogue, deep listening, and working with others. From the origins of Christianity, when the apostles debated the *means* of inclusion of gentiles, Greeks, and Romans into their Jewish origin religious movement, to today, the questions have turned on the *modalities* of inclusion, not on whether peoples from different identity groups could or should be included in the Church. As James Joyce described it succinctly, Catholic means “Here Comes Everybody.” What this volume refers to as “covenantal pluralism” has been both principle and practice of the Catholic Church long before this term was coined. Also, as both a church and a micro-state, the Holy See has diplomatic relations with 183 countries, and Church diplomats participate in IGOs and multinational fora worldwide. The Catholic diplomatic corps is one of the oldest continually functioning diplomatic corps on the planet. Thus the Catholic Church has some unique capacities for implementing covenantal pluralism and CCRL.

From a Catholic perspective (a view also shared by many faiths), all life is sacred, a gift from God, and all people are created with dignity, in the image and likeness of God. Thus while faith can be shared in a spirit of encounter and dialogue, it cannot be forced upon others, as noted by the School of Salamanca who articulated the Natural Law tradition and denounced brutality against Indigenous peoples by European colonizers. The Catholic Natural Law tradition holds that all people have access to knowledge of right and wrong regardless of their religious or cultural traditions. God has written these truths in all hearts, including atheists and people of various religious and cultural traditions. Thus laws, policies, and programs pursuing the common good are possible among all, from all faith and cultural traditions. War and repression of difference are not the means to grow the community.

Libraries have been written about Catholic approaches to peace, the Catholic Natural Law tradition, as well as the undermining of these gospel principles and practices as the church moved from its early years to become “The Holy Roman Empire.” Along with extensive lands, the Church became intertwined with medieval European power politics in ways which undermined and distorted Christianity’s principles and practices of peaceful, open engagement with the other. Pope Benedict IX, and the Crusades, are a few exemplars of this problematic history so at odds with the discussion here of *Fratelli Tutti*, covenantal pluralism, and CCRL.

With the unification of Italy and the loss of the Papal states, the Catholic Church was liberated to return to its roots. A flourishing of Catholic transnational organizations, such as Caritas Internationalis, Pax Christi, and religious orders, brought organized practices of cross-cultural engagement to all regions of the globe. After the ravages of World War II and the dawn of decolonialization, Saint Pope John XXIII convened Vatican II, and Pope Pius VI continued the council’s work after John XXIII’s death. The Council systematized and institutionalized this church renewal in new structures to carry the Church into the 20th and 21st centuries, as will be described in the next section.

These encounter, dialogue, and common action skill sets are particularly necessary for the Church's very survival, amidst internal and external cultural pressures. A century ago most Catholics lived in the Global North, in North America and Europe. Today most Catholics live in the Global South, in Latin America, Africa, and increasingly in Asia, including in communist China (Love 2020). Secularism has hit Europe hard. Tourists outnumber worshippers in many beautiful ancient Cathedrals, many of which serve as museum sites more than as vibrant hives of current religious activities.

Pope Francis may be the first pope of the modern era to hail from the Global South, but he will not be the last. This is where the majority of today's Catholics and church leaders, hail from. Thus deep listening, respectful encounter and engagement, and the search for common ground and action are necessary within the Catholic Church, for it to function at all across so many state, national, and ethnic identities. These skills and capacities are also necessary and mobilized for interreligious peacebuilding.

Managing these diverse demographics within the Catholic Church can be challenging. For example, African priests routinely minister to US parishes, leaving some parishioners struggling to understand their pastors' diverse cultural references and distinctive language accents. Multiple masses held in different languages (Tagalog, Creole, Spanish, English) create challenges for parishes to come together as one community. Lack of respect for different cultures can turn ugly. For example, in the fall of 2019 Pope Francis invited people to Rome for the Amazon Synod, to discuss implementation of *Laudato Si* in the Amazon region. Never before had a synod (a high level church meeting for a region) been organized around an ecosystem. Indigenous peoples, as well as representatives from the nine Amazon countries, convened in Rome to discuss issues from environmental protection to conducting religious services in areas lacking priests. In line with Vatican II's embrace of different cultural and artistic expressions, Indigenous carved wood statues, each depicting a pregnant women, were brought to Rome for the meetings, and the art was displayed in the Church of Santa Maria in Traspontina near the Vatican, when it was not being used in Synod activities. In the dark of night, culture warriors kidnapped the statues, dumped them into Rome's Tiber river, filmed the heist, and posted it on social media. They decried the Indigenous art as heretical and charged that it showed the illegitimacy of Pope Francis' papacy to bring such expressions into Roman churches. (White 2019).

The incident reveals underlying intra church fissures across identity lines. This demographic shift to the Global South has brought great gifts, life, and vibrancy to the Church. Yet some, like the statue thieves, feel "left behind" in the heart of old Catholic Europe, mourn the aging and loss of European parishioners, and feel displaced by others. Some who empathize with the critics of Vatican II promote what they refer to as the Benedict Option (in reference to the retired Pope Benedict XVI), the creation of a smaller, supposedly "purer" Catholic Church.

### **Practice: Lessons learned from advanced interreligious peacebuilding**

In the case of the Amazon Synod, only two wooden statues suffered ill consequences. But in other warzones around the world, lives are on the line over identity differences, as discussed in the CAR example. The Catholic Church has long engaged in interreligious peacebuilding efforts around the world, through the work of organizations such as Catholic Relief Services, Caritas Internationalis, San Egidio, and others, in partnership with local churches, Catholic bishops conferences, religious orders, etc. These works have included sustained efforts to learn from these efforts, and to share lessons learned. The Catholic Peacebuilding Network, on which I serve on the Advisory board, has participated in advancing lessons learned and supporting Catholic and interreligious peacebuilding.

These initiatives include Catholic Relief Services multi-year program, *Advancing Interreligious Peacebuilding* (AIP), as well as a separate book *Interreligious Action*. The theory of change animating the AIP project was that by bringing together

representatives from multiple interreligious dialogue and action projects to engage in a structured and facilitated process of exchange and cross learning, they will identify emerging guidance, based on their lived experiences in diverse locations and conditions, that can inform more effective interreligious dialogue and action (IRD/A) initiatives by CRS and other peacebuilding agencies.

(CRS 2019, 1)

To promote cross-cultural learning about best practices for IRD/A, CRS drew together those who worked on IRD/A projects for “annual learning events, to strengthen replication and adaptation of promising practices in interreligious peacebuilding.” The learning events drew heavily from interreligious projects working in the Philippines, Egypt, Bosnia-Herzegovina, and several countries sub-Saharan Africa.

CRS identified the theory of change for IRD/A as follows:

If local faith communities and their leaders, including Muslims, Christians, and other cultural groups, engage in personal healing, rebuild internal group cohesion, and participate in intergroup dialogue, training and practical initiatives to meet shared needs, then, over time, mutual understanding, tolerance and trust will be enhanced, because healing, reconciliation, joint decision making, and action represent opportunities for positive interactions that can break down stereotypes and hostility, contributing to peace and security.

(CRS 2019, 3)

Some of the lessons learned from the AIP project are that CRS IRD/A programs have been fruitfully using the “Three B’s Framework” in most of their projects, for many decades, whether directly or less explicitly. As Myla Leguro, CRS Peacebuilding program director based in the Philippines, explains it, (Bamat and Leguro, et al, 2017, 71) the three B’s are:

Binding: Personal change and trauma healing

Bonding: Building internal group cohesion

Bridging: Making connections across group boundaries to build trust and positive relations

These elements are not necessarily sequential or linear. They may be applied indirectly, simultaneously, and/or even cyclically, returning back for more attention to intergroup cohesion or personal healing, for example. The three B’s can be mutually supportive. Personal change can support efforts to build greater cohesion within identity groups, and intragroup cohesion helps groups have greater capacity for intergroup engagement with other identity groups. But they are not a one size fits all checklist. Local conditions, specific conflict analysis, and flexible adaptation of the 3 B framework are crucial.

For example, the Philippines has suffered over 40 years of conflicts in Mindanao, the southernmost of the Philippine archipelago of islands, over 500 miles south from the capital city of Manila. In Mindanao, people from different identity groups (Indigenous, Muslims, and Catholics) co-exist against a backdrop of contentious history. Building peace in Mindanao requires active participation and engagement with people from various identity groups. The Catholic Church

has been very engaged in peacebuilding in the Philippines, from supporting the “People Power” nonviolence resistance to President/ General Marcos in the 1980s that ushered in democracy in the Philippines, to engaging local communities to support and parallel the government peace talks with the various rebel groups, to engaging in the longest-running Muslim-Christian inter-faith dialogue in the world, to training military officers in peacebuilding alongside NGOs and civil society (Love 2011), to partnering to create and support the Mindanao Peace Institute which serves as a training center for peacebuilders from various identity groups, to supporting the official peace processes, to negotiating with armed actors, to tracking the natural resource roots of conflict, to facilitating land reform, to educating the population during the annual Mindanao Week of Peace. The 3 B’s have been used, in different ways and different contexts, throughout these various IRD/A programs, whether or not the “3 B’s” framework was explicitly invoked.

Another lesson learned from the AIP initiative is that IRD/A often focuses on “connector projects,” joint efforts across groups to address community needs in practical ways, such as IRD/A efforts to address water and sanitation needs, construct interreligious youth centers, improve street lighting, and address public health issues. A key finding is that while these IRD/A connector projects are rewarding, they should not be rushed. It takes time to build the relationships of trust, to create joint decision making, participatory processes to select the focus of the connector initiative and to carry it out, to coordinate with local authorities, and to continue conflict analysis to ensure conflict sensitivity regarding connector projects. These cannot be done well “on the fly.” To make sure IRD/A projects “first do no harm,” it is essential that time and technical expertise be devoted to them, so that connector projects do not create or exacerbate community conflicts. For example, where will the connector project—whether a water bore hole or youth jobs program—be located? Will all groups have equal access to the connector project? If it is seen as benefiting one group more than another, the well-intentioned project may not achieve its aims of building social cohesion and peace.

Drawing upon lessons learned from IRD/A programs in sub-Saharan Africa, John Baptiste Talla suggests a positive focused, Appreciative Inquiry, 4 D process should be added to the group levels of the 3 Bs. The Four D’s are discover, dream, design, and deliver/deploy. Rather than focusing primarily on problems and the past from the very beginning, appreciative inquiry takes a more positive psychology approach, which is often a good fit for faith-based groups. It can be particularly helpful for work with youth groups, as well as to help counter the personal and group depression and anxiety present in conflict (Bamat et al. 2017, 45).

Appreciative Inquiry generally involves 1) Appreciating what is [Discover]; 2) envisioning a positive future [Dream]; 3) planning a future by addressing needed improvements and building on assets [Design]; and 4) engaging in joint action [Deliver/ Deploy]. Appreciative Inquiry provides a useful conceptual framework for intergroup engagement, as a flexible planning tool that emphasizes positive elements, rather than focusing on problems from the beginning ... This positive and hopeful approach seems to appeal to faith-based groups, at least as a starting point, in contrast to methods that might emphasize a critique of what is wrong or problematic.

(CRS 2019, 4)

Like the 3 Bs, the 4 Ds are not a checklist, may be used indirectly and not explicitly invoked, and should be applied flexibly and contextually. The 3 Bs and 4 Ds frameworks provide specificity to the broad covenantal pluralism and CCRL approaches.

## Conclusions and critiques

Catholic interreligious dialogue and activities, in theory and practice, are consistent with the framing of covenantal pluralism and CCRL, which are useful framing concepts. But some caveats apply.

For actors new to IRD/A and peacebuilding, for smaller churches, and for religious actors more focused on proselytizing, covenantal pluralism and CCRL will be more helpful guides. They can help guide religious actors to the IRD/A equivalent of the peacebuilding Hippocratic oath: First do no harm. They give tools for actors to check their motivations and unexamined assumptions at the door, before they do unintended harm. They offer means for deepening understanding and reflection of IRD/A efforts and programs, and offer caution against “Hit and Run” or “Drive by” IRD/A.

For actors who have long histories and large geographic experience doing IRD/A in a variety of contexts, covenantal pluralism and CCRL may be less helpful, not providing the greater specificity and capacity they may have already developed. Yet this criticism poses no deterrent to the covenantal pluralism and CCRL approach, because everyone has a first time. Those who want to engage in interreligious dialogue and activity, or who find themselves thrust into it, need a startup guide. What experts in peacebuilding may see as general, may be revelations for general practitioners and newcomers to IRD/A. Many, if not most, religious actors, government actors, and others, are not trained in IRD/A, in seminary or other education and training channels.

Another caveat is that while the ethos of covenantal pluralism and CCRL processes are *not* of the “Clash of Civilizations” mindset, the framework could unintentionally foster religious essentialism. While the authors make clear that they refer to cultural pluralism as well as covenantal pluralism, the covenantal title may tilt the deck. Conflict analysis shows that religious components of conflicts never stand alone. They are embedded in economic, class, geographic, racial, national, ethnic, and other grievances and identity differences. As exemplified in the Amazon Synod example offered earlier, and in the rise of nationalist movements in Catholic countries, intra religious differences, seared by nationalism, are strong and rising.

Finally, *Fratelli Tutti* shows both the promise and the criticisms of covenantal pluralism and CCRL. On the one hand, many of the critics of *Fratelli Tutti* and Catholic efforts at IRD/A are likewise critics of covenantal pluralism. Why are churches engaged in the public sphere rather than sticking to personal pastoral matters? Is engagement with the other a heretical abandonment of core principles? As some violent actors seek to ignite a “new crusade,” the work of this pluralism project is needed. But as CRS notes in its lessons learned from advanced interreligious peacebuilding, better training does not necessarily lead to sustained behavioral change, and “increased contact between individuals and groups will not automatically result in increased peace and security” (CRS 2019, 10).

We are one human family, but unfortunately we are too often a dysfunctional family. On the other hand, we urgently need new models of cooperation, and large groups willing and able to commit to more cooperative paths, to achieve scale. The world’s largest and most geographically dispersed religious actor, the Catholic Church, has been walking the same path as covenantal pluralism recommends, for the past half century, and through *Fratelli Tutti* has just re-upped commitment to the project at the highest level. This provides fertile ground for cooperative efforts.

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## 5

# ARE CALVINISTS FOR PLURALISM?

## The politics and practice of a Protestant possibility

*Robert J. Joustra and Jessica R. Joustra*

For all the problems and pitfalls evident in the ways Protestant Christianity has responded to diversity, there is a real richness in the Protestant tradition to resource the sort of robust, covenantal pluralism to which this book is dedicated. To underline the baldness of this assertion, we suggest that this richness can be found best in Calvinism—more precisely, in the interpretation and application of Calvinism found in the persons of Abraham Kuyper and Herman Bavinck (neo-Calvinism).

As defined by Stewart, Seiple, and Hoover (Chapter 2 in this *Handbook*), covenantal pluralism “is characterized both by a constitutional order of equal rights and responsibilities and by a culture of reciprocal commitment to engaging, respecting, and protecting the other.” John Calvin is usually under celebrated for his commitment to this sort of pluralism. But the historical construction of the kind of Calvinism we want to draw out runs from John Calvin, through 19th century politicians and theologians Abraham Kuyper and Herman Bavinck, and to contemporary thinkers like Richard Mouw and Matthew Kaemingk. What Kuyper and Bavinck began was a recovery of certain Calvinistic principles (covered in this chapter) which are often referred to as neo-Calvinism. The neo-Calvinist tradition itself often talks about *principled* pluralism, but one can imagine, given some of the interpretations of Kuyper, that *covenantal* pluralism is, in fact, a fraternal project. What Calvinist, after all, would object to adding *more covenant* into their theology and politics! We receive this “covenantal” addition to the growing literature on pluralism with gratitude and appreciation.

What, then, can a distinctively Calvinist approach to political and social life add, foundationally and practically, to the challenges of deep diversity in our present day? In this chapter, we first set the neo-Calvinist theological foundations for such a perspective on public life; articulated, secondly, in the tradition of what neo-Calvinists call principled pluralism; which thirdly we lay out through the practical examples of Richard Mouw in his dialogues with Mormons, and Matthew Kaemingk in his dialogues with Muslims. Ultimately, there is a real gamble, as Paul Brink (2012) argues, behind this model: Namely, that religious (and non-religious) communities will do the heavy theological lifting necessary to *covenant* together on principles and practices while (often) disagreeing on their underlying rationale. We fondly remember here the maxim of the Catholic Jacques Maritain, who said of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, “we all agree on these rights, provided nobody asks us why.” And so, the real fundamental currency of this system, perhaps like all neighborhoods, and all political systems, is *trust*.

## Calvinists for pluralism? Theological virtues for pluralist societies

This section focuses on the core, neo-Calvinist theological commitments for pluralist societies by looking to creation's beginning and end: Neo-Calvinist *protological* commitments (foundational claims within the doctrine of creation) and neo-Calvinist *eschatological* commitments (foundational claims within the doctrine of the end times). Alongside these theological book-ends, we explore one of the unique insights of neo-Calvinism: The doctrine of common grace, a key theological emphasis for undergirding a robust pluralism. Finally, we uncover insights from neo-Calvinist theologian Herman Bavinck about the Christian posture for living in-between creation and consummation: The virtues of covenantal pluralism for Christians awaiting the fulfillment of God's promises.

### *Creational diversity: A worthy design*

In his *Lectures on Calvinism*, given at Princeton Theological Seminary in 1898, Abraham Kuyper promptly and succinctly debunked one of the pervasive myths about Calvinism. Many in his day—and perhaps no less in our own—understood the organizing principle of Calvinist theology as *soteriology*, the doctrine of salvation, understood in a Calvinist affirmation of justification by faith in Jesus Christ.<sup>1</sup> By contrast, Kuyper argued that the “dominating principle” of Calvinism was not soteriology but rather “*the Sovereignty of the Triune God over the whole Cosmos*, in all its spheres and kingdoms, visible and invisible” (Kuyper 1994, 79).<sup>2</sup>

In her role as Maria von Trapp, Julie Andrews, perhaps unknowingly, made an incisive theological claim: “let’s start at the very beginning; a very good place to start.” Little did she know, many Christian theologians would dispute this seemingly obvious claim, arguing that one must start the work of theology at the center of the Christian faith: The person and work of Jesus Christ. But in this seemingly innocuous claim, Andrews and Kuyper find a strange kinship. One must start at the very beginning.

Neo-Calvinists, following the thinking of John Calvin, understand the doctrine of creation as the critical starting point, laying the foundation for God’s design and plan for his world. After all,

Can we imagine that at one time God willed to rule things in a certain moral order, but that now, in Christ, He wills to rule it otherwise? As though He were not the Eternal, the Unchangeable, Who, from the very hour of creation, even unto all eternity, had willed, wills, and shall will and maintain, one and the same firm moral world-order!

The work of Christ, argues Kuyper, does not inaugurate a *new* moral order, or new theological foundations for Christian understanding of, and engagement with, society. Rather Christ “has swept away the dust with which man’s sinful limitations had covered up this world order,” restoring them to God’s original created intent, and making them “glitter again in [their] original brilliancy” (Kuyper 1994, 71).<sup>3</sup>

This order lays the groundwork for a bustling diversity in creation, a diversity that requires mutual engagement, to include the work of politics. Kuyper argues that “without sin there would have been neither magistrate nor state-order,” obviously rejecting the use of the sword until sin has entered into the world, but goes on to say that “political life in its entirety, would have evolved itself . . . from the life of the family” (Kuyper 1994, 80). Kuyper’s understanding of politics is about more than the post-fall work of the “sword” but also about the *good*, as intended, design of diversity in creation. Fulfilling the mandate to “fill the earth” (Genesis 1:28), argued Kuyper, was about



realizing creation's potentials, and stewarding the best to make it even better, a work that could include even *political power*.<sup>4</sup> Thus, while not all types of diversity are creational goods (see later on), many forms of societal diversification are in fact what God intended for humanity all along.

### ***Common grace: Upholding creational diversity***

Neo-Calvinism's insistence on the *good* of God's creational intent, including the multiformity built into creation, is met with an equally strong insistence on the *marring* of creation through Adam and Eve's act of disobedience (the "Fall" from God's intended perfection) in the Garden of Eden. Following Augustine's (and Calvin's) understanding of original sin, theologians like Herman Bavinck and Abraham Kuyper argue that humanity's insistence on patterning life our own way—that is, against the norms and guidelines that God laid out in creation—had cataclysmic and cosmic implications, introducing sin and its effects into every part of creation, including our understanding of diversity which became *misdirected* (as seen in the Tower of Babel episode of Genesis 11). In humanity's act of disobedience, "History itself changes ... it becomes a history of sin, misery, and death" (Bavinck 2006, 83).

Nevertheless, neo-Calvinists still insist that the difference built into the structure of creation remains upheld and sustained by God.

Bavinck's insistence that creation maintains some of the patterns, structures, and traces of God's original, creational intent does not, however, usurp any attention to the totality of the Fall. Instead, attesting to the pervasive nature of the Fall, Bavinck contends that God continues to providentially uphold and sustain his creation with an "economy of forbearance and long-suffering" (Bavinck 1989, 41). This work of God in creation after the Fall, Bavinck and Kuyper contend, is what they call *common grace*, a free and undeserved gift of God to humanity, upholding and preserving humanity and the world, in spite of human sin. Humanity "exists and lives only by the grace of God ... [who] firmly grounds the being and life of creation in a covenant with all of nature and with every living being" (Bavinck 1989, 40).

In their theological affirmation of the *common grace* of God, extended to all creation after the Fall, Kuyper and Bavinck, argues Raymond van Leeuwen, produce "one of the finest theological fruits" of neo-Calvinism (van Leeuwen 1989, 35). This common operation of God in creation is, however, to be distinguished from *saving grace*. In it, Bavinck and Kuyper are not contending, or imposing, a type of soft universalism that lessens distinctions between religious traditions, or intends to say that all religious traditions are in some way, due to the grace of the God of the Bible, paths to salvation. Common grace, for Kuyper and Bavinck, is necessarily differentiated from, and importantly distinct from, *saving grace*, or God's gift of salvation to those who are in Jesus Christ. The assessments that Bavinck and Kuyper offer of God's active presence in all of the world, and all of humanity, even those who do not confess belief in Jesus Christ are, as Richard Mouw points out, "extra-salvific" (Mouw 2001, 32). But, nevertheless, Bavinck and Kuyper argue that the God of the Bible *does* have an active presence in the world, providentially sustaining it in the midst of human sin, restraining the effects of human sin, and working to cultivate virtues, knowledge of morality, and other goods in the world (Bavinck 2010, 440–441). All that is good in the world, says Bavinck, quoting James 1:17, comes from "the Father of lights" (Bavinck 1989, 41).

The concrete effects of common grace, present in all human beings, importantly continue to undergird a theological understanding of how God's creational diversity continues, despite human disobedience to God's creational patterns. They also undergird a neo-Calvinist insistence on active engagement of cultural, societal, and political difference, highlighting both why

it is a *good* and how we can understand points of commonality and contact between people with radically different beliefs. This engagement of difference is a key dimension of the neo-Calvinist vision of principled pluralism, just as it is foundational in the philosophy of covenantal pluralism.

Richard Mouw argues that *even* in our deep difference, we are all “inescapably confronted with God’s ordering of creation” (Mouw 2016, 109). The effects of the Fall are widespread, extending to our very presuppositions and reasoning, but God continues to uphold his creational diversity. Because of this commitment, neo-Calvinists believe that those who believe in Christ can enter into robust dialogues, common projects, and the pursuit of religious literacy with those who have deep differences—with the *expectation* that such commonality both exists and can be known. Given such a commitment to God’s action in the world through common grace, in such a pursuit, Christians ought also to expect that real learning can happen from their neighbor who does not share their fundamental beliefs. After all, God is the “the Father of lights” (Bavinck 1989, 41), and as such, “all truth is God’s truth” (Holmes 1977).<sup>5</sup>

### ***Eschatological diversity: A restored cosmos***

The neo-Calvinist vision of a creational diversity that continues throughout human history finds its fulfillment in a similarly pluriform eschatological vision. Brian Mattson helpfully distills Herman Bavinck’s understanding of eschatology as restoration “to our destiny” (Mattson 2011). In other words, God’s original intent for all of creation will be fully realized and seen in the eschaton. This distillation of an important eschatological insight also underscores—once again—the foundational nature of creation for neo-Calvinist theology. God’s original will for creation will be realized in the restoration of the cosmos at the end of time.

Importantly, the realization of God’s original will for creation in the eschaton is not a negation of history, or a return to a pristine garden of Eden. At the end of time, Bavinck writes, the “original order” that God laid out will be restored, but not “as though nothing had happened, as though sin had not existed . . . Christ gives more than sin stole; grace was made much more to abound” (Bavinck 1989, 59). Though Christ “gives more” than sin took, the eschatological picture that Bavinck paints *really* is a picture of restoration towards God’s original intent for creation. Jan Veenhof argues that this “higher glory [of creation] constitutes the goal to which the earth had been directed *from the beginning*” (Veenhof 2006, 25).

The *restoration* of God’s created intent, affirms the centrality of diversity in neo-Calvinist political theology. The importance of diversity, both creationally and eschatologically, is helpfully seen in Bavinck’s understanding of the *telos* of humanity as the image of God. Humans were, of course, created as image bearers of God in the beginning of the Genesis creation narrative. But this, writes Bavinck, “is not the end but the beginning of God’s journey with mankind.” Humanity was created, collectively, to *do something* with the world that God had created. The collectivity of humanity’s task is not, in Bavinck’s thought, incidental to their image-bearing. Rather, “only the whole of humanity together is the fully developed image of God . . . the image of God is much too rich for it to be fully realized in a single human being, however richly gifted that human being may be.” Again, in Bavinck, we see evidences of a rich vision of properly directed diversity embedded into neo-Calvinist theological reflection. The collective image-bearing nature of humanity “can only be somewhat unfolded in its depth and riches in a humanity counting billions of members” and “is not a static entity but extends and unfolds itself” (Bavinck 2004, 577). The fullness of this image will only be seen in the new heavens and new earth, in “the new Jerusalem to which the glory of all the nations will be brought” (Bavinck 2004, 577).

An eschatological vision bursting with such diversity ought to propel us into practices and patterns of engagement that anticipate such eschatological pluralism in the *here and now, on earth as it is in Heaven*.<sup>6</sup>

### ***Living in the in-between: The virtues of pluralism***

How, then, *do* we anticipate properly ordered eschatological diversity? In other words, what does the neo-Calvinist tradition offer theologically for directing our pattern and posture in our world now? In his essay “Christian Principles and Social Relationships,” Bavinck draws heavily upon the person and example of Jesus Christ as *the* model for Christian engagement of the differences found in God’s world.

There is, Bavinck acknowledges “a wide divergence of opinions regarding the attitude of our Lord Jesus Christ toward society and its problems” (Bavinck 2008, 119). Here, we can begin to insert the challenges and social questions of our own day, including globalization and the religious questions it brings. Against views of Jesus as an “anarchist” and Jesus as “totally indifferent” to society, Bavinck lays out a neo-Calvinist understanding of Jesus’ relationship to society. Jesus, he argues, calls people back to creational structures and norms, in fulfillment of the law and prophets (Bavinck 2008, 199–120).

As Jesus did, so too ought Christians today, argues Bavinck. But Christians are not to follow Jesus in a literal way, mimicking the particulars of his culturally embedded actions, or in a merely ethereal, contemplative way that withdraws from the world (Bavinck 2013, 372–396). Instead, Christians are to imitate the *virtues—i.e., principles of engagement*—that Christ embodied, in their own particular time and place. Importantly, this means that imitating Jesus is not just about personal piety—though it is not about *less* than that—it is also following the way of Jesus *into* the public square.

Jesus lived a life of truth, righteousness, holiness, purity, meekness, gentleness, self-denial, generosity, compassion, faith, and love (Bolt 2013, 420). Looking to Jesus’ life shows Christians “the most important virtues which the law requires” (Bolt 2013, 426). These virtues flow from the law of God, laid out in creation, which “applies and is valid for all men everywhere,” but is to be contextually applied through “free, spiritual application of the principles by which [Jesus] lived” (Bavinck 2013, 396).

The New Testament affirms that Christians are to follow Jesus, becoming “imitators ... of the Lord” (1 Thess. 1:6). Bavinck’s understanding of this command, imitating Christ by imitating the virtues that he perfectly embodies, lays an important theological foundation for Christians living in-between creation and restoration. What does it look like to engage in questions of pluralism in a distinctly Christian way? It looks like practicing humility, love, patience, gentleness, generosity, and the other virtues seen in the life of Jesus Christ. But we are to *imitate* Christ, not ape him, as John Calvin famously said. Not every act of Jesus can or should be copied. Jesus is our model in living in *law-patterned obedience*, taking up the demands of the covenant and fulfilling them perfectly, as Adam was meant to. It is therefore in this pattern that we model our public witness on Jesus. Such virtues, then, do not dictate *exactly* what public policies or multi-faith partnerships a 21st century Christian would support, but they do provide meaningful categories, and boundaries, for public engagement. Every generation, every context, must ask itself what that law-patterned obedience looks like *for them*. This is precisely what contemporary neo-Calvinist thinkers like Richard Mouw and Matthew Kaemingk point us toward.

The imitation of Christ necessarily propels us *toward* the other, including our cultural and religious other. Jesus calls his followers to “self-denial with respect to rest and security”; to

“forsak[e] the world,” to “exchang[e] the world for a cross” (Bavinck 2019, 322). Patterning one’s life after these virtues necessitate seeking—in a world filled with polarization and difference—mutual understanding, justice for the other, even putting ourselves in perceived risk, if necessary, for the sake of the other.

Among many other postures in society, the virtues of Christ that ought to orient the neo-Calvinist’s way in the world should necessarily drive us towards the pursuit of religious literacy. For, how can we love our neighbor well—laying down our lives for them, championing their rights, displaying the type of hospitality and generosity that the imitation of Christ calls us toward—if we do not even understand what it is that they believe?

Imitating Christ in the public square also calls us to not only learn *about* our neighbors with generosity, humility, and self-denial, *defending* them and their rights; it also calls us to learn *from* our neighbors, celebrating and championing the “glory and honor of the nations” (Rev. 21:26; Mouw 2002, 94–98). Jesus Christ is the Lamb of God who was slain, we follow him by taking up our cross. But that same Jesus is also the one who has “overcome the world,” (John 16:33) and has reclaimed and restored His Father’s intentional design of diversity. As Christians seek to live out the kingdom of Christ on earth as it is in Heaven, they should use the gift of discernment to understand the *kinds* of diversity that they are called to engage according to the virtues of Jesus Christ.

### **Directional, structural, and cultural diversity**

There are at least three different, distinctive, kinds of diversity that emerge from this neo-Calvinistic account of creation and order—directional, structural, and cultural (Mouw and Griffioen 1993).<sup>7</sup> Key to the argument is to understand principled pluralism not as a *final* position, but as a *process* “in-between” in which cultures and peoples engage. Here we find the language of covenant helpful: covenants are always *between* people, negotiations, not simple impositions. Where principles seem static or final, covenants are always *about relationships*.

**Directional (or confessional) diversity**—that is, the existence of many religions, world-views, fundamental orientations, or as John Rawls calls them “comprehensive doctrines” (Rawls 1993, 58)—is a defining feature of societies with deep diversity. This basic kind of diversity is endemic of societies deserving of the title “pluralistic”; to be a pluralistic society is, by definition, to have a society which includes directional diversity, *and* which allows and includes public manifestations of that diversity, even in political life. The reality of deep confessional differences is a sad fact, Calvinists would say, of a postlapsarian (a fallen) world. While a good Calvinist might find beauty, genius, and even (common) grace in the great religions of the world, ultimately the fracture in our knowledge of God and our knowledge of each other is *not the way it’s supposed to be* (Plantinga 1995). Fallen humanity searches for God but catches only the barest glimpses of him in the natural world, not enough to restore our relationship with him or with each other (see Article 1, Belgic Confession).

These glimpses open up the curious and dangerous question that has long vexed Christians, Calvinists alike: If this general revelation cannot bring us back into full relationship with God, and this common grace cannot save us from the breakage in creation and, indeed, in our very hearts, then should we not be very *evangelistically* busy sharing the special revelation (the Scripture) and the saving grace (salvation through faith in Jesus Christ) with others? And if the answer to this question is “Yes, and Amen!” should Christians perhaps not use every tool at their disposal, including and especially the coercive power of the state? Can even a Calvinist be so callous as to not take every tool, including the state, into their hand to bring their neighbor saving knowledge of Jesus Christ?

This question has been a perennial one for Christians, and indeed many world religions. If the clue to a better life, to true life, as we understand it, is in our hands, should we not exercise every power, unsavory as it may seem, to achieve our neighbor's eternal good? Calvinists wrestled with this in their own way (though not altogether different from Catholics).<sup>8</sup> In fact, one of the core Calvinist confessions says in Article 36 on "The Civil Government":<sup>9</sup>

And the government's task is not limited to caring for and watching over the public domain but extends also to upholding the sacred ministry, with a view to removing and destroying all idolatry and false worship of the Antichrist; to promoting the kingdom of Jesus Christ; and to furthering the preaching of the gospel everywhere; to the end that God may be honored and served by everyone, as he requires in his Word.

This is hardly a celebration of political pluralism.

Yet in the debate that ensued some reformed churches, including our own Christian Reformed Church of North America (CRCNA), adapted the Confession as follows:

And being called in this manner to contribute to the advancement of a society that is pleasing to God, the civil rulers have the task, subject to God's law, of removing every obstacle to the preaching of the gospel and to every aspect of divine worship. They should do this while completely refraining from every tendency toward exercising absolute authority, and while functioning in the sphere entrusted to them, with the means belonging to them.

Those, like the Reformed Church in America, which retained the original text did so for largely historical rather than theological reasons. The argument for change in practice, if not in actual text, comes down to two very basic convictions in Calvinism already seen in Creation:

1. *The Imago Dei*: All human beings are made in the image of God, whether they have a relationship with Jesus Christ or not. Political power should *tremble* before this imprint of divinity, and with the utmost humility treat with tenderness and care the conscience of human persons. Any attempt to use the coercive power of the state, whether violent or bureaucratic, to prejudice or punish the human search for the divine, is a violation of that image, and ultimately a violation of the divine whose image we are stamped in.
2. *The Sovereignty of God*: Perhaps even more fundamentally, to imagine that we, mere mortals, regardless of how sweeping we imagine our political powers, can save even "a hair on our own heads" (see Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 1)<sup>10</sup> unseats the God of creation from his throne, and puts in its place the idol of the state. There is no public policy, no authoritarian command, and to that matter not even a single evangelistic outreach which *saves* human persons. God alone saves. God alone is the mover of hearts. To take for ourselves political power, as the original Belgic Confession's Article 36 suggests, to ensure God's true worship, imagines a timid God, too weak to see his plan made true. Calvinists utterly reject this.

A rich, pluralistic public square is then precisely what the neo-Calvinist ordered. In "living in the in-between" we expect, even labor for, a politics which includes the full weight of (all of) our convictions (Chaplin 2013).

**Structural diversity**, on the other hand, has none of the postlapsarian lament that neo-Calvinists feel regarding directional diversity. In the account of Creation which Calvinists

hold dear, God creates a world bristling with potential, and then commands humanity to “make something of it.” This is sometimes referred to in Calvinist theology as the Cultural Mandate. Here God not only invites humanity to discover the treasures he has built latent in the created order, but he *commands* it. “Fill the Earth,” he commands in Genesis, “and subdue it.” In that moment, humanity knows next to nothing of the extraordinary potential of the created order, of discoveries, sciences, artistry, and their structures and institutions. Indeed the entirety of our common life is latent in the created order: Schools, trade unions, states themselves, pop up as human beings *make something of the world*. To the Calvinist this is not simply an accidental evolution of human society, and its increasing complexity is not a mere happy curiosity. It is an answer to a spoken command that still reverberates in human hearts and societies. Calvinists sometimes call this the “opening up” of Created order, a flowering of human society commanded, and fulfilled, in principle by every human person, whether Christian (or Calvinist!) or not. And it is the special privilege of political authority to ensure that each *sphere*, as we read in the CRCNA’s revisions of Article 36 above, functions well in its intended area.

It is in part for this reason that Calvinists suffer “sphere anxiety” more than most, especially regarding the sphere of the market and the sphere of the state, both fundamental, powerful structures of our common life, but ones which threaten at times to homogenize, restrict, or undermine the other spheres of our common life. Abraham Kuyper himself detested homogenization in public life, and fought vigorously against it, to the point of error, where his love of structural and cultural diversity was taken up by later generations in a corrupting and unjust fashion, especially in South Africa.<sup>11</sup>

Finally, **cultural diversity** is, like structural diversity, embraced by neo-Calvinists without any theological or moral hesitation. By cultural diversity, Calvinists mean the *good diversity* that God created in human beings—diversity in language, race, cuisine, art, and more. Like structural diversity, cultural diversity is a response to a Creator’s commands which tells us to *make something* (culture) of the world. It is a command to discover, to create, to disperse. When Calvinists read the story of the Tower of Babel in Genesis, we see God punishing disobedient culture makers (and urban planners!) who are pooling their skill not to discover and create, but to become “like God.” Far from filling the earth, they are sequestering and concentrating human power in a bid for greater divinity. Buried in God’s Babel “curse,” then, of confusing human culture makers with many languages, is in fact the blessing of the return to intended diversity. What broken human hearts intend to make a name for themselves, God uses to sustain and expand the diversity of humankind. Cultural diversity was not a mistake, but a blessing.

The New Testament story of Pentecost, where the Spirit of God comes on his disciples, is a *confirmation* of that blessing, not a revocation of Babel: Here all those gathered hear the words of the Gospel in *their own language*, not a return to uniformity, as though all suddenly knew and spoke Greek, but rather a full throated endorsement of diversity, intended and blessed in Creation, but no longer a barrier between humankind. As Bavinck says, “Christ gives more than sin stole” (Bavinck 1989, 59).

Calvinists are *for* diversity, passionately and unqualified in its cultural and structural forms, and prudentially in its directional/confessional form on this side of the eschaton. This is the theology and the practice of what Calvinists sometimes call principled pluralism, but which we take from Stewart, Seiple, and Hoover as a “friendly amendment” to the tradition as *covenantal pluralism*. Both emphasize the “top down” need for political power, used well, to steward confessional diversity, but also the “bottom up” need for cultural and structural flourishing. Robust public engagement, bringing the “fulness of our convictions” is—as Jonathan Chaplin says—the “point of Kuyperian pluralism” (Chaplin 2013).

In short, we believe there are rich theological resources within Protestantism for affirming covenantal pluralism, as an extension of affirming what God has created and answering his commands in the fullness of his design. Neo-Calvinists have prioritized articulation of a theology supporting robust, relational, and nonrelativistic pluralism, yet these ideas are by no means so doctrinally specific to the Reformed tradition as to be exclusive.

Yet these doctrines and dispositions have also produced some fine examples in American public theology. Far from theological abstractions, this Protestant neo-Calvinism is often at its finest amidst widescale pluralism, engaging, respecting, and even learning from difference. It is to two of these kinds of examples, in Richard Mouw and Matthew Kaemingk, that we now turn.

### Calvinists for pluralism: Richard Mouw and Mormon dialogue

Richard Mouw, prolific Calvinist philosopher and theologian and a key figure in disseminating Kuypertian ideas in North America, recently authored a memoir entitled *Adventures in Evangelical Civility: A Lifelong Quest for Common Ground*. In it, he tells of his long career of intrafaith and multi-faith dialogue: A lifetime of engaging and respecting others made in the image of God, seeking common ground, especially with those who do not share his core, religious convictions.

Some of his dialogue partners come from within his own Christian tradition: Catholics, Anabaptists, liberal Protestants. Others are from outside of the Christian tradition: Jews, Muslims. And other dialogue partners, like his famous dialogues with Mormonism (Mouw 2012a), are more difficult to classify; some have called these ecumenical, others have cast them as interfaith. In each of them, Mouw describes his approach as focused on:

what I have called “convicted civility”—a concept borrowed from Martin Marty, who once remarked that people these days who have strong convictions are often not very civil, and civil people often don’t have very strong convictions. My overall quest has been guided by a conscious desire to cultivate a civility that is compatible with Calvinist convictions.

(Mouw 2016, 4)

Throughout a career of dialogue and seeking commonness, Mouw has managed what we might call a “convicted Calvinism,” naming and affirming the insights he finds important, and even beautiful, without fear that dialogue and even *learning* will invalidate his own capacious Calvinism (a consequence of *common grace*).

But what are these “Calvinist convictions” that guide Mouw’s “convicted civility”? Mouw’s memoir and his wonderful book, *Uncommon Decency: Christian Civility in an Uncivil World*, give us a profound insight into why he has dedicated a lifetime to seeking out commonness and striving for convicted civility. Here, we’ll lay out three, key (though not exhaustive) theological convictions that Mouw identifies as rationale for engaging according to the virtues of Christ’s engagement, i.e. pursuing dialogue and seeking out commonness, while not sacrificing core convictions.

As a guide for how God calls Christians to live, Calvinists tend to look to the Ten Commandments (the Law and its patterned obedience). Within them is God’s command to “not give false testimony against your neighbor” (Deut. 5:20). While one might not often place this front and center as a rationale *for* dialogue, Mouw does. To speak truthfully about other traditions—and even in some cases, to set the record straight—is a matter of “ecumenical fairness”

(Mouw 2012b, 110), he writes, in the case of Anabaptist–Calvinist dialogues. In his memoir, he puts it even more starkly. There is, he argues, a

real possibility that we will bear false witness against our non-Christian neighbors. ... It is easy [in the context of apologetics and evangelization] to emphasize the negative aspects of the other perspective, or even to distort the positive elements of that perspective, so that things are portrayed as worse than they really are.”

(Mouw 2016, 192)

But Christians are called to be truth-tellers, a call that includes speaking truthfully and accurately about what others believe.

Mouw also appeals to the book of Hebrews in his quest for civility. “Make every effort to live at peace with everyone,” writes the author (Heb. 12:14a). This command, Mouw argues, is nothing less than a call for *true* civility, which—unlike the common understanding of civility in our day—is *more* than mere pleasantries. It is to “genuinely care about the larger society ... a heartfelt commitment to your fellow citizens” (Mouw 2010, 14). Again, for Mouw, this is deeply rooted in the character and call of God to his people; civility must be *convicted*. The author of Hebrews continues this verse with these words, tying together the call for civility with a deep-rooted pursuit of God: Christians must “be holy,” for “without holiness no one will see the Lord” (Heb. 12:14b).

Mouw also directly appeals to Calvin as the source of one of the theological convictions that undergird his posture. Calvin’s understanding of a *semen religionis* (a seed of religion) and a *sensus divinitatis* (a sense of divinity) provide an important way of understanding the “admirable light of truth” that all human beings share (Mouw 2016, 12). One need not know Jesus Christ to share something in common with the Christian, for God has planted deep within each person’s heart this seed, or sense, of the divine. Calvin himself pointed to non-Christian thinkers, like Seneca, as those from whom he learned. Alongside these insights of Calvin, Mouw points to *neo*-Calvinist thinkers, like Kuyper and Bavinck, and their understanding of common grace as one he has “drawn heavily on” in his endeavors (Mouw 2016, 13–14).

In his book on common grace, Mouw writes of himself that, “while I am no universalist, my own inclination is to emphasize the ‘wideness in God’s mercy’” (Mouw 2001, 100). Statements like this have, unsurprisingly, provoked criticism from those who disagree with some of the dialogue partners Mouw has engaged throughout his career. Mouw has always remained true to the heart of this statement: He is by no means a universalist, but he *is*, unapologetically so, attentive and attuned to where and how the Spirit of God might be speaking and at work—even in unexpected places. “I am,” he writes,

a Calvinist who has tried to promote ‘convicted civility,’ a moderate tone in dialoguing with people whom we evangelical types disagree with on serious matters, and a posture of learning from what I see as the scholarly and cultural gifts distributed by God to the larger human community.

(Mouw 2016, 208).

### **Calvinists for pluralism: Matthew Kaemingk and Muslim dialogue**

Richard Mouw’s pluralistic Calvinism might not exhaust Calvinism, but it is certainly more than a minority report. His work is contagious, influencing not only major public intellectuals like David Brooks, but also mentoring new generations of *neo*-Calvinists, ourselves



among them, into this tradition of engaging difference within a framework of principled/covenantal pluralism. A striking example is one of his recent doctoral students, Matthew Kaemingk.

Kaemingk, a scholar of Kuyper's work, and of Dutch Calvinism, began what has become a tour of dialogues with Muslim thinkers on pluralism, by wondering how well Kuyper's pluralistic legacy had fared in his own context of the Netherlands. If this vision of pluralistic Calvinism was able to create a common space for seemingly irresolvable differences and diversity, had it managed to do so in its homeland? More practically, how had this Calvinistic pluralism created common cause and *covenant* with newly arriving, Muslim immigrants? The answer became a whole study in his celebrated book, *Christian Hospitality and Muslim Immigration in an Age of Fear* (Kaemingk 2018), the subject of dialogues with notable Islamic thinkers like Shadi Hamid and Asma Uddin, all across America.<sup>12</sup>

The results were mixed. The Dutch Netherlands are hardly one happy, harmonious culture when it comes to dealing with religious and cultural diversity. Kaemingk certainly found some evidence of this Calvinistic pluralism living at large, but he also found its opposite: Fear, Islamophobia, racism, and more. His argument soon became that Dutch society had the *theological resources* it needed in order to welcome the stranger, unabashed, and unafraid, if only they would take them up again. Case studies of this Calvinistic "Pluralism and Action" (Chapter 8) sustain his optimism.

But Kaemingk also makes a second, profound point. It is not only that this vision of Calvinistic pluralism can create covenant with newcomers, or new religions. Such a vision does not merely *make room*, it meets diversity, newcomers, and new religions, with eyes of common and special grace, watching for what they have *for us*, not merely what we can give them (or they need to integrate into).

In his important article for *Comment* magazine in the summer of 2017 Kaemingk calls the Muslim Headscarf "Islam's Gift to Western Democracy" (Kaemingk 2017). The gift it gives us, argues Kaemingk, is that it forces so-called neutral Western democracies into a recognition of their own illiberalism, their own moral and sometimes even religious-looking convictions. The ostentatious display of a "non-Western" religion has exposed the nakedness of Western secularism. He writes,

I submit that the Muslim schoolgirl who walks into her classroom with a simple scarf atop her head is performing a critical democratic function—one we should all be thankful for. Whether she knows it or not, she is offering a distinct contribution and precious gift to Western democracy.

Her hijab is doing the critical work of exposing several viruses growing at the heart of Western democratic culture: racism, colonialism, anti-religious bigotry, cultural insecurity, and fear. Each of these viruses is potential deadly to the democratic experiment, and she is exposing all of them.

(Kaemingk 2017)

He concludes arguing we should thank our Muslim neighbors for wearing their hijabs to the grocery store. They are performing a vital civic function.

What is extraordinary about Kaemingk's argument is not simply that he makes causal claims of the relationship between covenantal pluralism, Calvinism, and hospitality to new religions. It is that he argues that such new relationships, such directional diversity, is not simply tolerable to the Calvinist, it is constructively convicting. It draws us not simply into enduring diversity, or

even conversational diversity, it draws us into relationship, the result of the intentional engagement that is a core characteristic of covenantal pluralism.

## Conclusion

In this chapter we have wondered about the possibility of a Protestant pluralism, diving into the Calvinist, and neo-Calvinist, tradition to show the potential for a pluralism not only fit for Protestantism, but for public life more generally. We are certainly optimistic about the deep, rich resources in Calvinism, and its theological virtues which sustain its civil posture; a distinctive theological account of pluralism, which enables a thoroughgoing civic pluralism. As with Protestantism generally, one could hardly say it has always gone well. Yet we are loathe to abandon the best of a tradition because of the worst of its distortions.

It is our conclusion that Calvinists *can be* among covenantal pluralism's finest friends, and ones sorely needed *within* the evangelical community, and certainly beyond. Where prominent sociologists and political scientists now frequently warn that our world is "coming apart" and "fractured," we think there are reasons for hope within Protestantism generally, and the Calvinist tradition specifically, for thinking beyond fragmentation and toward a new conception of the covenant and community. This, we think, is just the kind of thing covenantal pluralism signals, and it is just this kind of process where we see Calvinists like Richard Mouw and Matthew Kaemingk busy today.

## Notes

- 1 Or, even more specifically, by God's eternal decrees of election and reprobation.
- 2 This key insight by Kuyper about Calvinism is sometimes referred to as *neo-Calvinism*, not to be confused with the *new Calvinism*.
- 3 "Man" in this usage is understood as including both men and women in its scope.
- 4 For more on a neo-Calvinist understanding of creation and filling, see Bavinck 2004 and Mouw 2011, 6–22.
- 5 Herman Bavinck (2003, 318) was quick to recognize the "elements of truth" that are present in "pagan religions. . . . Also among pagans, says Scripture, there is a revelation of God, an illumination by the Logos, a working of God's Spirit." This is, of course, a *non-salvific* working of the Spirit through God's common grace, but nonetheless a real presence of the Spirit in other religions.
- 6 Again, this pluralism is the pluralism that God has ordained from the beginning. Thus, not *all* pluralism fits into this (e.g. religious pluralism), but pluralism that comes from the *filling* of creation with structures, cultures, vocation, art, and more.
- 7 Mouw and Griffioen call these three different kinds of "pluralism" which we have modified to diversities in this chapter, meeting a similar aim but hopefully reducing some of the confusion around the different terms.
- 8 See, for example, Perreau-Saussine 2012. Also, the important papal encyclical from Pope Paul VI, "*Dignitatis Humanae*: On the Right of the Person and of Communities to Social and Civil Freedom in Matters Religious." December 7, 1965. [www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_decl\\_19651207\\_dignitatis-humanae\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651207_dignitatis-humanae_en.html). Accessed January 29, 2020.
- 9 See for background den Dulk and Joustra 2015. Original wording retained in a footnote in the CRCNA but maintained in the original in the RCA. See "Belgic Confession" on the Christian Reformed Church of North America's website: [www.crcna.org/welcome/beliefs/confessions/belgic-confession#toc-article-36-the-civil-government](http://www.crcna.org/welcome/beliefs/confessions/belgic-confession#toc-article-36-the-civil-government). Accessed June 18, 2021.
- 10 See for the Heidelberg Catechism in its totality, "Heidelberg Catechism" on the Christian Reformed Church of North America's website: [www.crcna.org/welcome/beliefs/confessions/heidelberg-catechism](http://www.crcna.org/welcome/beliefs/confessions/heidelberg-catechism). Accessed June 18, 2021.
- 11 Abraham Kuyper's legacy has been the subject of important debate about which Kuyper is the "real" Kuyper, especially as his concepts were applied in the generations after his death to South African apartheid. See, for example, Liou and Robinson (2015), "Our Racist Inheritance: A Conversation

- Kuyperians Need to Have.” Interestingly, at least part of the theological debate in South Africa included whether this application of Kuyperian thought was consistent with the Reformed/Calvinist tradition, an argument that brought in Herman Bavinck as *corrective*. See Jessica Joustra (2017), “An Embodied *Imago Dei*: How Herman Bavinck’s Understanding of the Image of God Can Help Inform Conversations on Race.”
- 12 For simply one good example, see dialogues between Kaemingk, Stephanie Summers (CEO, Center for Public Justice), and Shadi Hamid. See video of “Muslim Immigration, Christian Fear, and the Future of Democracy” at Calvin University, November 2018. [www.youtube.com/watch?v=KaEgBRakFQg](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KaEgBRakFQg).

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## 6

# DEED OVER IDEA

## Toward a shared Caliphate

*Mahan Mirza*

In June 2011, the Yale Center for Faith and Culture brought members of the three Abrahamic faiths together in a “Building Hope Conference” (Peace Catalyst 2011). We were together for ten days. The path to peace, according to the program, was through fellowship, breaking bread together, and developing bonds of friendship, to ease us into deeper and more difficult conversations with trust. As we broke for lunch one day, Joseph Cumming, the Director of the Center’s Reconciliation Program, asked me to say a few words about the status of the Holy Land from an Islamic scriptural and theological perspective. I was caught off guard. I can speak fairly well in public when I’ve had sufficient time to prepare. When put on the spot, I am a disaster.

In a state of panic, knowing there were Jews with deep connections to Israel in the room, alongside Palestinians suffering displacement and humiliation from ongoing settlement and occupation, I took a cue from the political media playbook: I addressed the question I wanted to address instead of the one that was given to me. In a display of narrative empathy, I agonized about the plight of the Jewish people in exile, the horrors of the Shoah that abound in living memory, why God would allow such a thing, the fulfillment of a two-millennia longing for return to the promised land, and the complexity of negotiating the morality of occupying and displacing another people from their land in a desperate attempt to survive in a hostile world.<sup>1</sup>

My deep engagement with the biblical narrative of the Israelites brought some of the participants close to tears. The Palestinians were in shock. But I was not finished. The verse that guided me appears in the third Surah of the Qur’an, where God counsel’s His messenger regarding his companions who had disobeyed him in the heat of battle:

By an act of mercy from God, you [Prophet] were gentle in your dealings with them—had you been harsh, or hard-hearted, they would have dispersed and left you—so pardon them and ask forgiveness for them. Consult with them about matters.

(Q. 3:159)<sup>2</sup>

The lesson I derive from this verse is that “truth” is insufficient as a force to move history. Despite Muhammad’s role as God’s messenger, the Qur’an tells us that his companions would have abandoned him had he not dealt with them kindly.

People need to know that they have been heard. I remember concluding my remarks with these words:

Now the Israelites need to retell the Palestinian story to them in a manner that is equally compelling. Once they believe that their story has been heard, their existence accepted, their pain acknowledged, we can take steps on the difficult path toward reconciliation.

Conflicts have dual if not multiple narratives (Landau 2019). A display of narrative empathy requires both personal and comparative competency, which, to cite the introductory chapter of this volume, is to first “understand one’s *own* moral, epistemological, and spiritual framework,” and then to “understand the moral, epistemological, and spiritual framework of one’s neighbor *as s/he* does.” One of the Jewish participants affirmed the power of the moment by saying to me afterward: “You are more Jewish than I am.”

Personal competency and comparative competency are thus in a symbiotic relationship. Each points to the other while reinforcing itself. Together, the two are generative of a third competency, the collaborative. According to the theory of cross-cultural religious literacy (CCRL), these three competencies are counterparts of the three skills of evaluation, negotiation, and communication, pursuant a shared citizenship with others across diverse and even contradictory commitments. This kind of purposeful relationality, the willingness to collaborate despite deep differences, is the hallmark of covenantal pluralism (CP). CP also has enabling conditions beyond CCRL: Religious freedom in the cultural sphere, and signature character virtues that are necessary for sustained engagement, such as humility and patience.

This chapter engages the framework of covenantal pluralism and cross-cultural religious literacy (CP-CCRL) from the perspective of Islamic scripture, traditions, and institutions in contemporary American Muslim life. While the examples provided here are limited and merely illustrative, the aim is to provide an account that is both descriptive and normatively constructive. The chapter foregrounds paradigmatic thinkers for the various skills and competencies: The Sufi Abu ‘Abd Allah al-Muhasibi (d. 857), the scientist and polymath Abu Rayhan al-Biruni (d. ca. 1048), and the theologian and jurist Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (d. 1111). A few examples from the North American context will illustrate how Muslims are negotiating their multiple, often competing, intersectional identities as minorities, and the potential consequences of these experiences at the “edges” of the Muslim world for the future.

### **Personal competency and evaluation**

According to the Qur’an, knowledge of oneself is intimately connected to knowledge of God: “Do not be like those who forget God, so God causes them to forget their own selves” (Q. 59:18). God is our origin and destiny: “We belong to God and to Him we shall return” (Q. 2:156). The Qur’an tells two human creation stories. One is of a primordial covenant between God and all human souls that were ever to be: “when your Lord took out the offspring from the loins of the Children of Adam and made them bear witness about themselves, He said, ‘Am I not your Lord?’ and they replied, ‘Yes, we bear witness.’ So you cannot say on the Day of Resurrection, ‘We were not aware of this’” (Q. 7:172). On the basis of this verse, an innate knowledge of God is believed to be ingrained in human dispositions, vibrant in some, dormant in others.

The second creation story parallels the biblical creation story of Adam in the garden. This story concludes with the expulsion of Adam and his mate from the garden, with the promise that guidance would come to them on earth to steer them toward “the straight path” (Q. 2:30–39). The promise for guidance is fulfilled through prophets and messengers who bring God’s revelations. One of the many names of the Qur’an is *al-Dhikr* or “the reminder,” because it

reminds us of our primordial covenant (Q. 15:9). If the Islamic religious tradition can be divided into law/ethics (*fiqh*), theology (*kalam*), and mysticism (*tasawwuf*), each of these has its own path to bridge the separation between the human and the divine: Jurists through obedience (the body), theologians through reason (the mind), and Sufis through inner purification (the heart).<sup>3</sup>

Human beings are forgetful, prone to distraction, and liable to succumb to their passions or to pay heed to the guiles of Satan who is for them “a sworn enemy” (Q. 2:168). They are commanded to remain on guard from evil whisperings (Q.114), obey God instead of their own desires (Q.45:23), pay no heed to their base impulses (Q. 12:53), and repent when they err (Q. 25:70). The prophet Muhammad is reported to have said: “Every son of Adam sins, and the best of the sinners are the repentant;”<sup>4</sup> and, “If you were to commit sin until your sins reach the heaven, then you were to repent, your repentance would be accepted” (Sunnah.com).<sup>5</sup>

The Qur’an tells us that faith is not a constant; it increases and decreases based on remembrance (*dhikr*) of God and an individual’s attention to divine revelation: “True believers are those whose hearts tremble with awe when God is mentioned, whose faith increases when His revelations are recited to them, who put their trust in their Lord” (Q. 8:2). The branch of *tasawwuf* or Sufism in Islam focuses on active repentance and frequent remembrance of God in order to maintain a state of high spiritual awareness. Before Sufism became entangled with philosophy, it was primarily an ascetic movement deriving inspiration from the prophet Muhammad, his companions (*sahaba*), and his successors (*tabi’un*).

An important figure in the formative period of Sufism, hailing from a hotbed of spiritual and intellectual activity in Iraq, is Muhasibi (d. 857 CE). Reported to have authored over two hundred works, Muhasibi’s best known treatise, *Kitab al-Ri’aya li-Huquq Allah*, has been called by Margaret Smith “the finest manual of interior life which Islam has produced” (Schoonover 1949, 27). The name Muhasibi comes from the Arabic word *muhasabah*, taking oneself to account, which he associated with the emotion of love: “Love is that you move towards the Beloved with all your self and then that you prefer Him over your own-self, your family and your belongings and lastly, that you be aware that your love for Him is imperfect” (Filiz 2006, 61).

The path to God, for Sufis, can be charted through deep reflection on what it means to love. A lover longs to be united with the beloved. The beloved is a lover’s primary object of attention and devotion. Directing attention away from the beloved is akin to disloyalty and betrayal. A lover obsesses over ways to serve the beloved. Lovers introspect. They are consumed by how they can do better. The prophet is told to say to the believers: “If you love God, follow me, and God will love you and forgive you your sins” (Q. 3:31). The prophet is also reported to have said: “None of you truly believes until I am more beloved to him than his child, his father and all the people” (Sunnah.com).<sup>6</sup>

A number of scriptural terms and etiquettes are associated with the spiritual path: *ikhlas* for purity of intention (one does not approach the beloved with mixed motives); *tauba* for repentance (one realizes and accepts past mistakes and commits to rectifying them); *ghafla* or heedlessness (one guards from being negligent); *riya’* or ostentation (one does not perform acts superficially for show); *’ujb* or conceit (one should avoid getting self-absorbed); *ghirra* or delusion (one must guard from being deluded in the relationship); *hasad* or envy (one should not begrudge others who are absorbed in their love); and *kibr* or arrogance (one must never self-aggrandize). One must remain attentive, guard against laziness (*kasl*) and incapacity (*’ajz*), and gain insight (*basira*) into the true meaning of things (Picken 2011, 69).

For Muhasibi, the spiritual path begins with self-knowledge (*ma’rifat al-nafs*), continues through the steps of *muraqaba* (vigilance or observance), *mujahada* (inner struggle to submit entirely to God), coming full circle in *muhasaba* (introspection) (Picken 2011, 188–204). “You will not be sincere to God,” says Muhasibi, “until you are sincere to your own soul; and you

will not be sincere to your own soul until you know it well; and you won't know it well until you examine closely" (Picken 2011, 189–190). Spiritual truths find resonance across traditions. We find the Sufi imperative of self-knowledge and self-examination illustrated in the biblical maxim, "Why do you look at the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye?" (Matthew 7:3). The maxim connects self-examination to neighborly relations in a move that is seamless and natural.

### **Comparative competency and communication**

In the summer of 2017, we met with a group of young madrasa graduates from India and Pakistan in Nepal as part of a project to bring the worldview of the South Asian madrasa, an institution of intellectual and spiritual formation in traditional Islam, into conversation with contemporary science and philosophy. The project, initiated by Ebrahim Moosa through a grant from the John Templeton Foundation, is housed in the Contending Modernities Research Initiative at the University of Notre Dame's Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies. I was the lead faculty implementing the program in its first three years (2016–2019).

Scott Appleby, dean of the Keough School of Global Affairs, was a guest instructor in the very first summer program. He was scheduled to teach for three days on the varieties of secularism, modernity, and religious fundamentalism. No topic was off the table. Every time Appleby opened the floor for questions, he was hit with everything under the sun: From US foreign policy to the history of early Christianity. He was later to say that this was the most meaningful teaching experience of his life.

One evening, an optional meeting with a small group of students after dinner went late into the night. The dispute was around the original language of the New Testament. Appleby told the participants that it was Koine Greek, but the madrasa graduates insisted it must have been Aramaic. Appleby's source was his knowledge of the history of early Christianity. The madrasa source was Islamic scripture and tradition, according to which God could only have revealed the Gospel (*Injil*) to Jesus in his own language (Q. 14:4). The discussion raised an important question that poses challenges for comparative literacy in Islam: What happens when history contradicts revelation?

Those who wish to respond to this challenge must listen carefully, agonize over dissonance between revelation and other sources of knowledge, and reconcile perceived or actual conflicts in new acts of interpretation. Traditions harbor internal tensions: They resist change for the sake of stability, and they make room for change in order to remain relevant. To be faithful to God's revelations and to think independently for oneself are concomitant imperatives of prophetic teachings. The tension inherent here is a driver for adaptive change, which means, at times, going against what is generally accepted. Messengers of God in the Qur'an are portrayed as being resisted precisely because they went against established traditions in society: "But when it is said to them, 'Follow the message that God has sent down,' they answer, 'We follow the ways of our fathers.' What! Even though their fathers understood nothing and were not guided?" (Q. 2:170)

An encounter with difference beckons the skill of negotiation. When confronted with a challenge such as the one the madrasa students were confronted with, the first thing that they needed to do was to listen. After the conquest of Mecca, those who were ignorant but willing to listen were spared from God's command to purge the city: "If any one of the idolaters should seek your protection [Prophet], grant it to him so that he may hear the word of God, then take him to a place safe for him, for they are people with no knowledge" (Q. 9:6). And when the Qur'an speaks to the masses who have not yet come to believe, it offers but one single imperative: "listen carefully" (Q. 22:73).



Ghazali, one of the greatest scholars of classical Islam, captures the spirit of intellectual independence in his autobiography, *The Deliverance from Error*:

Those with weak minds know truth by men, not men by truth. The intelligent person follows the saying of ‘Alī [b. Abī Ṭālib], “Do not know truth through men. Know truth and then you will know its people.” So the intelligent person knows truth then looks at the claim itself. If it is true he accepts it.

(Lumbard 2019, 401)

Intellectual independence, when combined with the humility that both precedes faith and then reinforces it, generates sufficient ground for grasping points of view that are different from one’s own, and consequently, for nurturing narrative empathy for other traditions.

The Qur’an requires of humans only a single condition for their guidance: *taqwa* (Q. 2:1). Typically translated as fear, regard, or consciousness of God, *taqwa* literally means the “protection” of oneself from falling into sin. It is semantically associated with the keywords of *iman* and *islam* in their connotations of peace, safety, and protection. The philosopher M. Ashraf Adeel argues that *taqwa* is a kind of “global conscience from which arise all local virtues” (Adeel, 2019, 49). It motivates positively, invites reflection, and provides an intuitive moral compass. All actions must proceed from *taqwa*; when “*taqwa* is absent, human affairs will go astray” (Adeel 2019, 49).

From *taqwa* proceeds humility: A recognition that we are never fully in control, that we are at the mercy of a power that is greater than us. “Above everyone who has knowledge there is the One who is all knowing” (Q. 12:76). Humility is the bedrock of gratitude, which people owe to God, their parents, and other human beings (Q. 31:14). The prophet Muhammad is reported to have stood in worship all night, at times until his feet swelled up; when asked about why he devotes himself so, while his sins have already been forgiven, he replied: “shall I not be a grateful servant?” (Study Quran 2015, 184). While *taqwa* may be considered the foundation of all other virtues, the cardinal vice is arrogance. Satan, in disobeying God’s command to prostrate alongside the angels before Adam at the time of his creation, said: “I am better than him: You created me from fire and him from clay” (7:12). The Qur’an warns both men and women of presuming they are better than others: “Believers, no one group of men should jeer at another, who may after all be better than them; no one group of women should jeer at another, who may after all be better than them” (49:11). And they are told to “ask those who have knowledge” if they do not know (16:43). The prophet Abraham is a paragon of attentive listening in the Qur’an. When he argues with his adversaries, his father, the leaders of his tribe, and Nimrod the king, he refutes them by *reductio ad absurdum*, which requires him to proceed from the premises of his opponents and follow the logical progression of their arguments. A commonly cited section from Surah 6 takes us through the steps that Abraham used to move from polytheism to monotheism by reflecting on the signs of God in the heavenly spheres above (Q. 74–83). While many interpreters take the verses as a genuine expression of Abraham’s inner spiritual development, others prefer to consider them as an argument Abraham adopted for the sake of persuasion (Study Qur’an 2015, 367–368).

The latter reading is in line with the theological position that prophets possess uncorrupted natures, and are thus born with the imprint of monotheism. It is also consistent with other passages in the Qur’an on Abraham’s argumentative style. For instance, when Abraham’s tribe returns to find all but the biggest of their idols smashed, they suspect Abraham of having done it, and question him:

“Was it you, Abraham, who did this to our gods?” He said, “No, it was done by the biggest of them – this one. Ask them, if they can talk.” They turned to one another, saying, “It is you who are in the wrong.”

(Q. 21:62–64)

Abraham had an ability to challenge opposing arguments on their own terms. He was able to generate receptivity to his message by demonstrating internal contradictions, flaws, or inconsistencies in the arguments of his opponents. He follows a similar tact with the political ruler, which some interpreters have taken to be the king Nimrod:

Have you not thought about the man who disputed with Abraham about his Lord, because God had given him power to rule? When Abraham said, "It is my Lord who gives life and death," he said, "I too give life and death." So Abraham said, "God brings the sun from the east; so bring it from the west." The disbeliever was dumbfounded.  
(Q. 2:258)

There was no question of Abraham revising his own core beliefs based on his attentive listening; he was a messenger of God. We are not in that privileged position. We are not prophets. Our knowledge of good and evil is not black and white. We are inheritors of traditions of interpretation. When we encounter new knowledge, different traditions, alternative perspectives, we must be able to negotiate between what is transmitted to us from the past and what is experienced in the present. While Abraham's example might serve the need of polemicists seeking to take down their intellectual opponents, the key lesson to learn from Abraham's example for us, in relation to comparative competency, is that in order to effectively communicate with others, we need to be able to enter the thought-world of those with whom we are engaged.

While all prophets are gifted communicators, the example of Moses in particular serves us well. No name appears more often than that of Moses in the Qur'an. When he is sent by God to the pharaoh, along with his brother Aaron, he is told: "Go, both of you, to Pharaoh, for he has exceeded all bounds. Speak to him gently so that he may take heed, or show respect" (Q. 20:43–44). Why would Moses, the man to whom God spoke directly, address a tyrant like the pharaoh gently? It is because possessing the truth and presenting sound arguments are necessary but insufficient ingredients for persuasion. Communication is persuasive when it is cognizant of the rhetorical situation and sensitive to human emotions. The prophet Muhammad is commanded to: "call [people] to the way of your Lord with wisdom and good teaching. Argue with them in the most courteous way" (Q. 16:125).

One of the reasons that Moses was sent with magical signs—the staff transforming into a serpent, his hand shining bright—was because he was to best the magicians of Egypt, in a dramatic act of public persuasion in pharaoh's own court. The prophet Muhammad, likewise, was sent with the Qur'an, "in clear Arabic," because eloquent speech was like magic in his society. In the words of the American Imam Sohaib Webb: "The prophet Muhammad was given the Qur'an because poetry is kind of what was popping in the Arabian Hood" (AJ+ 2016). The "Snapchat Imam," as Webb is known as, is persuasive to young American Muslims because he is relatable. It is important to know your audience in order to communicate; comparative competency and communication go hand-in-hand.

An exemplar of comparative competency in Islamic history is the polymath from central Asia, Biruni. Known as the founder of comparative religion and even the first anthropologist, Biruni set out to study Indian beliefs and society on their own terms (Mirza 2011b). He laments: "everything which exists on this subject in our literature is secondhand information which one has copied from the other, a farrago of materials never sifted by the sieve of critical examination" (Biruni 1910, 6). Biruni seeks direct knowledge through independent research and ethnography: "No one will deny that in questions of historic authenticity hearsay does not equal eye-witness" (Biruni 1910, 3).

Biruni justifies his approach through scripture: "It has been said in the Koran, 'Speak the truth, even if it were against yourselves'" (Sûra, 4, 134); and the Messiah expresses himself in the

Gospel to this effect: “Do not mind the fury of kings in speaking the truth before them. They only possess your body, but they have no power over your soul” (cf. St. Matt. x. 18, 19, 28; St. Luke xii. 4). In these words, the Messiah orders us to exercise *moral courage*” (Biruni 1910, 4–5). The moral courage spoken of is the courage of Abraham, the courage to listen attentively, the courage to speak truth to one’s tribe. For Biruni, it is the courage to first understand and then to represent Indian beliefs authentically instead of polemically. Biruni, thus, fulfills the task of comparative literacy *par excellence* in his well-known work on Indian culture and beliefs, popularized through Eduard Sachau’s 19th century translation as *Alberuni’s India* (Biruni 1910, xxii–xxiii).

### Collaborative competency and negotiation

Collaborative competency enables us to apply comparative competency in society, to live alongside and work constructively with others across our deep differences in “ultimate” concerns. The best theology is engaged theology, said Ian Markham in *A Theology of Engagement*: “a theology that is willing to learn from non-Christian sources” (Markham 2003, 1). The same can be said of all other systems of religious and secular thought, including Islamic theology. Just as personal introspection allows one to improve one’s relationship to God and neighbor, theological engagement enables traditions to critique and transform themselves through new encounters, new knowledge, new experiences.

Islamdom was, at its high point, an engaged civilization. According to celebrated scholar Franz Rosenthal,

Civilizations tend to revolve around meaningful concepts of an abstract nature which more than anything else give them their distinctive character ... [and] ... there is no other concept that has been operative as a determinant of Muslim civilization in all its aspects to the same extent as *‘ilm* [knowledge].

(Rosenthal 2007, 1–2)

Dimitri Gutas, who wrote the preface to the new edition of Rosenthal’s *Knowledge Triumphant: The Concept of Knowledge in Medieval Islam*, authored his own study on *Greek Thought, Arabic Culture*, where he records the debt that classical Islamic thought owes to Hellenism (Gutas 1998).

The “pure Islam” that some seek in the past is an Islam that is inflected with “foreign” ideas. “Partly because of empire,” begins the epigraph of Gutas’s book, citing the critic Edward Said, “all cultures are involved in one another; none is single and pure, all are hybrid, heterogenous, extraordinarily differentiated, and unmonolithic” (Gutas 1998). Marshal Hodgson, in his three-volume magnum *The Venture of Islam*, tells us: “The process of Islamicizing the traditions [of the Near East] had done more than integrate and reform them. It had released tremendous creative energies” (Hodgson 1974, 236).

Genuine engagement is inevitably transformative. Ian Markham suggests three ways in which traditions are engaged: By “assimilating,” “resisting,” and “overhearing.” Assimilation takes place by actively seeking out and adopting ideas that come from the outside. According to Markham, areas in which theologies must learn to assimilate new impulses today are human rights and Black and Feminist perspectives. The spirit of civilizational knowledge-assimilation is captured in the well-known prophetic saying to seek knowledge unto China (Israeli 2000).

In contrast to assimilation, resistance to foreign ideas takes place when they are at odds with existing beliefs and practices. While Muslim intellectual culture has historically been open to assimilative engagement, there have always been strong pockets of resistance. The assimilative drive, however, was impossible to contain in the formative centuries. Unlike today, that was

a different era when Islam was a confident and expansive power that successfully spread its wings across the vast geographies of the known world. When the winds changed through what Hodgson calls “The Great Western Transmutation,” inheritors of Muslim tradition, especially those who were embedded in authoritative institutions, went on the defensive, inspired by prophetic traditions such as the following: “I have left with you two things which, if you follow them, you will never go astray: the Book of God and the *sunna* of His Prophet” (Wyman-Landgraf 2013, 95).

A hadith often quoted in Friday sermons cautions: “Beware of newly invented matters [in the religion], for verily every *bid’ah* (innovation) is misguidance”<sup>7</sup> (Sunnah.com). Another hadith, read as a matter of course in traditional madrasa education, states: “Knowledge has three categories, anything else is extra: a precise verse, or an established sunnah (practice), or a firm obligatory duty”<sup>8</sup> (Sunnah.com). When the political fortunes of Muslim civilization changed in the modern era, the forces of resistance, armed with these kinds of traditions, gained the upper hand. Muslim scholarly culture thus came to devalue new ways of thinking that challenged inherited modes of thought and scriptural interpretation—knowledge that it neither generated nor had any control over—preferring instead to prioritize the transmission and preservation of the past tradition.

Though prophecy ends, history marches on, and with new historical experiences come new ways of knowing and being, new technologies and philosophies, new ways to think about ourselves, each other, and the cosmos. Negotiation with newness is nothing new to Islam, it is merely a forgotten art. An excellent example for us in this regard is the celebrated and aforementioned Ghazali. In *Ghazali and the Poetics of Imagination*, Ebrahim Moosa presents Ghazali as a *bricoleur*, someone who stands in a liminal space between two worlds. The space he stands in is like the veranda or courtyard of a home, neither fully inside nor entirely outside. Through creative imagination, the *bricoleur* uses bricks from walls bordering multiple worlds—the wall to the house representing tradition, and the boundary wall to the outside representing new knowledge—to construct a new wall that is both familiar and strange (Moosa 2005). The task is agonizing, but it gives life to future generations.

Ghazali roots his quest for knowledge in first principles: “I saw that the children of Christians always grew up embracing Christianity, and the children of Jews always grew up adhering to Judaism, and the children of Muslims always grew up following the religion of Islam” (Ghazali 1980, 63). In search of firmer philosophical ground, Ghazali scrutinizes the various paths to knowledge prevalent in his time. The journey takes him through some wonderfully rich reflections on the unreliability of the senses, the limits of reason, and the possibility of intellection in planes that are beyond human potential. Propelled by the conundrum of pluralism, both within Islam and among different religions, Ghazali elsewhere concludes that people who have either not been exposed to Islam or have been misinformed about it cannot be considered “disbelievers” in the real sense of the term (Khalil 2012). In this way, Ghazali’s framework opens up vistas for cross-cultural competency and intercultural negotiation that are conducive to covenantal pluralism.

Markham’s third kind of engagement, “overhearing,” in contrast to assimilation and resistance, happens when one finds resonance with non-native ideas by proximity, though a kind of organic osmosis. In line with this kind of dynamic, Richard Bulliet argues that civilizations tend to find regenerative energy at the “edges” that feed back into the center (Bulliet 1995). John Walbridge notes a similar kind of hope from Muslims who live in the so-called diaspora in the West. He concludes his book, *God and Logic in Islam: Caliphate of Reason*, expressing hope in the new energy that Muslim experiences at the edges of Islamic civilization will provide to their religious life and intellectual tradition: “Muslim communities in American or

European cities are microcosms of the Islamic world in a larger international society. I suspect that the lessons they are learning will prove invaluable to the Islamic lands of the Old World” (Walbridge 2011, 185).

The various literacies and skills necessary for what we are calling covenantal pluralism come together in Muslim experiences as minorities in free societies, and these are experiences that mirror the creative moments of Islam’s formational history. Here, they rediscover themselves in new contexts. They negotiate past tradition with present realities in their education, religious life, civic engagement, and political participation. And they communicate their convictions in partnership with citizens who do not share their beliefs. In this new environment, Imams are arguing that the core values of Islam and America are aligned (Abdur Rauf 2005), believers are running for office and transforming American political ritual (Spellberg 2013), and the US Congress is amending its laws to accommodate Muslim practices (Boorstein 2019). Even the mayor of London—the city’s CEO—is now the progeny of Muslim migrants from what had been the “Jewel in the Crown” of the British Empire in South Asia (Akhtar 2016).

Beyond these public and political engagements, Muslims, like other minority groups, have been involved in institution building at every level. Their experiences invite them to reflect on what it means to live in a “good society” today. Advocacy for rights as minorities and cooperation with other marginalized groups leads to the celebration of differences among peoples. In demanding a voice at the table in circles of influence and power, and in advocacy for their rights, Muslims are naturally compelled to reflect on how these virtues are sorely lacking in many Muslim majority societies in the heartlands of Islam. Thus, motivated in large part by self-interest, in an environment that permits them to flourish, Muslims are mining resources for covenantal pluralism within their scriptures and traditions.

To take a few examples by way of illustration, Islamic Relief, a faith-based NGO working “for a world free of poverty,” “provides relief and development in a dignified manner regardless of gender, race, or religion” (Islamic Relief, n.d.). In this spirit, American Muslims also operate free clinics and shelters for all (UMMA; NISA). The Council on American-Islamic Relations works on civil rights with headquarters in Washington, DC, and regional offices across the country (CAIR, n.d.). Muslim Advocates, another Muslim civil rights organization, “provides expert representation in the courts, the policy making process, and in the public dialogue so that American Muslims and all people can live free from discrimination” (Muslim Advocates n.d.). The Institute for Social Policy and Understanding “provides objective research and education about American Muslims to support well-informed dialogue and decision-making” (ISPU n.d.). The Center for Global Policy is a “think tank working exclusively on issues at the intersection of US foreign policy and the geopolitics of Muslim states and societies” (CGP n.d.). The Muslim Public Affairs Council (MPAC) organizes Muslim political participation and lobbies for favorable legislation (MPAC n.d.).

Online publications such as *altmuslimah.com* are sites where academic and cultural debates spill over into the public sphere (*altM* n.d.). The Islamic Networks Group, whose motto is “educating for cultural literacy and mutual respect,” operates a speaker’s bureau and offers tool-kits for public education on Islam (*ING* n.d.). Unity Production Foundations informs the public through film; their award-winning features include narratives of Muslim slaves brought from Africa, the interreligious encounter between St. Francis of Assisi and al-Malik al-Kamil of Egypt, and “Muhammad: Legacy of a Prophet” that aired on PBS (*UPF* n.d.). Among the many Muslim community organizations is the Inner-City Muslim Action Network, or IMAN, founded and led by a MacArthur genius in the south side of Chicago to foster “health, wellness and healing in the inner-city by organizing for social change, cultivating the arts, and operating a holistic health center” (IMAN n.d.). And the Islamic Society of North America, which hosts

an annual convention that attracts tens of thousands of people, strives for “the development of the Muslim community, interfaith relations, civic engagement, and better understanding of Islam” (ISNA n.d.).

These various regional and national organizations are supplemented by religious councils that provide authoritative opinions for regulating Muslim ritual, faith, and practice in new contexts (FCNA; IMAM; NAIF). While most national Muslim organizations have been dominated by recent Muslim immigrants or converts to Islam, others, like The Nation of Islam and The Mosque Cares represent longstanding Black Muslim communities in the United States (NOI; The Mosque Cares). MuslimARC, the Muslim Anti-Racism Collaborative, aims to “provide racial justice education and resources to provide racial justice” (MuslimARC n.d.). Launchgood, a crowdsourcing website, while primarily devoted to causes in the Muslim community, also raises funds for urgent needs by other faith communities (Launchgood n.d.). Its work has included the restoration of a Jewish cemetery and the rebuilding of Black Churches that were the victim of arson (NBC 2015; NBC 2017).

Cross-cultural religious literacy for Muslims is not simply an imperative across religions, but among these various groups of Muslims as well. Sherman Jackson, in *Islam and the Blackamerican*, highlights the importance of the intra-Muslim conversation around faith and identity between a relatively affluent immigrant Muslim community and the marginalized indigenous Black Muslims of America (Jackson 2011). Anthropologist Su’ad Abdul Khabeer coins a new term, “Muslim Cool,” to speak about Muslim American identities at the intersection of Islam and hip hop: “Muslim Cool is a way of being Muslim that draws on Blackness to contest two overlapping systems of racial norms: the hegemonic ethnoreligious norms of Arab and South Asian US American Muslim communities on the one hand, and White American normativity on the other” (Abdul Khabeer 2016, 2). Similar negotiations, if not conflicts, rage between “academic” and “traditional” Islam, where the fault lines tend to be around issues of gender, sexuality, and contemporary social justice issues (Safi 2003; Mir-Hosseini, Al-Sharmani, and Rumminger 2015). Karamah, an association of Muslim women lawyers for human rights, is committed to the promotion of “gender equity, religious freedom and civil rights” (KARAMAH n.d.).

As an alternative to mainstream academic voices, Muslims have begun to establish their own institutions of higher education as sites of negotiation among themselves and with the broader culture. Zaytuna College, America’s first Muslim liberal arts college in Berkeley, CA, opened its doors to its first undergraduate class in 2010 with an aim of inculcating cross-cultural religious literacy, inspired in part by the qualities needed for an Imam in the multicultural Ottoman Empire, as featured in one of their marketing videos: “To have mastered the languages of Arabic, Latin, Turkish, and Persian. To have mastered the Qur’an, the Bible, and the Torah. To be a scholar in Shari’ah and Fiqh. To have mastered physics and mathematics up to teaching standard” (Zaytuna 2012).

The American Islamic College in Chicago aims to prepare students for careers “in government, education, international relations, law enforcement, foreign service, diversity and inclusion, translation, social service administration, chaplaincy, spiritual care and religious leadership, military, international business or relief work” and beyond (AIC n.d.). The newly founded Islamic Seminary of America in the environs of Dallas, Texas, seeks to prepare “Muslim leaders to serve Islam and the American Muslim Community” (TISA n.d.). Bayan Claremont, founded in partnership with the Islamic Center of Southern California and the Claremont School of Theology, offers tracks in leadership, education, and chaplaincy, with a rich array of online content for lifelong learners from leading Muslim American academics. The Association of Muslim Chaplains supports the professional development of Muslims who seek to serve the spiritual needs of Americans in interreligious contexts (Association of Muslim Chaplains n.d.), and the

Islamic Scholarship Fund promotes Muslim achievements in the various fields of the liberal arts, including fields like film and media to change the conversation about Muslims and make them masters of their own narratives (ISF n.d.).

As these and other fledgling institutions navigate the norms of professional life and higher education in the United States, advance through the various stages of accreditation, and establish publications that will either be subject to peer review or at the very least public scrutiny, the processes of cross-cultural literacy and negotiation toward covenantal pluralism are expected to continue and even accelerate in the foreseeable future. In the formulation of their respective visions and policies, these institutions are compelled to bring all the resources of the past to bear on the living present. They must be authentic, but they must also be adaptive. In legal terms, being adaptive means being open to *ijtihad*, capable of formulating new rulings for new situations, while remaining rooted in the timelessness of scripture. They must be reflective, with a demonstrable ability for self-assessment and improvement in order to meet the high standards that are expected of them in their new contexts. And ultimately, in order to truly flourish, they must contribute to the common good.

### From local to global

Qur'anic sacred history affirms the truth of previous revelations, but it does so on its own terms, by accepting them in theory while rejecting everything as an alteration (*tahrif*) of the original when it contradicts what has come through Muhammad (Lumbard 2015). Supersession in theology translates into exceptionalism in society and politics (Hamid 2017). Supersession is reinforced in multiple ways: Belief in the prophet Muhammad as God's final messenger to humanity and the notion that the Qur'an abrogates all prior revelation; the framing of society as consisting of believers who are "the party of God" and those who oppose them, "the party of Satan," with a somewhat ambiguous gray area in the middle (Q. 58:19 and 22); and the imperative for believers to actively distinguish themselves from non-believers in belief, worship, custom, and even set themselves apart in friendship (Shavit 2014). "Muhammad is the messenger of God," says the Qur'an, "and those who follow him are harsh towards the disbelievers and compassionate towards each other" (Q. 48:29).

While everyday believers tend to observe acts of neighborly kindness irrespective of the faiths of others, "scrupulous" actors continue to pose questions such as the following: Is it permissible for Muslims to attend the funeral services of non-Muslims? Can Muslims wish Christians a Merry Christmas, or will that somehow be a validation of false beliefs? Is it acceptable for non-Muslim family members to inherit from them? Are poor/destitute non-Muslims eligible to receive Zakat, the mandatory alms that Muslims are obliged to pay from their surplus wealth? Even though some scholars, like the South African Farid Esack, have attempted to push the boundaries on these questions in light of their particular ethical locations, is covenantal pluralism possible if the answer to all of these questions is no? (Esack 1996).

Yes, it is. In fact, exclusive beliefs are the very conditions that make covenantal pluralism possible. Without our incommensurable faith claims, pluralism would have no meaning. Every religion sets norms for behavior that include/exclude on the basis of theology. Religions should not need to change their doctrines, however interpreted, in order to live peacefully and cooperatively with peoples of other faiths.

Most religions believe they are exceptional, offering unique paths to salvation. Covenantal pluralism cannot be predicated on theological inclusivism and relativism (Mirza 2018a). On the contrary, it must be a formulation that helps us function despite exclusive beliefs and practices. Yes: At its heart, covenantal pluralism is inclusive of the exclusive, while nudging us to seek ways

to widen the tent. Accordingly, the Marrakesh Declaration, signed in 2016 by over two hundred international scholars, is a call to conservative Muslim jurists around the world to develop a jurisprudence that promotes equality of citizenship in Muslim societies (Marrakesh Declaration n.d.). Hailed as a step in the positive direction, the initiative has also been criticized for severe shortcomings (Khan 2016). Nonetheless, it can be taken as a signal that the big players in the Muslim world recognize that they must come to the negotiating table.

The enabling conditions for covenantal pluralism include the freedom to live out and share one's commitments in society, and to stand firm in perseverance when challenged by closed-minded practitioners within and opponents without. As Chapter Two of this volume makes plain: "Covenantal pluralism is hard work, and there is no retirement age. It promises no utopia, no end of history." This echoes one of the shortest and most comprehensive Surahs of the Qur'an: "By the declining day, man is in [deep] loss. Except for those who believe, do good deeds, urge one another to the truth, and urge one another to steadfastness" (Q. 103). These four imperatives track the framework and virtues of CP-CCRL: Belief (personal); good deeds (personal and relational); and the urging of one another to truth and steadfastness (comparative and collaborative). This insight would please the likes of Imam Shafi'i (d. 820), the eponymous founder of one of the four major Sunni schools of jurisprudence, who said: "Were the people to ponder this *surah*, it would suffice them" (Study Qur'an 2015, 1557).

The privileges of living with religious freedom are undeniable. Muslims living in free societies draw on its principles to advocate for their rights, often in solidarity with other marginalized groups. Seeing the value of freedom for themselves, we are compelled to instinctively recognize the hypocrisy involved in denying it to others. This rational basis for religious freedom has scriptural warrant in the oft quoted verses: "There is no compulsion in religion" (Q. 2:256) and "Now the truth has come from your Lord: let those who wish to believe in it do so, and let those who wish to reject it do so" (Q. 18:29). The process of accepting the right to exist, even to flourish, of moral positions contrary to one's own necessitates every competency and skill in the CP-CCRL arsenal. And the implications go beyond the local. They are global.

In 1990, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) issued the Cairo Declaration on Human Rights as their own "universal" instrument in principled religious objection to certain clauses in the 1948 Universal Declaration on Human Rights. The Islamic instrument has been criticized for its parochial nature, in response to which that document has been recently undergoing revision (Kayaoglu 2020). Similarly, the principal finance institution of OIC member countries, the Islamic Development Bank (IsDB), has begun to use the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as its primary framework for assessing its effectiveness (IsDB n.d.). These are examples of negotiation in a global context. If the threats of nuclear proliferation, climate change, and terrorism, or the travesties of inequality, hunger, and poverty are not sufficient to convince us of the need for global cooperation, the Covid-19 pandemic should seal the deal. The inadequacies of the existing world order are evident, and a new era is upon us (Haas 2016). The religions of the world must begin to reflect on the call of covenantal pluralism and the need for cross-cultural religious literacy on a global scale to help steer humanity to a better tomorrow.

The Qur'an tells us that God placed the human being as a "Caliph" (successor/viceroy) on earth (Q. 2:30). "It is mankind, the children of Adam" who are charged in the Caliph verse, which, according to the political philosopher Andrew March, makes the doctrine somewhat "ambiguous with regard to universalism both globally and locally" (March 2019, 200). While Muslims have traditionally embraced the Caliphate as the exclusive prerogative of the *umma*—the global community of Muslims who explicitly submit to the authority of the sharia—we need to consider it in new light, a charge that is shared by the entire human family, a charge to be negotiated in light of a new narrative of human history in the context of an expansive



cosmic worldview (Mirza 2018b). Instead of thinking in isolation, hoping to change the world in their own image, people of faith must learn to think together, illuminating others with their light, while adding the light of others to their own, giving new meaning to the Qur'anic phrase "light upon light!" (Q. 22:35). The 19th century scholar Max Müller famously said about religion: "He who knows one, knows none" (Alles 2019). Müller's maxim is arguably a window into covenantal pluralism.

The Indian poet and philosopher, Muhammad Iqbal, prefaces his work on *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam* by privileging practice over theory: "The Qur'an is a book which emphasizes 'deed' rather than 'idea'" (Iqbal 2012, xlv). How ironic for a book about ideas to foreground their secondary nature. One could say that Iqbal is channeling the biblical aphorism, "You will know them by their fruits" (Matthew 7:16). The Qur'an tells believers: God "does not forbid you to deal kindly and justly with anyone who has not fought you for your faith or driven you out of your homes: God loves the just" (Q. 60:8). When it is not possible to find common ground theologically, as even the Prophet Muhammad experienced in his own encounters (Mirza 2011), members of rival faith communities have another way of bringing the light of the divine into the world: They can cooperate with each other, or engage in healthy competition with each other, to further the common good. "Each community has its own direction to which it turns," says the Qur'an, so "race to do good deeds and wherever you are, God will bring you together. God has power to do everything" (Q. 2:148).

## Notes

- 1 Narrative empathy is defined as "the sharing of feeling and perspective-taking induced by reading, viewing, hearing, or imagining narratives of another's situation and condition" (Keen 2013).
- 2 All translations of the Qur'an are from M.A.S Abdel Haleem. The translation was published by Oxford University Press in 2008. I have used the translation as it appears online at <https://quran.com/>. For more on Qur'an translations, see Joseph Lumbard, "The Qur'an in Translation," in *The Study Qur'an*. Translations from Abdel Haleem (quran.com).
- 3 A wonderful introduction to Islam through the lens of these three modes of body, mind, and heart is Chittick and Murata's (1998) *The Vision of Islam*.
- 4 Tirmidhi 4, 11, 2499, <https://sunnah.com/urn/678050>. All hadith have been cited from the online hadith database at Sunnah.com. These endnotes refer to the title of the Hadith work as commonly cited, followed by volume, book, and hadith number, as these appear in the database. The link is to the webpage where the cited hadith can be found in Arabic and English. When a hadith is found in a collection of forty hadith, that number has been given instead.
- 5 Ibn Majah 5, 37, 4248, <https://sunnah.com/urn/1293510>.
- 6 Ibn Majah 1, 1, 67, <https://sunnah.com/urn/1250670>.
- 7 Nawawi, 28, <https://sunnah.com/nawawi40/28>
- 8 Abu Dawud, 18, 2879, <https://sunnah.com/abudawud/19>. I modified the punctuations in the translation for accuracy.

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# 7

## HINDUISM, INSULAR PLURALISM, AND RELIGIOUS LITERACY

*Shylashri Shankar*

We often hear of the “tolerance” of Hinduism and its ability to include within it innumerable points of view ranging from belief in a god to pure materialism. We hear of different kinds of pluralism existing in Hinduism (Long 2019)—popular (employing Muslim healers in villages, going to Sufi shrines), theological (many schools of thought), and sociological (pluralism of authority). We also hear about the intolerance created by Hindu nationalism and the illiberalism of the caste hierarchy into which a Hindu is born, and how out of step Hinduism is with the egalitarian norms of modern democracies. We read about the difficulties of pinning down Hinduism within the rubric of a “religion” with a holy text and authoritative interpreters. We are told by historians about the moves by the British colonial state to categorize the subjects. Brahmins were used by the colonial state to create a Hinduism that could be understood as a religion wherein the ancient hymns of the Vedas and their commentaries and other writings were ascribed the status of holy texts. From the research of scholars, we also know that other ways of thinking about Hinduism continued, complicating independent India’s legal interpretation of constitutional guarantees of free and equal citizenship and of religious freedom. How do we make sense of all these Hinduisms in the context of covenantal pluralism?

Recently, a plumber came to deal with a blocked pipe in the bathroom of the nurse who is caring for my 90-year-old mother-in-law. The nurse lives with us and has her own room in the annex attached to the house. When he was to be paid, he demanded twice the amount he normally took. His explanation was that despite being a staunch Hindu, he had sorted out the drain used by a Muslim. How he found out that the nurse was a Muslim is not clear, but that he could even say such a thing, shocked me. I was furious and my first reaction was to call up his supervisor and complain. We did that, but the supervisor simply shrugged and said he couldn’t be held responsible for the plumber’s beliefs. I have been thinking about it ever since, and wondering how covenantal pluralism would deal with it.

As the editors of this volume point out in their introduction, covenantal pluralism agrees with Peter Berger (2014, 15) that the modern predicament of competing religious and non-religious beliefs is often met with one of two strategies: Fundamentalism (those who want to restore a moral and epistemic order through political means), or relativism (those who make an ideology out of moral equivalence, non-judgmentalism and “tolerance”). The Hindu plumber was firmly in the fundamentalist end of the continuum, but where was I? I didn’t want to be in the relativist end, but if I punished him for his beliefs, was I also not being in the fundamentalist

end (but from the non-religious point of view)? Berger argued for the maintenance and legitimation of the middle ground between fundamentalism and relativism, something that covenantal pluralism hopes to fill. What would covenantal pluralism require from me and the plumber? According to Stewart, Seiple, and Hoover in Chapter 2 of this volume,

A world of covenantal pluralism is characterized both by a constitutional order of equal rights and responsibilities and by a culture of reciprocal commitment to engaging, respecting, and protecting the other—albeit *without* necessarily conceding equal veracity or moral equivalence to the beliefs and behaviors of others.

They describe covenantal pluralism as emphasizing not only rules (legal equality) but also relationships.

Reciprocal commitment in the case I have just described could mean that the plumber treats the nurse's Muslimness with dignity and states his religious belief upfront and his inability to deal with the blocked pipe. Or he could ask for more money upfront because he would be contravening his religious belief. Or he could accept that his profession did not have any connection with his belief, or that some interpretations of Hinduism such as Vedanta would not agree with his view. When I narrated the incident to others, they said they had faced similar problems and attributed it to the militant Hindu nationalism of the ruling party. I will return to this issue in the final section on the clash between the reality of democratic processes and the ethical basis of neighborly solidarity found in Hinduism and covenantal pluralism.

The first section discusses the challenge of defining Hinduism and briefly notes the different strands (ancient and modern) within it that speak to the question of pluralism. It focuses on one strand—Vedanta—and assesses its ethical dimensions vis-a-vis covenantal pluralism. I will then turn to how Vedanta panned out in practice. Here the focus will be on a type of insular pluralism created by ruling elites to manage disputes between different Hindu schools of philosophy in the 10th century. Insular pluralism, as demonstrated by Elaine Fisher (2018), emerged from the need to pacify conflict between Hinduism's multiple faces and understandings, as well as between Hindus and non-Hindus. It allowed all to exhibit their faiths in public, creating insular spaces which demanded indifference to the beliefs of others (though there were also conflicts between and among these groups). Moving from the 10th to the 19th century, the essay will show the tension between the Vedanta's ethical principles and the urgent political imperatives confronting Hindu subjects of British colonialism. I will do this by focusing on two of its proponents, Ramakrishna Paramahansa and Vivekananda. The final section will turn to the post-independence era and discuss the relationship between insular pluralism and democracy's demands and conclude with some observations on the conditions under which it is possible to aim for covenantal pluralism.

## **Pluralism and Hinduism**

For our purposes, despite the many and different definitions in the vast scholarly literature on the subject, there seems to be some consensus among many scholars that Hinduism pertains to the rules of conduct, Dharma.<sup>1</sup> Dharma translates as civilization or rules of conduct, not belief. The concept of Dharma has a variety of connotations: Duty, karma, and has a relationship with the stage of life, the yuga (eon), and custom (Ghose 2003). The hierarchy of the caste into which a Hindu is born—Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya, and Sudra—and interconnections among the castes link all Hindus. These rules of conduct differ for each of the four castes. At the same time, according to Manusmriti, the four castes have some shared human aims: “Nonviolence, truth,

not stealing, purification and the suppression of sensory powers are the dharma of the four classes, in a nutshell” (10.63). What happens when the general rule conflicts with the rule of conduct prescribed for a caste? The specific rule dominates, say some scholars (Doniger 2015), but others disagree.

The liturgical Samhitas and Brahmanas emphasize interconnectedness, not separation between social groups (Smith 1994; Gray 2017). Brian K. Smith’s (1994) thesis is that within Brahminical thought, the universe is composed of mutually resembling and interconnected elements, but also hierarchically distinguished and ranked components, with ritual connecting the constituent parts. The Brahmin and the Kshatriya powers and social roles cannot be understood as independent of one another. Vedic ontology thus presents a group-based understanding of individuality that is further embedded in a holistic cosmological and metaphysical framework (Gray 2017, 128). In these readings, hierarchy rather than equality functions in the social dimension.

However, on the concept of hierarchy, there too is a conflict. Hierarchy is viewed differently according to two different perceptions of the nature and essence of man, argues A.M. Ghose (2003). In the first view, hierarchy is inconceivable. Man is seen as a rational being, as a knower of objects and situations and therefore has no need to choose, order, and arrange since everything as an object of knowledge is equally important or unimportant. In the second view, hierarchy is a given. Here man conceives of himself as a desiring creature and orders and arranges objects and situations, as well as his own feelings, passions, needs, and requirements. The question that Ghose poses to the concept of pluralism is this: Can a desiring creature assume an attitude of neutrality? The answer per covenantal pluralism—that one doesn’t have to be neutral to the beliefs of others but simply neutral to their right to hold those beliefs—would still not answer Ghose because these two types of neutrality are subsumed within a desiring creature who will create hierarchy.<sup>2</sup>

A similar conflict arises in how Hinduism views human nature and what the status of the individual is within it. Kalidas Bhattacharya (1964) points out that apart from the pure materialists (Carvaka system), the other systems share these views on the individual:<sup>3</sup>

- Every individual has a spiritual side;
- His spiritual side is, from the valuational point of view, more essential than his material side;
- Its autonomy has to be fully realized;
- This realization is possible through progressive detachment from the essential sides of his being.<sup>4</sup>

Complicating matters further is the dual aspect of human nature in Manusmriti, says Ghose. Manu’s view was that man is not essentially or naturally good. Left to himself, man would bring chaos. Hence the need for punishment and for a monarch. However, Manu also believed that man occupied two different worlds—one as a social animal and the other as a spiritual being. It is not clear to me if Manu’s view of human nature holds for man as a spiritual being. These complexities are highlighted only to show how Hinduism contains within itself several contradictory strands.

Let us return to the question of whether Hinduism contains a view that one should treat non-Hindus with equal dignity. For this, we have to turn to the concepts of individual and god. Is divinity in everyone or are god and man different? The notion that divinity is in all beings (Tat tvam asi—Brahman and Atman are the same say the Upanishads) militates against the notion of caste hierarchies also found within Hinduism (Sen 1962). This distinction plays out in the numerous philosophical schools, far too many to be discussed here. Doniger (2015) highlights

six major schools of Hindu philosophy, which became fully developed from the 12th century on in conversations with one another.

1. Mimamsa (critical inquiry) began with Jaimini (c. 400 BCE) who took the Vedas as the authority for dharma and karma.
2. Visheshika began with Kanada (3rd century BCE) who presented an atomic cosmology where god imposed order on pre-existing atoms. Shankara called the Vaisheshikas half-nihilists.
3. Logic and reasoning began with Gautama (2nd century BCE, no relation to the Buddha) and was an analytical philosophy basic to all later Hindu philosophy and to the scientific literature of the shastras.
4. Patanjali's Yoga-Sutras (150 BCE) codified yogic practices and the belief that moksha came not from knowledge but from the concentration and discipline of the mind and body.
5. Sankhya dates back to the Upanishads and is important in the Mahabharata (especially in the Gita), but was formally codified by Ishvarakrishna in the 3rd century CE. Sankhya is dualistic, dividing the universe into a male purusha (spirit, self, or person) and a female prakriti (matter, nature). There are an infinite number of similar but separate purushas, no one superior to another. Early Sankhya philosophers argued god may or may not exist but is not needed to explain the universe, but later Sankhya philosophers assumed that god does exist.
6. Vedanta reads the Upanishads through the lens of the unity of the self (atman) and the cosmic principle (brahman). The different branches of Vedanta, which arose in South India, see the phenomenal world as an epistemological error, a psychological imposition, or a metaphysical illusion. Evil and death too are illusions. The basic schism is between the dualists (Madhva) who argue that god and universe (including the worshiper) were of two different substances, and the nondualists (Shankara who practiced pure advaita and Ramanuja who practiced a qualified one) who argued that they were the same substance.

I want to now turn to the Vedanta school and briefly discuss the type of pluralism that plays out in the 10th century.

Elaine M. Fisher (2018) resituates Hindu sectarianism as a pre-colonial and distinctly non-Western form of religious pluralism. She argues that these sectarian religious publics of early modern South Asia provide us with the opportunity to rethink the criteria for a non-Western pluralism, founded not on the prescriptive model of Western civil society but on a historically descriptive account of the role of religion in the public sphere. She points out that Saivite (Shankara's followers) and Vaishnavite (Ramanuja's followers) adherents in 10th century South India wore their sectarian identities on their foreheads and moved about in the public sphere. They were marked citizens or subjects. Pluralism in this context was not the absence of conflict but its effective resolution—a process, she says, that in Hindu early modernity was facilitated not by the removal of religion in public but by its active publicization and by the shared performance of plural religiosities.<sup>5</sup> Sectarian was not a bad word in pre-colonial India; where religious violence erupted, it was not in the form of riots or large-scale militarized clashes.<sup>6</sup> Fisher (2018, 6) argues that Saivite and Vaisnavite were distinct religious communities. To belong to either was also to belong to a socially embedded community and to mark one's religious identity as a member of a particular religious public.

Doniger (2015) however complicates Fisher's story by pointing out that in medieval India, people cared about philosophy enough to fight about it, mostly with words but sometimes with weapons. These fights were with other philosophical schools within Hinduism and also with



Buddhism and Islam. Though Vedanta preached monism (the assumption that all living things are elements of a single universal being) which would in theory be devoid of hierarchy and castes, their philosophical orders were in fact highly hierarchical (Shankara excluded the lowest caste) and often intolerant of other orders (Doniger 2015, 512). They also proselytized because they saw themselves as possessing the only truth. How does this form of pluralism comport with covenantal pluralism? The adherents stuck to their beliefs and either tried to convince non-adherents of its veracity or were indifferent to other views. It is not the same as the cross-cultural religious literacy demanded by covenantal pluralism, which, among other things, requires an understanding of the other person's belief. Here Vedanta's pluralism becomes blunt proselytization rather than understanding and mutually respectful sharing.

Throughout classical Hindu thought, the drive to hierarchize surpasses and rides roughshod over the drive to present equal alternatives, observes Doniger (2015). This hierarchy is present in the seniority of the varnas, the supremacy of the mind over the senses, men over women, preceptor over disciple (Ghose 2003). Violence and tolerance interact in attitudes not only to other religions but between upper and lower castes, between men and women, and between humans and animals.<sup>7</sup> Thus, the way Dharma (the rules of conduct) plays out is complex, in part because it is the site of contestation between renunciation and violence (Doniger 2015). It is also complex because for the same action, the punishment differs based on one's caste and context. Hindu moral judgments are "context sensitive" and must be considered as finely tuned rather than discriminatory (Ramanujan 1989).<sup>8</sup>

From this brief glimpse into Hinduism, it is clear that its vast corpus contains an eclectic pluralism within (Doniger 2015; Sen 1962), and also more cautiously with other religions (Doniger 2015; Long 2019). One can agree with them that it is more useful to think of Hinduism not as a hotchpotch or a singularity but as a complex variety of sources and the power of the integrations that make up what we call Hinduism. In fact, as Ghose (2003) points out, it is difficult to ascertain a "master-meaning," and the temptation must be avoided.

Let me now turn to one of the philosophies within Hinduism that coheres with covenantal pluralism and see how its ethics play out in the context of pluralism.

### **Ethics of Vedanta and covenantal pluralism**

In the "Ethics of Vedanta" published by the *International Journal of Ethics* in 1914, philosopher and later President of India, S. Radhakrishnan, discusses Vedanta's ethics and its concepts of equality and reason. He likens the Vedanta criterion of morality with the Hegelian school of ethics: "my station and its duties" (Radhakrishnan 1914, 176). When rules come into conflict, a Vedantin will ask what the course most conducive to the realization of reason is. It is the Upanishads that inform Vedanta philosophy. The Upanishads explained the significance of sacrifices (declared by the Vedas as the way to salvation) by holding out that the greatest sacrifice is unselfish devotion to the general good at the sacrifice of the individual self. "The highest knowledge cannot be got by turning our attention inward, but only by conducting ourselves in our external relations, fully imbued with the spirit of the all-presence of the divine" (Radhakrishnan 1914, 174). A Vedantin therefore must live a life of reason and unselfishness, one in which the senses are disciplined and controlled by reason, and the whole life will be marked by unity and consistency. "Man is God and brute crossed, and it is the task of the moral life to eliminate the non-divine element, not by destroying it, but by suffusing it with the divine spirit" (Radhakrishnan 1914, 169). Vedanta's ethic thus views every individual as a coequal to be treated as an end, not as a means, a view that corresponds to covenantal pluralism's emphasis on equal dignity of all regardless of their religion. These tenets—seeing divinity in all beings, unselfish sacrifice for the general good, and

an interconnection with other beings—cohere with and even go beyond covenantal pluralism's aims. We can see this in the way Ramakrishna Paramahansa (1836–1886) interpreted the ethic.

Ramakrishna Paramahansa and his disciple Vivekananda advocated Anubhava (direct experience of the ultimate reality) as the mode to adjudicate various authorities proposed by the world's religions as foundations for valid knowledge about ultimate reality. Ramakrishna said,

I have practiced all religions—Hinduism, Islam, Christianity—and I have also followed the paths of the different Hindu sects. I have found that it is the same God toward whom all are directing their steps, though along different paths. You must try all beliefs and traverse all the different ways once.

(Nikhilananda 1942, 35 quoted from Long 2020)

However, Ramakrishna also argued that each path is to be honored while holding firm to our own path. This pluralistic turn in modern Hindu thought corresponds with the rise of an emphasis on the direct experience of divine realities, argues Long (2019). The emphasis on direct experience can be traced back to ancient times when the divide emerged between it and mediated experience through sensory perception championed by the Carvaka school. For Ramakrishna, pluralism meant the harmony of religions (*dharma samanvaya*). He held the view that religions are all part of a larger truth, and each religion points beyond itself. Such a concept of pluralism emphasizes salvific efficacy rather than the ability to capture the truth, Long points out. Ramakrishna's statement—that each piece is to be honored and respected while holding firm to our own particular piece of the puzzle—coheres with covenantal pluralism's "neighborly solidarity."

The ethic of Vedanta and its interpretation as experiential manifestation collided with the reality of India's subjection to British colonialism. As T.N. Madan (1999) points out, all India Hinduism emerged in the 19th century out of a welter of regional religious traditions such as Vaishnavism in the west, Shaivism in the south, and Shaktism in the east. Hindu reformers such as Rammohan Roy and others of the Bengal renaissance of the 19th century saw the need for creating nationalism and a sense of a common identity among Indians. For Roy and the Brahmosamaj (Community of Brahman), which wanted to remove the ills of caste and reform Hinduism, there was no difference between Christ's teachings and the Vedas.

Others like Vivekananda (see Vivekananda 1964), who was Ramakrishna's disciple, had a more problematic relationship with the teachings of other religions. T.N. Madan points to a different strand where Vivekananda becomes more selective and favors the higher Brahminical tradition combined with *bhakti* (devotion) over other forms of religious faith. This was Vivekananda's method to fashion a Hindu rebellion while preventing the danger of intolerance of other religions. Vivekananda emphasized religious pluralism and tolerance but from a Hindu platform where there is a specific hierarchy with Brahminical tradition on top, and non-Hindus such as Christianity as a very patchy imitation of Hinduism.

In Vivekananda's stance, we see the uneasy relationship between the experiential form's inclusiveness with other religions and the exclusiveness demanded by nationalism. To rally the Hindus, Vivekananda appealed to a taboo—against eating beef—that all Hindus adhered to. This is evident in his response to the question of whether eating meat (which he exhorted all Hindus to do) would include beef. No, said Vivekananda. All Hindus were united on one thing—that they did not eat beef. Why? Because the cow is a sacred animal, and here his discourse links being a Hindu with religion, and with inhabiting the land of India. Cows and buffaloes were slaughtered for meat in abattoirs run by Muslims, so this group became the immediate target of rioters led by the *gau-rakshaks* (cow-protectors) in the late 19th century (Shankar 2020).

Others, like philosopher S. Radhakrishnan, though wary of an exclusionary nationalism, spoke of their uneasiness with the misinterpretations of the ethic of Vedanta as advocating resignation and turning inward into thought rather than deeds.

It is not the mystic in his cell or the philosopher in his retreat who is held up as a model (by Vedanta), but the warrior fighting with righteous indignation the battle against the forces of evil and wickedness ... The highest ideals can be realized only through loyalty to the smaller ideals of family, country.

(Radhakrishnan 1914, 176)

Quietude, he says, brought India to its ruin, and bids each Indian to contribute to the national strength his quota of earnest work.

It is Gandhi's relativistic yet engaged pluralism that T.N. Madan champions as one that emerges out of Gandhi's Hinduism and transforms into a universal spiritual humanism. Madan describes it as participatory pluralism, which is contingent on intercultural communication, judgment, and choice. He says that Gandhi practiced what he preached—he acknowledged the enormous influence of the moral content of Christianity (“Jesus has given a definition of perfect dharma”) and similarly considered Islam to have been influential in making India's national culture through the emphasis on the oneness of God and the brotherhood of man. But such pluralism championed by Madan is also not what covenantal pluralism envisages, because Gandhi's pluralism erases religious boundaries and creates a composite oneness. This is something that could be aspired to ultimately but is not feasible in the present reality. Moreover, as we shall see shortly, the breakdown of insular pluralism has marched alongside virulent religious polarization rather than a composite oneness.

### **Independent India and pluralism**

Vedanta's emphasis on the equal validity of all paths to divinity plays out in the “sarva dharma sambhava” (equal respect for all religions) motif of independent India's constitutional attitude to religious diversity. But other imaginaries of Hinduism—as a religion, ancient order, and Indianness as a culture (Shankar 2019)<sup>9</sup>—drawing on other philosophical schools permeate the constitution, complicating the legal interpretations of religious freedom (Articles 25–30) and non-discrimination (Articles 14 and 15). If Hinduism is treated as a religion, how could the state conform to neutrality and separation of state and religion, and still reform unjust social practices within the Hindu caste system? If Hinduism is an ancient order based on the caste hierarchy, how could the state undertake social justice for the lowest castes? And if Hinduism is part of an Indian culture, how could the state bar it from political discourse and election rhetoric? The result was the introduction of a resilient vein of ambiguity within the constitution. The imaginaries of Hinduism as a culture and as an ancient order are forms of lived experience which pertain to a third category—one who is neither a believer nor an unbeliever. The existence of this category has simultaneously problematized the state's efforts to manage diversity and increased concerns about a crisis of secularism, but has also created a buffer or a zone of ambiguity for the state and prevented it from being torn apart by the fierce battles between majority and minority religions, and between co-religionists.

Let me illustrate the problem of ensuring legal equality in applying the principle of religious freedom.<sup>10</sup> In religious conversion-related cases, one can clearly observe a trend among high court and Supreme Court judges of India towards limiting conversion activities. This is not because judges are necessarily biased against non-Hindus but because of decisions made in

the Constitution to limit the access to social justice to, among others, the bottom-most group within Hinduism. The most disadvantaged in the caste system are the dalits, whom Indian legal discourse refers to as “scheduled castes” (SCs, approximately 16.6% of India’s population according to the 2011 Census). Dalits are often derogatorily referred to as “untouchables” and have traditionally suffered discrimination and violence at the hands of the upper castes, and continue to do so even today. Most conversions in independent India occur among dalits/SCs and “scheduled tribes” (indigenous peoples who too have suffered such discrimination) who want to improve their low social standing by converting to Islam and Christianity, which promise “equality” to their congregants.

The framers of the Indian Constitution had a foundational commitment to social justice for these discriminated groups, and allowed only scheduled castes and scheduled tribes to qualify for affirmative action benefits. These benefits include quotas reserved in government jobs, political constituencies, and educational institutions. However, the initial legal definition of a scheduled caste as a Hindu or a Sikh, limited the range of beneficiaries to the disadvantaged groups *within* Hinduism. This decision has meant that the constitution inadvertently installed *barriers to conversion from Hinduism*. It is this constitutional linking of entrenched social disadvantage with Hinduism that explains the apparent anti-conversion bias of courts. By curtailing the ability of a scheduled-caste convert to access affirmative action benefits, courts have discouraged conversions from Hinduism, but also indirectly encouraged re-conversions to Hinduism, thereby creating discord with the proselytizing religions (namely Christianity and Islam), and deepening, rather than modulating, religious polarization.

An analysis of 80 religious conversion cases in the High Courts and the Supreme Court reveals a jurisprudential tilt towards facilitating conversion to Hinduism and obstructing conversion away from Hinduism. Of the 80 cases, 42% dealt with affirmative action benefits, 38% with personal law disputes, and 15% pertained to propagation. Reconversions to Hinduism (36%) and conversions to Islam (23%) and Christianity (28%) were among the main issues tackled by the courts in these cases. In over half of the cases dealing with affirmative action, scheduled-caste converts to Islam and Christianity were stripped of their welfare benefits, though several judgments recognized that *even after conversion* caste sticks to the convert. But on re-conversion to Hinduism, the Court, on grounds that affirmative action was a group right, allowed the scheduled-caste person to regain the welfare privileges as long as he could prove that the caste had accepted him into its fold (*S. Anbalagan v. B. Devarajan, 1984 AIR 411*). To these judgments, the ideologues of the RSS and other organizations of the Hindu Right responded with approval. S. Gurumurthy, an RSS ideologue and the co-convenor of the Swadeshi Jagran Manch, an organization “for promoting the awareness of Indian tradition,” said that the court tried to “minimize the harmful impact of the constitution” and “balanced” the needs of (the predominantly Hindu) society by handing down judgments against conversion and “upholding Hinduism or Hindutva as part of the national character rather than confining it to a religion on par with Islam and Christianity” (interview with author, March 6, 2007, Chennai).

These judgments have contributed to reinforcing the divide between religions, reduced religious literacy, and deepened two trajectories: Religious polarization and religious insularity. The electoral demands of democracy have more often compromised covenantal pluralism’s requirements of religious literacy, neighborly solidarity, and a supportive cultural context. When I returned to India in the early 1990s after completing university in England, I was struck by the rise of anti-Muslim rhetoric in public discourse. Hindu nationalists were encouraging the “Hindu” voter to reclaim India from the Muslims. But what shocked me were some friends who had never uttered anti-Muslim sentiments, but were doing so now. The use of religious misinformation and divisions (manipulating religious *illiteracy*) to spark nationalism among Hindus

has been a recurring motif in the electoral process, particularly with the Hindu nationalists who have used it to fashion a Hindu vote-bank. While their success in recent years can be attributed to the decline of the Congress Party and the inability of non-BJP parties to present a unified stance, there is a larger and more vocal presence of a Hindu nationalism now than there was earlier.

On covenantal pluralism's second requirement of reciprocal engagement with diversity which requires religious literacy, the two trajectories of religious polarization and insular pluralism have taken Indians in the opposite direction—towards religious illiteracy and indifference to other belief systems and to differences among themselves. Covenantal pluralism's religious literacy includes three dimensions: (a) A working understanding of one's own beliefs, especially what it says about engaging with people outside that tradition; (b) understanding one's neighbors' beliefs (and what they say about engaging those outside that tradition); (c) historical and contemporary particulars of specific contexts where multifaith collaborations may or may not be advisable. Insular pluralism doesn't lend itself to (b), and the absence of any strict set of rules or expectations of a Hindu (no equivalents of catechism or knowing the Bible or going to church) doesn't impose any requirement for (a).

## **Conclusion**

The complex and morally contextual rules of conduct of Hindu philosophies in conjunction with democracy make for a very complicated relationship with covenantal pluralism's requirements of trust, curiosity, and a deeper engagement with other religious groups. Ramakrishna Paramahansa, S. Radhakrishnan, and Mahatma Gandhi in their different ways aimed for the kind of public engagement and neighborly solidarity envisaged by covenantal pluralism. But the more dominant trend has been towards either religious polarization or insular indifference, not reciprocal engagement. There is a concerted move by a democratically elected government to draw a misleadingly neat circle around Hindu religion and Indian nationality, and blend personal experience and old and still powerful social practices, in this case the divide between Hindus and Muslims. New amendments to citizenship laws privilege non-Muslim immigrants and, when applied in conjunction with the government's stated objective to carry out a compilation of a national register of citizens, carry a grave threat to those Muslims in India who do not possess the documentary evidence of citizenship. Our long struggle to corral such sentiments in private spaces through insular pluralism has been torn down. We live in a politically incorrect world with complete freedom of speech and expression. Our decades of living in insular bubbles, and where we either ignored or were matter-of-fact in our encounters with others not like us, are now coming apart. An example is the plumber's loud utterances about Muslims.

The editors of the volume point out in their chapters that globalization requires broad-based partnership to resolve conflicts (e.g., resistance to Covid-19), and that the continuous transfer of information and mobility challenges how we conceive of ourselves and our willingness to partner. To this list of woes we can add the active and targeted bombardment of fake news by partisan media directed by political parties to create fear about an "Other" in order to shape their voter-banks. Such a situation makes it hard to visualize how the long tradition of insular pluralism can transform into a reciprocal commitment emphasized by covenantal pluralism. Technology may be a disruptor of these old patterns and may create online spaces for these discussions, but it also enhances the ability of powerful groups to spread misunderstanding. There is also a second concern raised by some scholars (Chakrabarty 1992; Parekh 1992; Daya Krishna 2003), namely whether we can have a common lexicon of pluralism that transcends religious

and national boundaries, as covenantal pluralism seems to imply. The problems highlighted by the case of Hinduism could be repeated in the case of Buddhism, Confucianism, Shinto, among others. There are no easy answers. The global economy in a freefall from COVID that has put millions of jobs at risk, combined with the anomie produced by the social distancing and lockdown culture, does not bode well for neighborly solidarity. Now more than ever, trust and the willingness to engage with one another are needed.

## Notes

- 1 At the beginning are the Vedic Samhitas (1700–1100 BCE) and the Brahmanas (1000 BCE). These are followed by a rich variety of systems: Brahminical Dharmasastras (4 BCE), Manusmriti (2 BCE–2 CE), Mahabharata (2 BCE–2 CE), Buddhist canonical (4 BCE) and post-canonical (2 CE) texts, and Arthashastra (322 BCE). The final stage in the evolution of ancient Hindu political theories are treatises described to Kamandaka (400–600 AD), Brihaspati Sukra (12th CAD), Jaina texts on polity and law, and the later Brahminical canon (Gray 2017). The Mahabharata tackles Dharma and the problems that arise from it—how to define it, live by it, break it, repair it, and how to accommodate it to the exigencies of a political life. These texts are classified according to those that were uttered (*struti*) and those that were remembered (*smriti*).
- 2 In the Upanishads, men of knowledge carve out one path and men of action carve out another. Men who acquire the highest knowledge go beyond life and death, men of action don't (Ghose 2003).
- 3 What is disputed however is the question of plurality of individuals, which Advaita Vedanta and some sub-schools of Saivite philosophy challenge. The Advaita Vedanta denies plurality and says that the individual has a mind, body, and a self. To realize the self, he has to disassociate it from the body and the mind. The other systems agree about realizing the self but reject the Advaita notion that body and mind do not matter.
- 4 On the question of Karma and pre-determination, Bhattacharya points out that only three things in life are predetermined: Bodily and mental make up at the time of birth in that life (*jati*); the span of life (*ayush*); particular experiences with all the hedonistic tones they have in that life and all that is necessary as objects or direct and indirect causes of these experiences (*Bhoga*). Direct and indirect causes include physiological movement but not include moral and spiritual actions. The merits and demerits of the previous life gets exhausted in this one, so there is freedom for the individual to choose better moral and spiritual actions in this life.
- 5 In this form of pluralism, insular pluralism, one engages in a public demonstration of one's religious identity (self-marked citizen), and one is convinced of the truth of one's own belief. Such certitude could lead to clashes with those with other beliefs but it could also create an indifference i.e., no religious literacy. Insular pluralism has continued after independence with no injunctions against wearing one's religious identity in public spaces such as universities or in government offices. That's why the headscarf controversy in France and Turkey doesn't make sense in the Indian context because of this long tradition of functioning as marked publics. Insular pluralism is what T.N. Madan (1999) calls mutual indifference disguised as tolerance.
- 6 Sectarian, she says was coined by Sir Monier Williams who saw sectarianism as the worship of a personal god more or less in direct opposition to the orthodox philosophy of Brahminism.
- 7 In each period, Doniger (2015, 9) highlights moments when inter and intra-religious interactions took place, marked by either tolerance or violence, the deciding factor often being historical circumstances.
- 8 He points out that systems of meaning in Hinduism are elicited by the context, nature, and substance of the listener. While noting that all societies have context-sensitive behaviour and rules, he says that the dominant ideal in, say Protestant Christianity, may not be context sensitive but context-free. Any member of Protestant Christianity is considered to be equal to and like any other in the group. Not so in India, except Bhakti (direct experiential stream) that denies the very need for context.
- 9 Whether colonialism is seen as a project of cultural control and the conquest of India as the conquest of knowledge, or of oriental empiricism, these narratives agree that colonialism developed an understanding of caste that allowed it to dismantle a previous power structure and make it into a "hollow crown," while a Western Christian concept of religion resulted in the postulation of one religion, Hinduism, which unified the diversity of doctrines, texts, practices, and gods that existed in on the subcontinent (Bloch, Keppens, and Hegde 2010). The view of Hinduism as an ancient order is based not on religion,

but on varna (a classificatory system). This view does not allow for entry or exit from the Order (no conversion). Indianness as a culture—the appropriateness of viewing Hinduism as a religion, and of Brahmanism as its basis—is challenged some who argue that “religion” is better thought of as a model of “explanation” that applies only to the Jewish, Christian, and Islamic worlds.

10 This part is adapted in part from my section in Schonthal et al. (2016).

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# 8

## THE ELEPHANT IN THE ROOM

### Buddhist religious exclusivism and prospects for covenantal pluralism

*Paul Fuller*

In the encounter between different religions, it is often claimed that the Buddhist attitude is one of tolerance (Roloff 2020, 63). It is also suggested that Buddhism has an inclusivist attitude to other religious traditions (Burton 2017, 161–163; Schmidt-Leukel 2020, 54–56; Vélez 2013, 81–104). There are a number of factors in this characterization. It is based, in part, upon the notion that Buddhists do not make strong claims about the true nature of reality. This idea is reflected in some of the textual tradition with the idea that one should not assert that “only this is true, everything else is wrong” (D II 282; M II 169–170). Added to this assertion is the idea that conflicting religious truth claims cause disputes with others whereas the Buddha taught a doctrine whereby “one does not quarrel with anyone in the world” (M I 108). Finally, it is suggested that Buddhism does not forcefully convert people (Rahula 1974, 5), as Buddhism is the epitome of tolerance and acceptance. Although some have questioned this pacific characterization (e.g., Faure 2009, 85–89), the dominant narrative about Buddhism remains one of universally inclusivist tolerance and relativistic pluralism (McMahan 2008, 8; Harvey 2000, 260; Warder 2000, 492).

In this chapter I will be considering a specific school of Buddhism commonly known as Theravāda Buddhism. Theravāda Buddhism has been historically important in South and Southeast Asia. One of its principal influences has been through its use of a textual tradition, known as the Pāli canon. The Pāli canon is a large body of texts covering the narrative and doctrinal norms of Theravāda Buddhism, along with rules of conduct for monks and nuns, and highly complex philosophical texts. It is not necessarily earlier than the other Buddhist traditions of Tibet and East Asia. These latter traditions are sometimes termed Mahāyāna Buddhism. The Pāli canon forms a relatively uniform body of texts. It does not contain a key text, but might best be considered to be a wide range of teachings authored from perhaps the 5th century BCE to the beginning of the Common Era, but claiming to contain the authentic words of the Buddha, who is held to have lived around the 5th century BCE in North India.

I would like to suggest, before moving onto my main points, that I think Buddhism has an abundance of ideas and doctrines that can contribute to, and even dictate, a meaningful conversation between itself and other religions. Buddhism is focused upon compassion (*karuṇā*) and loving-kindness (*mettā*). The latter suggests that one should regard all living beings of whatever type, race, gender, or ethnicity, with a feeling of complete and unconditional kindness. The



central focus upon types of compassion, for which Buddhism has a large vocabulary, is essential to a clear, straightforward, and honest religious pluralism. Buddhism has much to offer in its understanding of the peaceful relationship between different religions. The Buddhist eightfold path begins with “right-view” (*sammā-ditṭhi*). A key factor of right-view is that it is a mental attitude which eradicates attachment to ideas, concepts, beliefs, and truth claims. It therefore highlights a mental attitude which leads the person accomplished in view to be peaceful, to lessen aggression, to refrain from stubbornly clinging to truths and beliefs, even if they are cherished and correct ones. It is in this sense that I think Buddhism is positioned to support a pluralism in which no religion/worldview is privileged over, or forced upon, others. It can contribute in a meaningful way to respectful dialogue precisely because it has a central teaching pointing to the danger of obstinately clinging to truths and beliefs and trying to foist them on others. From the Buddhist perspective, it is not diverse religious truths and beliefs that are the problem, but the psychological damage caused by an obstinate attachment to them.

Therefore, in the following I am suggesting historical and doctrinal ways that these positive teachings have not been used. I am not questioning the abundance of ideas that Buddhism can bring to covenantal pluralism. This Buddhist perspective respects alternative formulations of ultimate truth, but naturally proposes its own as the most complete and beneficial.

This chapter challenges the traditional understanding of Buddhism’s “tolerant” character on two fronts. First, it will suggest that in the Pāli canon, which forms the basis of much of South and Southeast Asian Buddhism, a radically “inclusivist” religious pluralism is not found. By inclusivist I mean simply that Buddhism accepts the validity of the truth claims of other religions. Second, through describing the actions of Buddhist groups in modern Myanmar it will be argued that Buddhism can often be nationalistic and protectionist. This will offer a more useful barometer on which to build a meaningful understanding of Buddhism’s relationship with other religions. Moreover, I will suggest that in understanding these localized forms of Buddhism we gain a religious literacy which is closer to the covenantal pluralism presented in the opening chapters of this book. Buddhist attitudes to the religious other should not be based upon an unrealistic and simplistic assumption of “tolerance.” Such assumptions are described by Stewart, Seiple, and Hoover (Chapter 2) as “bumper-sticker slogans,” in which banal similarities between religions are emphasized at the expense of acknowledging and respecting differences.

Tolerance implies that we tolerate the religious other. However, in my experience, it is often an attitude of superiority, privilege, and indifference. Tolerance can also suggest a lack of understanding of religions, and a lack of religious literacy, which is actually harmful to the peaceful co-existence of different religious traditions. Tolerance can imply something which is endured, not something which we give value to.

It is not easy to find an Indian Buddhist term for tolerance. The Pāli term *khanti* means patience or forbearance, and carries some of the meaning of tolerance, though not in the pluralistic sense of interfaith dialogue. Textual uses of the term do not display this meaning (for example S V 169 where the term clearly means patience). The same term would be used in Burmese but it would not mean tolerance as a virtue but the idea that something is treated with forbearance. The term *mettā*, usually translated as loving-kindness, carries a similar meaning; however, it also does not express the attitude of religious tolerance. Buddhism’s diction in the Pāli material conveys the distinct impression that when we consider Buddhism’s tolerance of other religious traditions, we really mean its respect for them. Respect can have the sense of appreciating profound differences and is therefore closer to the idea of covenantal pluralism described in this book.

The idea of tolerance is used to promote Buddhism to the West; but at the local, cultural, political, and national levels it serves little practical purpose. Nor is the term particularly helpful

in the encounter between Buddhism and non-Buddhist ethnic and religious groups. Further, the assumption that Buddhism is tolerant does not address deep differences found in the various religious understandings of the nature of reality, as well as the beliefs and doctrines that result from them. This understanding of tolerance in Buddhism is consistent with the second chapter's general description of tolerance as "pluralism-lite." What is needed is a more genuine understanding of religious and philosophical differences. Deep-seated questions remain as to whether Buddhism historically articulated an understanding of other religions based upon tolerance, or if this is an imagined tolerance originating in more recent concerns that Buddhism is pluralistic. In this chapter I question if there was a vocabulary of unqualified, inclusivist, and relativistic "tolerance" in Buddhism or whether this is a recent romanticized caricature.

Stewart, Seiple, and Hoover suggest that the notion of tolerance is often based upon religious illiteracy. By this I understand that there is a prevailing naïveté about how the nature of religion is lived locally. This illiteracy often means that differences are framed as unimportant, and similarities, based upon assumptions about the true nature of religion, are pronounced. However, essential to the covenantal pluralism that cross-cultural religious literacy seeks is the basic fact that religions are not the same and that there are irreconcilable differences between them that can nevertheless be mutually respected based on the common dignity of each.

It is, as Stewart, Seiple, and Hoover put it, "inclusive of the exclusive." My experience in academia suggests that the default position of many who are not literate in the study of religions is that the similarities are more important than the differences. This notion is often explained on the basis that all religions share similar ethical ideas, while ignoring differences.

Covenantal pluralism offers an alternative model whereby Buddhism is more realistically understood as a religious and philosophical tradition which accepts religious differences, but upholds its rightness and uniqueness. The first discourse of the Pāli Buddhist canon, the *Brahmajāla-sutta*, makes the point explicitly that the Buddha's teachings are superior to other philosophical and religious teachings. This perspective is certainly the rhetoric of some modern Buddhist groups and might in fact be the prevailing historical attitude of Buddhists (Compson 1996).

### **A history of Buddhist "tolerance"**

Walpola Rahula's influential *What the Buddha Taught*, originally published in 1959 (but subsequently expanded), offers the following summary of Buddhist tolerance:

This spirit of tolerance and understanding has been from the beginning one of the most cherished ideals of Buddhist culture and civilization. That is why there is not a single example of persecution or the shedding of a drop of blood in converting people to Buddhism, or in its propagation during its long history of 2,500 years. It spread peacefully all over the continent of Asia, having more than 500 million adherents today. Violence in any form, under any pretext whatsoever, is absolutely against the teaching of the Buddha.

(Rahula 1974, 5)

Rahula clearly describes Buddhism as the religion of tolerance which promotes the peaceful co-existence of religions. The related idea that Theravāda Buddhism is inclusivist owes much to K.N. Jayatilleke's *The Buddhist Attitudes to Other Religions* (Schmidt-Leukell 2020, 54–55). He argues that there are certain types of Buddhas known as *Pacceka Buddhas*. These are often described as solitary Buddhas, who achieve awakening without having followed the teachings of

a previous Buddha. This suggests the possibility that those who do not follow a Buddha's teachings achieve awakening (Vélez de Cea 2013, 91–93). The influential Jayatilleke passage reads:

The concept of the Buddha as one who discovers the truth rather than as one who has the monopoly of the truth is clearly a source of tolerance. It leaves open the possibility for others to discover aspects of the truth or even the whole truth for themselves. The Buddhist acceptance of Pacceka-Buddhas, who discover the truth for themselves, is a clear admission of this fact [...] This assertion of the possibility of salvation or spiritual growth outside Buddhism does not mean that Buddhism values all religions alike and considers them equally true.

(Jayatilleke 1975, 26)

Based in part on these ideas, J. Abraham Vélez de Cea argues that because Buddhism accepts the idea of a Buddha who is awakened without the influence of another Buddha, then it follows that the highest goals of Buddhism are open to those who are not Buddhists (Vélez de Cea 2013, 91).

The historical evidence for tolerance is based upon Aśoka, who ruled over much of India between 268–232 BCE. He famously left a written legacy of inscriptions at various sites around his kingdom. The following is notable:

The king [...] honours all religious sects [...] with gifts and honours of various kinds. But he does not value gifts and honours as much as he values this—that there should be growth in the essentials of all religions. Growth in essentials can be done in different ways, but all of them have as their root restraint in speech, that is, not praising one's own religion, or condemning the religion of others without good cause. And if there is cause for criticism, it should be done in a mild way. But it is better to honour other religions for this reason. By so doing, one's own religion benefits, and so do other religions, while doing otherwise harms one's own religion and the religions of others. Whoever praises his own religion, due to excessive devotion, and condemns others with the thought "Let me glorify my own religion," only harms his own religion. Therefore contact (between religions) is good. One should listen to and respect the doctrines professed by others. The king desires that all should be well-learned in the good doctrines of other religions.

Those who are content with their own religion should be told this: The king does not value gifts and honours as much as he values that there should be growth in the essentials of all religions.

(Major Rock Edict XII. Adapted from Dhammika 1993: 24–25. See also his VI pillar edict, Dhammika 1993: 40–41)

It is in these statements, attributed to Aśoka, that we find the clearest indication that religious tolerance (and mutual respect) was valued in ancient India. However, his ideas are isolated and it is not clear that they were known throughout Buddhist history (Gombrich 2006, 84).

Christopher Ives (2005) has suggested that in the debate about religious pluralism and Buddhism it is best not to compare prominent religious ideas such as God and Emptiness, but to address the issue from the perspective of suffering, what he terms a "religio-diagnostic" approach rather than the types of pluralism pioneered by John Hick (Ives 2005, 178–179). John Hick's identist pluralism proposes that all religions are cultural encounters with one divine reality. This understanding might be amenable to a casual reading of some ideas that came to prominence in

Mahāyāna Buddhism, but are not likely to be applicable to the traditions of Buddhism prevalent in South and Southeast Asia known as Theravāda Buddhism (Ives 2005, 179).

The idea that Buddhism is tolerant of the religious other is based upon the idea of non-attachment. Because Buddhism advises that people should not be attached to conceptual ideas, it follows that it is tolerant of other religions. However, in the Pāli canon, when the Buddha explains his ideas about other ascetic traditions, he suggests that his teachings are superior, as they lead to the eradication of suffering. Buddhism's "pluralist" attitude seems to owe more to the way it has presented itself to the world, rather than to doctrinal ideas found in the texts. The ideas of loving-kindness, compassion for all sentient beings, not to be attached to any view or belief, the mindfulness promoted by its meditation, all suggest tolerance, understanding, and acceptance of other religions.

In an important sense Buddhism does promote the ethical actions of other religious traditions. To follow certain ethical practices such as compassion, kindness, patience, and generosity will indeed result in rebirth in a heavenly realm of existence (Bodhi 2020, 21). However, these forms of rebirth are provisional. The rebirths they engender are happy and fortunate, but they are impermanent, and rebirth is not the goal of Buddhist teachings. The notion that all religious traditions fundamentally teach an ethical life is based upon similar principles. Buddhism will no doubt support other religious traditions that promote abstention from the taking of life, stealing, sexual misconduct, and false speech. Pluralism based upon these principles is possible. But, if we are considering the early texts of Buddhism, these are not essential. In the *Brahmajāla-sutta* it is stated that the Buddha should not be praised because of his virtuous qualities, which the text states are "trifling and insignificant matters, minor detail of mere moral virtue" (D I 3. See Fuller 2004, 113). The reason for this is that ethical behavior gets the person to heaven, but not to liberation. A Buddha should be praised because his is the only teaching that overcomes all attachment. Indeed, he teaches a doctrine that cannot become an object of attachment. Therefore, it is the only path that overcomes suffering.

Buddhists might be taught that because they do not convert others, it is a more accepting religion. It is a "come and see" (*ehi passiko*. D II 217, D III 5, S I 9, A I 158) religion, one "inviting inspection" (D II 217).<sup>1</sup> However, the idea that Buddhism does not convert people from other religions is simply used to suggest that Buddhism is superior for this reason. There is a circular argument suggesting that because it does not convert people, it is superior, therefore one should convert to Buddhism.

### **Religious diversity in the Pāli canon**

I would now like to consider some key textual passages which contain indications of the early Buddhist attitudes to the religious other. I will use the Pāli canon which can be taken as representative of early Buddhism. The *Mahāparimibbāna-sutta* gives a very clear evaluation of the Buddhist attitude to other religions:

In whatever Dhamma and discipline the Noble Eightfold Path is not found, no ascetic is found of the first, the second, the third, or the fourth grade. But such ascetics can be found, of the first, second, third, and fourth grade in a Dhamma and discipline where the Noble Eightfold Path is found. Here only (or "here indeed")<sup>2</sup> [...] in this Dhamma and discipline the Noble Eightfold Path is found, and in it are to be found ascetics of the first, second, third and fourth grade. Those other schools are devoid of [true] ascetics; but if in this one the monks were to live the life to perfection, the world would not lack for Arahants.

(D II 151)

The reference to four types of ascetic refers to different stages of the Buddhist path. In a sense they are different Buddhist saints. The passage is clear that advanced stages of the religious path can only be achieved by those following the teachings of the Buddha. In other words, you need to be a Buddhist to alleviate suffering. As the noble eightfold path can only be found in Buddhism, Buddhism is the only path to liberation. These points are relatively unambiguous in this text. It could be argued that other religions could include the noble eightfold path as part of their teachings, though the path is very specific and this is unlikely. However, this does not appear to be the point of these passages. The emphasis is on the uniqueness of the teachings of a Buddha, and his ability to know and teach this path. The path originates with the Buddha (Bodhi 2020, 9–10). It is dependent upon the teaching of a Buddha, which has the unique quality of the noble eightfold path. And it is clear from the early texts that the noble eightfold path is only found in the Buddha's teachings:

Bhikkhus, these eight things, developed and cultivated, if not yet risen, do not arise apart from the appearance of a Tathāgata, an Arahant, a Perfectly Enlightened Buddha. What eight? Right-view, right-intention, right-speech, right-action, right-livelihood, right-effort, right-mindfulness and right-concentration.

(SV 14)

As Bodhi suggests, even if we allow that other religions could teach the noble eightfold path, it would still follow that they would also teach that humans are stuck in an endless cycle of suffering, that ignorance and craving are the causes of rebirth, that all actions have consequences and this implies the operation of karma, that there is a type of liberation from the cycle of rebirths, and that the teachings of Buddhism are central to the overcoming of suffering (Bodhi 2020, 10–11). There is, if we follow the teachings of the Pāli canon, only one path for purifying wisdom, and this is the Buddhist path (*Dhammapāda* 274). Finally, the understanding of types of attachment, specifically the attachment to the doctrine of a self, is only located in the teachings of a Buddha (M I 66). For the “goal is one not many” (M I 64). This is very similar to the *Brahmajāla-sutta* (D I 1–46), which I noted above, in which 62 diverse philosophical views are rejected and it is stated that the teachings of the Buddha should be praised because they are the only ones that lead to complete non-attachment (D I 16; Fuller 2004, 112–114). This is the highest teaching, and there are no other teachers who teach a Dharma that is true:

Is there outside here another ascetic or brahmin who teaches a Dhamma so real, true, actual as the Blessed One does? He understands thus: There is no other ascetic or brahmin outside here who teaches a Dhamma so real, true, actual as the Blessed One does.

(SV 229–230)

It is clear in the Pāli canon that, although religious and spiritual development is possible in other religious traditions, final liberation, and specifically the overcoming of suffering, is only possible by following the teachings of a Buddha (Bodhi 2020, 14). To put this in stronger terms, liberation is only open to a Buddhist.

It is also apparent that less specific factors point to the exclusivity of the Buddha's path, such as “unwavering confidence in the Buddha, Dhamma, and Saṅgha” (SV 343). Elsewhere it is stated that a person at an advanced stage of the Buddhist path cannot “acknowledge another teacher” (*aññaṃ satthār*, M III 65).<sup>3</sup> This implies that they cannot accept anyone other than the Buddha as their supreme spiritual guide. Once again, in very simple terms, these sentiments are completely counter to the idea that Buddhism is infinitely inclusivist. One should follow the

teaching of the Buddha, accept him as the only teacher, and be aware that his is the only way to overcome suffering.

Passages can also be found in the Pāli canon which state that not all religious practices are able to accomplish the goal of the Buddhist path. This message is made clear in the *Sakkapañña-sutta* (D II 263–289). I will give this passage in full as it is central to many of the issues in this chapter:

“Sir, do all ascetics and Brahmins teach the same doctrine, practice the same discipline, want the same thing and pursue the same goal?” “No, Ruler of the Gods [the conversation is between the Buddha and Sakka, who rules over one of the Buddhist heavens], they do not.” “But why, sir, do they not do so?” “The world, Ruler of the Gods, is made up of many and various elements. Such being the case, beings adhere to one or other of these various things, and whatever they adhere to they become powerfully addicted to, and declare: ‘This alone is the truth, everything else is false!’ Therefore they do not all teach the same doctrine, practice the same discipline, want the same thing, pursue the same goal.”

“Sir, are all ascetics and Brahmins fully proficient, freed from bonds, perfect in the holy life, have they perfectly reached the goal?” “No, Ruler of the Gods.” “Why is that, sir?” “Only those, Ruler of the Gods, who are liberated by the destruction of craving are fully proficient, freed from the bonds, perfect in the holy life, and have perfectly reached the goal.”

(D II 282–283)

In this passage we learn that there are different religious goals and that not all of them lead to liberation. Also, some of them lead to attachment, which is incredibly detrimental on the Buddhist path. In the *Therīgāthā* (Thig, PTS 146, Verse 240–241) there is a criticism of those who think they can be purified by water (which perhaps suggests Hindu traditions), stating, rather jokingly, that if that were the case then frogs, turtles, water snakes and crocodiles, and other creatures who dwell in water would go to heaven. Even butchers, hunters, thieves, and executioners and anyone who has done evil will also go to heaven if they perform rituals in which they sprinkle water (Thig verse 242). These practices are clearly being ridiculed. If we take this passage at face value it is mocking any religious practices that involve the idea that water can purify negative karma or sins. The Buddhist idea is that only wholesome actions are purifying. The texts are clearly indicating the superiority of Buddhist practices.

Other passages talk of an impure teaching (*dhammo asuddho*) which was devised by those who are stained, which the teachings of the Buddha have supplanted (S I 137). For the teachings of the Buddha are described as “lovely at the beginning, lovely in the middle, lovely at the ending” which will help people grow (Vin I 21). When followers of other religions are converted by the Buddha, the leaders of the other traditions are occasionally said to painfully die, presumably in shame (M I 378–379). Rival Buddhist schools who proposed new scriptures or philosophical positions could be regarded as leading people away from the authentic teachings of the Buddha (Burton 2017, 159–160).

Thich Nhat Hanh, a Vietnamese Buddhist monk who became prominent in the 1960s for his teachings on peace and compassion, uses the rhetoric of pluralism, while really judging other religions according to the central premises of Buddhism. While appearing to offer an inclusivist understanding of religious pluralism, Thich Nhat Hanh’s relationship with the religious other is exclusivist. Buddhist concepts are imposed on other religions in order to evaluate their value. Differences are then overlooked (Burton 2017, 178). The central features of religion are explained in Buddhist terms. For example, the influential 20th century Thai Buddhist monk

and intellectual Buddhādāsa argued that all religions are the same if we understand the similarity to be based on the promotion of non-attachment and selflessness. This attitude displays a bias towards Buddhism (Burton 2017, 175–176). One of the reasons that Buddhism is a superior religion is that it is held to offer the best welfare for society. The refrain repeated several times throughout the *Aggañña-sutta* is that “Dhamma is the best (*seṭṭho*) thing for people, In this life and the next as well.”<sup>4</sup>

### The Buddhist elephant in the room

The story of the blind men and the elephant is often referred to in explaining the tolerance of Buddhism. In the popular understanding of this story, several blind men approach an elephant and describe their understanding of it based upon the part they are touching, whether an ear, leg, tail, or back. This situation is compared to different religions describing the truth. It must be noted that the popular telling of this story resembles the Jain notion of “manypointedness” (*anekāntavāda*) rather than its meaning in Buddhist texts. The Jain notion has been termed “intellectual *ahimsā*” for its promotion of a well-intentioned, but likely distorted, idea of Indian religious tolerance (Dundas 2002, 232–233).

The Buddhist telling of the blind men and the elephant is found in the *Paṭhamanānāṭṭhiya-sutta* in the *Udāna* (Ud 66–69). A number of blind men, having described the nature of an elephant after they have touched part of it, are then told that their understanding of an elephant is not correct. This causes them to fight each other. This is described as analogous to different religious ascetics, disputing about the nature of reality:

Even so, bhikkhus, those wanderers of other sects [...] are blind, unseeing. They do not know what is beneficial, they do not know what is harmful. They do not know what is Dhamma, they do not know what is not Dhamma. Not knowing what is beneficial and what is harmful, not knowing what is Dhamma and what is not Dhamma, they are quarrelsome saying: “Dhamma is like this Dhamma is like that!”

(Ud 69. Adapted from Ireland 1997, 87–88)

For Buddhism, a key factor of correct belief (right-view) is to know what is wholesome and unwholesome. This correct attitude is one free from attachment. The Buddhist text, the *Udāna*, clearly states that the problem with adhering to specific truth claims is that it causes quarrels and disputes, such that “people who see only one side of things engage in quarrels and disputes” (Ud 69).

The Buddhist elephant in the room is the unavoidable conclusion that Buddhism is the only true religion, according to the Buddhist understanding of itself compared to the religious other. This elephant causes problems for a relativistic, pluralistic understanding of Buddhism. As I have already suggested, Buddhists argue that their tradition is superior to others, and that the insights of the Buddha are unique.<sup>5</sup>

### Sitagu Sayadaw, justifiable evils, and the religious other

I would now like to consider recent events in Myanmar to see how they might be indicative of some of the ideas I have been discussing. Sitagu Sayadaw is one of the most respected religious leaders in Myanmar. He is very well known for his teachings and for his philanthropic work. He has considerable influence. It therefore surprised many in his native Myanmar and worldwide when he gave a sermon with a particularly striking message. The sermon appeared to suggest

that the killing of those who are not Buddhist could be justified on the grounds that they were not complete humans, or indeed humans at all.<sup>6</sup> In the context of the present discussion, we might suggest that, though extreme, the position of Sitagu Sayadaw reflects wider themes in the history of the Buddhist acceptance of the religious other. I am not suggesting that followers of other religions were understood as less than human, but that the sense of the nobility and uniqueness of the Buddhist path is reflected in this episode.

There has been much online discussion about the passage. In its extreme form there is the idea that Sitagu Sayadaw argued that non-Buddhists are less than human, and, therefore, it is permissible to cause them harm. How could such a revered teacher like Sitagu Sayadaw preach such a message? Particularly troubling was that the sermon was given to a group of army officers likely to be involved in the conflict against Muslim Rohingyas. The interpretation could be that this was a Buddhist justification for the killing of Rohingyas. There are clearly wider contexts to the sermon. Buddhism in Myanmar has suffered from an extreme form of Buddhist nationalism for a number of years. Buddhist groups such as the “Organization for the protection of Race and Religion” (Burmese: *amyo barthar thathanar*), often known by the Burmese acronym MaBaTha, has offered a rhetoric of chauvinistic Buddhism. Prominent Buddhist monks like Ashin Wirathu have also figured in creating an intolerant religious landscape in which other religions are often the target of violence and discrimination. In Sri Lanka there is also an overt form of Buddhist nationalism. This is most prominent in the Buddhist nationalist movement, the *Bodu Bala Sena* or “Buddhist Power Force.” Prominent members like Venerable Galagoda Aththe Gnanasara campaign on an agenda of protecting Buddhism against a perceived threat from other religious faiths (Schonthal and Walton, 2016).

The sermon was delivered on October 30, 2017 to army officers at the Bayintnaung garrison and military training school in Kayin, Myanmar. In reflecting on the relationship between the actions of the Burmese military and the consequences of a soldier’s duty to protect the Myanmar nation, Sitagu Sayadaw used the 5th century CE Sri Lankan chronicle, the *Mahāvamsa*. He also chose to quote from a notorious passage which forms part of the 25th chapter of the *Mahāvamsa*, “The Victory of Dutṭhagāmaṇī.” The passage in question appears to go against many of the key ideas (assumed) of Buddhism. One possible way to interpret it is simply to suggest that “Buddhists are as capable of hypocrisy, double standards, and special pleading as anyone” (Gethin 2007, 63).

In the context of our consideration of tolerance I would suggest that the primary intention of the Dutṭhagāmaṇī passage is not to justify the killing of living beings who are not Buddhist. The point of the passage, however much we might disagree with its logic, is the idea that actions performed with the idea of protecting and defending Buddhism, or “bringing glory to the doctrine of the Buddha” (*Mahāvamsa*: XXV: 111) can override more accepted ethical norms, such as the precept of not killing living beings. Protecting the Dhamma circumvents the usual operation of karma. All actions have consequences, but the effects of these actions can be lessened if the motivation for them is a noble one. More than this, this attitude shapes Buddhist attitudes to pluralism, tolerance, and the Buddhist acceptance of other faiths.

In case I am misunderstood I would like to state clearly that the use of the passage was unwise in the extreme by the revered Sayadaw. It is also a passage which sits very uneasily with mainstream Buddhist thinking on the use of violence. However, it can be used by Buddhists to describe how “unwholesome actions” (B. *arkhutho*. P. *akusala-kamma*) can be used to defend and preserve Buddhism. This “protectionist Buddhism” (Frydenlund 2013) offers an insight into ways in which Buddhists react to other religious traditions, which is in considerable tension to the tolerant attitudes which are thought to have been prevalent throughout Buddhist history and which I discussed above. My suggestion is that it shows how localized forms of Buddhism,



ones with ethnic and nationalistic characteristics, respond to the religious other in ways radically different to the more universalistic forms of Buddhism which have become popular in recent decades. Of course, it also interrogates the idea that inclusivist tolerance really is the default position of Buddhism.

I would also suggest that in the context of religious pluralism that the passage, and the use of it by Sitagu Sayadaw, can be understood in a different manner. The *Mahāvamsa* passage suggests a deep-seated message of religious and cultural differences between Buddhism and other religious traditions. This is clearly not a text supportive of relativistic and indifferent tolerance but one emphasizing difference, otherness, and a sense of a Buddhist identity and the supremacy of Buddhism.

In a famous episode, Duṭṭhagāmaṇī, whose reign lasted from 161–137 BCE, having waged a long and bloody war in which millions were killed, suffers from extreme unease and remorse. Through their supernatural powers a group of eight Arahants become aware of this remorse and travel to Duṭṭhagāmaṇī. Using their supernatural powers, they travel through the air from the Island of Piyangudipa, to comfort him. However, Duṭṭhagāmaṇī tells the Arahants, “How shall there be any comfort for me, O venerable sirs, since by me was caused the slaughter of a great host numbering millions?” (*Mahāvamsa* XXV: 108). He is then famously advised:

From this deed arises no hindrance in thy way to heaven. Only one and a half human beings have been slain here by thee, O lord of men. The one had come unto the (three) refuges, the other had taken on himself the five precepts. Unbelievers [those with “wrong-views,” *micchā-ditṭhi*] and men of evil life were the rest, not more to be esteemed than beasts. But as for thee, thou wilt bring glory to the doctrine of the Buddha in manifold ways; therefore cast away care from thy heart, O ruler of men!  
(*Mahāvamsa* XXV: 109–111)

This passage appears to absolve the consequences of the military killing other living beings, and even to justify these acts. This is the manner in which it was quoted by Sitagu Sayadaw. The episode is an analysis of Duṭṭhagāmaṇī’s remorse. He has remorse because he is responsible for the deaths of millions of people. He considers that he has performed very destructive “unwholesome actions.” The comforting words of the Arahants explain why these actions do not have the consequences that we might expect. The Arahants analysis is based upon the idea that the “deeds,” the “actions” (*karma/kamma*), the killing of millions of “human beings” (*manussa*) has no negative consequences because of the status of those killed. The Arahants, through their “higher knowledge” (*abhiññā*) make a judgement on the ontological and spiritual nature of those defeated in the battle. They are “unbelievers” in Wilhelm Geiger’s translation, more correctly they have “wrong-views” (*micchā-ditṭhi*). They are “men of evil life” (*dussilā*), they do not practice ethical conduct. They are, in the logic of the *Mahāvamsa*, not “human beings” but “like beasts” (*pasusamā*).

How then does the *Mahāvamsa* describe a “human being”? A human is one who has taken refuge. This is a full human. They have taken refuge in the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha. This is a standard marker of Buddhist identity and many Buddhist ceremonies begin with the act of taking refuge. Secondly, to be human in the context of the Arahants explanation is to have practiced the “five precepts” (*pañcasīla*). These are the five ethical practices of a layperson, to refrain from killing, lying, stealing, sexual misconduct, or intoxicants that cause confusion. This is half of a person in the advice of the Arahants.

The point is that the glory brought to the religion of the Buddha appears to override other more natural ideas of what is right and wrong. Duṭṭhagāmaṇī brings “glory to the doctrine of the

Buddha” (*bahudhā buddhasāsana*). This is a theme found earlier in this chapter of the *Mahāvamsa*, in which a vitriolic blend of preserving Buddhism and using violence in its defense is clear, “not for the joy of sovereignty is this toil of mine, my striving (has been) ever to establish the doctrine of the *Sambuddha*” (a perfectly awakened Buddha). The protection of Buddhism, of the *sāsana*, is key in the recent Burmese discourse about the relationship of Buddhism and national identity. The protection of Buddhism is both a rallying call of Burmese Buddhist nationalists, and a key element in what it means to be Burmese.

It would clearly be wrong to assume that this is a general appraisal of the nature of a person in Buddhism. The Arahants have the specific task of consoling Duṭṭhagāmaṇī. To use this as a justification for violence would surely be to misuse the text. However, I do think that in this passage we do get an unusual glimpse into ideas that shape some Buddhists’ rejection or devaluing of the religious other. It would be good if Buddhists were always tolerant, but, as has been argued, tolerance can be an uneasy ally of multi-faith dialogue. This is not to suggest that this episode is a prevailing attitude, but it might offer an understanding of a more realistic and historically important idea of Buddhist attitudes to other religions, rather than the unrealistic narrative of limitless tolerance.

What was Sitagu Sayadaw doing in using this infamous passage? In the sermon he appears to be aware of the sensitivity of the message he is preaching. He repeatedly suggests that it is not he who is teaching in this way. “The Arahants said it.” At stake in many of the countries in which a chauvinistic form of Buddhism is gaining followers is the question of Buddhist and national identity. In Myanmar this identity is being polarized around ideas of “nation, language, and religion” (*amyo-barthar-tharthanar*). There is the idea that Buddhism is under threat and needs to be protected. The threat is usually thought to be from a growing Muslim population. The *Mahāvamsa* passage can be used to suggest the idea that Buddhism stands in opposition to other religious traditions.

It might then not come as a surprise that Sitagu Sayadaw used the *Mahāvamsa* and the story of Duṭṭhagāmaṇī in the way that he did. Much of the outrage caused by its use is justified. Its message contradicts many of the fundamental principles of Buddhism. Its use might provoke the Burmese Buddhist community to reflect upon how distant the nationalistic Buddhism of modern Myanmar is from the cherished ideals of a more familiar Burmese Buddhism based upon compassion and loving-kindness.

## Conclusion

I have argued that Buddhism has always regarded itself as the highest religious tradition. It has also consistently held that its path to liberation is unique. There are clear indications in important parts of the textual tradition which stress this uniqueness, that the Buddhist idea of truth is more precise and in line with reality as opposed to that offered by other religions. The contrast between Canonical Buddhism and faiths like Christianity and Islam is less stark than is popularly understood in the sense that each believes that it has a greater understanding of the ultimate truth than other religions do. In considering the Buddhist attitudes to the religious other I have questioned the centrality of an unqualified, inclusivist tolerance. I have suggested that a radically relativistic notion of tolerance has often been superimposed upon Buddhist doctrinal history as a controlling principle, but this is unrealistic. While it is not absent, it is certainly not the default position of Buddhism.

Buddhism can be exclusivist. Indeed, I am suggesting that, canonically, it is exclusivist. I am also arguing that its exclusivism is (or at least, can be) entirely consistent with covenantal pluralism. It is consistent with covenantal pluralism because it makes strong claims that it has the most accurate understanding of ultimate reality. This is its starting point, and also one where true dialogue begins. Problems arise from this exclusivism if there is a public privileging of Buddhism.

We should not assume that those who make such claims are extremist, as this need not be the case. It is true that exclusivism can give rise to extremism, and this extremism is often violent in nature. However, we should not be worried by the idea that Buddhism is exclusivist in nature—it is not necessarily a dangerous thing. Exclusivists are not bad people or unethical people if, as I said, they do not act on their faithful exclusivism by defending Buddhism with political exclusivism. This could be the case with some of the Buddhist groups I have discussed. Exclusivism could lead to the persecution of the religious other, of those holding different worldviews. However, Buddhist exclusivism might also be the location where an honest exchange of ideas is possible, and a way to counter extremism. For it could be argued that the only way extremism can be countered is by understanding and respecting the differences between different religions and alternative worldviews.

Based upon these ideas there needs to be an acceptance of the differences and not just the similarities between religions. To constantly assume, or indeed insist on, similarities is a false enterprise when Buddhism clearly asserts its uniqueness. A central focus of covenantal pluralism is to respectfully acknowledge differences to allow for honest dialogue between religions. Although the 2017 example of Sitagu Sayadaw’s message is extreme, I would suggest that the reason for it is to highlight the radical difference between Buddhists and non-Buddhists. Its point is to emphasize that the Buddhist path is considered superior and unique. Because of this it should be preserved and protected. Until we understand differences, and question simplistic rhetoric of tolerance, a worthwhile dialogue between Buddhists and the religious other is not possible.

As I suggested at the beginning of this chapter, Buddhism does have teachings at its disposal that can contribute to a non-relativistic pluralism, to covenantal pluralism. The teachings of compassion and loving-kindness are based upon the idea that they are integrated into the idea of right-view. Right-view is a mental attitude which is completely free from craving and attachment. It does not counter the validity of different religious truth claims. However, it teaches that, in order to counter conflict, the mental attitude of vigorously defending individual positions should be understood as a personal and social hindrance. In this sense, Buddhism can emerge with a vigorous respect for the religious other, which allows them to voice their uniqueness, while also upholding its own traditional individual perspective on truth and liberation.

### Buddhist scriptures cited<sup>7</sup>

A	Aṅguttara-nikāya
D	Dīgha-nikāya
M	Majjhima-nikāya
S	Saṃyutta-nikāya
Vin	Vinayaṭṭhaka

### Notes

- 1 The following examples make these ideas clear: “This Dhamma is directly visible, immediate, inviting one to come and see, applicable, to be personally experienced by the wise.” S I 9; “The directly visible Dhamma, the directly visible Dhamma.” “In what way, Venerable sir, is the Dhamma directly visible, immediate, inviting one to come and see, applicable, to be personally experienced by the wise?” S IV 41; “The Dhamma is well expounded by the Blessed One, directly visible, immediate, inviting one to come and see, applicable, to be personally experienced by the wise.” SV 343.
- 2 See Bodhi (2020: 8) where there is a discussion of this term in its Pāli form. Clearly this phrase is important. However, the wider implication of this passage is not disputed.

- 3 In the language of the Pāli canon, the person at an advanced stage of the Buddhist paths is the individual who is “accomplished in view” (*diṭṭhisampanna*) a designation for someone who has understood right-view (*sammā-diṭṭhi*) which is, of course a factor of the noble eightfold path. I discuss some of these passages elsewhere (Fuller 2017, 167–168). For the idea of *diṭṭhisampanna* see Fuller 2004, 93–96.
- 4 D III 84: *Dhammo hi seṭṭho jane tasmim diṭṭhe ceva dhamme abhisamparāyeca.*
- 5 Bodhi (2020) and Burton (2017) reach similar conclusions as those outlined in this paragraph.
- 6 This section includes material adapted in part from Fuller 2017.
- 7 Translations of Pāli texts are from the editions published by the Pāli Text Society, Oxford, UK.

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# 9

## ISOMORPHISM, SYNCRETISM, AND POLY-ONTOLOGICAL DYNAMICS

### The implications of Chinese religion for covenantal pluralism

*David A. Palmer*

Religious pluralism is generally seen as a value to be cherished, promoted, and even celebrated, at least in liberal societies and cultural circles; and its acceptance as a global norm is reflected in the fact that few would dare to openly deny it, even when they adhere to effectively anti-pluralist or intolerant ideologies. However, conventional understandings of pluralism inadvertently exclude widespread forms of religious/worldview diversity from the pluralistic field. This essay will draw on the pluralistic structures of Chinese religion to propose a critical re-examination of conventional Western-derived norms and values of religious pluralism.

I use the Chinese cases examined in this essay to build on the notion of “poly-ontology,” elaborated by Janet Macintosh in her anthropological study of religion among the Swahili and Giriama communities of coastal East Africa (Macintosh 2009; 2019).<sup>1</sup> Here, I use this model to examine how individuals, groups, and society concurrently act and think within multiple, incommensurable ontologies, with the choice of identifying with one or many of them, in any given context of multiple allegiances. This model will be contrasted to both the “isomorphic” nature of conventional religious pluralism (particularly in the West), which advocates for mutual appreciation between bounded identities and affiliations, and to conceptions of syncretism and hybridity that presuppose the erasing of boundaries and the permanent dilution of difference.

Poly-ontological pluralism raises questions for the vision of “covenantal pluralism.” In Chapter 2 of this *Handbook*, Stewart, Seiple, and Hoover describe the concept as follows:

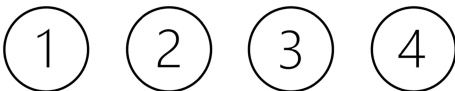
A world of covenantal pluralism is characterized both by a constitutional order of equal rights and responsibilities and by a culture of reciprocal commitment to engaging, respecting, and protecting the other—albeit without necessarily conceding equal veracity or moral equivalence to the beliefs and behaviors of others. The envisioned end-state is neither a thin-soup ecumenism nor vague syncretism, but rather a positive, practical, non-relativistic pluralism. It is a paradigm of civic fairness and human solidarity, a covenant of global neighborliness that is intended to bend but not break under the pressure of diversity.

In contrast to most Western-based models of religious pluralism, the poly-ontological model acknowledges deeper mutual engagements and interpenetrations between traditions, simultaneous modalities of engagement, and multiple forms of religious identification and authority. At the same time, unlike the superficial tolerance, syncretism, and relativism that Stewart, Seiple, and Hoover criticize as characteristic of many Western discourses of pluralism, the poly-ontological model maintains distinctions between ontological systems; pragmatically affirms the relative superiority of specific ontologies for specific purposes; and involves lived engagement and incorporation of multiple ontologies while allowing for identification with only one of them. Poly-ontology has important implications for the application of covenantal pluralism, which aims to develop pluralistic norms that are distinct from conventional Western models of religious pluralism. The philosophy of covenantal pluralism represents a normative/aspirational paradigm for living with and engaging deep diversity. The intent is to be inclusive of and accessible, relevant, and attractive to people of non-Western as well as Western religions/worldviews.

While the poly-ontological model outlined here sounds radically different from conventional discourses of pluralism and hybridity, I would argue that it corresponds to the way most people actually live around the world: To a degree we are all, even if only implicitly, poly-ontologists. Thus, covenantal pluralism should take care to ensure that, even as it rightly criticizes shallow Western relativism, it avoids two potential problems. Namely, it should neither (a) inadvertently suggest a casual equivalence between this relativism and the poly-ontological models common in China and other Asian contexts, nor (b) inadvertently exacerbate isomorphic pluralism by under-emphasizing the necessity—and complexity—of including poly-ontological worldviews in its conceptualization of robust pluralism, especially when it comes to issues of freedom of religion or belief and equal treatment of religions/worldviews.

### **Isomorphism in pluralism**

I call the conventional model of pluralism “isomorphic” because it assumes a plurality of entities sharing the same form but differing in content (see Figure 9.1). Modern conceptions and practices of pluralism emerged in the aftermath of the European wars of religion, when different Christian churches and sects, in Europe and America, learned to reconcile exclusivist theological doctrines with a social tolerance that was enshrined in emerging discourses on the right to freedom of religion (Hutchison 2003; Rouméas 2015). The model was one of a plurality of different churches that shared common basic elements of dogma and had comparable practices and institutional structures, so that the plurality of sects could still recognize each other as “churches.” During and after the Enlightenment, Judaism was also belatedly included within the emerging religious pluralism. With the increasing exposure to the beliefs and practices of people in other parts of the world, other traditions were gradually incorporated into the pluralist model, both as “world religions” comparable to Christianity, and as communities enjoying the same legal rights and freedoms as the Christian churches (Masuzawa 2005). Academic discourses, social values, and legal norms of religious pluralism, however, assumed that non-Western “religions” were isomorphic to the Churches, i.e., defining themselves according to a specific dogmatic credo, worshiping a single supreme deity, venerating a single holy Book, possessing a hierarchical ecclesiastical structure, a chronological history beginning



*Figure 9.1* Isomorphic pluralism.

with one or several founding figures, standardized rituals, and a membership of lay believers with exclusive membership and identification with a single church/religion. These churches or religions are “undifferentiated units” in the sense that they are considered to be clearly demarcated from other churches or religions (or non-religion). Meanwhile, internal differences are considered to be sufficiently minor that they do not affect the essential identity of the religion in question, and are never conceived as being as consequential as the purported differences between different religions. These churches and religions are self-contained, in that they already possess all the necessary components of the normative model of religion: Exchanges or mutual borrowings with other religions are not considered to be legitimate—to the extent that such exchanges or borrowings take place, they are denied or downplayed (Duara 2014).

Under a simplistic isomorphic pluralism, being recognizably a “church” or a “religion” according to the normative model is a precondition for the full enjoyment of the appreciation and rights entailed by conventional pluralistic values. In practice, what this means is that, in each of the religiously pluralistic countries of the West, the dominant or “majority” Christian Church is treated as a conceptually undifferentiated normative ideal, and is surrounded by “minority” religions which are provided with a space to perform different versions of the normative ideal (see Figure 9.2). Non-Christian immigrant religious communities and networks, if they wish to become members of the pluralistic religious field, need to format themselves as churches or as church-like in their public presentation, institutional forms, and legal documents.<sup>2</sup> These groups face pressure in the direction of isomorphism, in which the minority groups need to adopt the form of the majority institution, while stressing the difference in their content. For example, the “Taoist Church of Italy” (daoitaly.org), in its efforts to acquire a legitimate space and legal registration within the Italian pluralistic religious field, has strongly emphasized its adoption of “ecclesiastical” Daoist institutions that are comparable to those of the Roman Catholic Church. This strategy is in conscious opposition to the loose health-based networks and entrepreneurial spirituality that are widespread in Daoism in China and in the West, which lack the institutional forms and modes of authoritative religious representation that are required to be recognized within the legal and social parameters of the religious field defined by the historically Christian church-based normative model.

Isomorphism is not a uniquely Western or Christian phenomenon: Isomorphic norms define the regulation of religious plurality in many Islamic countries, and local acculturation has seen some Christian or Muslim institutions adopt local religious forms in various parts of Africa and Asia.

Isomorphic pluralism can be compared to national flags, in which the flag as an object, its function, and its shape are unquestioned, and diversity exists as distinct colors and patterns on a

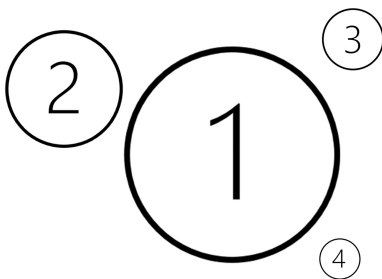


Figure 9.2 Isomorphic majority and minority units.

standardized template. Isomorphic pluralism is deeply consequential: People become highly and exclusively attached to one particular flag which is isomorphic to the other flags, to which other people are highly and exclusively attached. Under the ideal conditions of this sort of pluralism, people tolerate, appreciate, and even celebrate the assorted colors and motifs of the national flags and athletes' uniforms of different countries, as in the spirit of the Olympic Games. But when the pluralistic framework is weakened or under threat, what remains is isolated and mutually antagonistic groups each seeking security around their own self-contained flag. Often what remains is merely the presence of diversity, not meaningful engagement of diversity.

Isomorphic pluralism has had profound effects on non-Western religious traditions, which have often had to completely reinvent themselves in order to find a place within the pluralistic religious field of mutually recognizing religions. For example, in China, after the modern notion of "religion" was imported from the West, local traditions felt that they had to reformat themselves along the lines of what a religion was expected to be (Goossaert and Palmer 2011). Thus in the early 20th century, the *rujiao* tradition, known in English as Confucianism, was compelled to format itself as either a secular Confucian philosophy (within the isomorphic intellectual pluralism of the secular Western academy), or as a church, the *Kongjiao* or "Religion of Confucius," which modeled itself on the Christian church, with Sunday mass, a centralized hierarchical organization, a congregational membership, and the aim of being enshrined as China's state religion, comparable to the established churches of Europe (Sun 2013). A growing body of scholarship has shown how the modern forms and identities of what are now known as the religions of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Shintoism have been deeply shaped by intense interactions with Christian institutions, Western intellectual discourses, and colonial and post-colonial regimes (van der Veer 2014; McMahan 2008; Storm 2012). This process often led them to become isomorphically recognizable as "religions" comparable to other "religions" within the diverse religious fields of a given country. On the other hand, traditions that were unable to find a place within the isomorphic field are not even known as religion and do not enjoy the even limited rights of religious freedom that are enshrined in the constitutions of most states. In Asia, this includes most of Chinese religion, much of "folk" or "popular" religion in most countries—including what is often called "animism" in Southeast Asia, and aboriginal and Indigenous religions. These traditions, lacking a distinctive religious identity and church-style institutions and representatives, often cannot find recognition within the conventional framework of isomorphic pluralism.

### **The problem with syncretism**

The obvious contrasting concept in academic theories is perhaps the notion of "syncretism" and the many substitutes that have floated around in recent decades, such as hybridity and Creolity (Hannerz 1987; Mary 1999; Ménil 2009; Boespflug 2006). Of course, such phenomena are widespread. But the weakness of theories of hybridity or syncretism is that they tend to stress the mixing together of diverse cultural elements, but, generally speaking, do not ask whether there is any structure or logic to the way in which the elements are mixed, and to the preservation, or not, of the elements that come into the mixing.

Chinese religion is usually understood as highly syncretistic. Under this moniker, it is commonly held that "anything goes" in Chinese religion, and that anything can be mixed. At the same time, this notion of unrestrained mixing also carries with it the idea that there is nothing substantial to syncretistic combinations, which are nothing but a mixture of elements from elsewhere. The logic of their mixing is of no interest. Chinese religion is thus portrayed as composed of the "Three Teachings" of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism, plus an undefined



“popular religion” or “folk religion” that is commonly described as a syncretistic mixture of the three teachings (Ching 1993; see also Schmidt-Leukel and Gentz 2013 for a more in-depth treatment of religious diversity in China).

Syncretistic religion poses a challenge to models of religious pluralism based on mutual respect between fully differentiated religions with distinct identities. On the one hand, by combining the different traditions, the syncretist claims to have solved the problem of pluralism by being unconcerned with religious differences. On the other hand, the syncretist, by selectively appropriating and reinterpreting elements from different traditions, challenges the authority of the authoritative representatives of the orthodox, differentiated traditions.

But how is a “dialogue” possible with an amorphous entity whose identity is its lack of clear identity, structure, or leadership? How are efforts to promote freedom of religion or belief and equal treatment of religions/worldviews to account for these amorphous realities? This requires us to move beyond simplistic concepts of syncretism. In Chinese religion, there is often a logic to the way things are combined. Unpacking this logic gives us new insights into the modalities of pluralistic interactions.

### **Poly-ontological assemblages**

Isomorphic pluralism exists between comparable, internally undifferentiated units. Here, I would like to propose the notion of poly-ontological assemblages—networks and assemblages of entities that are based on different ontologies. When I use the term “ontology,” I draw on some of the recent developments in anthropological theory (Descola 2013; Holbraad and Pedersen 2017). The term often causes confusion because we tend to think of ontology as it is understood in the Western academic tradition, which has a very specific tradition of discourse on the nature of “being,” that is absent in many other cultures and philosophical traditions, such as China’s (Feuchtwang 2014). But here I am not using ontology in that restricted sense. I refer to ontology in its general sense, which is a discourse on the nature and structure of reality: What is reality, and what are the relationships between the basic components of reality? In this anthropological understanding of ontology, the Greek and Western discourse on the “nature of being” is only one of myriad discourses on what the world is made of, that exist in diverse cultures and religions.

Ontology can be understood at two levels. One is in an abstract conceptual sense, referring to how the basic components of the cosmos and their relationships are conceptualized and categorized, and made into objects of discourse. But ontology also exists in a *pragmatic* sense, meaning the *implicit categories* that govern peoples’ *actions* in their relationships with other humans and with non-human objects and entities. This refers to the real, lived relationships within which people are embedded, and within which they perceive and act in the world.

Conceptual and pragmatic ontologies are in a dialectical relationship with each other. For example, in Chinese medicine, certain forms of training, practices, and dispositions of the body may lead the practitioner to experience the world in a certain way, which are conducive to being described and conceptualized in Chinese ontological categories (Farquhar 1994; Kuriyama 1999). These categories have, in turn, historically shaped the development of these traditions of training the dispositions of the body. Thus, there is a reciprocal relationship of mutual influence and production between conceptual and pragmatic ontologies, even if that relationship is not an organic and fully integrated one: It’s possible to be engaging in a pragmatic ontology without knowing about an associated conceptual ontology, and it’s possible to discourse on a conceptual ontology without engaging it in a pragmatic way. For example, to practice *taijiquan* is to transform one’s body into an expression and experience of Chinese cosmology. However, it is not

necessary to have any intellectual knowledge of this cosmology to do so. Conversely, Daoist cosmology is rooted in a specific experience of the body. Many people have intellectual knowledge of Daoist philosophy, without having ever practiced or experienced it in an embodied manner.

The question of poly-ontological dynamics is to understand what happens when multiple distinct ontologies interact and interpenetrate. Is there a logic to the interpenetration? In the following sections, I will use several examples from Chinese cosmology and religion to explore different types of poly-ontological dynamics.

In my discussion, I will refer to entities such as “Western Medicine,” “Traditional Chinese Medicine,” “Confucianism,” “Daoism,” and “Buddhism.” One might object that this approach essentializes these traditions, ascribing to them an unchanging reality corresponding to their ontologies. Thus I should clarify that when I speak of “Confucianism,” “Daoism,” and so on, I refer to these traditions as they are named in the specific contexts that I am discussing. The purpose is not to name and identify an eternal and unchanging ontology for each of these traditions; rather, I aim to consider the different ontologies that interact in specific contexts—localized networks and assemblages that produce certain forms of knowledge and practice which, in spite of their diversity, are nonetheless based on certain foundational assumptions about reality. Whether what is identified as “Buddhism” in one context shares the same conceptual and pragmatic ontologies as what is identified as “Buddhist” in a different context, is a question for empirical research and comparison.

On the other hand, I do not subscribe to a postmodern view that “Daoism,” “Buddhism,” and so on are nothing more than discursive formations, products of socio-political forces. The different ontologies I discuss here involve practices and pragmatic orientations that create certain kinds of experiences, embodied dispositions and relationships, that lead actors to look at the world in a certain way. These both inform and are guided by the conceptual ontologies associated with the practices. They are more than simple identity claims or discursive productions.

### **Poly-ontological dynamics: The case of Chinese and Western medicine**

The first example, which is widespread in Chinese societies, is the way in which people simultaneously use Western medicine and traditional Chinese medicine. Western medicine (WM) and traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) are two systems of knowledge that have completely different ontological foundations—different understandings of the body, of the relationships between components of the body, between the body and external forces and substances. These are radically different and incommensurable ontologies. Some researchers have tried to combine Chinese and Western medicine, and different people have produced their own idiosyncratic approaches and philosophies that combine the two.<sup>3</sup> But, overall, there has been no widely accepted theoretical combination of TCM and WM.

Notwithstanding that, the same person can go to a clinic of Western medicine and pragmatically engage with his body in a relationship with the doctor, with the medical instruments, with fluids and substances, and with a certain social system of knowledge and understanding of the body, and thus become a part of the ontology of WM in both pragmatic and conceptual senses—and then the next day or a week later, go to the Chinese doctor, or be practicing *taiji-quan* or *qigong*, and enter and engage with a completely different ontology, becoming part of a different system.

If you see a doctor and buy a certain type of medicine, then you become part of that medical system—you contribute to the reproduction of the system. Your body becomes part of the system, part of the chain of relationships that connects your body and your self to the substances you will be consuming, to the doctor, to the medical and training institutions, to the manufac-

ture and processing of the medicines, etc. By going to a pharmacy and collecting a prescription for penicillin, for example, you become part of a specific medical system that is based on certain ontological assumptions about reality, and which is generating all kinds of knowledge, practices, technologies, and so on.

It's quite common in pharmacies in China to find Western and Chinese medicines at opposite counters in the same shop. On one side, you find the drawers of Chinese herbs, bark, dried insects, and so on that constitute the Chinese material medica. As soon as you take that kind of medicine, you become part of a whole medical system that has been producing and processing these materials for thousands of years based on a body of knowledge that determines the selection of these materials, the combination of these materials, drawing on certain ontological assumptions and classifications about the basic composition of reality, the world, and the body. By buying them, cooking them, and ingesting them in a certain way, you bring your body into this ontology. So if you go one day to the drugstore and buy penicillin on one side of the shop, and also get a TCM prescription and buy other substances on the other side of the shop, and you take both the penicillin and boil the herbs three days a week, you are engaged in a poly-ontological process. Note that the person who is consuming both types of medicine may be completely ignorant of the theories of both medical systems. "Belief" need not come into the picture at all. The ontological engagement is pragmatic. But this does not make it insignificant: The process leads to very real transformations of the body, and to the growth of very real and powerful revenue streams, institutions, industries, regulatory processes, and training systems devoted to both WM and TCM.

It is thus quite possible to either simultaneously or consecutively live in radically incommensurable ontologies, and it's not a practical problem. This is not a syncretism, and it's not hybridity. TCM and WM have their own logic, their own coherence, and their own history. They do influence and borrow from each other—but this is not hybridity or syncretism as they do not merge with each other. Chinese actors operate within a poly-ontological field, and Chinese medical pluralism is poly-ontological.

What is a discussion of different types of medicine doing in a chapter on religious pluralism? The exclusion of medicine from "religious pluralism" reflects the isomorphic norms of conventional pluralism: Only religions that are isomorphic to the normative form of religion (which does not include physical healing methods as one of its practices) will be invited to the pluralistic table. Going one step further, Chinese medicine, whose ontology is based on apparently metaphysical forces, does pose problems for some Christians. The ontology of Chinese medicine is incommensurable with that of Christianity. Incommensurability may or may not mean opposition or contradiction, and different Christians have different views on this question. Christians who engage in Chinese medicine are taking part in a poly-ontological process, as I have described above. In fact, to an extent this is also the case when they engage in Western medicine, which makes no reference to a creator God or to metaphysical realities (Brownutt, n.d.).

### Ritual tradition in Huanghua

My second example is from a field site where I have done anthropological research on rituals in the northern Guangdong province. In this ritual tradition, there is a division between two types of ritual, which can be found throughout south China. One is called the civil (*wen*), and the other is called the martial (*wu*). At large communal *jiao* rituals, similar to many other ritual traditions in south China, there are thus two ritual spaces, the "civil altar" (*wentan*) and the "martial altar" (*wutan*) (Lagerwey 2010, 80).

The ritual space is divided according to Chinese cosmological principles. The civil altar is also called the upper altar, and is associated with universality. In this particular field site, the priests claim

a Buddhist identity, and they are more senior than the priests of the martial altar. The three main deities at the altar are the Three Jewels of Buddhism. This altar associates notions of universality, male gender, seniority, texts, and scripture recitation. It's considered to be very proper, serious, and solemn. In the rituals of the civil altar, the Buddha is treated as an emperor whose authority extends over the divine offices of a celestial bureaucracy governing a hierarchical cosmos. The Buddha, by his civil authority, can issue edicts to save the souls of the deceased imprisoned in hell.

But the other altar, the martial, is identified as Daoist. This altar is associated with locality. In contrast to the Three Jewels of Buddhism on the side of the civil altar, on the martial altar are three deified female magicians, known as the Three Dames (*sannai*), as well as all the local gods of the local temple. It is also associated with the female gender—the priests at this altar are male, but they cross-dress as female during most parts of the ritual. To execute ritual actions, the ritual experts invoke the power of the Three Dames to command spirit troops to defend the community's territory marked by the five directions (East, South, West, North, Centre) and capture life-bearing spirits that guarantee the fertility of the community. This tradition is practiced by junior priests, before they progress to the civil altar. So this altar is female, it's considered to be junior, and the actions revolve around twisting and turning movements of the body, and exorcism and blood sacrifice. The participants at this altar are considered to be "evil" or "crooked" (*xie*) compared to the civil altar. The martial altar is also comical, in contrast to the dreary solemnity of the civil altar. At the martial altar, all night long the cross-dressing priests do a kind of crosstalk comedy, with plenty of lewd jokes, that the locals enjoy attending.

In this ritual we thus find the combination of two traditions, one that self-identifies as Buddhist and the other as Daoist. The same group of priests, in fact, know how to do both types of liturgy. They put on a Buddha hat to do the civil altar rites, but they can switch and dress up as women to do the Daoist rites of the martial altar. Priests, in their apprenticeship, begin by learning how to perform the Daoist rites, and later progress to the Buddhist ones.

This is a poly-ontological combination, which is not a random mixing of Buddhism and Daoism, or a hybrid combination of the two. There are two very distinct identities that are conjoined into a meaningful structure. At the conceptual level, the Buddhist and Daoist ontologies are radically different, involving completely different beings and cosmic geographies. For instance, the Buddhist ontology is based on a soteriology of rescuing the ghosts of the dead from the prisons of hell, while the Daoist ontology is based on waging warfare to protect the community from attacks by demons from afar (see Table 9.1). The two ontologies are not merged, nor are they simply mixed in a random fashion.

The two ontologies are dynamically inter-related at two levels. First, at a pragmatic level, both ontologies fit into a third, popular or folk ontology, in which the universe is populated with dangerous invisible entities, and experts need to be called upon to ward off these entities. The experts are connected to more powerful invisible entities, who can be called upon to defeat the dangerous ones and protect the community. From the perspective of this folk ontology, any type of expert, connected to any type of power, can be called upon, and it is not even necessary to pay attention to the nature of the esoteric knowledge of the ritual specialists, as long as they are efficacious, or at least capable of a convincing performance. Both the Buddhist and the Daoist ritual traditions provide ritual specialists who meet the conditions of the folk ontology and play the prophylactic and exorcistic role that is expected within that ontology. The Buddhist priests define the dangerous entities as ghosts and call on Buddhas and Bodhisattvas to remove the danger by delivering them from hell and guiding them to the Western Heaven, while the Daoist masters define the entities as demons and call on Daoist deities to expel them.

At a second, more conceptual level, the two ritual traditions are integrated within the dyadic structure of classical Chinese correlative cosmology, with the Buddhist and Daoist traditions

Table 9.1 Categories of beings and relationships of the civil altar and martial altar

<i>Categories</i>	<i>Civil (Buddhist)</i>	<i>Martial (Daoist)</i>
Deities	The Buddha, bodhisattvas, other Buddhist deities	Daoist deities, deified ritual masters
Other entities	Ghosts, souls in hell	Demons, malevolent spirits
Cosmic geography	Vertical hierarchy of Five realms: Buddha, Heaven, Water, Mountain, and Earth	Horizontal spatialization of four cardinal points surrounding the Center: East, South, West, North
Important locations	<p>The Buddha Realm</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The highest realm where the cosmic ruler resides;</li> <li>• Represents the most supreme bureaucratic authority.</li> </ul> <p>The Earth Realm</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Bureaucracy that imprisons the souls of the dead;</li> <li>• Consists of ten offices that maintain the order of hell.</li> </ul>	<p>The local community (Huanghua)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A place defended by local deities against the threat of roving rebels and bandits.</li> </ul> <p>Yangzhou</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A place far beyond the community's territory;</li> <li>• A military camp from which spirit troops are recruited;</li> <li>• A destination where unwanted spirits are sent to</li> </ul>
Ritual purpose	Salvation of the dead	Prosperity of the living

respectively assigned a specific role as yang or yin, north or south, male or female, proper or crooked, literary or embodied, etc. Within this scheme, Buddhism and Daoism are established as distinct, symmetrical, and complementary within an even broader ontological structure.

In this case, then, we see a poly-ontological structure in which four distinct ontologies are in dynamic interaction with each other: The folk cosmology, the classical correlative cosmology, and Buddhist and Daoist ontologies (see Figure 9.3).

### The union of the three teachings

The “Union of the Three Teachings” (*sanjiao heyi*) has been a widespread notion for many centuries in China. It was promoted by the imperial state, which saw the need to establish harmony between them in the interest of social stability, and also in order for the emperor to transcend them all as the Son of Heaven (see Figure 9.4). However, although the union of the three teachings has been advocated by various religious groups and movements, and by the imperial Chinese state itself, the three never merged together. Each of them has maintained a strong identity. Each has its own intellectual tradition, its own history, its own ritual practices, its own clerical or priestly class, and its own ontological conceptions. And the three of them, especially Buddhism, are incommensurable with the other two. Daoist priests, Buddhist monks, and Confucian literati had distinct professional roles and social status. Each would read and learn from each other, and incorporate ideas and practices from each other. But they retained their distinctive Confucian, Buddhist, and Daoist identity (Brook 1993).

In traditional China, all of these specialists provided ritual, religious, and spiritual services for the people. Most people were not affiliated with any of the three Teachings, and, depending on their

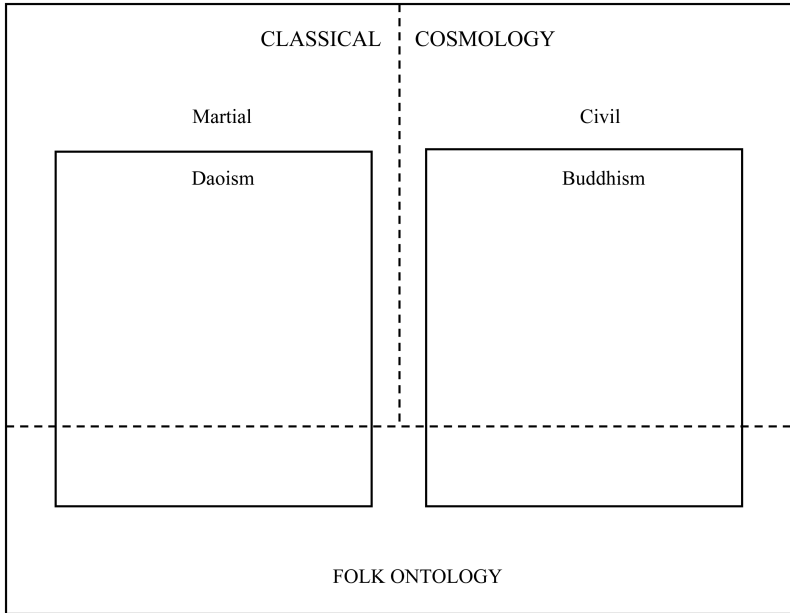


Figure 9.3 Poly-ontological structure of the Huanghua ritual tradition.

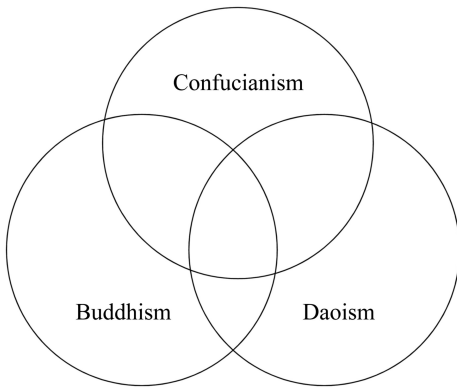


Figure 9.4 Confucianism, Buddhism, Daoism.

need, might have called on a Daoist, or a Confucian, or a Buddhist (Chau 2012; Goossaert 2017). There was a functional differentiation between the tasks that could be performed by the specialists of each of the three teachings. Buddhist ontology has the most to say about death and delivering the souls of the dead, so in the Chinese context the Buddhists became the main specialists of death, providing funeral services in many regions. Daoist ontology, on the other hand, focuses more on life and on vital forces; Daoist priests became the specialists of the body, both at the individual level, through health, longevity, and medical practices, and at the collective level, as the priests of rituals for communal flourishing and prosperity. The Confucian tradition, on the other hand, focused on education and governance. Specialists in Confucian knowledge trained to be teachers, administrators, magistrates, and judges. The emperor Xiaozong (r. 1163~89) famously said, “Use Buddhism to rule the mind, Taoism to rule the body, and Confucianism to rule the world” (Brook 1993, 17).

Most Chinese people never became “members” of one of the Three Teachings, but they shared a common folk ontology. The three teachings needed to insert themselves within this ontology. A tension exists between the soteriological tendencies within the conceptual ontologies of each of the Three Teachings, and the highly immanent, pragmatic orientation of the folk ontology; but all three traditions have successfully incorporated these poly-ontological tensions in a process that Duara has called “dialectical transcendence” (Duara 2014).

## Implications

The concept of poly-ontology offers a new way to think about the dynamics of pluralism. Isomorphic pluralism assumes that bounded individuals and groups possess only one identity, and that all identities are similar in form but different in content. It tolerates or celebrates the coexistence of individuals and groups with different but unique identities. Concepts of syncretism, hybridity, and postmodern pastiche, on the other hand, imply unregulated mixture and fusion, denying the boundaries and stability of the different systems that are conjoined in cultural assemblages. This, in turn, evokes disparaging value judgments on the part of orthodox religious representatives and scholars who tend to prefer orderly intellectual systems.

Poly-ontology, however, does not fall within this dichotomy of identity vs. dissolution. It points to the stable and enduring ontological structures that underlie conceptualization and pragmatic engagement within different systems of thought and practice that are conjoined in different social configurations. It draws our attention to the modalities by which incommensurable ontologies are conjoined while retaining their boundaries and distinctive logics. It invites us to map out the structures and dynamics that govern the interaction between ontologies in specific contexts and situations—not so much at the level of abstract philosophical discourses, but at the level of social pragmatics. The cases used in this essay outline a model of poly-ontological pluralism, in which people are not confined within the ontology of a single religious identity, but simultaneously operate, at a pragmatic level, within multiple incommensurable ontologies.

Poly-ontology raises the question of an associated “poly-epistemology.” Indeed, an ontology is always potentially connected to an epistemology, or a discourse on the justification of knowledge or belief. In the anthropological perspective I take here, however, I assume ontology to be prior to epistemology in peoples’ lived experience: People are enculturated and socialized into specific pragmatic and conceptual ontologies. It is from within those ontologies that people may then discuss and debate different knowledge claims, which may lead to the formation of a discourse on legitimate knowledge.

Anthropologists have used the poly-ontology concept in studies of religious/ontological diversity in Kenya (McIntosh 2009; 2019), Mozambique (Premavardhana 2018, 100), and Meso-America (Astor-Aguilera and Harvey 2019, 136). In modern society, a common poly-ontological condition is the necessity for religious people to switch, in different contexts of life, between a religious ontology and a secular ontology that leaves no place for spiritual realities. “It is not a matter of either/or, but rather of both/and,” wrote Peter Berger, describing the cohabitation of the secular and the religious within the same mind (Berger 2014, 53).

Living within a poly-ontological reality does not negate the possibility of affirming and upholding a primary religious identity. It is possible, for example, for a person to devote their life to serving a monotheistic God within a community affirming the absolute truth of His revelation, while admitting the possibility of multiple, incommensurable human ways of naming, categorizing, and relating to Him and His creation. In a poly-ontological reality, the person committed to living within a specific religious path or identity cannot avoid being simultaneously

engaged in other ontologies, some of which may be contradictory to, or incommensurable, with the ontology of the primary religious affiliation (Oostveen 2017). In such cases, one may try to prioritize one over the others, devote more time and energy to one, work to expand the space and influence of one, seek correlations between them, and/or (re)interpret one such that it is compatible with, and encompassed within, the primary ontology/identity. But it is highly unlikely that—in an ever globalizing world—all other ontologies can be eliminated from one's life. Poly-ontological pluralism exists within the lives and bodies of committed members of a single religion, even when that religion makes exclusive truth claims. Only totalitarian revolution, or efforts at the total religious conversion of the individual, aim to eliminate the possibility of poly-ontology, by expurgating (i.e., brain-washing) all traces of other ontologies from peoples' minds, and restricting their social contact with people living in other ontologies. Such efforts are pathological.

Poly-ontology works in people's lives to the extent that it operates at a pragmatic level of experience. Seligman and Weller, in their work on pluralism (2012), discuss the paradox of the human proclivity to bring order to the world, reducing chaos and ambiguity through constructing boundaries and categories. Categories and boundaries are rendered fixed and systematic in writing, through forms of "notation" such as legal systems, academic scholarship, administrative regulations, and templates, and so on. However, each category generates ambiguities at its edges, forever leading to the elaboration of new categories within notational systems. Seligman and Weller argue for the need to embrace both order and ambiguity, and the dynamic tension between the two. Outside of notational systems, they point to ritual and shared experience as modes of embracing ambiguity: Ritual, because it both generates boundaries and cyclical occasions to cross them; and shared experience, because "each person brings the full complexity of her many identities and selves and allows them to interact freely with others, rather than reducing everyone to one side or another of a simple boundary" (Seligman and Weller 2012, 202). Poly-ontology operates as we navigate the ambiguous spaces between or outside the categories of notationally fixed philosophical or theological systems: Either through rituals that incorporate different ontologies, or through the shared experience of living together, drawing on different ontologies in different contexts and circumstances.

Poly-ontology has critical implications for any genuinely comprehensive philosophy of "pluralism." In terms of the institutional and legal regulation of pluralism, it suggests that "religious" pluralism is but one subset of a much broader field of "ontological pluralism"—or a "covenantal" pluralism that extends to non-religious worldviews. What is legally, discursively, and institutionally defined and regulated as the field of religious pluralism in the modern world tends to include only isomorphic entities and to exclude all others, thus, in fact, seriously restricting the field of religious pluralism. In China, for example, this has meant that, since the beginning of the 20th century, the vast majority of practices based on Chinese cosmology and folk ontologies have been fully excluded from the isomorphic pluralism of the five officially recognized religions (Buddhism, Daoism, Catholicism, Protestantism, and Islam), and from the concerns of most international scholarship on religious freedom in China. The excluded traditions have been either suppressed as illegal or allowed to survive in a gray zone, as in the case of the folk religion of the vast majority of Chinese people; or they have been required to remove or dissimulate their ontological core in order to obtain recognition and legality within non-religious fields such as health, heritage, or tourism (Palmer 2009).

A poly-ontological perspective suggests that isomorphic pluralism may have the unanticipated effect of tearing the social fabric apart through administrative and legal practices that require people to identify with a single religion to the exclusion of all others. In India, for example, historical and anthropological studies have shown how the British colonial practice of



assigning exclusive religious affiliation to individuals, disregarding widespread poly-ontological practices, contributed to a sharpening of communal identities, exacerbating tendencies to inter-religious conflict (Robinson 1998, Bhagat, 2013). In Indonesia, isomorphic pluralism, which requires people to first identify exclusively with a single religion before engaging in pluralistic dialogue and understanding, fails to capture the widely shared lived reality of at least three mutually incommensurable ontologies: Indigenous customs and law, known as *adat* and based on tribal cosmologies; *sharia* based on monotheistic Islamic theology, and the secular Western legal system and values (Adeney-Risakotta 2018).

Thirdly, poly-ontology raises questions about the role of expert authorities within specific ontological systems. The Chinese examples discussed above suggest that clergy, being specialized in a specific system of knowledge and belief, are more likely to uphold the ontological purity and identity of their system of knowledge. A poly-ontological field consists of professional specialists of incommensurable knowledge systems, who acknowledge each other's position within the field, while most laypeople are free to pragmatically circulate between the professionals with different affiliations. Within this field, the professionals (clergy) represent their system of knowledge, but they have no claim over the identities, lives, beliefs, or views of laypeople.

Accordingly, even as covenantal pluralism defends the principle of freedom of conscience for all, it should take special care to avoid the all-too-common pattern of neglecting the freedom of laypersons to engage with different beliefs and ontologies beyond the religious traditions to which they have been ascribed, usually by state or religious institutions, by virtue of birth or ethnicity. This also raises the question of the limits of verbal interfaith dialogue or even the discursive representation of ontological systems. In an isomorphic field, each religion has its designated representatives or spokespersons who can recognize each other as mutual counterparts occupying similar positions of discursive authority within their respective religions, and who can be recognized as such by the state. But, outside the isomorphic field, other ontological systems exist, which are core components of the poly-ontological field, but, lacking isomorphism, are structurally not in a position to provide spokespersons. In Chinese religion, for example, most clergy are specialists in ritual and not in verbal representation. Those who engage in discursive practices usually lack representational authority. Often, the practices simply do not have specialized "representatives" or "spokespersons" of any sort. A poly-ontological perspective thus reminds the actors and spokespersons engaged in dialogue that other ontologies, which may even be the most important in the field, are, perhaps even by definition, not part of the dialogue.

The Chinese poly-ontological cases discussed in this chapter suggest that different ontologies lead to different points of emphasis in our intra-engagement of different perspectives, as well as our inter-relationship with the world, producing different systems of knowledge with different strengths and specializations: For example, in China, the body-focused ontology of Daoism generates systems of knowledge and practice with relative specialization in health, healing, and medicine; the disembodied ontology of Buddhism generates systems of knowledge and practice focusing on the mind and on death; and the socially centered ontology of Confucianism generates systems of knowledge and practice focusing on social relations and governance.

This Chinese example, while it may sound exotic to Western readers, is not so different from the norm in modern Academia. Different disciplines, and even subdisciplines, operate within often radically incommensurable ontologies: Quantum physics, Newtonian physics, economics, anthropology, cognitive neuroscience, and theology, for example, are all recognized as legitimate fields of academic knowledge, and inter-disciplinary research or collaboration between them would be encouraged in most universities. Such collaborations can take place on a pragmatic level, even though no attempt to reconcile their incommensurable ontological foundations has ever been accepted by the mainstream in any of these disciplines. What this suggests is that no

ontology is fully all-encompassing. It is true that most notational systems of knowledge aspire to totality. They strive for comprehensiveness, which is a good thing since it leads to the pursuit of ever more complete and coherently interconnected branches of knowledge. But the realization of this aspiration is always somewhere in the distant future, perhaps eternally so.

Poly-ontology points to the imbrication, within a single individual or group, of multiple, always incomplete and incommensurable systems of knowledge and practice, that are always in perpetual evolution, that learn from and influence each other, absorb from each other, and yet maintain their own trajectories and paths. Covenantal pluralism is laudably inclusive in spirit and moves us some distance toward the necessary middle ground between fundamentalism and relativism. To reach its full potential, however, covenantal pluralism will need to resist any temptations toward the reductionist simplicity of isomorphism, which tends to exclude or at least under-represent poly-ontological individuals and groups. Poly-ontologists represent a huge swath of humanity, particularly within Chinese religions but more broadly as well. Covenantal pluralism rightly stresses the importance of freedom of conscience, equal treatment of all, and engagement, but the complexity of implementing these ideals vis-à-vis amorphous poly-ontological traditions should not be underestimated.

## Notes

- 1 The term “poly-ontology” was coined by Michael W. Scott in his anthropological study of the Solomon Islands, defined as “any cosmology that posits two or more fundamental and independently arising categories of being” (Scott 2000, 63). Contrasting poly-ontology to “mono-ontology” as an ontology that posits that all beings derive from the same source, Scott’s definitions seem to contrast ideas of monogenesis or polygenesis in different ontologies. In his study of the Arosi, he thus compares the poly-ontology of the Indigenous cosmology with the mono-ontology of Christianity, and analyses how the two co-exist in tension among contemporary Arosi (Scott 2007). In this chapter, I follow MacIntosh to extend the concept of poly-ontology to include combinations of ontologies from radically different cultures and religions. According to this understanding, the coexistence of Indigenous and Christian ontologies in the lives of the Arosi creates a poly-ontological condition.
- 2 This point aligns with Stewart, Seiple, and Hoover’s observation in Chapter 2 of this *Handbook* that too often conventional approaches pressure minorities toward assimilation (looking and acting like the majority) rather than integration (characterized by mutual engagement and respect).
- 3 For example, see a case presented by Sean Hsiang-lin Lei about how Dr Chuang Shu Chih, a prolific author of health-related books in Taiwan, develops the notion of vital energy “qi” in TCM and transforms it into a concept close to “intestinal gas” that can be comprehended by WM. See Lei (2017), “Housewives as Kitchen Pharmacies,” 172.

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# 10

## ON NEUTRALITY AND THE NONES

### Secular humanism, covenantal pluralism, and “religious” literacy

*Roy Speckhardt*

Regardless of worldview, nearly everyone around the globe understands that we face pressing concerns that span our nations and cultures. At the same time, expanding knowledge of ourselves, our world, and our universe itself, presents opportunities that can best be realized by overcoming the barriers between us. Covenantal pluralism is a framework and vision for collaboration based upon equal rights and responsibilities that will enable us to seek a world where all have the chance to flourish. Once in place, a shared understanding of equal rights and responsibilities leads people to engage, respect, and protect each other in just the way necessary for worldwide advancement. This can be true, without people sharing a common worldview or giving up their differences that enrich us all.

A pre-requisite to covenantal pluralism and the better existence that its potential reveals is the building blocks found within cross-cultural religious literacy and the associated skills of mutual engagement. As individuals strengthen their knowledge and understanding of their own life stances as well as others, they are prepared to negotiate differences and communicate with each other in mutually supportive ways. But for that process to be fulfilled, those of differing perspectives must accomplish something beyond mere dialogue. Through preparing for a project or common aim, people naturally negotiate their different identities, which remain intact, but become better understood and respected. Through collaboration, folks from different cultures communicate and build reciprocity that builds trust and mutual support. This cross-cultural religious literacy multiplied by countless interactions between and among many worldviews develops, deepens, and expands covenantal pluralism. Ultimately, with the groundwork of cross-cultural religious literacy and covenantal pluralism, humanity can be positioned to address both our global challenges, and opportunities.

In that context secular humanism can be examined, considering the phenomenon of its recent growth, its defining characteristics, and its approach to government and religion. We can explore what happens when it is taken to the extreme, how it applies to modern challenges, and how humanists can be part of the solution to the challenges faced by our species.

#### **The rise of the nones**

Prominent in the media worldwide is the phenomenon of the rise of those that answer “none” to questions about their religious affiliation. “Nones” represent 23% of the United States, up

20 million from 2007 (Pew Research Center on Religion and Public Life 2014). Many of those not affiliated with religion are still people of faith, but the number of those who were certain, or even fairly certain about their belief in God, went from 60% of this group of nones in 2007, to 49% in 2014, a trend circumstantial evidence suggests has continued in recent years. As initial reports of political scientist Ronald F. Inglehart's soon to be released study and book on these changes, "The U.S. shift is part of a global trend also perceptible in 43 of the 49 countries (containing 60% of the world's population) that he studied" (Lane 2020).

A key component of the increase in those who aren't religious and don't believe in God are young people. As far back as 2003 this was evidenced in a UCLA study funded by the John Templeton Foundation that found that 21% of first-year college students said they didn't believe in a god (Higher Education Research Institute 2004). By 2016, 31% of first-year students joined the nones (Downey 2017), suggesting that overall numbers of religiously unaffiliated will be rising for many more years as these cohorts grow older.

Speculation about the source of this trend varies widely, from the rise of organized secularism to the sudden popularity of new atheist authors, to the inculcation of religious figures in government, to challenges within mainstream religions like the Catholic Church. Most likely the internet was among the most significant factors, as for the first time, one's family and geography were no longer significantly limiting factors on what options for belief were available (Zuckerman 2014).

Admittedly, since the nones are so diverse in the United States and around the world, it makes sense to focus on the increasing majority of them who don't believe in traditional notions of gods, since that group, as I argue below, is, in many ways, more cohesive in its beliefs, politics, and practices and more distinct from other religious categories. This group is most accurately referred to as "nontheists," a term that is gaining increased traction because the term atheist is so widely misinterpreted as being anti-theist in its orientation.

Nontheists go by many names including: Atheists, agnostics, humanists, freethinkers, skeptics, godless, nonbelievers, rationalists, and the like, most of which emphasize different elements of their interests. In some nations humanists prefer to focus on secularism, such as Chile, and for some, like India, rationalism is the common identifier. In my informal surveys of local humanists, ethical cultures, Unitarian Universalists, atheists, and other groups with large numbers of nontheists, I've found that the majority of these individuals identify with nearly all the names listed. Humanists, however, whether or not they embrace religious identities (without the theology), are the most common variety in the community.

Interestingly, this group of nontheists is bolstered by a significant number who simultaneously reject theism and identify with traditional faiths. More study is needed because the 2007 version of the Pew Religious Landscape Survey is among the only ones accessible that acknowledge the millions of godless people who retain a nominal religious affiliation. That study found that 1% or half a million US Catholics don't believe in God, and another 29% of them saw God as an impersonal force, whereas 60% of Jews and 64% of Buddhists saw god as nonexistent or an impersonal force. Most of those in this category are humanists by definition if not by label as well.

On one end of the spectrum of nontheists are anti-theists, who are defined by their vehement rejection of the supernatural, and atheists, who see their lack of theism as the most prominent aspect of their identity. On the other end of that spectrum are religious humanists and ethical culturists who still don't rely upon the intervention of the supernatural into the daily affairs of humanity, but see that question as an unnecessary component of who they are, usually preferring to focus on deeds over creeds. This latter category can include deists and pantheists as there is not a practical difference in how they make decisions and act in the world versus how an atheist would do the same. None of them expect or accept intervening supernatural powers as a reason for what happens in our lives or as a solution to our struggles.

## The humanist worldview

Secular humanists, or simply humanists, utilize reason and empathy to arrive at their worldview's foundational principles, which include: 1) A science-based foundation that rejects supernaturally sourced conclusions; and, 2) a compassion seen through an egalitarian lens that drives priorities for personal and societal change (Speckhardt 2015).

The science-based epistemology, or way of determining the validity of knowledge claims, is relied upon because a reasoned review of the evidence suggests that it's the most reliable method for deriving answers and improving them over time. The amalgamated experience of history, not just the experiences of individuals, shows us the effectiveness of observation, experimentation, and rational analysis. In science, anyone has the opportunity to discover something new or to prove an old theory to be incorrect by presenting the evidence. Good scientists not only don't prevent such advances, they embrace them. Just like science, humanism itself is an evolutionary worldview where individuals and standard bearing organizations alike are constantly reevaluating humanist claims to see if they still make sense in the context of the best information available. That may lead one to think humanism is highly volatile, but in practice it isn't. Crowdsourcing knowledge development over decades, with expert historical review of the eons preceding, leads to answers that rarely require major revisions.

Humanists don't reject theism and other supernatural beliefs dogmatically, but driven by reason and the scientific method, humanists conclude that alleged supernatural sources, be they divine revelation or ancient texts, do not provide clear or reliable guidance. Accepting supernatural intervention or the complexities of rebirth, for example, provides serious complications to determining scientific rules and to better understand the workings of our universe from the elementary particles all the way to cosmology. For some devout believers, confronting those with a lack of religious faith is problematic, but it may help to note that, other than the one god, or a pantheon of gods in one's personal faith, we all do not believe in the thousands of gods adhered to by other faiths—humanists just take it one step further.

Most humanists don't prefer to focus on what they don't believe but are driven by positive priorities that arise from their empathy for others. As Unitarian Universalist minister Kendyl Gibbons said in a sermon I heard at the New York Ethical Society in 2011: "If there is no personality governing the universe and promising us love, justice, and meaning on some ontological bottom line, then it is all the more necessary for us, flawed and finite as we are, to give love, to enact justice, and to build meaning here and now."

Enhancing our capacity to recognize and share feelings experienced by others strengthens our sense of unity with all with whom we share this planet. Our human history of slowly moving away from violence (Singer 2011) can be explained in part by this virtue, for as people came to know each other better with increased urbanization, transportation opportunities, and online communications, we empathetically realized that we all strive to avoid suffering and seek happiness—not only for ourselves, but for others as well. Admittedly, rapid populations shift without deliberate education can have the opposite effect, breeding fear and hostility rather than empathy despite the increased contact.

It is through the cultivation of empathy that humanists develop a deep-seated compassion for humankind and the world at large. In situations where we have the courage to act compassionately, instigating such action is a natural result, both logically and emotionally, from strong feelings of empathy. Benefiting society maximizes individual happiness and raises the potential of humanity (Post 2005). Indeed, a primary purpose of our engaging the scientific method is to pursue compassionate goals, to improve the world through the quest for knowledge, and to use that knowledge to benefit ourselves and society.

Given this focus on reason and compassion, humanists are driven to embrace social policies that are inclusive, that diffuse political power, and that foster self-determination. This is the source of our embrace of democracy as well as individual, civil, and human rights.

Still, compassion without egalitarianism can be hollow since without recognizing our sameness, we can accept different outcomes for those committing the same work and talent. That's why egalitarianism is such a crucial element of the humanist worldview—the conviction that humans are basically equal despite differences in aptitude, and that each person should be treated as having inherent worth. Given such humanist reasoning, there's plenty of room for differing outcomes based on intellect, ability, creativity, and hard work. But acceptance of inequality between ethnic, cultural, or other groups as grounds for discrimination against them is insupportable.

Humanism's commitment to viewing humanity as one group with individuals sharing equal worth, doesn't mean the philosophy dictates colorblindness or the erasure of cultural differences. While we don't always live up to our highest ideals, the compassion and egalitarianism integrated into this worldview emphasize the need to understand the nuances of privilege, address white supremacy directly, and both respect and celebrate cultural distinctiveness.

One can see how this leads humanists to be politically liberal on many issues, for such is the logical conclusion from the worldview's foundational principles. There is such a strong imbalance to the left among humanists, that it's been noted that the rise of the nonreligious has resulted in a growing secularization gap between liberals and conservatives in general (Thompson 2020). Historically, humanists have been among the leaders of movements for progressive change, from women's rights, to unions, to LGBTQ equality, to end of life choices. Today humanists join with others, sometimes taking the lead, sometimes standing side-by-side, and sometimes following those who seek to expand civil and human rights.

Humanists encourage empathy, along with the compassion and the sense of inherent equal worth that flow from it, in a way that honors human knowledge about ourselves and our universe. This means applying the scientific method to our pursuit of happiness and well-being, a pursuit we see as not just a solitary one, but one for us to strive for as a society. When we look at the world in this way, we discover that improving oneself, nurturing others, and working to improve society are the keys to deep-seated happiness. Those ideals are consistent with many traditional morals such as integrity, fidelity, and an independent work ethic.

There's also a sort of optimism about progress found in humanism. As a Pitzer College professor of secular studies explains, "Humanity's ability to be cruel, selfish, deceitful, and violent is far outweighed by our more pervasive and dominant capacities to be humane, altruistic, cooperative, sensible, fair, and peaceful" (Zuckerman 2020). This optimism, supported by the arc of human history (Pinker 2018), prepares humanists to be a positive part of a community that extends beyond themselves.

Covenantal pluralism, while a new construction that seeks to engage and respect differences without lending them moral equivalency, is also one that is fully consistent with humanist values. Whereas some critique humanists, and more specifically those among us identifying as atheists, as anti-religious because of the outspoken few, most humanists aim for a level playing field for all faiths and philosophies, so that we can lift each other up instead of tear each other down while we collaborate to make the world better. Humanists readily embrace the opportunity to discuss morality and ethics and their foundations with those we differ in an environment where everyone has a seat at the table. Humanists see humanity as one people on this planet who bring many diverse qualities that enrich us all, and seek to robustly integrate such difference in society even when we are in the majority.



## Humanists in the world

In the application of covenantal pluralistic concepts in humanistic ways, a number of questions arise. Often a first consideration is the humanist perspective on what is the right relationship between government and religion. Such matters are treated differently in different countries, but humanists consistently advocate for religiously neutral governments.

The case of Norway is illustrative in this regard. While Norway is moving toward secularizing its government, it has a long history of officially supporting the Church of Norway, an Evangelical-Lutheran church, to which it provides significant government sourced financial support (Nikel 2016). However, unlike most other nations with established churches, Norway sought to support religious freedom by financially supporting other groups as well. Among the largest of the approximately 800 registered faith and life stance groups is the Humanist Association of Norway with nearly 100,000 members. Humanists hold a significant place in Norwegian society, which may be one of the reasons that, despite having a state church, Norway is a place with high levels of religious freedom (US Department of State 2019).

The Norwegian example may give rise to the question: Is humanism a religion? Humanism isn't a religion in the traditional sense as there are no unchanging rules, no set of beliefs one must follow, no higher power one must give over to, and no requirement to attend services or pray. Humanist conclusions about religious questions, such as the scientific origins of the universe, the lack of an intervening higher power, and the potential for human progress, don't equate to a religion by most definitions of the word. And humanist positions evolve. Just as mathematicians and psychologists study the knowledge that their disciplines have accumulated and seek to build upon them, humanists do the same regarding their philosophy. Respecting the wisdom of experts in their fields doesn't mean dogmatically standing by what's been said. Humanists learn from experts and creatives alike, questioning everything, while accepting the parts with reasonable proof that fit together with what is known of the world and most simply explain what remains. So, while there's a history of groups concerned that secular humanism is a religion being taught in public schools (Wood, Jr. 1987), the evidence doesn't bear that out. Instead, what's being taught in public schools is the best of modern knowledge, which is embraced by humanists and many religious people alike.

In the United States, as government funding programs must be religiously neutral in their purpose, there are some challenges when both religious and secular entities apply for and receive funding. On the one hand, wouldn't it be religious discrimination to automatically disallow such funding? On the other hand, many religious groups exclude outsiders or those who violate their group's principles of faith, from their employ, from those who receive their services, or both. Isn't there something wrong about asking taxpayers to fund a program that excludes themselves and their families?

When it comes to religious institutions providing public services, some would argue that the very faith connection inherent in a religious organization providing services results in exclusion, since those seeking services are often well aware of a religious group's exclusionary belief or practice. They might further argue that all public service providers be scrubbed of the slightest religiosity. But such steps would not only unfairly exclude faith groups, putting such rules in effect would be to reward our collective failure as a society to find common ground and respect those who believe differently from ourselves.

Reconciling the conflicting values of freedom of and from religion is a challenge that can be overcome in many cases, but it requires some give and take by both religious groups and taxpayers.

Humanists are convinced that in order to receive government funding, at least the part of the religious entity getting the funding should follow all government regulations with religiously

neutral purposes even if those regulations happen to go against their religious principles. So, in cases where government funding is involved, religious adoption services shouldn't exclude same-sex couples, religious birthing centers shouldn't exclude single mothers, and religious schools shouldn't exclude those who don't follow their faith even if they are apostates. Furthermore, no publicly funded religious services should proselytize those they provide services to without their permission. That applies to every instance of taxpayer funded services, be they the provision of addiction care, food distribution, or even public uses of religious facilities such as polling places. And such religious groups should also accept government oversight to ensure government regulations are followed, which likely includes financial and programmatic reporting.

Some would argue that it's too much of a burden to ask religious organizations to take these steps and that it may damage the integrity of their principles to do so, but humanists believe these accommodations are necessary to avoid violating the rights of others and should be required if the institution wishes to participate in public funding. It's precisely because of such dangers that many faith groups from Baptist churches to Reform synagogues avoid acquiring government funding, because of the necessary strings attached, and the danger to their prophetic voice such intermingling entails.

Taxpayers trust that their government is making sure that religious institutions receiving their public dollars are using those dollars for non-exclusionary services, but that doesn't mean service providers cannot be religious. And since it would be unreasonable to expect the environment of a religious provider to be completely devoid of the trappings of the relevant faith, citizens needing such services should accept that the environment in which they receive them may be religious in nature. As they should in any environment, recipients of services should endeavor to respect those providing services even if they do not share their faith. At the same time, institutions should make accommodations to be sure their facility and staff are not proselytizing or excluding. Their religious facility and practices should not be so overbearing that those seeking services feel pressure to convert in order to receive the services.

There are other areas beyond the provision of services where similar measures are needed to ensure religious liberty flourishes, people remain free to believe or think as they see fit, and taxpayer funds aren't used in ways that harm them.

In some cases, government rules to protect minorities are in such conflict with certain religious teachings that a decision needs to be made whether to accept the religious practice or deny them in favor of other protected class considerations. Humanists would agree with the 2018 Canadian Supreme Court ruling that LGBTQ rights trump religious expression, when they prioritized civil liberties over the religious freedom to discriminate (BBC News 2018). Their law now states:

[F]reedom of religion can be limited where it interferes with the fundamental rights of others (Ross, *supra* at paragraph 72; B.(R.), *supra* at page 385; Big M, *supra* at page 337; Amselem, *supra* at paragraph 62). When individual rights come into conflict, the conflict ought to be resolved through the proper delineation of the rights and values involved (Trinity Western v. British Columbia College of Teachers, *supra* at paragraphs 29–31; Reference re Same-Sex Marriage, *supra* at paragraphs 50, 52; B.(R.), *supra* at paragraph 226).

(Department of Justice 2020)

While humanists advocate for nations such as the United States to seriously consider following Canada's example to protect identity above ideology, a number are moving in the opposite direction. The 2020 United States Supreme Court's decision in *Espinoza v. Montana Department of Revenue* ruled that the states can apportion funds to religious private schools, and that Montana's

“no aid” provision in its constitution discriminated against the plaintiff for denying her tuition assistance to a religious private school (US Supreme Court 2020). Many have interpreted this ruling as allowing state governments to indirectly fund religious institutions as raising religious freedom over other types of protections. Writing for *Rewire News*, Lisa Needham explains that this case “creates a pathway for religious schools to discriminate against already-marginalized students, including LGBTQ youth and students with disabilities” (Needham 2020). What’s more, in a statement signed by rabbis, ministers, and bishops, and religious experts, they expressed concern that government’s attempt “to elevate religious freedom above other human rights will weaken religious freedom itself and undermine respect for and damage the protections of the universal values of human dignity” (Kelly 2020).

Unfortunately, as problematic as some religious freedom violations against humanists are in the United States, they are undoubtedly more extreme elsewhere. A Pew global survey reports that nearly half the world’s population thinks it is necessary to believe in a god to be good. Findings like this suggest the foundation is present for rampant discrimination (Tamir, Connaughton, and Salazar 2020). This situation is emphasized in both highly Christian nations like the Philippines and Brazil as well as countries balanced between Christianity and Islam like Lebanon and Nigeria (Tamir, Connaughton, and Salazar 2020, Appendix). While the survey didn’t look at highly Muslim nations like Pakistan and Indonesia, based on their legal framework, it seems likely that they would have a similar level of intolerance toward those who do not believe in a god. This is further supported by known examples of violence against nontheist people.

For example, author, activist, and humanist blogger Rafida Bonya Ahmed provided Congressional testimony in 2020 about the brutal murder of her husband Avijit Roy, saying, “Avijit was perhaps the most prominent victim of religiously motivated violence in Bangladesh targeting secularists, but he was neither the first nor the last such victim” (Bonya Ahmed 2020). Writer and activist Raif Badawi remains imprisoned in Saudi Arabia for the accusation of promoting secularism, for which he was sentenced to receive ten years in prison, 1,000 lashes, and a fine of one million riyals (Humanists International 2017). Mubarak Bala, president of the Humanist Association of Nigeria, was arrested for blasphemy in April of 2020 and despite multiple international efforts to provide him with legal support and verify his health, no word of his whereabouts has been heard at this time (Maclean 2020). Being secular and a humanist can be dangerous positions to hold in many parts of the world.

While not as well known for it, humanists play an active role in the world advocating for progressive change and taking part in charitable endeavors. When the American Cancer Society rejected an attempt to raise money for them under the atheist label (Levy 2011), the nontheist charity Foundation Beyond Belief (FBB) supported the Leukemia and Lymphoma Society and broke the LLS record for money raised in the first year by a corporate team (Mehta 2014). FBB went on to provide relief funds for a number of projects in the US such as aid to victims of Hurricane Harvey, and around the world, such as for a school offering nursery, primary, and secondary education in Uganda (Jacobsen 2020). Humanist and rationalist organizations from Norway to India to the Philippines engage in substantive charitable work. And the international coalition of humanist organizations, Humanists International, has a long history of charitable endeavors all around the globe.

### **When secularism diverges from religious neutrality**

Most often, a secular government is synonymous with a religiously neutral government, for anything other than a secular approach tends to favor one religion over others and religion over

nonreligion more generally. There are, however, times when secularism is so doggedly pursued that religious freedom is unjustly limited. These are cases where people's ability to practice their faith is impinged even when they are neither taking taxpayer funds for their activities nor interfering with the lives of others.

Historic examples of secularism taken to the extreme can be found readily in communist nations like the former Soviet Union and the former North Vietnam, but can still be seen today when we view governments excusing crackdowns on religious practice as a way to preserve cultural secularism.

A number of humanists were skeptical when France instituted what is known as the Burqa Ban in 2010, making it illegal for anyone to cover their face in public. In 2014, the law was upheld by the European court of human rights with the argument that the ban encouraged people to "live together" (Willsher 2014). But when masks were mandated to prevent the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic in France, the government failed to relax restrictions on burqa or niqab face coverings, what explanation remained other than their using secularism as an excuse to discriminate against their Muslim population? (McAuley 2020). Restrictions on clothing should be neutral in application. If masks (be they ski masks, medical masks, or even Halloween masks) are permitted in public spaces, restricting religious face coverings like this suggests prejudice and discrimination.

While some humanists would debate it, Turkey's previous practices of curbing religious political organizing and restricting the teaching of Arabic and other elements of Islam, stepped over the bounds of neutrality to engage in unnecessary restrictions on religious freedom. But today we see that those restrictions have been replaced with majority Muslim laws that inherently discriminate against Christians and other religious minorities (Akyol 2019).

Perhaps the most notable religious persecution of any kind today can be found in China's practices of sending millions of Muslim Uyghurs to "re-education" camps in order to shift their allegiance from their faith to their secular state. Such policies are abhorrent to the very nature of religious freedom (Sun 2019). Practices there are so severe that the government openly analogizes the Uyghurs' faith to disease, and reports of government engaging in the practice of torture in these camps are too frequent to ignore (Samuel 2019).

While no religious or secular group is immune from ideological extremism that leads to (religious) oppression, secular humanism rarely goes too far in constraining religion in part because there are relatively few places in the world today where it is in a position to discriminate against the religious, and even then, it must proceed to engage in such discrimination in violation of its own universalist principles. Still, extremist secularism in the grips of political ideology or when used as an excuse to act on prejudice, can be just as threatening to pluralism as any other form of exceptionalism.

### **Humanist approaches to a pandemic**

An undeniably practical application of the conflict surrounding boundaries between religious freedom and governmental neutrality can be seen in the responses to the Covid-19 pandemic. In an ideal world, the pandemic would be addressed for what it is, and measures both temporary and significant would be put in place to best address it without political positioning to utilize the crisis as a chance to have individual agendas furthered in the future. But we see the opposite happening. On one side religious conservatives are often unwilling to suspend religious services in order to protect their congregants and the wider community in order to position religion as beyond the hand of government (Brownstein 2020). On the other side secular activists are seeking to prevent financial relief from challenges inherent to the pandemic from reaching religious circles for fear (quite possibly justified) that such will be precedent for future government

funding of religion in ways that undermine the separation of religion and government (Mehta 2020). These battling camps have contributed to the slowing of political decision making that could provide aid to the needy.

Factually speaking, due to the pandemic, faith and secular leaders alike have been asked to suspend their freedoms of assembly (and to a degree, religion) and along with it the means to sustain their work. Arguably, there is a fairness issue here where we shouldn't expect the government to suspend one part of the First Amendment rights of churches while simultaneously saying that, because of another part of the First Amendment, they can't get the relief for that very suspension that was offered to all others. But is the level of relief (in the billions) an appropriate response? And is the lack of restrictions or government oversight an acceptable way to implement these measures? Maggie Siddiqi, director of the faith and public policy initiative at the Center for American Progress, told *Deseret News* that the religious right is seeking more than just the right to gather during a pandemic, "A small set of individuals has demonstrated that they want the ability to use religious freedom as a free pass out of any and all regulations" (Dallas 2020).

It's difficult to say what would be a balanced solution, but if we're to be constrained by both the inflexible church-state separationists and unbending religious freedom advocates, we'd end up declaring churches immune from all the emergency social distancing measures, but then also ineligible for the financial relief—a solution that ultimately helps no one and harms many.

What might a real solution to this conundrum look like? Since scientists and safety experts are united in the need for social distancing in places with high rates of infection, religious rights to assembly should be suspended along with similar secular gatherings, but not in a way that unfairly targets churches. Religious organizations, like every other business and nonprofit should be eligible to receive relief funds, but with some restrictions. All recipients, religious or otherwise, must be willing to follow the same financial reporting requirements in order to ensure the funds are used as they were intended and not abused for personal or political gain. The legislation and administrative rules should be clear that this relief is for a temporary and extraordinary situation so that neither the rules restricting religious assembly nor the rules restricting government funding of religion become standardized.

In a world with robust covenantal pluralism, we could find ways like the above to address the concerns on both sides and put in place measures that ensure public safety and provide targeted relief that least harms constitutional principles—and does so without permanent impact where one side wins and the other loses. It's clear from the ongoing debate that we're not there yet, but that doesn't mean it isn't something to strive for.

### **Humanists collaborating for a better future**

Envisioning the future, we should strive for a world at peace where humanitarian values have become widely accepted as the basis for a global community that is tolerant, sensitive to environmental concerns, and respectful of diversity in all its forms. To get there, a profound change in public opinion is needed, and thus a consortium of the willing from all religious/worldview perspectives must emphasize cross-cultural "religious" literacy, and advocate for covenantal pluralism in order to create the change we wish to realize.

As history shows us, perfect government neutrality toward religion isn't possible without either oppressing religion, or allowing the religious to trample the rights of others. A government that must be scrubbed of faith in every aspect of its being, does so only by discriminating against expressions of faith. And at the same time, permitting those who represent government to act-up and display their faiths without restriction may lead to others being harmed,

oppressed, or made outcasts in their own lands because some faith and worldviews are diametrically opposed to one another. That's why these sometimes-conflicting values must be balanced.

We must seek as much government neutrality as possible that goes short of violating people's faith and conscience, and does not prevent people from engaging core elements of their religious practice. In this way, no one religion, or religion in general, nor secularism itself, should hold sway over other worldviews. Failure in this endeavor opens the door to a slide toward theocracy or secular fascism that will ultimately devour freedom of religion and freedom of conscience.

In order to move forward, real people need to take steps to educate themselves about, accommodate, and respect different viewpoints on religion. Cross-cultural religious literacy provides baseline understanding of one's own, as well as others' moral frameworks and how to engage together to accomplish shared aims. While teachers in secondary schools may not be universally prepared to teach such subjects fairly and evenly, that would be an aspirational goal. That said, just as International Baccalaureate secondary education programs already include robust theory of knowledge classes, such classes could begin to educate students about skills of engagement, teaching them about how to evaluate themselves, others, and how to positively navigate the differences between worldviews.

Meanwhile, higher education and special trainings for those engaging in international and cross-cultural communication should become the norm. To navigate such waters, people need the capacity for this type of introspection and evaluation, as well as communication and negotiation skills, which could also be part of educational practice. Absent such literacy, when those of divergent faiths meet, we invite conflict or isolation rather than the societal progress that is our collective potential.

Cross-cultural religious literacy can be applied to our interactions in ways that lead us to greater understanding. For instance, the conviction among too many of the faithful today—that goodness can only come through godliness—must be less and less accepted as faith communities come to learn about secular worldviews. At the same time, secular humanists must cultivate respect for their religious brothers and sisters, similarly educating themselves about alternate faith-based perspectives. In some situations where we have conflicting differences that are irreconcilable, those topics may be bracketed aside so we can concentrate on where we share common purpose. In other cases, we might recognize our difference and further our own actualization through adopting new insights. This process of negotiating our differences deepens our shared connection as we communicate with each other in open, candid dialogue and mutual support.

This process takes the Golden Rule to another level of meaning and effectiveness. To see this, one might begin by expanding the Golden Rule beyond the traditional “Do unto others as you would have done to you,” to “Do unto others as they would wish done to them.” But then we more fully understand ourselves through personal competency, we see how others understand themselves through comparative competency, and finally we follow our collaborative engagement to see results in addressing real life challenges and opportunities, providing the potential to better our global society.

By building on common ground, however narrow, however temporary, we can coalesce to accomplish great progress. Human beings have the potential to reduce violence and promote cooperation on some of the most pressing challenges facing our species. It is past due time for humanists and allies to bring everything we have to bear on these matters. Only then can we thrive in the kind of pluralistic world in which we already find ourselves and arrive at a principled approach to cross-cultural interactions that can be agreed upon by those of all faiths and worldviews.

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## PART II

# Who needs religious literacy?

Perspectives on professional fields



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# 11

## RELIGIOUS LITERACY AND K-12 EDUCATION

*Benjamin Pietro Marcus*

“Why am I here?” I asked myself. I sat in a small office in the Albanian Ministry of Education. I was hot, jetlagged, and confused.

I understood *how* I got there. At the direction of Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama, the Albanian Institute for Education Development had begun a national initiative intended to integrate the academic study of religion into Albanian primary and secondary education, and the Institute had in turn requested support from US Embassy Tirana. Foreign Service officers at the embassy contacted the Religious Freedom Center of the Freedom Forum (RFC), the organization for which I work, and asked whether we could provide training and resources to support Albanian officials as they undertook a project to create guidelines for national curricular reform. As the RFC’s religious literacy specialist, I was happy to accept. In 2017 I had spearheaded the effort to develop national guidelines for religious studies education in American primary and secondary schools. By June 2018, I found myself on a trip to Albania funded by the Fulbright Specialist program.<sup>1</sup>

But when I touched down in Tirana, I began to question why I was selected for the task. It was my first time in the country. I did not speak a word of Albanian. I had no formal training in Albanian history or contemporary politics. What I knew about Albania I had learned from a book by Albanian novelist Ismail Kadare, a photojournalism book called *Besa: Muslims Who Saved Jews During World War II*, phone interviews with a handful of scholars who studied the country, and hundreds of pages of briefing materials sent by the US Department of State. I worried that I would be seen as an American intellectual imperialist. I did not want to force Albanians to adopt American educational frameworks and legal norms. I feared that doing so could disrupt centuries of peaceful coexistence between the country’s various religious communities, which include Sunni and Bektashi Muslims, Catholics, Orthodox Christians, and Protestants.

Over the next three weeks, I came to a new understanding of the expectations for my visit. I was not there to impose American norms and practices on my hosts, nor was I obligated to obscure my own legal and pedagogical values and commitments. I would speak honestly about the strengths and limitations of American approaches to religious studies education. I admitted that American approaches, developed in the particular legal and cultural context of the United States in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, might not fit perfectly in Albania today. Thankfully, my role was not to force the American system on Albania, but to provide it as but one reference point. My hosts and I entered into a dialogue through which we could develop a meaningful

understanding of the similarities and differences of our perspectives vis-à-vis the knowledge, skills, and dispositions that should be cultivated by religious literacy education within a civics education framework. Through that dialogue, Albanian ministry officials would be empowered to create a system that worked for them. And over the course of our conversations, I came to see American religious literacy education in a different light. The lessons I learned have directly informed projects on which I have worked since my return to propose new policies and partnerships to improve religious literacy in K-12 education.<sup>2</sup>

My experience advocating for religious literacy education in Albania and the United States guides my analysis of the framework that inspired this volume: Covenantal pluralism. Conversations with Albanian and American scholars, educators, government officials, religious community members, and students also shape my response to the related concept of cross-cultural religious literacy. To contextualize my reflection on the volume's key concepts, I begin by summarizing the state of religious literacy education in American primary and secondary schools. This summary matches the overview of religion and education I provided to my Albanian colleagues. I then explain the changes to my thinking and advocacy that resulted from dialogue with my Albanian interlocutors. Finally, I reflect on my experience through the lenses of covenantal pluralism and cross-cultural religious literacy.

### **Key topics related to religion in primary and secondary schools**

Before arriving in Albania, US Embassy Tirana and the Albanian Institute for Education Development requested that I summarize key topics for policy consideration related to religious literacy within a civics education framework. I obliged by creating a 32-page outline that listed important (1) international, European, and Albanian legal frameworks and cultural principles, (2) topics related to religious expression outside the curriculum, (3) topics related to the study of religion within the curriculum, and (4) training options for pre-service and in-service educators. For each of these topics, I included excerpts from passages in important guidance documents published by inter-governmental, educational, religious studies, and advocacy organizations.

### ***Legal frameworks***

I began the outline with an overview of some international and Albanian legal frameworks and cultural principles because conversations about religious literacy education in the United States frequently begin with those topics. American public school educators often want to know whether teaching about religion is constitutional. To answer that question, I first turn to the First Amendment to the United States Constitution. I explain the history, meaning, and significance of the Establishment Clause and Free Exercise Clause, and their connection with the principles that determine the relationship between religion and public schools. I then summarize landmark US Supreme Court decisions beginning in the 1940s, and accelerating in the 1960s, which struck down state-sponsored devotional exercises in public schools but affirmed student-initiated and student-led religious expression (see Witte and Nichols 2011). The opinion from one case in 1963, *School District of Abington Township, Pennsylvania v. Schempp* (374 U.S. 203), also explicitly recognizes that “one’s education is not complete without a study of comparative religions or the history of religion.”

Based on my experience in the United States, I hypothesized that state justification for education about religion in Albanian public schools would need to draw on international, European, and Albanian legal instruments and norms, policy guidelines, and cultural principles. As a consequence, I referred my Albanian colleagues to a number of relevant documents about religious

freedom, the rights of children, and education from the United Nations (see ODIHR Advisory Council of Experts on Freedom of Religion or Belief 2007, 120–121). Given Albania’s interest in joining the European Union and other European inter-governmental bodies, I also excerpted legal and guidance documents that speak to religious freedom, education, the rights of minorities, and the rights of children and parents from the European Court of Human Rights, the Council of Europe, and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) (see ODIHR Advisory Council of Experts on Freedom of Religion or Belief 2007, 117–120). Of course I also included relevant passages from the Albanian Constitution, including the preamble and relevant articles.<sup>3</sup> To generate discussion about cultural norms that would shape conversations about religion and education in Albania, I included reference to the Albanian concept of *besa*—a code of honor that is often used to explain the positive relations between Albania’s religious communities (see Gershman 2008).

### ***Religious expression outside the curriculum***

In the second section of my overview, I named key topics related to religious expression in schools. In Albania—a religiously diverse country still grappling with the effects of state-enforced atheism under strongman Enver Hoxha—the public is wary of introducing the study or expression of religion in schools (Institute for Democracy and Mediation 2018). Without ignoring public opinion related to religion and education in Albania and its foundation in a traumatic national history, I shared lessons learned from decades of religious literacy advocacy in the United States. To build community support for education about religion, American religious literacy advocates for the past half-century have sought to ensure stakeholders that schools will respect the rights of all. In particular, advocates affirm that students of all religions and none should feel like equal members of the school community. As a site for inculcating civic values and virtues, public schools “must model democratic process and constitutional principles in the development of policies and curricula” related to religion and education because “public schools belong to all citizens” (Haynes and Thomas 2007b, 12). Or, as another guidance document put it, “Public schools may not inculcate nor inhibit religion. They must be places where religion and religious conviction are treated with fairness and respect” (Haynes and Thomas 2007a, 12).

In the United States, guidance about religious expression in public schools has followed landmark US Supreme Court cases, especially the 1962 case *Engel v. Vitale* (370 U.S. 421) (in which the Court decided that the state cannot hold prayers in public schools), and the 1963 case *School District of Abington Township, Pennsylvania v. Schempp* (374 U.S. 203) (in which the Court decided that public schools cannot sponsor devotional Bible readings or recitation of the Lord’s Prayer). Despite striking down state-sponsored devotional exercises like prayer and Bible reading, the US Supreme Court affirmed the importance of teaching *about* religion in public schools. These cases marked the transition to a new chapter in the history of religion and American public education. In the decades that followed, legal advocates and scholars of religion wrestled with questions related to the religious liberty clauses of the First Amendment, which safeguard religious free exercise and non-establishment in schools.

As cases about religion and education made their way through courts in the latter half of the 20th century, and after the passage of the Equal Access Act of 1984 (20 U.S.C. § 4071) (which prohibits federally funded secondary schools from denying students access to limited open forums on the basis of religious, political, philosophical, or other speech), Charles Haynes and Oliver “Buzz” Thomas brought together important education, civic, and religious groups from across the political, ideological, and religious spectrum to create consensus documents about religion and education in public schools. These documents were intended to

provide a safe harbor to administrators and educators who felt battered by the storms of the culture wars of that era, during which religious conservatives promoted a political, social, and educational agenda to counteract changing gender and sexual norms. Haynes and Thomas' consensus-building strategy achieved great success. In December 1999, President Bill Clinton announced that the US Department of Education would send five publications about religion and education to every school in the country, including documents written by Haynes and Thomas.<sup>4</sup>

I suggested to my partners in Albania that communities might also provide guidance about religious freedom issues should the Albanian Ministry of Education begin to integrate the study of religion into schools. I recommended that they consider adopting a similar approach to Haynes and Thomas, who prioritized building consensus among key stakeholders invested in the education of young people. I hypothesized that questions might relate to the religious expression of students and teachers, including the right to pray, wear religious garb, read and distribute sacred texts, celebrate holidays, form and lead student clubs, and access food that conforms to their dietary restrictions (see, e.g., Haynes and Thomas 2007b). I explained that American public school educators and administrators have also requested guidance related to harassment and bullying based on religious identity, sexual orientation, or gender identity—including in the context of sex education classes.<sup>5</sup> And I described how guidance documents published in the United States and by the OSCE offer advice related to parental requests to adapt curricula or opt out students from coursework that does not conform to parents' religious convictions (see ODIHR Advisory Council of Experts on Freedom of Religion or Belief 2007, 63–73; Haynes and Thomas 2007a, 54).

My colleagues were quick to point out adaptations they planned to make to American guidelines. Some adaptations were necessary for prosaic reasons. For example, Albanian schools do not provide students with meals in the same way that American schools do, so policies related to the provision of meals that satisfy dietary requirements do not apply. But my Albanian colleagues proposed other adaptations for ideological reasons. One education official expressed strong misgivings about policies that would provide parents with the right to excuse their children from any assignments for religious reasons. The same official also suggested that schools were within their rights to refuse entry to young women who covered their heads. I disagreed. I admitted that some European countries might side with his interpretation of limits to religious freedom, but I explained that it was my role to represent those principles that I admired from American academic thought and jurisprudence.

Our conversation about how best to safeguard the rights of all revealed differences in certain fundamental assumptions. While we agreed that public schools could reinforce bonds between Albanians (or Americans) of different backgrounds, we disagreed about how schools best create that national cohesion—what Americans might refer to as an ethic of *e pluribus unum* (Latin for, out of many, one). From my perspective, the government inculcates trust when it protects the rights of students of all religions and none to bring their whole selves to public schools—including their religious convictions, practices, and clubs. When governments welcome students to come as they are, students recognize that they are equal members of the educational—and political—community, which further enforces democratic inclusion (see Lester 2011). As Emile Lester has written, “the public has a substantially legitimate claim to ownership of public schools in a pluralistic democracy like ours,” so public schools “are better off . . . reflecting and representing” communities rather than imposing or forbidding (within limits) certain beliefs or behaviors (Lester 2013, 115, 116). My Albanian colleague, however, argued that the best way to achieve unity is to insist on student uniformity. When students dress the same and complete the same assignments, for example, they think of themselves as equals.

My Albanian colleagues might interpret differently the meaning of the guidelines I provided in part because of the *relationship* between religious communities and the Albanian government. The Albanian government has a State Committee on Cults—under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Tourism, Culture, Youth, and Sports—which regulates the relationship between religious communities and the government. The Committee has agreements with five religious communities: The Sunni Muslim and Bektashi communities, the Roman Catholic and Orthodox Churches, and the Evangelical Brotherhood of Albania (see “Albania 2018 International Religious Freedom Report” 2018). These arrangements might determine to whom the government feels responsible when enforcing its guidelines on religion and education. For example, I still do not know whether Albanian officials will provide accommodations to students who do not belong to one of these five religious communities. Nor do I know whether the government, when considering whether to provide accommodations, will favor students’ sincerely held religious beliefs or the doctrine promulgated by leaders of communities with which it has official relations. As I discuss below, my conversations with Albanian colleagues about the inclusion of all communities—including minority and marginalized communities—might have been more productive if, at the time, I had the relational and normative dispositional language and frameworks that are central to cross-cultural religious literacy and covenantal pluralism.

### ***The study of religion within the curriculum***

In addition to policies and guidelines that protect religious freedom in American public schools, I introduced my Albanian colleagues to an American perspective on the best practices for the academic study of religion. I began by explaining that mainstream education organizations and learned societies for religious studies scholars in the United States distinguish between the academic and devotional study of religion (see, e.g., National Council for the Social Studies 2017; Bertucio and Marcus 2018).<sup>6</sup> One set of guidelines, adapted from the work of James V. Panoch at Wright State University, explains that teaching about religion (academic) includes “study about religion” that seeks to “expose,” “educate,” and “inform” students about “a diversity of religious views” whereas teaching religion (devotional) might advocate for student “acceptance” or “practice” of religion and might at times include an effort to “promote or denigrate” religion (see Haynes and Thomas 2007a, 45–46). I suggested that Albanian educators might encounter less resistance from community members if they explain that religious literacy education would facilitate student analysis of the ways religion manifests in private and public life rather than student evaluation of specific religious expressions as “good” or “bad.”

Indeed, one influential religious studies scholar, Diane Moore, locates critical analysis at the definitional center of religious literacy. Moore defines religious literacy as

the ability to discern and analyze the fundamental intersections of religion and social/political/cultural life through multiple lenses. Specifically, a religiously literate person will possess 1) a basic understanding of the history, central texts, 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; and 2) the ability to discern and explore the religious dimensions of political, social and cultural expressions across time and place.

(Moore 2007, 56–57)

Unlike some scholars who conceive of religious literacy as primarily the acquisition of factual knowledge about specific religious traditions (see, e.g., Prothero 2007),<sup>7</sup> Moore argues that



religious literacy should “foster the skills, values, interest, and confidence in students to be able to participate as active moral agents in the conscious social reproduction of society in its most inclusive form” (Moore 2007, 24). In order to participate as active moral agents, students need to study dynamics of “power and powerlessness” (Moore 2015) to better understand “which expressions of orthodoxy (‘right’ believing) and orthopraxy (‘right’ behaving) are socially and politically prominent or marginalized in specific contexts” (National Council for the Social Studies 2017, 95; see also Moore 2015). This has obvious implications for the study of religion in Albania, where certain religious communities have a special relationship with the government through the State Committee on Cults.

Factual knowledge cannot be ignored, however. Scholars disagree about the content that introductory courses should cover. Some scholars like Moore would choose the content for courses in response to the biases and assumptions that students bring to class. Religious literacy education should disrupt those biases and assumptions by introducing students to a variety of religious expressions (Moore 2007, 111–138). Other scholars like Prothero, for example, argue that American public schools should teach Bible 101 courses and World Religions 101 courses. Prothero suggests that the former is necessary in part because so much of American history and contemporary public life—from political speeches to artwork to literature—refers explicitly or implicitly to the Bible (Prothero 2007, 164–168). He argues for the latter because we live in an increasingly religiously diverse country, and residents of the country should share basic knowledge about the religious traditions of people who live here (Prothero 2007, 168–170). Given the demographics and history of Albania, Prothero’s logic might suggest that schools there should introduce students to the Bible and the Quran. In case my colleagues in Albania wanted to pursue this curricular option, I shared with them two sets of guidelines for teaching about the Bible, one produced by the Society of Biblical Literature (SBL) (“Bible Electives in Public Schools: A Guide from the Society of Biblical Literature” 2009), and the other produced by the First Amendment Center and the Bible Literacy Project (“The Bible and Public Schools: A First Amendment Guide” 1999).

No matter how Albanian officials decide to address factual knowledge in the curricula, I suggested that Moore’s vision for a religious literacy education grounded in conceptual and procedural knowledge should be at the core of Albanian education about religion. Indeed, Moore’s model serves as the foundation for the November 2019 American guidelines and frameworks for religious literacy education published by the American Academy of Religion (AAR), the world’s largest and most influential learned society for religious studies scholars, and the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS), the nation’s leading professional association for K–12 social studies educators. I summarized the premises of religious studies and frameworks of religious identity that the AAR and NCSS suggest should represent core conceptual knowledge that students should acquire and utilize in critical analysis. First, religions are (1) “internally diverse,” (2) “change over time,” and (3) are “embedded in all aspects of culture” (National Council for the Social Studies 2017, 94). Instead of presenting one expression of a religious tradition as universal, the AAR and NCSS guidelines insist on situating information about religion in particular social and historical contexts. In addition, religious identity is not grounded solely in beliefs related to theology and doctrine. Instead, educators might introduce students to a framework of religious identity that recognizes the imbrication of (1) *beliefs*, including those associated with “ethical evaluative claims about daily life as much as those about a transcendent reality or experiences of the divine;” (2) *behaviors*, including those “associated with rites, rituals, and life both inside and outside of strictly religious settings;” and (3) experience of *belonging* to intersecting communities grounded in religion and “racial, national, ethnic, familial, gender, class, and other identities” (National Council for the Social Studies 2017, 94; see also Marcus 2018).

I also explained the methods of inquiry associated with the procedural knowledge of religious literacy education. According to NCSS, students should be able to

collect and analyze the meaning and significance of primary and secondary religious sources in their particular social, historical, and political context, including statements of theology and doctrine, sacred texts, depictions of rites and rituals, biographies, histories, ethnography, art and architecture, and demographic data.

(National Council for the Social Studies 2017, 95) In the course of their analysis, students should be able to identify and describe the expressions of orthodoxy and orthopraxy that are prominent and represented or marginalized and obscured in public discourse (National Council for the Social Studies 2017, 95).

These premises and frameworks immediately became a focus of my conversations with religious leaders in Albania. They wanted to know which interpretation of their traditions Albanian schools would represent in the curriculum. I explained my recommendation that students should study a range of religious expressions from a variety of individuals and communities who self-identify as members of a religious tradition. Religious literacy education that takes these premises seriously can equip students with the tools necessary for identifying how temporally, geographically, and socially situated religious expressions produce, perpetuate, or undermine systems of power and privilege. Rather than promoting moral relativism, as some of my conversation partners feared, this model of religious literacy education trains students to analyze religion and its role in public life so that students can evaluate for themselves whether specific religious expressions align with their own theories of the good.

In addition to discussing the content and skills of religious literacy curricula, I explained that educators in Albania would have to make decisions about the structure of religious literacy coursework and the grades at which students will begin their study. The OSCE identifies three models for coursework: Subject-specific, integrated, and cross-curricular (ODIHR Advisory Council of Experts on Freedom of Religion or Belief 2007, 43). Some OSCE countries require independent religious studies courses in the subject-specific model, whereas others integrate the study of religion in other subject areas like history, literature, or art in order to explore the intersections of religion with every aspect of the human experience. The cross-curricular approach takes the integration model one step further by insisting on collaboration between teachers in multiple subjects who work together to help students explore the relevance of religion in various fields. I told my Albanian colleagues that in my experience, American public schools that do include the academic study of religion generally use an integrated approach, though some schools are beginning to offer standalone, subject-specific religious studies courses.<sup>8</sup> Whereas some standards in the United States—e.g., the National Standards for History—have required the study of religion for children in grades as young as Kindergarten (Douglass 2000, 32–36), mainstream guidelines for the study of religion from NCSS currently provide learning objectives only for grades 9–12.<sup>9</sup> I recommended that my colleagues in Albania carefully consider how to match instruction about religion with students according to their developmental stages.

### **Training and equipping educators**

In the final section of my overview, I encouraged my colleagues to consider how they would train and equip educators to teach about religion. I suggested that officials in the Ministry of Education, along with professors of pedagogy in institutions of higher education, would need to develop training programs for both pre-service and in-service educators. In my recommen-

dations, I encouraged Albanian officials to consider the format of training programs as well. In particular, I recommended that they evaluate the relative strengths of in-person, online, and blended professional development opportunities when designing different types of learning opportunities for educators.

I confessed that educators in the United States, including social studies teachers, generally receive inadequate training in the academic study of religion before they enter the classroom (Soules 2019, 21–25). Teachers lack pre-service training in part because teacher accreditation standards overlook the importance of religious studies (Bertucio and Marcus 2018). However, institutions across the United States—including the RFC, the Harvard Religious Literacy Project, the Boniuk Institute at Rice University, and the Interfaith Center of New York—offer robust models for training in-service educators to teach about religion academically. In addition, high school educators like Chris Murray in Maryland, Kelly O’Riley in Kentucky, and John Camardella and Seth Brady in Illinois have organized strong in-service religious studies training programs for their colleagues.

When asked about curricular resources, I answered that teachers in the United States are not required by the federal government to use specific instructional materials. Schools and districts use different textbooks, assignments, assessments, and syllabi. As such, I could not point Albanian educators to a definitive set of resources. However, I did mention that Albanian educators might use or at least draw inspiration from a variety of free, high quality, online resources including the Harvard Pluralism Project’s introductory essays to religious traditions; the Harvard Religious Literacy Project (2020a; 2020b) case studies, which are designed to facilitate inquiry into the ways religious traditions are embedded in culture; and the SBL’s Bible Odyssey, an online resource for teaching about the Bible academically. By introducing my colleagues to these resources, I intended to generate a discussion about the relative merits of using textbooks—which too often offer an over-generalized (if not essentialized) introduction to religious traditions—versus primary and secondary sources that represent a range of perspectives among members of a religious community. When pushed to provide an example of a scope and sequence for a standalone religious studies course, I referenced International Baccalaureate’s Diploma Programme World Religions course, which is currently undergoing a complete overhaul to better align with current trends in the field of religious studies.

Many of my Albanian colleagues were surprised about the degree of local control in the American education system given the power invested in the Albanian Ministry of Education. In addition, nearly all of my conversation partners in Albania, especially representatives of various religious communities, posed the same set of questions about selecting teachers and developing resources: Who would be allowed to teach about religion in Albanian schools? In particular, would religious communities have a say in the selection of teachers who would provide instruction about religion? And who would design the instructional materials? I had not anticipated these questions in my manual, in large part because I did not anticipate the ways memories of Hoxha’s anti-religious dictatorship continued to affect the relationship between religious communities and the government. According to my interlocutors, teachers were trained to denigrate religion under Hoxha’s regime. Representatives from religious communities wanted to know whether they would be able to participate in a vetting process to ensure that teachers do not reintroduce anti-religious discrimination into the classroom. They wanted teachers and instructional materials to offer authentic, positive, and even normative interpretations of religious traditions. Religious leaders also did not want teachers or materials to favor a particular religious tradition or favor non-religion over religion.

To answer their questions about American practices, I returned to key principles related to the academic and constitutional study of religion. First, I re-affirmed that the learning objectives

and guidelines published by the AAR, NCSS, and OSCE compel teachers to inform students about “diverse devotional assertions” of religious communities rather than promote a single, normative set of religious expressions of interpretations (National Council for the Social Studies 2017, 94; ODIHR Advisory Council of Experts on Freedom of Religion or Belief 2007, 73–74; AAR 2010). As such, instructional materials created by organizations like the Harvard Religious Literacy Project include primary and secondary sources that represent a broad range of perspectives within a religious community. Second, I explained that American educators who teach about religion are not—or at least, should not be—chosen based on their religious affiliation or lack thereof. Instructors come from a variety of traditions and none, and they should be judged by their ability to communicate effectively that religious beliefs, behaviors, and communities of belonging are diverse, dynamic, and culturally embedded. Third, I told my Albanian colleagues that I was unaware of any certification requirements for educators who teach about religion in the United States, but I affirmed my conviction that American accrediting bodies should introduce such standards to ensure that teachers receive formal training in religious studies.

### **How conversations in Albania changed my approach in the United States**

The conversations I had with Albanian colleagues directly impacted my writing and advocacy priorities in two important ways when I returned to the United States. First, my conversations with Albanian religious leaders about selecting and training educators to teach about religion inspired me to focus my attention on teaching certification requirements in the United States. The fall after I returned from Albania, I co-wrote a brief article with Brett Bertucio about the 2018 NCSS National Standards for the Preparation of Social Studies Teachers, which focuses on teacher preparation in “civics, economics, geography, history, and the social/behavioral sciences” but fails to mention religious studies explicitly (Bertucio and Marcus 2018; National Council for the Social Studies Task Force on Teacher Education Standards 2018). The following year, I organized a National Summit on Religion and Education—co-hosted by the RFC, AAR, NCSS, and Boston College’s Lynch School of Education and Human Development—to assess the present and future of religious studies education in primary and secondary schools. Kate Soules, David Callaway, and I wrote a white paper after the summit to present “eight major action items to improve religious studies education in the United States,” and action item four included a suggestion to include religious studies in “accreditation and licensing, including the standards for licensing and accreditation in teacher education programs (related to both subject matter requirements and diversity and equity requirements)” (Marcus, Soules, and Callaway 2020, 9–10).

Second, my Albanian colleagues recognized the importance of teaching students content and skills related to the study of religion, but they encouraged me to dedicate more attention to a third aspect of religious studies education: Dispositions. They pointed out that the American guidelines did not make clear which values and attitudes religious literacy curricula would inculcate in students. Some of my conversation partners in the Albanian government wanted coursework about religion to combat violent extremism explicitly, and they suggested that students should develop dispositions consistent with such a project. A different official referenced *Signposts*, a publication of the Council of Europe, which “stresses the values of tolerance and solidarity gained through understanding others, values that underpin the Council of Europe’s educational work” (Jackson 2014, 15).

While many religious literacy advocates in the United States discuss why students should study religion and the values such study might cultivate, guidelines from the AAR and NCSS do not include robust and specific disposition-focused learning objectives (see Ellis and Marcus 2019).

Though I discouraged my Albanian colleagues from framing religious literacy education as an anti-violent extremism project, I regretted not having concrete examples of learning objectives related to dispositions from the United States. These conversations inspired me to begin a dialogue with American colleagues about that topic when I returned home. Since the summer of 2018, I published an article with Justine Esta Ellis about balancing the why, what, and how of religious studies education (Ellis and Marcus 2019), and I am currently working on an article with Allison Ralph for a special issue of *Religion & Education* that identifies the cognitive and affective dimensions of influential religious literacy definitions (Marcus and Ralph 2021).

### **Analyzing my experience in Albania through the lens of covenantal pluralism**

As an American advisor in Albania, I adopted a mode of engagement that parallels the framework of covenantal pluralism. I honestly represented my own values and practices, and my interlocutors and I acknowledged differences of opinion in a spirit of humility and empathy. Nevertheless, when our differences were deep and related to human rights—as when an Albanian colleague and I disagreed about the rights of parents and students to request accommodations to curricula—I rejected indifferent relativism. Instead, I tried to persuade my colleagues to align more closely with my interpretation of the legal and guidance documents to which we all have a commitment, including those published by international and inter-governmental institutions. But in the true spirit of pluralism, I expected that mutual engagement would lead to mutual enrichment—and indeed, I returned to the United States with new questions about and ideas for American religious literacy education.

The strategy of appealing to shared, robust legal and normative commitments resonates with what Os Guinness calls “chartered pluralism” (Guinness 1990, 11–12).<sup>10</sup> Guinness proposes that Americans navigate their deep differences in the spirit of chartered pluralism by “forg[ing] a substantive agreement, or freely chosen compact, on three things that are the ‘3 Rs’ of religious liberty in a pluralistic society: Rights, responsibilities, and respect,” all of which derive from the First Amendment to the US Constitution (Guinness 1990, 11).<sup>11</sup> My Albanian colleagues did not share my commitment to the US Constitution, but we did share commitments to documents from the OSCE and the UN. By appealing to those documents, or charters, we recognized common ground on which we could engage one another. We also belonged to distinct chartered communities—bound by the American and Albanian constitutions—and many of us belonged to distinct religious communities. My experience in Albania provides just one example of how actors in the contemporary world must navigate between multiple overlapping but distinct chartered and covenantal commitments.

In navigating an array of convergent and divergent commitments, I utilized skills that Seiple and Hoover (Chapter 1 of this *Handbook*) associate with cross-cultural religious literacy. There are strong parallels between the constituent competencies of “cross-cultural religious literacy” and the definition of “religious literacy” proposed by Moore and myself. By examining my own commitments before engaging others, I began to cultivate what Seiple and Hoover call “personal competency” and what Moore calls an understanding of “situated perspectives.” Moore explicitly calls for individuals to acknowledge that all claims, including one’s own claims, are “‘situated’ in that they arise out of particular social/historical contexts” and that those situated claims lead to personal biases and perspectives that require examination (Moore 2007, 79–81).

Just as Seiple and Hoover’s “comparative competency” involves “understand[ing] the moral, epistemological, and spiritual framework of one’s neighbor *as s/he does*” (emphasis in original), religious literacy requires an “empathetic understanding” of how religion operates in people’s private and public lives (Haynes and Nord 1998). Such empathy requires not only a familiarity

with important beliefs, including those related to morality, but also an understanding of the complex ways individuals and communities construct their identities around behaviors and communities of belonging (Marcus 2018). Attending to the full complexity of religious identity reveals possibilities for what Seiple and Hoover call “collaborative competency,” which Peter Ochs might describe as a competence that emerges from “hearth-to-hearth” dialogue (Ochs 2015). Instead of appealing only to agreements about morality among various stakeholders, leaders who want to “get specific things done in a particular context” might identify points of convergence vis-à-vis a variety of beliefs, behaviors, or communities of belonging that might motivate or sustain common projects.

In their attention to the relational and normative dispositions that motivate and sustain common projects, Seiple and Hoover make an important contribution to discussions about religious literacy. Though many scholars recognize that religious literacy education should cultivate knowledge, skills, and dispositions that prepare students for civic life, influential definitions of religious literacy today generally center on either knowledge or skills (Ellis and Marcus 2019). Dispositions are certainly important to scholars like Moore and Prothero, but they often do not explicitly include their dispositional goals in their core definitions of religious literacy (see Prothero 2007, 17, 18; Moore 2007, 56–57). Seiple and Hoover, on the other hand, center relational and normative dispositions in their definition of cross-cultural religious literacy: Specifically, “the nature and requirements of leadership in crossing cultural and religious barriers for the sake of practical collaboration, which tends to yield civic solidarity (a collaborative competency).” Here, Seiple and Hoover emphasize the dispositions required for navigating—through the specific skills of evaluation, negotiation, and communication—the deep differences that divide the self and other. By linking cross-cultural religious literacy with covenantal pluralism—which values “a robust, relational, and non-relativistic paradigm for living together, peacefully and productively, in the context of our deepest differences”—Seiple and Hoover challenge religious literacy proponents to be explicit about their relational and normative commitments.

I welcome Seiple and Hoover’s challenge to think deeply about the relational and normative dispositional commitments of religious literacy education. Upon reflection, I am confident that I would have been better served in Albania if I had left more room in our conversations for not only an intellectual discussion of the substance of laws and curricula but also a more-than-cursory dialogue about the relational and normative dispositions the laws and curricula do or should inculcate. To be fair, I did emphasize Haynes and Thomas’ consensus-building and empathetic approach to religion and education, which grounds itself in relational and normative commitments to democratic inclusion, and I did consider my own situated perspectives. But I did not leave adequate space for myself or my interlocutors to develop our personal or comparative competencies *in relationship with one another* to better serve our collaboration. In focusing on intellectual knowledge and skills related to religious literacy education, I failed to anticipate fully the relational concern raised repeatedly by my interlocutors with regard to the balance of power between different Albanian communities, religious and otherwise. And if I had left more time for myself and my colleagues to cultivate our personal and comparative competencies in dialogue with one another, I expect that our conversations about religious garb and opt out rights might have been more productive. While I am grateful to have these frameworks to reflect on my experiences in Albania, I am even more grateful for the opportunity to leverage these frameworks to strengthen my future advocacy work.

I feel obliged to add a final note of caution as cross-cultural religious literacy and covenantal pluralism disseminate widely and contribute an important corrective to the field. Clearly stating the relational and normative dispositional goals of religious literacy education might present

academic, political, and legal challenges to religious literacy advocates. Scholars often speak of religious literacy as a sub-field of religious studies, which has long sought to prove its rigor as an academic field by decoupling moral education from the study of religion (Marcus and Ralph 2021). Encouraging relational and normative dispositional goals for religious literacy education challenges a rigid distinction between academic and practice- and norm-oriented approaches to the study of religion (see, e.g., Beliso-De Jesús 2018). It is not surprising that Seiple and Hoover would question whether academic and applied approaches to the study of religion can or should be conceived of as distinct, given their deep experience with inter-religious engagement. But it is unclear how naming robust normative and relational dispositional goals for the study of religion—especially in public schools—will affect academic and political support for religious literacy education.

Furthermore, by linking religious literacy education with covenantal pluralism, which “emphasizes both legal equality and neighborly solidarity,” Seiple and Hoover might invite legal challenges from some religious (or anti-religious) exclusivists who would question how far public schools can go in inculcating an attitude beyond “tolerance” for the religious other. This is not to say that schools may not or should not promote respect for students of all religions and none. But the more robust and explicit the normative and relational goals of religious literacy education, the more likely some people are to question whether the government can or should promote those goals—and therefore whether the government should promote religious literacy education itself. Perhaps the tools to address those concerns may be found within cross-cultural religious literacy and covenantal pluralism.

## Notes

- 1 The Fulbright Specialist program was set up as “a unique opportunity for US academics and established professionals to engage in two- to six-week, project-based exchanges at host institutions across the globe.” For more about the program, see “Fulbright Specialist Program” n.d.
- 2 For example, I worked with Brett Bertucio to propose the integration of religious literacy into the National Standards for the Preparation of Social Studies Teachers (Bertucio and Marcus 2018). I also worked with Kate Soules and David Callaway on a white paper to propose eight key action items to improve the field of religion and education in K-12 schools (Marcus, Soules, and Callaway 2020). More details on these projects below.
- 3 Though I intended to include Albanian judicial opinions related to religious freedom and education, multiple subject matter experts in Albanian law and politics told me that they were unaware of relevant court cases. I was unsuccessful in locating pertinent decisions through my own research, which was limited to English language materials.
- 4 For a history of these consensus documents, see Beauchamp 2000 and Marcus 2017.
- 5 For a somewhat dated example of a guidance document on navigating conversations about sexual orientation and religion, see First Amendment Center and BridgeBuilders 2006.
- 6 For a critique of the distinction between “scholar” and “practitioner,” see Beliso-De Jesús 2018.
- 7 In this section, I differentiate between different dimensions of knowledge using David R. Krathwohl et al.’s revision of Benjamin Bloom’s taxonomy of educational objectives. The revised version of Bloom’s taxonomy can be found in Krathwohl 2002. See also Marcus and Ralph 2021 and Marcus 2021.
- 8 The Harvard Religious Literacy Project began a study to provide “comprehensive information about how religion is taught in public schools in the United States,” but that study has been put on hold (see “Religious Studies in Public Schools Mapping Project” n.d.).
- 9 A group of teachers, administrators, religious studies scholars, and professional development providers gathered in 2018 to develop learning objectives for grades K-2, 3-5, 6-8, and 9-12. Their guidelines are not yet published, but they are available upon request by emailing religion@freedomforum.org. I shared that set of guidelines with my colleagues in Albania.
- 10 From spring 2015 through fall 2016, I worked at a non-profit, Global Covenant Partners, dedicated to preventing and reducing religion-related violence. The organization was frequently critiqued for using the word “covenant,” which was said to appeal narrowly to Jews, Christians, and Muslims. The

organization responded that the term “covenant” is not exclusively religious, and that the international community uses the language of covenants in some treaties, such as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. Some critics were unconvinced. Given this experience, I ask whether using the language of both charters and covenants might create different points of entry for both religious and non-religious individuals and institutions engaged in a conversation about principled pluralism.

- 11 Guinness is specifically referring to “The Williamsburg Charter” of 1988; <https://www.religiousfreedomcenter.org/about/charter/>.

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# 12

## RELIGIOUS LITERACY AND HIGHER EDUCATION

*James Walters*

The story of modernity has been the shift from the local to the global. Communities whose frame of reference once extended little beyond the horizon have become increasingly interconnected. People, information, and capital have all become more mobile, creating fluid and complex societies in which the ability to evaluate, negotiate, and communicate with and through multiple differences has become essential to achieving results. This is the story that has defined the modern era from colonial expansion and the Industrial Revolution through to the globalization of markets and the digital revolution.

Universities have been a major part of this story. From their inception in Paris and Bologna in the 12th century, universities gathered scholars from different regions and cultures in the shared pursuit of knowledge and wisdom. People traveled long distances to attend universities and they aspired to understand truth from a global perspective (see Ridder-Symoens 1992, 280–304). Of course, there have been times and places that have seen universities serving primarily local needs or national agendas. But in its spirit the university is a cosmopolitan institution, seeking to find unity and coherence across diverse worldviews, philosophies, and epistemic systems. John Henry Newman explores this principle in his 1854 description of the university as a “School of Universal Learning.” It is, he writes, “a school of knowledge of every kind, consisting of teachers and learners from every quarter” (Newman 2001, 1). For Newman this approach was linked to the fundamental Christian notion of the universality of truth. Just as there is one God, one faith, and one baptism (Ephesians 4:5), and one source of truth and redemption for all nations (Matthew 16:24), so there is a unity of knowledge. Just as it cannot be said that the Gospel is good news for one section of humanity only, neither can it be said that there are bodies of knowledge or ideas that do not relate to all others. In short, for Newman (whose influence on the idea and purpose of higher education has extended far beyond the Church), a university is universal, and as such it is oriented to the global rather than the local.

Questions of religious understanding and literacy within the university have to be addressed within the frame of these global concerns. This is because religions (Christianity and Islam at least) have long exerted global influence as they engage with local contexts, and we will consider later why the global character of religion is of renewed importance today. But the temptation for a university to remain too local in its consideration of religion can take one of two forms, both of which are present in the ways in which religion is approached in the British education system at primary and secondary (pre-university) level. First, knowledge and engagement might

only be considered relevant for those religions present within the locality. In the UK, religious education in primary and secondary community schools is not prescribed under the National Curriculum but is determined in each county or borough by a Standing Advisory Council on Religious Education, constituted of different faith representatives from the local community. While these councils may propose a good, broad curriculum with a global perspective, they are not required to take such a wide view and the temptation for local considerations to dominate is significant. As a consequence, little coherent thought has been given to what kind of global religious literacy should be required for children in British schools. Second, the religious foundation of the institution itself can lead to the exclusion of alternative religious viewpoints. In the UK for instance, while regulation is increasing to introduce different religious viewpoints within faith schools, there is still a significant problem that a sectarian ethos can dominate a particular school's religious agenda. In trying to preserve its own religious identity, the school excludes alternative religious viewpoints.

Both these problems can contribute to, and be found at, universities in the UK and further afield. At many universities, religious influence is confined to those local faith groups who provide chaplaincy services or who have significant representation among students and faculty. In others, the (usually historic) religious foundation of the university will dominate the religious agenda, perhaps over-asserting itself in the face of secular attack. Both situations fail to take religion seriously as part of an education that explores the dynamics of global thought and action, seeing it as a primarily local concern and/or a matter of student psychological welfare. This relegation of religion to the local over the global is the outworking of a long process of religion's domestication and privatization in Western society. That is to say that enabling the vested interests that may be present in the local community or in a historic foundation will likely be some predominantly Western assumptions about the essentially private, interior nature of religion.

### **Modernity's confinement of religion to the local**

The confinement of religion to the local rather than the global agenda of the university is not merely a result of the over-influence of the local religious presence; it reveals the dominant assumptions about where academia (and wider Western society) believes religion belongs and the role it serves. Within Western European culture, and the institutions it has influenced and propagated through colonialism and globalization, faith is predominantly a private matter for individuals and, in so far as it serves a public role, its concerns are essentially parochial and focused on local communities. Much has been written about the origins of this European trajectory of secularization in the aftermath of the Wars of Religion in the 16th and 17th centuries. Scholars have argued that the bloody cost of religious conflict led to the subordination of religious expression to national citizenship. State churches imposed uniformity and regulated religious life in such a way as to domesticate or privatize the role of religion in society.

This political prioritizing of local over global in relation to Europe's accommodation with the potential divisiveness of religion translates into the epistemological agenda of the modern university (see Flatt 2020). Thinking about religion has frequently been reduced from the consideration of civilizational narratives and symbolic systems to a more concentrated attention to local beliefs and practices. The modern field of religious studies has become extremely nervous of universals. We are discouraged, for example, from speaking about "World Religions" for fear of generalization and neglecting attention to local, or even individual, expressions of faith.<sup>1</sup> On the one hand, this is surely an appropriate consideration of the complexity of religious communities and traditions, including those for which the category "religion" is itself an ambiguous fit. Postcolonial deconstructions of the whole concept of religion are enlightening, not least in

forging new connections across traditions (see Asad 1993). But on the other hand, it seems to epitomize the zenith of a denial that theological ideas and stories can be formative and constitutive in global history, as well as the lives of individuals. The bigger narratives and systemic worldviews have now been colonized by secular theories and disciplines.<sup>2</sup>

At some point, therefore, it became the dominant view in academia that religious traditions ought not to be studied as formative narratives across global civilizations. Instead religion became one of the objects under examination by the rational subject who could draw on social or scientific theory for understanding, but certainly not faith itself. Theological narratives about the meaning and order of the universe were displaced by post-Enlightenment principles of pure insight, free enquiry, objectivity, causation, and logic. In the terms of Hegel's discussion, it was the victory of enlightenment over superstition (though Hegel himself saw this new mode of enquiry as arising out of the Reformation) (Hegel 2018, 314–333). Religion, either through its propensity for institutional control or its irrational enthusiasms, was seen as inconsistent with this new paradigm and so emerged a more thoroughgoing secularism in the culture of academia.

Scientific understanding has come a long way since Isaac Newton, yet a mechanistic worldview in which knowledge can be pursued without any metaphysical reference was deeply entrenched in the academic landscape of the 18th century. The motto of my own institution, “Know the causes of things,”<sup>3</sup> can easily feed a mechanistic and siloed interpretation of reality and presupposes the irrelevance of a divine “First Cause” that Thomas Aquinas thought essential to our understanding of the world and its purposes.<sup>4</sup> Newton's idea of God was deism in which God is the architect of a cosmic machine, set in motion at the point of creation but unsustained by providence. For Newton this at least left the Bible as a source of fruitful study. But by the time Napoleon came to ask the French physicist Pierre-Simon Laplace why, unlike Newton, his works did not mention God, he replied, “Sire, I have no need of that hypothesis” (cited in McGrayne 2012, 30).

The working assumption of most universities ever since has been that acquisition of the knowledge that really counts does not require, or even allow for, the God hypothesis. While some theology departments have remained, religion is rarely given serious consideration outside of them, and even many of them have embraced the reductive “local” approach of much Religious Studies. For universities committed to addressing the realities of today's world, this is no longer satisfactory. Serious consideration of the global scene now requires us to take religion more seriously as a galvanizing, motivating, and dynamic force. Some scholars even speak of a postsecular turn, and demographic predictions do indeed suggest that declining birth rates in Europe and growing birth rates in the most religious parts of the world will lead to the numerical growth of believers over non-believers.<sup>5</sup> But the most persuasive definitions of the postsecular derive less from the interpretation of statistics than from analysis of religion's seemingly expanding sphere of operation, from the local confinement of modernity to a complex globalized role in postmodernity. This globalized presence and role is true in three senses.

First, we are at a point in history that is moving us beyond a European/American orientation of global order towards a world of multiple power bases and worldviews. This shift is rapidly eroding the expectation that the rest of the world will automatically mirror Europe's experience of secularization, the ever-growing confinement of religion to the local. But more than that it is exposing the falsehood, long propagated in Western universities, that this form of secularization was natural and universal. Perhaps the postsecular is not so much that religion is resurgent as that it had never gone away. Most people on the planet have continued to follow a religious tradition through the processes of development and globalization.<sup>6</sup> This reason alone is enough to warrant greater attention to it in the university. But, in fact, many universities have learned that they are unable to ignore religious concerns on their campuses as they have sought to recruit students

from the emerging economies of Asia, South America, and Africa. This has made the kind of religious literacy that we shall explore a necessary skillset, not just for life after graduation, but for the flourishing of the university community itself.

Second, this global reorientation that is fracturing the European assumption that religion belongs in the local is also enabling new global connections and realignments in which religion is a formative part of identity. We are seeing an increase in transnational linkages of religious groups. Much of the global Indian diaspora now connects through a strong narrative of Hindu nationalism.<sup>7</sup> Christian groups are more connected across nations and denominations, particularly in support of persecuted churches.<sup>8</sup> Pan Islamic groups are growing in strength in the developing world and in their links in the West.<sup>9</sup> Again, these connections reach our university campuses and have potential to fuel campus tensions if not explored, mediated, and brought into the discussions of the classroom.

Third, the new global reordering is in part driven by, and is in part driving, the crisis of the European/American model of what it means to be modern. The systems of thought and social order that have flowed from Enlightenment thought (democracy, free markets, human rights) with the free, rational human subject as its defining agent, are all now questioned by alternative systems and models such that we must now speak of multiple modernities. Integral to this is a questioning of secularity and the supposed neutrality of excluding religion from public and academic discourse (see Wolterstorff 2019). Many students are now arriving on our more international campuses with these divergent worldviews and (at least in my experience in a university that draws students from over 150 countries, and 69% of whom come from outside of Europe) are unwilling to leave religious concerns at the door.

All of this puts religion at the forefront of the global challenges with which universities must engage. We are at the point in history where the marginalization of religion to local concerns will no longer hold and universities must grapple with the problems and possibilities religion presents on the global stage. Thus we turn from the need for religious literacy as part of the global agenda of the university to its content and role in higher education. I share the fundamental contention of covenantal pluralism that religious literacy is not so much a body of knowledge as a mode of intercultural engagement. It is a set of skills and competencies that have as much to do with the formation of character as of intellect. This is related to the fact that religion is not just an aspect of a person's identity alongside many others (race, gender, sexual orientation, etc.); it is more foundational since it connects the material life of the believer and their community with their transcendent ends. It is an identity that shapes every other identity and is more profoundly constitutive of community and belonging.

I will, therefore, explore religious literacy in higher education under the three themes of empathy, imagination, and humility. While I argue that these three attributes are tools necessary to becoming religiously literate, we will also see how an engagement with thoughtful religious literacy as part of the university experience can deepen these important capacities among learners and become a vital component in the character formation to which universities should aspire.

## Empathy

To consider religious literacy in higher education as a task of deepening empathy is potentially to address an area where today's university students are deficient. The impact of the digital revolution on the formation of human brains and behaviors is a matter of much debate. But research into the effects of a childhood where much face-to-face interaction has been replaced with time spent on digital devices is now yielding troubling findings. In South Korea, where 20% of

teenagers are using devices for more than seven hours a day, research has found a deterioration of cognitive abilities akin to having suffered brain injury or psychiatric illness. Particularly affected is the right side of the brain whose functions are associated with emotions, meaning, humor, and the ability to empathize with the experience of others (see Bazalgette 2017, 115).

Today's secondary school leavers are the digital generation who have grown up with the immediacy of online communication and knowledge exchange. On the one hand this screen exposure can certainly make them aware of, and open to, the need for religious literacy and willing to foster global debate and engagement. But we are also aware how the online world can be one of echo chambers, silos, tribalism, and polarization. Rather than opening people to the perspectives of others, the abundance of information and cacophony of voices which surround us today may lead to a paradoxical closing of minds. This is one element of what NYU President Emeritus John Sexton calls the new "secular dogmatism," rigid bipolarities that suppress the enquiring spirit. He presents universities as a counterforce, "sacred spaces for critical reflection" (Sexton 2019, 16) in which dialogue leads to the expanding of minds and the exploration of difference. Yet we all know that universities themselves are not immune to these politicized polarizations with agendas on both Left and Right excluding the possibility of empathetic encounter as a basis for dialogue. Religion is obviously very present in the kind of culture wars that Sexton describes and the subject of many of the starkly polarized conflicts in the world today. Building religious literacy is therefore a crucial and colossal empathetic task, both because such empathy is needed to address these specific tensions but also because it builds understanding of a primary motivator for so many people in today's world.

In a global university with students and faculty from diverse backgrounds, a community is formed that is ideally suited to empathetic religious literacy work. Learning about world religions does not rely simply on the content of the curriculum but on the learning community within which listening and debate can occur. It is in such communities that mature individuals are formed. Edith Stein, in her major philosophical work on empathy, notes that the empathetic task is not merely the discovery of the other but the discovery of ourselves: "the 'I' does not become individualized because another faces it, but its individuality, or ... selfness is brought into relief in contrast to the otherness of the other" (Stein 1989, 38). This appears to be a major difference between the cross-cultural religious literacy (CCRL) promoted by covenantal pluralism and an approach to religious literacy that simply seeks to gain knowledge about the other. In CCRL, self and other are both transformed (not homogenized) in the shared project of mutual understanding and ethical living. The transformative power of an empathetic encounter for both self and other has also been crucial to the religious literacy work we have done at the London School of Economics. Mindful of the number of students coming from countries of escalating religious conflict and seeking to form them as peacemakers within those situations, shaping the dynamics of each cohort has been as important to us as the caliber of the speakers they hear.

There is some element of psychologist Gordon Allport's well-known "contact hypothesis" from the 1950s in our work: The belief that engaging in constructive learning and dialogue with members of other faiths will build an empathetic understanding of the other and their faith that overcomes individual differences and challenges pervasive negative stereotyping (Allport 1954). Allport identified four conditions necessary for positive contact to foster empathy, all of which rely on critical institutions to sustain repeated and consistent interactions. The structure and ethos of a university is one such critical institution.

First, equal status is required between participants for the contact period. Being a student is a kind of leveler. Whatever a student's background, nationality, age, or class, the institution of the university instills an equality of status as learner. The issue of religious equality may be harder to establish and is a challenge common to any interfaith gathering. Who is hosting? What is the

dominant faith community? What is the religious status of the university itself? In our own case, LSE is a secular university but our religious literacy programs are run by a majority Christian staff, with a director who is ordained within the state church. To establish the necessary equity, therefore, we need to exercise a great deal of critical self-awareness to check our biases and we seek constantly to achieve appropriate balance in course participants and presenters, even as we encourage their own self-reflection, considering what unknown biases they might bring to the encounter.

Second, Allport outlined the need for a common goal. Defining a common goal can itself be divisive through a tendency to capitulate to a lowest common denominator, a factor that is off-putting to a wider spectrum of views that see any watering down of deeply held positions as an unacceptable price for engagement. We have found the posture of *curiosity* a common goal that resonates across these differences. Again the university already provides something of this in the shared task of learning. Students have enrolled for similar reasons: To advance their capacity for critical thought, achievement, and career success. They have this curiosity in common as a basis for empathy. To take a group of Muslim, Jewish, and Christian students to Israel and Palestine (as we do every year) is a very different enterprise from taking a group of more disparate community leaders. Wearing a hoodie emblazoned with the university logo is more than just an easy way to identify the group! It is a sign of a shared common goal, even before the specific goals of that program are agreed.

This aids the third condition, intergroup cooperation. Sometimes our programs intentionally facilitate conversations around “hot topics” by means of teaching our students the tools to “disagree well.” However, it is important to recognize the emotional labor required in this intentional dialogue, and that holding a space together also requires incidental encounters outside the control of the facilitators. Since university students are well versed in collaboration on coursework and presentations, as it is an integral element of university study, all of our religious literacy programs involve some element of collaborative research or project work. We intentionally work to structure religiously diverse groups and see time and again how important conversations and observations naturally come to the fore as relationships of trust are built around other means. Our Faith and Climate Action program combines this condition with the last by encouraging innovative interfaith responses to climate change, the common goal that is more and more recognized as the precondition for any kind of resilient religious pluralism in the 21st century.

Finally, the contact hypothesis requires the sanction or support of authority figures. While most mainstream senior faith leaders today support interfaith work and some knowledge of other faiths, this is far from the case universally at the community level and particularly in non-Western countries. Taking part in our religious literacy programs may be an act of courage or even rebellion on the part of some students. Some come from places where adherents of other faiths may be demonized and conversion may be outlawed by religious hierarchy if not criminalized. It is important, therefore, within the university that students are exposed to credible religious leaders who model and legitimize the business of religious literacy and engagement across religious differences.<sup>10</sup>

## Imagination

As we have discussed, cross-cultural religious literacy is more than simply conveying abstract knowledge. It is perhaps the boldest statement of a consensus that has emerged in the (still relatively new) field of religious literacy. Learning information such as the content of the Five Pillars of Islam or the Eightfold Path of Buddhism may be a key component. But a great deal is

lost if we simply think we are communicating facts. Dinham and Francis frame their approach in terms of improving the conversation about religion on university campuses in the context of its problematizing over concern about extremism (Dinham and Francis 2015). For them, religious literacy is about attitudinal change as much as knowledge sharing. Andrew Wright adopts a critical realist approach to religious literacy in which theological frameworks shape the pursuit of truth within the university (Wright 2016). Gwen Griffiths-Dickson has advocated a person-centered approach in which religion is not understood as a list of tenets but as narratives generated between individuals and communities of faith (see Dinham and Francis 2015, 77–100). CCRL embraces all these relational aspects while putting a strong emphasis on the development of skills and qualities in the learner.

Our approach at LSE has been to frame religious literacy through the lens of an expanded imagination. Informed by Charles Taylor's theory of "social imaginaries" (Taylor 2003) and John Henry Newman's "theology of a religious imagination" (Newman 2013, esp. Chapter 5), we encourage students to consider the ways in which religious narratives, ritual, and communal belonging organize the believer's interpretation of the world and their place and purposes within it.<sup>11</sup> None of us look at the world purely empirically. We all perceive and interpret the physical world around us through the various imaginative frameworks that we have inherited and which organize our thoughts and attitudes. The philosopher Mary Midgley (who focuses primarily on the imaginative frameworks of science) terms these frameworks "the myths we live by" and argues that the way in which we imagine the world "determines what we think important in it, what we select for our attention among the welter of facts that constantly flood in upon us" (Midgley 2004, 2).

For the vast majority of the world's population, religion plays a part in this organizing imagination. The privatized, belief-oriented understanding of religion that dominates Western thinking will fall short of grasping this significance. Religious traditions are powerful symbolic systems that shape both collective memory and our vision of the future. As such they form individuals and communities in their personal habits, social attitudes, and political beliefs in multiple ways. Scriptural texts, practices of prayer, and collective acts of worship build a picture of the world, and the place and purposes of the believer within it. The fact that these narratives and practices are concerned with ultimate, transcendent realities takes their significance beyond the merely pragmatic or utilitarian frameworks of much everyday thinking. The religious imagination engages life and death, material and metaphysical, earthly and heavenly.

The discovery of religious literacy as an exercise of the imagination is, of course, crucial to the empathetic task discussed in the previous section. It is an attempt to see the world as others see it and not impose even my understanding of what it means to be religious. But beyond interpersonal maturity, considering religious literacy in terms of imagination opens up the educational experience in three important ways. First, it unfolds for us the ways in which the ancient religious imaginations continue to exert their influence in the contemporary world. Many students at my university, for example, are engaged with the Israel-Palestine conflict as both a topic of study and as a focus of much political activism on campus. Most speak about it as a conflict relating to sovereignty, nationhood, land ownership, and violations of human rights and international law. All this is true, but we experience a profound deepening of understanding when the significance of the different religious imaginations of the region (at once both overlapping and competing) is fully grasped.

To understand the crucible of the tensions within the Old City of Jerusalem is to see the living legacy of the religious meanings that have been embedded in physical space over centuries. For Jews the Temple Mount represents the center of God's purposes for creation. Held to



be Mount Moriah where Abraham went to sacrifice his son Isaac (even the site of the Garden of Eden itself), the Temple that stood there until AD 70 housed the Holy of Holies, the dwelling place of God on earth. That destruction was given meaning by Christians who believe Jesus prophesied it and became himself the new temple of sacrifice. A new wave of Christians (influential among a minority but vocal group of evangelicals in America) believe that God's purposes for the temple are not over and that it may even be rebuilt in a future "millennial dispensation." Such ideas provoke horror among Muslims for whom this same *haram al-sharif* or "noble sanctuary" is the third holiest site of Islam. The Dome of the Rock marks the site from which Muhammad made his "night journey" and was the original direction of prayer before this reverted to Mecca. The implications of these competing narratives of meaning reverberate around the world and shape attitudes and allegiances in ways that mainstream media largely overlook. This is just one example of the enduring power of historic religious imaginations in today's world. Western academia, driven by secular assumptions, has downplayed or failed to recognize them even in its own societies and institutions. Indeed many argue that secularism itself is a product of the Christian tradition's differentiation of sacred and secular power (e.g., Holland 2019).

Second, in our age when religions are dynamic and mobile, we can see how religious imaginations are evolving and interacting with other forces in today's world. A major example is the wave of populist nationalism we have seen growing over recent decades. Vladimir Putin's vision for Russia is closely fused with the Orthodox Christianity that has been resurgent since the end of the Cold War. Narendra Modi leads India's first government since independence to claim that the nation has an intrinsic Hindu character. Evangelical Christianity has been central to the electoral appeal of both Donald Trump in the United States and Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil. But more positively, religion is reacting and adapting to all kinds of social forces—from LGBT rights to movements that address the climate crisis—including the phenomenon of religious pluralism itself. Religious traditions are not static; they are adaptive imaginative frameworks that can be ossified into sectarian ideologies or expanded as they respond to social change and new concerns.

Third, and perhaps most importantly, religious imaginations open up possible futures. Whether we consider religious narratives in terms of their legacies, their evolutions, or their contemporary interactions, the power of the religious imagination might be said to lie in its opening up of the unseen. Jean-Paul Sartre defined the imagination as the ability to think of (the image of) what is not. This is how imagination (of what is not) amounts to more than mere perception (of what is) (Sartre 2012). For religious people this may include the willingness to attribute agency to unseen dimensions of the real (angels and demons, the communion of saints, the miraculous). But most especially it is the ability to think of what is not *yet*, that is to say, what is to come. Theologians call this *eschatology*, a vision of God's purposes for the future that shapes the believer's present. For a Christian to pray, "Thy Kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven" is for them to invoke a rich picture of God's future purposes for justice, peace, and restoration which informs their actions today.

While this future orientation is most obviously the case in the linear salvation histories of the Abrahamic faiths, imaginative visions of the future also exist in the cyclic traditions of the East. In the Theravada Buddhist tradition, it is believed that the teachings of the Buddha will pass away after five thousand years. At this point a degenerate human society will see the advent of a new Buddha, embodying wisdom, goodness, happiness, and knowledge. He will rule over an earthly paradise and teach virtue to humanity (Strong 2004, 27–50). In its theory of reincarnation, Buddhism shares with Hinduism and Sikhism a more personal imagining of the future as

the eventual liberation from rebirths through moral progress. The believer is oriented towards a utopian future toward which they are already journeying.

Imagining possible future worlds is a necessary element of academic life. As we grapple with the postsecular dissatisfaction with many of modernity's ways of ordering the world, new social imaginaries drawn from religious traditions will be important tools to unlock global problems. In response to the global climate emergency, for example, religious narratives of care for a material world conceived as a gift entrusted by God to humanity have an ability to convert hearts and minds where secular discourses have not. And crucially faith communities have the social capital to realize them, mass movements of people bound together by a shared imaginative vision for the healing of our world. Collaborations across traditions on such projects are precisely the vehicles envisaged by covenantal pluralism for the living out of the rules and relationships necessary to live peacefully and productively in a world of deep differences.

### **Humility**

Finally, we consider humility, a virtue which perhaps the modern university (or modern society more generally) is not known for valuing. As the higher education sector has been progressively marketized, degrees have been sold as commodities that enhance labor market competitiveness. Universities have become oriented to making students more confident and articulate, not more humble. On the face of it, adding religious literacy to the curriculum is one more enhancement to that competitive educational offer. Religious literacy, as argued here, is a crucial tool in navigating today's radically plural world, a world in which religious identities and tensions have come to the fore while secular assumptions and paradigms are proving inadequate. At LSE, many of our students have taken up the offer of our interfaith leadership programs to enhance their employment potential and equip them to be leaders of religiously diverse corporations or organizations.

And yet, while the study of religion empowers and equips with new skills, it is fundamentally an exercise in humility. This is true in the sense that to learn about the most powerful generator of meaning in the lives of others always raises challenging questions in our own. To ask what is most important to the other, what motivates, challenges, and binds them, forces us to confront the same questions ourselves. To a minority of scholars these are purely distanced, intellectual questions. But for most, humility is instilled as we recognize that, even while we remain committed to our own worldview or belief system, the way others see the world has truth within it and inevitably something to offer us. This is the reason, I believe, why humility is so noticeably prominent in descriptions of the normative essence of covenantal pluralism. As mere tolerance gives way to mutual engagement, mutual respect, and mutual reliance, we are inevitably humbled by the other, as we accord them new dignity.

Beyond that extension of empathy into the realm of humility, becoming literate about theistic worldviews has a more intrinsic effect of eroding and relativizing the ego. While maintaining the highest standards of scholarship and critical thought, this reintroduction of religious questions decenters the intellectual subject of post-Enlightenment thought as we explore a world, not laid bare for our observation or our intellectual or consumptive domination, but a world imbued with significance and purposes that are given, not imposed by us and not subordinate to human will. This raises fundamental questions about the purpose of education and its meaning as a social good.

In the pre-modern era, these concerns were more thoroughly explored. Contrary to debunked caricatures of the so-called "Dark Ages," the medieval period was a time of great learning and

intellectual enquiry, witnessed in the founding of the universities. Yet Thomas Aquinas was one of many scholars who also explored the dangers of learning. He concluded that,

knowledge of truth, strictly speaking, is good, but it may be evil accidentally, by reason of some result, either because one takes pride in knowing the truth, according to 1 Corinthians 8:1, “Knowledge puffeth up,” or because one uses the knowledge of truth in order to sin.

(Aquinas 1981)

For Aquinas, the goodness of learning is not a given; it depends on the disposition of the learner and the uses to which it is put. His own prodigious scholarship explores a moral universe in which knowledge and facts are not disconnected from the moral subject whose life is shaped by the purposes, blessings, and judgment of the Creator.

To revive these considerations is not to indulge in sentimentality, much less resurrect old superstitions. It is to recalibrate the purpose of the university and the obligations of the scholar to the social goods we want to see. Leaving these questions unexamined for so long has enabled academia to collude in all kinds of environmental degradation, money-driven myopia, and other dehumanizing practices. Universities might consider themselves neutral in relation to society’s dysfunctions, and yet so often unquestioned at the heart of academia is the logic of mastery that we perpetuate in our systems of knowledge. For the French philosopher Luce Irigaray, this dominating subject is ill-equipped to engage in a world of difference since we do not know simply how to “let the other be”:

Such a letting be is what is most difficult for us. It forces us to relinquish the ideal of mastery that has been taught to us, not as an aptitude for staying within our limits in order to respect the other, but as an ability to dominate everything and everyone—including the world and the other—without letting them blossom according to what or who they are.

(Irigaray 2008, 58)

Effective religious literacy, therefore, does not simply add more knowledge to the learner; it shifts the mindset. This is true in respect to all three aspects of the self through which I have sought to frame an understanding of the kind of religious literacy needed in higher education. As a practice of empathy, it moves us beyond the rigid bipolarities of our digitally driven culture wars to better understand both the other in their difference and our own identity in response to them. As an exercise of the imagination, it gives us invaluable new tools for thinking and envisaging new worlds. Finally, it gives us an appreciation of alterity that enables us to stand in humility before the other (the human other and the natural world) recognizing that our position is not a godlike one of control but one of openness, to learn more, to take responsibility for the flourishing of others, and to be a bridge-builder across manifold divisions.

## Notes

- 1 See, for example, Cotter and Robertson 2016 for a comprehensive critique of the “World Religions Paradigm.”
- 2 José Casanova describes this process as “the triumph of the knowledge regime of secularism.” He suggests that European secularization is better understood as this way of interpreting the world, which has become embedded through colonialism and globalization as a global academic culture, than “in terms of structural processes of socio-economic development” (Casanova 2006, 15).

- 3 The motto of the London School of Economics, “Rerum cognoscere causas” is a quote from the classical poet Virgil.
- 4 In the second of his “five ways” by which the existence of God is proved, Thomas Aquinas argues that “if there be no first cause among efficient causes, there will be no ultimate, nor any intermediate cause” (ST I, q.2, a.3). We cannot, he claims, explore causality in the natural world without presuming the existence of a first cause which is God.
- 5 Pew Research Center predict a 4% drop in the proportion of the world population that is not religiously affiliated from 17% to 13% between 2010 and 2050. See *The Global Religious Landscape*, December 2012, <https://assets.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/11/2014/01/global-religion-full.pdf>.
- 6 Pew Research Center figures from 2018 suggest 88% of the world population affiliate to a religion with 54% describing their religion as “very important.” See *The Age Gap in Religion Around the World*, June 2018, [www.pewforum.org/2018/06/13/the-age-gap-in-religion-around-the-world/](http://www.pewforum.org/2018/06/13/the-age-gap-in-religion-around-the-world/).
- 7 Zavos 2010 examines, for example, the growing influence of a “Hindutva effect” on British Hindu identity.
- 8 See, for example, the creation of new charities such as The International Community of the Holy Sepulchre to support Christians in the Holy Land and an increased awareness through exhibitions such as *Chrétiens d’Orient* at the Institut du Monde Arabe in Paris in 2018.
- 9 Many such groups (e.g., Muslim Brotherhood) emerged in the 19th and 20th centuries in reaction to Arab Nationalism but the internet has enabled a range of international movements promoting Muslim unity and solidarity.
- 10 A notable example is Khalid Latif, Executive Director and Chaplain for the Islamic Center at New York University. His commitment to interfaith understanding in the post-9/11 climate of New York City, combined with his obvious integrity as an Islamic scholar has given confidence to young Muslims to engage with other faiths and the secular world, even at our university in London.
- 11 I set out this approach at greater length in the introduction to *Religious Imaginations: How Narratives of Faith are Shaping Today’s World* (Walters 2018).

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# 13

## INTERNATIONAL STUDIES, RELIGION, AND CROSS-CULTURAL RELIGIOUS LITERACY

*James K. Wellman, Jr.*

I begin this chapter with the unlikely story of the pairing of religion with International Studies at the University of Washington (UW). Next, I critically examine the field of religious literacy, its strengths and weaknesses, using the concept of “emotional literacy” to illumine new dimensions in this study. Third, I outline the specific courses in the UW cross-cultural religious literacy program as well as my own thinking and analysis of Stewart, Seiple, and Hoover’s work (Chapter 2 of this *Handbook*) on covenantal pluralism. I conclude with an outline of six principles for the work ahead, equally applicable to the student new to the field as well as those who are experts in it.

### **Religion and international studies—An unlikely pairing**

The fact that the Comparative Religion Program (CRP) in the UW Jackson School of International Studies (JSIS) launched the first Cross-Cultural Religious Literacy program in 2018 is a remarkable but unlikely story. In many ways it was never intended. Indeed, the only reason the CRP ended up being housed by the JSIS in the first place was to protect it from a lawsuit—instigated by a group of Presbyterian ministers in 1967 who claimed that the program was teaching “liberal theology.” The suit went to court and the ministers lost, but it was close, 2 to 1. The University wanted to protect and, one might say, *hide* the CRP from the public eye. And true to form, the CRP, in its history, has been academically productive and non-controversial, and mostly out of the spotlight. CRP taught a traditional set of comparative religion courses that covered all religious traditions, but did so without much interaction with “international studies” per se.

However, after 9/11, it became clear to me and to many in international studies (IS) that religion had to be taken a lot more seriously in contemporary global politics. It was for this reason we produced two edited volumes. The first, *Belief and Bloodshed: Religion and Violence Across Time and Tradition* (Rowman and Littlefield 2007), examined the historical and contemporary forms of violent religion in most if not all global religious traditions. In 2012, with funding from the Luce Foundation, the second volume we produced was an edited book on *Religion and Human Security: A Global Perspective* (Oxford 2012). It examined all the most violent and difficult contemporary international religious conflicts around the globe. We wanted to know

if religion aided human security; we found a mixed record. By this time, I was teaching one of the core undergraduate courses in the IS major, *Cultural Interactions in an Interdependent World*. I was thinking and talking about religion as a powerful force in IS; it could not and should not be avoided. At the very same time, the history and study of religion and US foreign policy was just coming into its own as a relatively recent academic field (Preston 2012). Randy Thomson, my Ph.D. student at the time, and one of the first in the newly formed JSIS Ph.D. program in *Religions, Cultures, and Civilizations*, partnered with me to publish an article entitled, “From the Social Gospel to Neo-conservatism: Religion and US Foreign Policy.” We explained the remarkable journey of American religious thinking on religion and international studies and how central religious factors have been in foreign policy over the last century (Thompson and Wellman 2011).

Because of these common interests, I had come to know Dennis Hoover and Chris Seiple. In 2006, I published an article in their journal, *The Review of Faith & International Affairs* (published quarterly by Routledge), as well as a chapter in their 2012 volume, *The Routledge Handbook on Religion and Security* (see Wellman 2006; Wellman 2013). Years later, in 2016, Seiple moved to Seattle, and not long afterward, he joined the JSIS as a Senior Fellow. In 2017, in partnership with Thomson and Seiple, and with support from a JSIS Carnegie Grant called *Bridging the Gap*, we combined our academic and policy work to explore the scholarly and policy intersections of religion and IS. These meetings led to JSIS asking Seiple to develop and teach the course *Cross-Cultural Religious Literacy* for Winter Quarter 2018. By February 2019, the UW Board of Trustees approved our proposal for a Cross-Cultural Religious Literacy certificate. It passed unanimously and with some excitement; multiple trustees mentioned its “timeliness,” “importance,” and the “critical nature of confronting head on the religious conflicts of our time.” During this time, we also began a partnership with the Aspen Institute in Washington, D.C. For example, the UW CRP contributed several speakers to an October 2018 conference on “Conscience, Community, and Citizenship: Religious Pluralism in an Age of Religious Nationalism.” We worked again with the Aspen Institute in a Seattle-based series of events in 2020, sponsoring a global panel on the 2020 summer tensions in Seattle surrounding race and religion.<sup>1</sup>

It is true that schools of IS have been late in recognizing the importance of religion. Too often we have assumed that religion is a dependent variable and therefore not critical to explaining global events. In contrast, we are making the claim that cross-cultural religious literacy should be included—systematically, thoughtfully, and comprehensively—in how schools in global studies train students in academic research and public policy. Further, it is not simply the content and substance of global religions that is salient, but we argue that even more important is articulating a framework on how to strategize and instrumentalize a practice in cross-cultural religious literacy such that *emotional literacy* also contributes to public policy, especially peace-making (Wellman and Choksi 2020).

### Religious literacy and peace-making

Diane L. Moore originated the religious literacy nomenclature giving the most widely cited definition on religious literacy: “Religious literacy entails the ability to discern and analyze the fundamental intersections of religious social/political/cultural life through multiple lenses” (Moore 2007). While this is the critical building block of any work in the study of religion, we also see its limits. In a recent article in *The Review of Faith & International Affairs*, “Why Religious Literacy Requires Emotional Literacy,” my co-author Mitu Choksi and I argue that religion is so much more than “head knowledge” about the beliefs of religious people

(Wellman and Choksi 2020). We argue that we need a form of *emotional literacy*. Emotions, particularly when it comes to forms of religious faith, are critical. Emotion is essential in bridging the gap between what one observes, what one senses, and what one knows. When it comes to religion, much of what is believed is *invisible*. And, of course, this same feature is true of patriotism, or any kind of belief system.<sup>2</sup> The feeling and emotional satisfaction that one derives from one's identification with a system is what gives one the need, want, and desire to remain connected to it. Emotional attachments to religion are the understudied lattice work in personal belief systems as well as identification with a group that calls forth our commitment. How one feels toward the figures in the religion—Jesus for Christians, Buddha for Buddhists, and to some extent with the Prophet Muhammad for Muslims—is quintessentially important. This affective dimension is visceral and comprehensive—a connection that is sticky and binding. As my co-author described in our recent article (Wellman and Choksi 2020, 100):

Zen Buddhism, for example, holds that words, concepts, and the logic based on them impede authentic comprehension of the reality that exists beyond reason. This comprehension is not cerebral but ontological. It entails and even demands a transformation, and indeed, a dissolution of a disciple's conditioned sense of self so that she may experience *satori*, the realization of the enlightened nature inherent in all human beings and a spontaneous comprehension of reality beyond verbal interpretations or dogmatic systems of belief. The experience of the holy is *visceral* and *aesthetic*: In daily life, it is evoked by a decaying flower in a cracked bamboo vase, by the irregularities of a clay tea bowl darkened with age, by all things that reveal the ephemeral and contingent nature of material existence. Although Zen's spiritual means and ends differ from those the religions of the West, still the power of tradition concentrates in embodied transformation. The accumulation of facts about religion is useless and, absent affective experience, the mind can become a detour or even a block to experiencing enlightenment.

Our article further argues that studies of religion must go beyond understanding doctrinal belief systems; we need to comprehend the emotional structures of our religious lives. We need to know not only what someone believes but how and why they believe. What is the emotional connection, or in my co-author's terms, what is the "ontological" sense of being that allows one to have faith in something one cannot touch, taste, hear, or see? In that sense, if our literacy does not go beyond, for instance, knowing the Five Pillars of Islam—*Shahadah* (profession of faith); *Salat* (prayer); *Zakat* (paying of alms/charity); *Sawm* (fasting during Ramadan); and the *Hajj* (pilgrimage to Mecca)—it remains an abstraction with no connection to experience.

This empirical knowledge gives us no real grip on the intense nature of Islam, much less that of any faith, let alone how Muslim faith is understood and applied locally. We won't understand why Malcolm X, because of his experience on the Hajj, returned to America and turned his back on the Nation of Islam. How did this religious and moral conversion occur? Well, it was because he was treated with such hospitality by people of all ethnic backgrounds in the Middle East—including Caucasians. He realized the demonizing of race in the US was bigotry. Malcolm X's emotional attachment to the Nation of Islam was severed; he turned away. In his experience of the Hajj, he came to experience and know the inclusive potential of the Muslim faith, and it changed his mind and transformed his heart (Malcolm X 1964). One could argue he became more *emotionally and ontologically literate* about the inner workings of the Islamic faith. This is why I have students not just read books about the faith traditions that they study, but also attend religious ceremonies of their choosing to experience, at the visceral level, the nature and the sensibilities that draw people to these communities.



All of this leads to our perhaps revolutionary aim that comparative religion programs should and need to be integrated into IS more generally. As a part of our research in this area, Mitu Choksi performed a comprehensive review of national programs in international studies to examine whether and how religion is studied in these programs. To our knowledge the programs most similar include Georgetown University and their Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs and Boston University's Institute on Culture, Religion, and World Affairs. There is the growing religious literacy program at Harvard Divinity School, as well as Notre Dame's Mellon Initiative on International Relations and Religion. At the UW Jackson School, our Director, Leela Fernandez, recently worked with the Jackson faculty to create a new Strategic Plan. One of four major initiatives centers on matters of identity, with religion as a leading area of study, examining *how community identities are formed, develop, and change and how they intersect with categories of indigeneity, religion, race, ethnicity, gender and sexuality*. In this sense we would argue that IS is a natural home for a re-imagined comparative religion program, as IS takes on a holistic and historic approach to peoples, cultures, and regions. Thus, this positions cross-cultural religious literacy as one of the key links between traditional forms of comparative religion and programs in IS.

This is also why Chris Seiple's *Cross-Cultural Religious Literacy* course at UW is so relevant to our times. He evaluates the self in the context of the other's faith community, and he examines the verbal and non-verbal communication which is profoundly important. We need to know that the body communicates our emotions first and it is only afterwards that we come to understand what we think and what we believe. In the process, we realize that knowing the beliefs of another religious community, or of any community, without having an experience of it, means we miss what is truly essential—the feelings, dispositions, and struggles of people as they work out their own salvation in fear and trembling. We also come to realize their belief is not just one thing; it is not feelings alone, but also a compendium of ambivalence, doubt, confusion, concern, and freedom as well as a series of beliefs and cognitive claims. In my work with Christian communities, I'm always struck that faith is intermittent and fluid; people move in and out of their religious worlds. In that sense religious identities change with time and circumstance. Without coming to some sense of emotional literacy with faith traditions, we tend to project whatever pre-understanding we have on them and we miss the deeper complexity, whether in the shadows of suffering, the extraordinary expression of joy and peace, or in the mundane boredom of rote ritual.

### **Cross-cultural religious literacy education at the University of Washington**

In creating a Cross-Cultural Religious Literacy (CCRL) program at UW we have developed two courses, one on CCRL, which Chris Seiple has taught for four years now. The second course, which I developed, is called *Religion, Politics, and International Conflicts*. I begin this course with the suggestion that we go into any area of study with certain sets of "pre-understandings," whether positive or negative. I point this out to students so as to help them see what frames and directs their thinking and may distort their ability to understand and analyze the material. The course aims to empower students to adjust these frames, both for the sake of accuracy but also for the sake of creating a more cosmopolitan point of view and disposition toward themselves, one another, their country, and world. I then offer to them concepts of *faithful patriotism* and *principled covenantal pluralism* as a capacious and flexible grid to analyze, measure, and examine systems of governance and policy. I argue that these values sustain populations that are free, democratic, and spiritually and religiously plural in a way that gives freedom to all to practice as they please and to believe as they will—whether one is religious or not.

All of this is premised on the idea that these governing principles should be guided by democratic politics and with freedom of religion as lodestone of an open and fair society. In this sense the course introduces students to the process of CCRL in international studies. I make the claim that whether we are religious or secular, our self-understanding and awareness of our identities is a key building block for our goal of understanding others as they understand themselves. This is crucial because depending on our lens—whether religious or secular—we tend to be blind to the position of the other. This often leads to our inability to sympathize and value the other, whether they are secular or religious, and deeply impacts our ability to be cross-culturally literate in international relations and global engagement.

We take this foundation into our study of religion, politics, and international conflicts. The course begins with the ways American religion has impacted US foreign policy over its history. We examine this history of successes and failures—judging this history on the development of the ability to negotiate, mediate, and reconcile our own secular and/or religious lens in relation to the secular and religious perspective of the other. From this foundation we take on the issues of religion, politics, and international conflicts as they relate to questions of human and national security. We explore how the field of human security emerged at the end of the Cold War—a project stemming from the increasing security of global populations (both secular and religious) as they are recognized and understood. We know that national security doesn't equal human security—the relation between the two is uneasy and complex (Wellman and Lombardi 2012). And religion significantly impacts the degree of human security in populations, affecting national security as well. This can and, I would argue, must mean that we take seriously our own position (whether we are religious or secular) and the religion and secularism of others in negotiating our own and the others' human and national security.

We take all of this into our work on the rise of religious nationalism and authoritarianism and the spread of strongman politics in many parts of the globe.<sup>3</sup> The course explains that religious politics is, in part, a defense against the rise of secularism over the last generation. Majority religions, whether Hindus in India or Muslims in Indonesia, have flexed their power to dominate and alienate religious minorities. Contrariwise, secular powers (in China in particular) have risen to dominate and even harass and persecute religious minorities, forcing Christians to deny their faith or face prison; sending Muslims into camps to “unlearn” their faith (Roberts 2020). This begs multiple questions: Is religion a force of domination? Or is it a threat simply in response to the growing power of secularism in the West? The course ends by giving each student a chance to practice the craft of understanding the questions and problems that each brings to these issues, and how to negotiate, mediate, and reconcile these issues of religion and conflict in the context of human and national security and, in the end, for the sake of a more secure and just international community. This also means looking at the regressive aspects in world politics, for example, China's repression of the Uyghurs and as well as the growing restrictions against those of the Christian faith in Hong Kong and in China (see Roberts 2020 and Yang 2020).

To illustrate the dynamic tensions of religious nationalism in the international context I've created a graph (Figure 13.1) that gives a presentation of the pressures and relationships between religion and nationalism. This grid sorts states along a North-to-South axis from provincialism/nationalism to internationalism/cosmopolitanism, and an East-to-West axis from secularism to religion.<sup>4</sup> Provincialism connotes one's loyalty is first to one's own kind, whether one's family, tribe, or nation. Cosmopolitanism means, as St. Paul put it, to be a “citizen of the world.” Such a person is not primarily loyal to tribe, nation, or state but takes on what many have called the universal rights of humanity. I then graph onto the map the countries of the world to track their positionality, depending on politics, culture, and history. There is no scientific way to place countries precisely, especially relative to time and change, but that is a part of the intrigue of

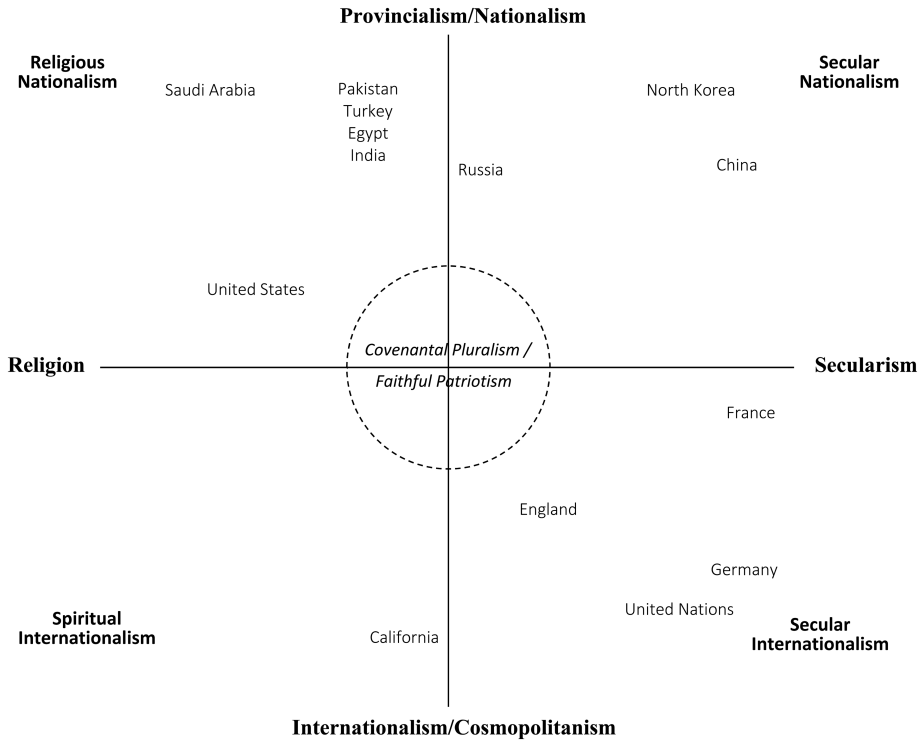


Figure 13.1 Religion, nationalism, and internationalism.

going back and reframing the graph based on how one analyzes countries in history and politics across time. This is intended merely as a heuristic grid, a typology of how one might explain the relative distance of countries to each type, as well as a way to guide thinking and analyze nations based on what one finds in these evaluations. I’ve put in the middle of the graph Seiple’s ideal type combination of faithful patriotism and covenantal pluralism (Seiple 2018). This combination embodies a type of loyalty to faith, people, and identity, all the while able to pledge oneself to the heterogeneity of belief and action—an ideal type of abiding peace, appreciation for difference, and the necessity, at times, for reconciliation with the other.

To be sure, the rise of various forms of religious and secular nationalisms has been troubling and challenging for many—this combination of being loyal to one’s family, tribe, nation, or religion can push one toward a more parochial and introverted attitude that alienates and at times leads to violence. And, of course, as I am arguing for, the relation of nations (whether religious or secular) can move in the direction of hospitality and mutual forbearance—the cosmopolitan dream of Kantian ideals of *equal regard and recognition*, where one is “co” as well as committed to the sacred nature of the other no matter their religion or secularity. As we know, the globe seesaws back and forth between a more cramped understanding of solidarity to a more capacious vision in which all are welcome. The tension between the two underscores the importance of CCRL. In states, groups, and religions where there are increasing forms of oppression against religious minorities, the need for CCRL as an intervention could not be more urgent. Indeed, religious discrimination is at an all-time high, and with the increase in forms of religious and secular nationalism, we are seeing ever greater forms of discrimination especially against minority faith groups.<sup>5</sup> For all of these reasons, emotional literacy in religion and a covenantal pluralist

approach to the diversity of global faiths and worldviews is more critical than ever in creating a well-informed citizenry as well as preparing policy makers and politicians to make wise and informed decisions as they move into the fields of international relations.

### **Conclusion: Six takeaways from CCRL for IS scholars and students**

1. **Respect for religions:** More than ever, we need a robust recognition of not only the deep diversity of religions and worldviews across the globe, but the understanding in which academics and policy makers take more seriously the power and prominence of religion in people's lives, families, and actions. If we don't take religion seriously, or if we see it as only a dependent variable, or as something that is antithetical to the common good—how can we move forward toward an enlightened world? We will overlay our prejudice (or what I talk about as pre-understandings) on these religious communities. We will miss partnerships with religions and thereby undercut the efforts of these communities to move forward.
2. **Religious literacy:** This follows from the first imperative that without knowledge we walk blindly into situations that are not only bad for those we serve but for our own work. Religious literacy is the knowledge of the elemental parts of a religion of those we serve, but it also goes to our own personal and professional preparation. Some of us, perhaps many of us in the academic world and in the public service sectors, have never experienced religious people; we may even be prejudiced against religion. Again, this is critical if we are to move forward as a whole community; a part of our work in religious literacy is to learn our prejudices, our pre-understandings, which are often unconscious. All of this is difficult work because it *calls on us not only to know better but to be better*. The moral work of CCRL is not only about being acquainted with our own pre-understandings about the religion of other cultures but to be able to find a way to move beyond these assumptions and to see the other as they are and not as we see ourselves or how we want to see ourselves. When we work with those different than ourselves, can we learn to see the value of the difference and to come to respect the difference and to see it as opportunity for us to learn and to move forward by doing so?
3. **Covenantal pluralism:** Some may see in it the overlay of Western religious language—but our purpose here, at least at the Comparative Religion Program at the University of Washington's Jackson School of International Studies, is to use covenantal language as a broad category for any and all groups that seek a communal expression of moving forward with respect and responsibility. We both respect religion but we recognize that it is just one among many forms of faith. For many believers this paradox may strike them as disrespectful. But in my experience, when approaching religious folks with respect, even if one doesn't believe in it or one practices another religion, people will listen. But it can be challenging for some. Perhaps this is because they have been disrespected by their religions because they are women; or because they are in the LGBTQ community; or for any manifold set of other reasons. This is never easy. At times, when we don't recognize the hurt that religions have caused it is very difficult for those who have been hurt to move forward. And sometimes, we need to accept that there is no way forward and that we need to pause and be patient. Sometimes it means recognizing the pain that some groups have experienced and to take it seriously. In this sense, we have to move beyond simply thinking about these issues and to become people who recognize the emotions in others and embrace them as they are. We need to learn to invite greater understanding for those on all sides of these divides. This is the covenant to be committed even in our differences and to

make the moral pledge to work across difference. It is essential that we recognize the pain and suffering that comes from the recognition of difference, as well as to commit to a plural covenant. Here, again, our work with religious others is a moral and relational calling, not just a technical matter of knowledge acquisition.

4. **Emotional literacy:** This will strike many as problematic, especially those in IS. Most scholars in the various disciplines of IS go into the field to think about issues, solve problems, and do some good. But one of the overwhelming findings in our work is that the “other” is often religious. They often feel misunderstood; we academics often don’t know their language; we don’t know their family values; we don’t know their religion; we don’t know what brings joy and suffering into their lives. Sometimes just understanding another makes all the difference. The first time I attended Muslim Salat was in Uzbekistan, I asked to go to prayers with my Muslim brothers one day. This opened up a conversation that lasted five hours, prompting many tears, and created a friendship for a lifetime. It was worth the risk; it opened worlds that I never knew existed.
5. **Religion is NOT always the problem:** Many of us in IS have left behind our religion or never had any. We often simply don’t know much about religion. And we assume, often from experts, that religion is the problem and if it was disposed of, all the better. This is our prejudice, our pre-understanding; and it misses the complicated and variegated nature of what and who religious people are. We miss understanding how they function and what we need to know in order to understand them and to find solutions that work for all. And this points to a truth—the more we know about another’s religion, the more likely it is that problems can be overcome.
6. **Religion can be part of the solution:** Religions can and often are one of the chief avenues by which and through which societies take care of themselves. Religious groups and communities often know what the community needs and wants. Religious representatives are in these communities. This is what Clark Lombardi and I found out in our book on *Religion and Human Security* (Oxford 2012). We should listen to them, work with them, and see them as a resource for moving forward as a community. When we don’t recognize what is important in a community, we create resentment and negative reactions. When we listen and take in information, we can create working groups that can be on our side and become a positive force for moving everyone forward.

## Notes

- 1 See “Community and Solidarity on the Frontlines: A Case Study of Seattle, Wa.” This conversation took place on September 30, 2020. It featured Nikhil Mandalaparthi (Inclusive America Project), Rabbi Rachel Nussbaum (Kavana Cooperative), Andre Taylor (Not This Time), and the Rev. Angela Ying (Bethany United Church of Christ). [www.youtube.com/watch?v=uHmIs3UzGvw&t=60s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uHmIs3UzGvw&t=60s).
- 2 See my *High on God: How Megachurches Captured the Heart of America* (Wellman 2020). Here using the work of Randall Collins (2004) on interactive ritual chains to describe the processes by which humans are moved by emotion. We are accepted/energized/given a reliable leader/delivered into joy/given service for the other and purpose that is re-membered in small groups. Humans thrive in these interactive rituals which promote, as Collins asserts, *emotional energy*. See also Draper (2019).
- 3 See Soper and Fetzer 2018; Whitehead and Perry 2020; Bayat 2017; Han 2016; and Grzymala-Busse 2015.
- 4 A distinction derived from Joseph Levinson (1971), *Revolution and Cosmopolitanism: The Western Stage and the Chinese Stages*.
- 5 See the 2018 Pew reports on increasing religious persecution: [www.pewforum.org/2020/11/10/in-2018-government-restrictions-on-religion-reach-highest-level-globally-in-more-than-a-decade/](https://www.pewforum.org/2020/11/10/in-2018-government-restrictions-on-religion-reach-highest-level-globally-in-more-than-a-decade/).

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# RELIGIOUS LITERACY IN DEVELOPMENT AND HUMANITARIAN RELIEF

*Katherine Marshall*

A parable shared among very different cultures and religious traditions conveys a vital message: Differing perspectives can blind us to understanding what is truly important and appreciating it. Blind men feel an elephant's different parts and dispute their conflicting interpretations of what they "see." There are apt parallels today, as people passionately committed to international development or to a religious calling focus on their differences and therefore fail to engage. The Sufi poet Rumi offers an important and practical insight. His version of the story puts his elephant into a darkened shed, and the arguing observers can see perfectly well. His solution to contradictions and confusion is to shine a candle in hopes of illuminating the whole, allowing a clear common vision to emerge. Better light (read knowledge) and new pairs of eyes or ears (read insight) offer gifts of enlightening new perspectives.

This chapter traces my personal journey of learning about the remarkably diverse field of religiously inspired development work and, in the process, revisiting ideas and places from earlier professional vantage points. An abrupt professional change in the year 2000 launched an unexpected new, 20-year journey: A mission to bridge both the hopes and hostilities surrounding religious engagement—and implicitly, "religious literacy"—in development work, starting in the World Bank (Marshall 2013). This journey has offered me the opportunity to revisit ideas, places, models, and approaches gained over a lengthy professional career working in different world regions. My efforts to bridge worlds of development and religion came unexpectedly, confronting me and colleagues with often unexpected tensions and opportunities. The journey has stretched my perspectives in many directions, both personal and professional and it illuminates how I understand religious engagement and what literacy around this topic involves.

Tensions between development and religious actors often arise when individuals or institutions, like the legendary blind men confronting the elephant, focus so much on differences or on specific parts that they are blind and deaf to shared, underlying purposes. These include working to secure better lives, especially for people who suffer and are marginalized. The "preferential option for the poor" that is a central principle of Catholic Social Teaching (Vatican 2005) is not far from the World Bank's motto: "Our dream is a world free of poverty." Human dignity and a "common humanity" are noble and widely shared ideals that convey important insights and draw on roots in different philosophies and religious traditions. The framework of the Sustainable Development Goals approved by the United Nations General Assembly in 2015 also

draws on wide consultations across the world, including with non-religious and religious actors, and are widely presented as an agreed upon global architecture.

But there are also many differences, often larger than the rhetoric of shared values and common humanity might suggest. These include significant differences both in ideologies and theologies as well as in the lived realities which color people's models and approaches. A central challenge for literacy in the professional world of international development is to ensure that differences do not drive disputes or indifference, but are seen as opportunities to view issues in a new light. For international development work and approaches of different institutions, non-religious or religious, this can help to identify better paths towards action. Two cryptic pieces of wisdom from my family color my personal approach to confronting diversity and difference. My grandmother's advice: "A gingerbread, he went to Rome, a gingerbread, he came home" was an admonition to go into a new situation without stubbornly sticking to established habits and understandings. She was urging us to be curious and open to change, looking always for new understandings. That ingrained character trait has stood me in good stead on my journeys. My mother admonished me with great conviction on more than one occasion: "Each to his own taste, said the old woman as she kissed the cow." Puzzling over what on earth she meant, I slowly recognized it as an ode of sorts to diverse tastes and visions, contributing to my own sense of wonder at the range of human experience. Keeping in mind the challenges of common human aspirations and real differences is a critical part of the development enterprise that has great significance in bridging divides, including those that have separated religious and non-religious perspectives.

What follows are glimpses of insights gained in working to build bridges between religious and development communities, which turn above all on mutual literacies. I have had the rare opportunity in my career as an international development specialist to see places, issues, and ideas through very different lenses, sometimes in a bewildering living kaleidoscope, and sometimes by revisiting a place or topic in a different role, at a different time, with new questions, demands, and insights. Contending with diversity and difference have been a hallmark of my life and career, as I came to both with a hankering for multidisciplinary approaches and insatiable curiosity. I started work at the World Bank in 1971, driven by fascination with cultures, anguish at the suffering I witnessed, and hope inspired by changes that I saw. As a "pioneer" woman in men's worlds, clashing (as well as congenial) perspectives around differing worldviews were always part of the mix. The development journey I lived demanded a constant willingness to change and awareness of diversity that could at first sight seem deeply unfamiliar and unappealing. This combination of motivation and experience was a central feature of my professional journey, spent in widely different assignments within the World Bank. And it colored the ways in which I approached my assignment to engage with religious communities.

### **An uneasy topic: Controversy flares about religious dialogue at the World Bank**

I was a World Bank official working broadly on operational development challenges in different countries when the World Bank's then president, James D. Wolfensohn, drafted me to work on his personal venture—one that many saw at the time as audacious, even foolhardy. It was to engage the world's religious communities in a dialogue that might bring sparring visions about development paths into harmony. I felt unqualified for this temporary assignment, having left behind formal religious studies after a required college sophomore course. But Jim Wolfensohn, with impressive collaborators in the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Aga Khan, senior Vatican officials, and others, was uninterested in the answer "no" and off we went. To condense a long story, what had seemed to many an interesting if somewhat marginal activity for the World Bank



erupted in sharp controversy, as the representatives of most of the World Bank's 184 member governments raised serious objections to the dialogue project. Thus began a series of learning experiences, not only about the remarkable world of religious institutions but also on the sharply different ways in which people from different religious and cultural backgrounds understood their own roles, the goals of development, and the very ethics of different forks in the road.

For those working in the fields of development and humanitarian relief, it is sometimes jarring to appreciate that beneath the shared commitments to common humanity, working to improve lives, and navigating the numbing jargon of the fields, there can be complex differences in interpretations of reality by those most closely involved. These include notably many religious communities which view themselves as the forerunners of development through their work with education and health and social protection for vulnerable communities. How these differences are addressed often shapes both the caliber of relationships that are so vital to the challenge of development, and how effective we (collectively) are in finding ways to translate ideas and ideals into practice.

Jim Wolfensohn and Archbishop George Carey (now Lord Carey of Clifton), in launching a "world faiths development dialogue" in 1998, presented a narrative that still today reflects the basic rationale for development/faith engagement: The two communities, overall and fundamentally, share a deep concern for poor communities, with a focus on paths towards human development (especially health and education). What, then, was there to oppose? As Wolfensohn's director for the effort, understanding the concerns and arguments that left member government representatives uneasy was my first task. Many topics that surfaced during discussions in 2000–2001 have recurred repeatedly, albeit in different forms. They fall essentially into four categories: Politics, priority, patriarchy, and preconceived views or simple lack of knowledge about "religion." Some might label these categories as features of a secular worldview, though, to be clear, neither then nor now do I view them in this way. Nonetheless, the topics that shaped similarly hesitant approaches from religious institutions often came in different forms and orders of priority, that were elucidated in various dialogues including with the World Council of Churches (WCC—see below).

Although religious topics, as such, had rarely figured explicitly on agendas during the World Bank's first five decades, most of the executive directors (representing constituencies of member governments) and many senior staff held quite strong and generally negative opinions on whether religious dimensions should be brought explicitly into the World Bank's broad strategic framework. The ways in which the arguments were framed were often unfamiliar to me, and the process opened up new appreciations for the history and present concerns around, especially, relationships between states and religious communities. The idea of formally engaging religious institutions came up against a foundational principle for the World Bank, which was to avoid political entanglements. In essence, many saw religious issues and institutions as essentially political, their motivations turning on influence, power, and numbers of followers. Questions around political relationships were especially a concern in some regions and for several countries—France, for example, and the United States, albeit in complex ways—which had long histories of defining boundaries between religious and secular worlds. A heightened awareness at the time about religious dimensions of bitter conflicts in several world regions (starting with the Middle East) accentuated the concerns.

Concerns were also framed in terms of priorities. This was a time when "mission creep" was much discussed, as the World Bank and definitions of development more generally moved constantly into new fields of activity. Some recognized that processes of modernization were far more complex than many had been led by theories and training to recognize, with many if not all topics intricately interlinked. Others, however, saw the World Bank's leaders overstepping

its core mission by venturing into relationships with religious institutions. The overtures to religions struck some as a classic instance of taking on a topic that, perhaps, belonged somewhere else.

But beyond these two issues were some deeply held perceptions about what religion represented in contemporary society. Positions taken by religious leaders on women's rights and reproductive health topped the list of concerns, that boiled down to a sense that religious communities did not share essential concerns about human rights, that their motivations in fact differed from those of a development institution like the World Bank. At a simplistic level many religious institutions were seen as standing against, not for, change and modernization. This gave rise to some quite vehement views that engaging with religious institutions could pose serious risks, that it could be dangerous.

The lengthy discussions that centered on the World Bank's governing board produced a fragile compromise with the bank's executive directors in early 2001: Wolfensohn would proceed cautiously with a dialogue-linked program. The compromise was partial and uneasy in many respects but opened a path to learning and to building new relationships and partnerships. The work undertaken by the World Bank since then has been strikingly dependent on individual leadership. The overall faith initiative lost momentum after Wolfensohn departed in 2005, though some subsequent presidents, notably Jim Yong Kim (2012–2019) who launched a "Moral Imperative" to engage religious communities, have given the topic some attention and support. At the time of writing a faith office continues its work and a working group has a mandate to explore the World Bank's Research Agenda.

The next years (until 2005 when Wolfensohn's World Bank term ended) saw substantial work led by the World Bank. It included ambitious gatherings of development and religious leaders (in Canterbury, Dublin, and Accra, the latter later, in 2009) that some described as transformational. An autonomous NGO, the World Faiths Development Dialogue (WFDD), was established with, initially, formal relationships with the World Bank. It was established as a UK Charity, based in Birmingham, UK, but was later reconstituted (in 2005) as an American 501(c)(3) organization. With the turn of the millennium in 2000, a World Bank team was part of a remarkable religious "Millennium Summit" linked to the United Nations' celebration of the event. WFDD was involved in World Bank reflections on poverty, notably through contributing to the 2000/2001 World Development Report that focused on the topic. Pilot efforts were launched in three countries: Tanzania, Ethiopia, and Guatemala. A series of partnerships took shape with widely varied groups, for example around health programs, on environmental action, and, with the lay Catholic Community of Sant'Egidio, on both peacebuilding and HIV/AIDS. In the aftermath of the Jubilee 2000 efforts to address poor country debt, consultations on government Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers involved religious communities at country level. The effort opened doors for a number of institutions, development and religious, to pursue a process of growing relationships.

The events of September 11, 2001 marked a fundamental shift, and they shone a bright if negative spotlight on religious roles in global affairs and their potential links to violence. In the immediate aftermath, there was some aura of "I told you so" in Wolfensohn's dialogue on the topic, but there was also a heightened sense that engaging with religious matters was risky and perhaps even dangerous.

The tensions involved in the dialogue about religious engagement went well beyond concerns about religion, reflecting broader geopolitical and personality issues of the time, for example, the World Bank's engagement in the Middle East and Wolfensohn's tendency to embark on bold and unconventional new ventures. But it is fair to say that something of a pall of unease has persisted, notwithstanding significant World Bank initiatives to build on the development-religion

dialogue that have included launching the “moral imperative” to advocate for poverty alleviation in 2015, a 2016 “evidence summit” to highlight significant religious contributions to development, and, most recently, a review focused on World Bank research to explore ways to take religion better into account. While the World Bank experience was distinctive, the issues that emerged and the underlying differences of view echo in discussions on other venues and institutions.

### **Religious unease about development institutions: Dialogue with the World Council of Churches**

The early 2000s saw a continuation of tensions that had altered development institutions and thinking in many ways in the prior decade, prying open long habits of secrecy and discretion and calling into question often implicitly accepted assumptions about what was right, practically and ethically, and what worked best. The tensions involved both governments and civil society organizations. Among the vocal critics at the time was the World Council of Churches (WCC), which essentially threw down a gauntlet to the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank in 2001, with an invitation to an encounter. Somewhat to the WCC’s surprise, the invitation was taken up, at least to launch a process of dialogue. The three-year process began as the WCC paused to prepare their internal “briefing,” which took the telling title “Lead us not into Temptation” (WCC 2001), followed by successive meetings, and culminating in an encounter in Geneva with senior leadership from the IMF, the World Bank, and the WCC in 2005. The results? Certainly not agreement or even a new mutual understanding. But the process brought mutual concerns closer to the surface, and leaders from different (religious) perspectives into a conversation that they otherwise would not have had.

The WCC dialogue highlighted in ways that drove home to me critiques that I had heard earlier in operational discussions in a more masked form. These included a perception that the tempting allure of the International Financial Institutions (IFIs) was “the attraction by the flow of money they control and the power invested in them” that set “traps and temptations that are to be faced in so many discussions and debates about the role and character of the IFIs in global economy and politics.” The WCC call was to “renounce a new ‘religion’ that focused on the central role of the market mechanisms and economic growth, ... strengthened under the strong influence of the neo-liberal economic model.”

The prescriptions based on the neo-liberal ideology became rules and norms not just in the world of economics, but also in politics and even the life of societies in disregard of the diversity of cultures and different conditions of local economies. The rules and norms of the neo-liberal ideology perfectly serve the needs and interest of corporate business and finance and demand the transfer of power from the state to the private sector in general. ... an ideology that legitimises the transfer of power to the so called “market forces” and the major actors in the economy. Privatisation, liberalisation and de-regulation are keywords of neo-liberalism. Transnational corporations and financial institutions in particular, taken as the iron law of economics, assume religious status, justifying massive exclusion and sacrifice of human lives and nature in the name of economic growth through privatisation and the liberalised and de-regulated market. Analysing this situation, a number of theologians called the core of the neo-liberal worldview the “religion of the market.” They were met with strong resistance. Anybody criticising the “new religion of the market” is heavily attacked for an “unrealistic” and utterly “outdated”

approach. An environment hostile to critique developed, tempting everybody to follow the flow and swim with the mainstream.

(WCC 2001)

A complex challenge here was to appreciate how far the views expressed so vehemently at WCC, from its Geneva headquarters, were in some sense representative of “religious” thought worldwide (including among Christian denominations not represented by the WCC and even within the WCC orbit). The views were clearly influential (echoed in different world regions), but a knowledgeable colleague in a private conversation called the WCC’s claim to “represent” 500 million people “risible.” The views expressed were, to put it mildly, not unanimously held among religious institutions, though they did represent an important current of thought and perception. Two important lessons for me from the experience were a richer appreciation for the nature and intensity of angry and suspicious attitudes that were held about development institutions, but also the extraordinary complexity of even this slice (WCC) of one among many religious traditions: Protestant and Orthodox Christianity (that excluded most evangelical denominations and the Catholic Church).

Working at a country level, differing perceptions of economic and social conditions had often been difficult to understand, seemingly in many cases diverging from what data suggested was the reality, for example poor management of state budgets and of state owned enterprises. There were often very different narratives about the causes of poverty. The sharp criticisms that emerged in the WCC dialogue also reflected very different narratives that centered in large measure on relative power and the money controlled by different institutions: The development institutions were about empire, controlling what was seen as their excessive power and resources. Anger was also linked to the perceived driving role of economists and economics: At each session WCC representatives said, with something mixing pride and fear, as they introduced themselves: “I am not an economist.” Their clear assumption that development thinking was driven solely by measures of economic growth and money was frustrating to the IMF World Bank teams who, granted, were mostly economists, because they could argue that it was decades since GDP growth had served as a sole or primary indicator of progress.

But apart from jarring dissonance around the language and “science” of economics, what emerged was an echoing focus on “neo-liberalism.” What, asked the IMF/World Bank teams, was meant by that term? Neoliberalism was not part of the self-understood ideology or discourse, which instead was seen as pragmatic and country adapted. But the debates of the 1990s (of which I had been part) on economic crises and the reform packages (termed “structural adjustment”) to address them had left deep scars that included a perception of callousness towards social consequences of policy measures and disrespect for the state. Shared concerns about corruption led down diverging paths, one pointing towards the bribees and the other the bribers. As discussion returned often to governance and power (the injustices of the weighted voting structure of the multilateral development banks) frustration grew since these were matters that lay in the hands of governments, and in the dialogue process in which we were engaged there was no real way to advance discussion.

So where, working directly with the WCC, a body that claimed to represent some 500 million Christians, did the religious dimension come in, apart from language and symbols? At the time, my growing understandings (and the basis on which we had “sold” the dialogue process within the World Bank and the IMF) centered on the networks of communities that the WCC could draw on and their active roles in health care and other services. We (at the World Bank and IMF) hoped to draw on WCC networks to gain a deeper understanding about how poor communities functioned. I and others had been much marked by the extensive Voices of the

Poor studies (Narayan 2000) that had highlighted the importance that poor communities gave to their religious beliefs and leaders, as well as greater trust than was measured for governments, military, NGOs, and other groups. We hoped for new insights into ways to better reach poor communities. We found instead far more focus on what seemed like politicized views where there was little scope for agreement or progress.

A clear insight was that there needed to be far better communication about situations and objectives for development institutions and strategies if they were to bridge divides. Though it was not articulated in that way at the time, gaps in literacies were apparent, both World Bank/IMF lack of familiarity with the institutions and language of their religious counterparts, and, among the WCC teams, lack of understanding and acceptance of many widely used concepts within development circles. These gaps in literacy made it difficult to have a productive dialogue about what were intrinsically complex issues. What emerged time and time again were sharply different understandings of why people were poor, even when a specific time and place was the focus, for example northern Ghana. There were large gaps in language, in listening and hearing, and in learning together. The WCC dialogue, events like the annual multifaith Prayer for Peace organized by the Community of Sant'Egidio, and various academic events, for example at the Institute for Social Studies in the Hague and the University of Birmingham, helped me to appreciate in far greater depth the *perceptions* about how development institutions thought and worked that drove much of the anger and protests from religious actors about that work.

### Refocusing on ethics

During the long discussions at World Bank headquarters in 2000–2002 about the religion initiative, it was clear that religion as religion made many country representatives uneasy. And it was very clear then, as it is still today, that it was unthinkable that funding would be directed to religious entities specifically because they are religious. The opposite, however, was also true: That there was and should be no specific prohibition of funding going to institutions that have a religious character. But, in those complex times, when development models were coming in for sharp critiques, the idea that the engagement and dialogue centered on ethics elicited somewhat more support than ones focused on religion per se. At that time, understandings of what ethics meant, as it was linked to development, centered mainly on governance and accountability, that is, corruption above all. But the ethical issues that emerged from the discussions with religious actors were different. They involved above all the difficult choices that had to be made among differing interests and options where often the best path could not be fully ascertained much less determined. It was on these issues that dialogue about differing interpretations needed to center, as much as on the “evidence” for robust success or on more abstract principles on which there was little real disagreement.

Thus, the issues turned very much on processes for making choices and engaging those involved, at different levels, as well as on the nature of partnerships. Through discussions about what religious engagement might bring to development in enriched understanding, it began to emerge that the partnerships could and should focus on building shared objectives and probing areas of difference. Ending poverty met little dispute, though consensus on other topics like population growth was another matter. An uneasy discourse emerged during engagements about what many termed “instrumentalization”—basically a sense that development institutions wished to “use” religious bodies to carry out pre-cooked policies, as well as unresolved and often unspoken questions about financing. But engaging in discussion within a frame of appreciating better how different actors understood both diagnosis and prescriptions opened better paths towards engagement. Process, engagement, and relationships mattered.

Few discussions about religious engagement escaped lengthy questioning about definitions. No single definition or definitions satisfied all comers, even in English, much less in other languages. Did “religion” mean organized bodies like the Catholic Church, or was it really about “lived religion”? How were religion, faith, and spirituality similar or different? Where did values and human rights come in? And how was religion related to culture, and culture to religion? Harking back to the tensions around politics, was religion “politicized,” or politics “religionized”? Different disciplines have distinct traditions and debates around definitions of religion and secularism. The extraordinary diversity of religious traditions obviously complicated the discussion and was often poorly appreciated, even within religious communities themselves.

A first step towards religious literacy was to dispel common preconceptions that often tended to view religion with rather monotone understandings, as a “sector” with common features. There was and is nothing resembling a monolithic religious view or structure. The dynamism of religious institutions, traditions, and beliefs is a striking feature of today’s fast-changing, globalized world, with marked changes taking place within every community, many linked to the momentous changes that are a central feature of modernization and thus development. The notion of a “religious sector” or understandings that segmented religious from secular, people of faith from others, distorted the complex interconnections and gradations. As a wise observer noted, everyone has faith: The pertinent question is: Faith in what?

A major part of my journey in working to build bridges between different understandings and approaches of the institutions involved was the challenge of reliving or rediscovering institutions, places, and events I had lived with in the past. It forced a constant grappling with the tensions between a worldview that saw clear segmentations: Religion versus secular, Christian versus Muslim, evangelical versus atheist. My increasingly nuanced appreciation of the situation as I worked with widely varied religious partners encountered dueling perceptions in many situations. This went well beyond challenges I faced within, especially, a development institution context. There, I was expected constantly to answer tough questions about evidence and results: What were rates of return on faith-linked activities and how did they compare to others? What quantitative research demonstrated differences in the quality of health care and education? What was the measurable benefit of investments in partnerships and relationships? Instead, encounters focused increasingly on more fundamental issues about what development meant, the nature of desired societies and economies, and how to get there.

After a baptism of fiery criticism within the World Bank, my learning adventure led me down many paths. In engaging in repeated discussions about the blurred boundaries I increasingly encountered, three people’s approaches proved especially helpful in defining where gaps in understanding lay and in suggesting ways to bridge them.

Denis Goulet was an iconoclastic Catholic whose focus was on broad notions of ethics of development that I was finding a useful foundation for our bridge-building approach. I met and interacted with him in various meetings and with some of his admirers: Goulet inspired a number of followers over the years (Omer, Appleby, and Little 2015; Wilber and Dutt 2010). He left the memorable image of development actors as “one-eyed giants,” who came to poor countries with science but little appreciation for the roots of cultures, meeting communities where science was largely alien. His analogy was in fact from Laurens Van Der Post who saw the “white man” bringing with him

the characteristic split and blindness which were at once his strength, his torment, and his ruin. ... The one-eyed giant had science without wisdom, and he broke in upon ancient civilizations which (like the medieval West) had wisdom without science: wisdom which transcends and unites, wisdom which dwells in body and soul together and

which, more by means of myth, or rite, of contemplation, than by scientific experiment, opens the door to a life in which the individual is not lost in the cosmos and in society but found in them. Wisdom which makes all life sacred and meaningful ... even that which later ages came to call secular and profane.

(Goulet 1980)

Goulet linked the complex issues of culture to the complexities of lived religion in useful ways that also highlighted the part played by institutions of religion. He also pointed to aspects of religious approaches that institutional and instrumental approaches often ignored: The spiritual quest that in fact is a clear part of the human condition.

A second approach was less personal, more intellectual: I had met and been inspired while at the World Bank by Chris Argyris (1976) and his notion of “dueling ladders of inference,” and found the discipline of focusing on the approach useful even in facing what seemed intractable differences (for example firmly held views that a woman’s roles in society should focus on care of her husband or that female genital cutting was necessary). Argyris’ “ladders” trace an idea or argument back to the vast pools of observations of realities, up through a selection of data points, to their grouping, then fitting with explanations, and finally conclusions and positions. The insight here is that in approaching different views and those who hold them, often firmly, it is important to explore in depth their ladder of inference and thus the ways in which their narratives are constructed. Dueling narratives are a fundamental issue in many development debates including those that involve people whose worldviews are shaped in important ways by religious teachings and beliefs. Again, finding ways to appreciate how the ladders may be shaped, both one’s own and others, is a central competence needed to find areas where there are common elements and also to identify significant differences.

A colleague whose provocative intellectual journeys offer important bridges for development actors, for example on attacking corruption, is Robert Klitgaard. Klitgaard has long worked to bridge understandings shaped by his training in economics and a constant focus on culture. Klitgaard’s *The Culture and Development Manifesto* (2021) takes his experience, reading, and teaching to a new level. He grapples with the ironic reality that though everyone agrees that culture must be taken into account in development, few have meaningful approaches to doing so. The notion that we have explored together is what he calls “poisonous texts.” These may take the form of a written text but, looking deeper, often represent an approach or dogma that makes it impossible to engage constructively with a partner or person. Examples include tense relationships in the past between World Bank teams (that I was leading) and governments in Senegal and Gambia. In both cases, our deliberate efforts to understand and address the tensions took the form of week-long meetings and, at least to a degree, helped to lance the major tensions and to trace paths towards respectful partnerships (Marshall 1997). Klitgaard’s solutions are sensible and feasible: Step back, take a broader look, for example with a comparative analysis or focusing on a situation or case that has been successful, then agree to work together towards solutions. In both the Senegal and Gambia cases, this process involved first a willingness to appreciate how each party saw the other, then stepping back from annoyances and active disputes to focus on shared goals for the future.

### **Beyond explorations, towards engagement**

My professional journey had taken me to West Africa, including Senegal, during a tumultuous period of economic tribulations during the 1990s that culminated in the CFA (*Communauté Financière Africaine*) franc devaluation in 1994, which affected 14 countries. After many years, I

returned to Senegal in 2010 with a very different focus, working to answer basic questions as part of an academic/policy project to “map” the roles of religious actors, of faith, in development (Herzog and Mui 2016). This project has involved working with very different actors and issues over several years.

The two worlds I was coming to know (development partner, academic focus on religious institutions) overlapped in only a handful of ways. While country director for Senegal I caught glimmers of my colleagues’ religious commitments, but then an uproar broke out that involved a powerful Sufi religious community, the Mourides. In 1991, without warning at least to the donor community, the Mouride leader mobilized followers to cut down an entire protected forest (Mbegue) in a matter of days. The incident caught everyone, government included, off guard, as there were firm agreements on protecting forests. An informal political agreement had in fact allowed the Mouride confrérie to convert a somewhat scrubby savanna forest into land suitable for peanut cultivation. This was an eye opener on a little discussed aspect of politics and governance (Herzog and Mui 2016, Box 2). Another lively concern centered on children from *daaras*, Muslim religious schools, begging in the streets, which was seen as a serious human rights challenge. Multiple initiatives to address these problems have met little success (to this day). Apart from that, religious matters rarely entered the perspectives.

My return in the late 2010s as part of WFDD revealed a very different world, and thus a rapid learning experience. Many former colleagues were still involved in the government and some NGOs, but broadly it involved the discovery of new circles and approaches to a country I thought I knew well. I had a head start as I had worked with several Senegalese religious leaders in different settings and thus had significant windows into their approaches. And despite the transformation of the city of Dakar (it was vastly larger and busier) in over two decades, much about Senegal, including approaches to problems, was familiar. The mapping exercise was based on extensive interviews and overall highlighted the major challenges facing Senegal’s education system. The roles of Senegal’s Sufi communities in governance, deeply part of the country’s history, were undergoing changes. There was a growing awareness that the informal, largely political relationships between religious communities and the government were far from optimal and that opportunities to learn from each other and work in partnership were missed.

WFDD’s research work led to an operational involvement in a very different area, linked to a nine-country program focused on family planning, the Ouagadougou Partnership. The Sahel countries have the world’s highest population growth rates, and analyses of prospects for the different countries highlight the vital importance of achieving what is called the demographic dividend, meaning that fertility rates are reduced so that for a period a higher proportion of the population is engaged in production. Accompanying the high fertility rates, high rates of maternal and child mortality in the region cause great suffering. An international group of funders, public (USAID, UNFPA, and others) and private (Gates and Hewlett Foundations and others) has supported the Ouagadougou Partnership. However, while the approach builds on constituencies (women, youth, mayors, private sector) supporting national family planning programs, the engagement of religious actors was at a bare minimum—indeed religious actors were seen by many (not without reason) as part of the problem, in their support for high fertility or simply their indifference.

WFDD worked with the Hewlett Foundation, Sheikh Saliou Mbacké (a Mouride leader with extensive international interreligious experience), and the Ministry of Health to prepare and launch an alliance that brought together Senegal’s major religious communities (mostly Muslim but also Catholic and Lutheran; Senegal’s population is roughly 94% Muslim and 4% Christian) in support of the country’s family planning program. The effort began with what at the time I viewed with some skepticism—successive visits to the major religious leaders to



explore the topic of child spacing. It also involved visits to countries (notably Morocco) that had engaged religious actors in successful family planning programs. In fact, both sets of visits in retrospect were transformational and also served the important role of building relationships within the religious leader group and with the WFDD team. Six years into the program, it has met remarkable success, adding new dimensions to the broader national program (for example engaging religious women through community structures). The direct impact of religious leadership and communications (radio, television, social media, workshops) is, in the teams' view, not measurable in quantitative terms. Among the full team, skills of engagement, evaluation, and negotiation have increased. The government and other specialists have little doubt that the engagement is helping to inform men and women, and cuts down on false information as well as dangerous narratives advanced by some groups, that family planning amounts to a Western plot to limit the size of the Muslim population. These skills and insights are yielding important benefits during the Covid-19 emergencies.

The experience in Senegal represents a rare grouping of assets: Knowledge of the country's development history and challenges; research to establish solid information about the religious landscape and its engagement in different development sectors; and the opportunity to address the operational challenges of program management through the family planning program. The process has allowed the WFDD team to learn more about the diverse communities and offered opportunities to probe attitudes towards, for example, gender relations, early childhood development, and intergroup relationships. The Senegal institutions learned the language and concepts behind development programs, including nuts and bolts like accounting, examination of trade-offs, and the benefits that can come from meaningful monitoring and evaluation of a program. The effort is building evidence, of which probably the most valuable is detailed probing of the different views expressed in interviews and focus group discussions with religious leaders. These have helped to pinpoint the ways in which family relationships as well as religious beliefs shape decisions on childbearing and care during pregnancy and delivery, as well as the misconceptions that lead many women to fear family planning techniques.

Behind the Senegal venture there are two classic challenges that need to be addressed, that are common to many development situations. The first challenge is a continuing concern about what many term "instrumentalization"—the sense by religious actors that they are being essentially used by governments and financing partners to carry out previously defined programs. Even today, CRSD (the Senegalese organization responsible for the family planning program) has pivoted swiftly to support the Senegal government's remarkably successful Covid-19 health measures, but in private comments I hear grumbles about lack of full respect and participation in basic design. The second challenge is the uncertainty about long-term sustainable financing. The question remains how an interreligious body should properly be financed, as reliance on external partners is appropriate for startup and pilot phases but not for continuing activities.

### **Bridging religions, cultures, and worldviews**

In the efforts to find approaches to the complex religious environments in different world regions, and globally, interreligious institutions play important roles. The challenge of navigating different religious communities, large and small, and addressing concerns of development institutions about possible favoritism means that working with interreligious bodies is attractive. Workable bodies can offer platforms that can be inclusive and also creative if they escape established rules and traditional hierarchies. More important, the mission of the interreligious community tends to focus primarily on peacebuilding and on addressing social cohesion challenges. Building constructive relationships with the interreligious bodies also can be helpful in

seeking constructive platforms. However, while the function and origin of most interreligious (and intrareligious) platforms is relationships among religious traditions, the challenges of bridging different worlds are often more pressing and more demanding. This certainly applies in many development situations.

An example was during the 2014–2015 West Africa Ebola crisis where, rather late in the crisis, the issue of dignified burials emerged as a critical factor in Ebola transmission. Public health mandated cremations and strictly regulated burials met strong resistance that extended to riots and digging up buried bodies to give them proper rites. Working with religious communities to develop an effective protocol was a game changer (Marshall 2016). However, the interreligious institutions were not sufficiently strong to assure a broader strategic engagement, and there were few established relationships with governments to allow for the continued dialogue and relationships that were needed. Many lessons that should have been learned from the roles that religious institutions played in the crisis were only partially reflected in broader efforts to learn from the crisis, including those that emerged starkly during the Covid-19 pandemic (Robinson, Wilkinson, Marshall 2020).

An unexpected but invaluable learning journey in interreligious worlds began (for me) with an invitation to take part in a new venture linked to the Fes Festival of Global Sacred Music, in Fes, Morocco, in 2002. The music festival was the brainchild of a Moroccan Sufi anthropologist, Faouzi Skali, following the first Gulf War. He saw sacred music as a unique way to reach people of different cultures and to bring them to understand each other and to heal pain and conflict. But his vision went well beyond the music, to dialogue. The idea was to have, alongside the music festival, a daily encounter between people from different and often opposing communities who, inspired by the music and ambience, would move beyond set positions and create pathways towards peace, respect, and understanding. The Fes Forum was born, and I worked with Faouzi Skali for some ten years, as co-moderator. To a remarkable degree, the hypothesis proved to be a valid one. People, many holding very senior positions, found that, in the very different setting of a meeting in a lovely palace garden, with a backdrop of diverse music and other art forms, new ideas could be tested and sharpened.

The Forum itself no longer has the same leadership or allure, and today multiple music festivals have emerged, so the Fes festival has lost its uniqueness. But many new friendships and relationships were forged there, many lasting to this day. In the light of the Covid-19 emergency, Faouzi Skali has launched a new venture that he calls Trismegistus, named for an Egyptian God who is said to link Art, Science, and Spirit. The experience of the Fes Festival highlights the importance of looking beyond formal structures and institutions, taking especially into account the power of the arts to bring people together. Similar comments apply for other sectors, including sports, and bringing religious actors into such ventures can open new windows.

## **Conclusion**

The international relations and development fields have long faced challenges of working in siloes, whether divided by sector (e.g., education versus water) or by institutional habit and history. The three fields of humanitarian relief, economic and social development, and conflict resolution and peacebuilding have tended to have different training approaches, institutional arrangements, financing, and so forth. The focus on fragile and conflict-prone states, seen today as the central development challenge for the next decade by many, has highlighted the need for these three communities to work far more closely together. The fact that religious communities and beliefs play such critical roles in the poorest and most fragile situations means that an ideally well-coordinated approach would engage religious communities proactively. The optimal

approach would be integrated and well adapted to the dynamics of each situation within a framework that involves mutual, continuing efforts to draw on knowledge and through meaningful relationships and partnerships. Efforts to move in this direction might be termed a work in progress, with very partial examples of how it might work. There are many efforts: In the Philippines, in Mindanao; in Aceh, Indonesia (Feener and Fountain 2018); in South Sudan; in Central African Republic; in Nigeria; and in Colombia. But bringing segmented approaches closer together has yet to be achieved.

The rich experiences of the past two decades, through my journey of bridge-building between the worlds of development and religion, have left me with more questions than answers. Why, for example, are so many in religious circles convinced, deeply, that poverty in the world and in their community is getting worse, while development analysts argue that remarkable progress towards ending poverty is being made? (Radelet 2015). Is it because although most are better off, the inequity of growth is so striking that it appears that those at the bottom are worse off or increasing in number? Why is the challenge of ensuring equality between men and women and among ethnic groups so difficult to achieve? Why are inequality and inequity seen so differently and what are the most likely paths towards some resolution? Why are so many monitoring efforts showing that violations of human rights and especially of religious freedom are getting worse, in all world regions? Is it true, or are we just becoming more aware?

The time when development specialists adhered to simple solutions is far behind us, though there are many who would still argue strongly for certain policy prescriptions, for example heavy investments in education or universal health coverage or small and medium enterprise. The reality is that with so many intersections single simple solutions are misleading. Likewise, something approaching a simplistic idea that development actors, government, and partners, can simply “add religion and stir” is foolish. Complexity and dynamism are the names of the game.

The end of my exploring of the gullies, canyons, and bridges is far away still, and my own development and faith literacy are far from complete. The worlds of development and religion are infinitely complex and constantly changing, so a clear vision of the elephant is probably a chimera. However, I suggest two important lessons learned along the way.

A first echoes a recent finding from a study in Myanmar, that relationships probably matter more than evidence in the effort to convince those making policy and thus to bring about change (Green 2020). Perhaps telling a personal story of how you reached a position—including a willingness to evolve further—might be more convincing than marshaling quantitative evidence showing a similar finding. Evidence is critically important, but there are countless questions about what kind of evidence is sought as well as how to present and distill it in meaningful ways. Relationships are the route, however, to understanding and communicating, including across the many divides of culture, discipline, language, and place. In my own journey it is the effort to gain a deeper understanding of how a colleague or leader thinks that yields the most significant results. The discipline of extended interviews, reviewing and testing understanding, is, for example, a powerful tool in probing the critical issues of motivation and differing perceptions. That adds the vital importance of listening and the task of building relationships, whether at the personal or the institutional level.

A second lesson is a reinforcement of the vital lesson that context matters, a lot, probably most of all. It should come as no surprise that engaging religious communities is complex and challenging, given their long history (millennia), dynamism, and diversity. The oft-cited figure that some 84% of the world’s population has some religious affiliation (Pew Research Center 2012; Birdsall and Beaman 2020) is a clear clue to the size and complexity. Each place, each tradition, each belief has complex roots. Efforts to seek a “faith DNA” that would characterize all religious actions are a Quijote-like quest. The evolution and divisions of major religions

over the millennia are testimony to that. The ways of faith are infinitely complex, individual to each person but also to each institution, at a given moment. Looking to the multiple disciplines involved in approaching religious literacy, history to my mind has paramount importance. But the venture inevitably involves economy, finance, psychology, geography, cultural heritage, and, of course, politics. Taking the complexity of the challenge with humility and even good humor, however, opens doors to an infinite richness of appreciation for the human condition and, it is to be hoped, ways to contribute to its flourishing in a time when so much is possible.

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# RELIGIOUS LITERACY AND DIPLOMACY

*Nicole Bibbins Sedaca*

Diplomacy has been a part of global history for millennia, providing sovereign leaders an invaluable tool to communicate, negotiate, and conduct business with other leaders. From the time the first foreign ministry was created to the present, diplomats have been the front line of relations with foreign entities (Roberts 2006). The art and science of communicating and negotiating with foreign leaders, government officials, and citizens of diverse backgrounds and identities has been integral to the existence and survival of the state system since the Treaty of Westphalia. Religious affiliation is one of many identities that people around the world have and which impact their thinking and decision-making. In a world in which 87% of the global population will be religiously affiliated by 2050, engaging with people of different religions has been, and will continue to be, a natural and constant part of diplomacy—and a variable in its success or failure (Pew-Templeton Global Religious Futures Project n.d.).

In this context, the consideration of the relationship between religious understanding and diplomacy is not a discussion about *whether* diplomats encounter and engage religion and religious actors; that is a given. The consideration about religion and diplomacy is a discussion about *how* and *why* and *to what end* diplomats encounter religion and religious actors, and whether religious literacy—and ultimately cross-cultural religious literacy and covenantal pluralism—are relevant to the practice of diplomacy.

For the purpose of this chapter, we will use the following definitions. Religious literacy “entails the ability to discern and analyze the fundamental intersections of religion and social/political/cultural life through multiple lenses,” as defined by Harvard Professor Diane Moore (Harvard Divinity School n.d.).<sup>1</sup> Further, “cross-cultural religious literacy” (CCRL) builds on this definition of religious literacy, expanding it to include self-understanding, engagement, and leadership. As outlined in the opening chapter of this book, CCRL is part of a theory of change, “a process of mutual engagement with a religious actor, state or non-state, rooted in an understanding of self, the other’s self-understanding, and the objectives at hand, in a specific cultural context.” Finally, “covenantal pluralism” as also defined in the opening chapter of this volume provides a framework that increases the “likelihood that people of profoundly different points of moral and religious departure will nevertheless engage across differences and contribute to the common good.” Seiple and Hoover explain that covenantal pluralism moves beyond mere side-by-side “tolerance” and instead calls for a mutual engagement that builds mutual respect and mutual reliance, yielding resiliency. “The normative essence of covenantal

pluralism is the humility, patience, empathy, and responsibility to engage, respect, and protect the other. It is a secular covenant of global neighborliness, one with a balanced emphasis on both the rules and relationships necessary to live peacefully and productively in a world of deep differences.”

This chapter explores how American diplomats navigate the concept of religion as a part of foreign policy making,<sup>2</sup> the challenges to expanding religious understanding in diplomacy, and how diplomacy can and should relate to religious literacy, CCRL, and covenantal pluralism. Ultimately, this chapter explores whether diplomatic undertakings adequately and fully integrate religion and religious actors into the analysis and practice of diplomacy, and what tools will be best to reach that point.

### **Diplomacy’s “relationship” with religion**

Diplomacy—at its heart—requires a deep understanding of other cultures and people, in order to engage in conversation and negotiations to advance the policies, interests, and values of a particular entity, state or non-state. Understanding religion has long been a part of this broader engagement with other cultures. Diplomats have learned the demographics, statistics, religious protocols and practices, and core tenets of faiths throughout history. In short, the need for a diplomat’s “religious literacy” is not new, if s/he is to be successful.

While knowing about religions is not new, what is newer is exploring *how* and *why* diplomats understand religion. Is it simply a noteworthy demographic factor? A remaining relic of thinking in less developed societies, likely to fade out over time? A negative source of violence and conflict, which must be navigated or tolerated? Or should religion be seen—or better said, understood—as a central defining and motivating factor of behavior in some, if not many contexts, worthy of deep understanding and consideration in foreign policy making?

During a decade of service at the US Department of State and a decade in academia—particularly at an institution that trains future diplomats from multiple countries—I have observed a spectrum of views on the relevance of integrating a broader understanding of religion in diplomacy: From rejection to indifference to reluctant tolerance to full acceptance. In my experience, some diplomats significantly minimize the importance of religion as a relevant or even potentially useful factor, given their personal view on religion or the “problematic nature” of religion in the world. Others recognize its importance situationally, depending on the issue at hand. Still others are among a growing minority that recognizes the importance of integrating religious understanding into foreign policy making and diplomacy, viewing religion as a key driver of world affairs, and even seeing it as a key element of addressing global challenges.

Some diplomats may bristle at these characterizations, noting that they have long dealt with issues with complex religious components—from Islamist terrorism to negotiations between Palestinians and Israelis to violence against Rohingya in Burma. This is unquestionably accurate; diplomats deal extensively with religion in specific countries or issue-contexts. But dealing with religion within individual contexts is different than integrating an understanding of religion as a key factor, if not driver, in international affairs. This difference is the central debate considered here.

While there are clearly different perspectives (as noted above) on how central an understanding of religion should be in foreign policy making, there is growing support for the idea that religion, or at least religious literacy, cannot be downplayed or dealt with situationally, and therefore must be a part of a diplomat’s core competencies. Numerous US Secretaries of State—most notably Secretaries Madeleine Albright and John Kerry—have argued for the importance of understanding religion in foreign policy making. Secretary Albright, author of many books

including her 2006 book entitled *The Mighty and the Almighty: Reflections on America, God, and World Affairs*, has argued that

(r)eligion is a powerful force whose impact depends entirely on what it inspires people to do. The challenge for policy-makers is to harness the unifying potential of faith, while containing its capacity to divide. That must be the ultimate goal and purpose of the efforts we are discussing today. To succeed, we will need to learn how to talk about religion in ways that do not offend the people we are trying to reach.

(Casey 2015)

Secretary Kerry echoed a similar sentiment in a message to American diplomats saying, “In every country, in every region of the world, and on nearly every issue central to US foreign policy, religious institutions and actors are among the drivers of change” (Kerry 2015).

Statements such as these reflect a growing awareness about the need to deeply understand religion and engage religious actors in diplomatic efforts. However, while support for the essential nature of cultivating a deep religious understanding in diplomacy is growing, it is not yet shared fully throughout diplomatic circles.

### **How religious engagement and literacy has expanded**

Since the creation of the United Nations, religious freedom and anti-discrimination have been included in many international documents, from the 1948 Universal Declaration on Human Rights to the 1966 International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, to the 1967 Convention on Religious Intolerance (United Nations 1984; OHCHR 1976). Eventually, religious freedom and anti-discrimination were incorporated into religion-specific documents such as the 1981 Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief, or the 1986 establishment of the Special Rapporteur to identify existing and emerging obstacles to the enjoyment of the right to freedom of religion or belief. These actions provided a notable legal and normative framework for international religious freedom and foundational documents for advocates, but they did not galvanize widespread integration of religion as an analytical factor into Western diplomatic efforts.

Over the last three decades, Western diplomatic organizations and entities have unquestionably increased their focus on some aspects of religion. This growing focus reflects both the progress made and challenges to integrating religious understanding into foreign policy making.

Three key trends are worth noting, summarized here as foundational to a broader discussion:

- In many cases, governments have approached religion primarily through the lens of “religious freedom,” one of many human rights, which were generally walled off from broader integration into key foreign policy issues. In other words, religion was dealt with on an ad hoc basis within one sphere (human rights) of diplomacy, or not at all;
- Increased engagement on religious freedom has been followed by an increase in training on religious freedom. While a significant step in increasing understanding, this was largely not a full integration of religion as an analytical factor; it was—in essence—a step to understand religious freedom within the context of international relations;
- An increased focus on religious freedom and—at times—religious literacy was not always accompanied by a parallel effort to challenge institutional biases—within the US government, but other governments and multilateral organizations as well—against increased understanding of religion.

The 1990s saw a significant expansion of the national and international focus—and thus diplomatic engagement—on religious freedom and religion in general. Following the fall of the Berlin Wall and the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the world saw both the expected expansion of freedom and an explosion of conflicts involving ethnic and religious divisions, many of which had been contained by Communist rule. The Balkans exploded with ethno-religious violence, as Yugoslavia broke into multiple states. Religious communities throughout the Middle East—from Baha'i to Christians to Muslims—suffered state and non-state repression. Christians, Muslims, and any believers outside the official state-authorized churches in China continued to suffer persecution and imprisonment. Religion was back in the headlines.

In the United States, the passage of the 1998 International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA) was a monumental leap in focusing American efforts on religious freedom. This Act created the US Commission on International Religious Freedom, an independent, bipartisan US federal government commission that “monitors the universal right to freedom of religion or belief abroad” (US Commission on International Religious Freedom n.d.). The Act also created an Office of International Religious Freedom within the US Department of State, marking the first time that the issue of religious freedom would be dealt with as a standalone issue. The creation of an Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom position within the Department of State and the annual Report to Congress on International Religious Freedom greatly expanded the diplomatic tools and personnel focused on these issues. Other countries eventually followed suit with similar high-level positions focused on religious freedom (US Commission on International Religious Freedom, n.d.).

The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, significantly increased the American and global focus on religion, particularly the role of religion in the context of violence, terrorist actions, and dissent. The attacks amplified the religious identity trends first witnessed in the Balkans, forcing analysts and policy-makers to redouble their efforts to understand religiously motivated violence and conflict. This focus was, however, largely on Islamist terrorism. Unfortunately, this emphasis contributed to the view of religion as a singularly negative factor to be managed, rather than a multifaceted driver of individual, community, and state behavior. Although the United States and its allies accomplished some notable security goals in combating religious extremism particularly in the Middle East and South Asia, this period also witnessed significant human rights abuses in the name of the Global War on Terror. There were significant crackdowns on the civil and political rights of religious believers around the world, particularly Muslim populations in many countries, and limitations of civil liberties in long-standing democracies, including the United States and Europe.

While significant US policy and diplomatic efforts focused on deepening the understanding of Islam abroad, the George W. Bush Administration expanded engagement of faith groups domestically. This outreach facilitated the full participation of faith-based actors in federal grant making and social service programs, and the removal of legislative barriers faced by these groups. The United States Agency for International Development (USAID), for example, created an office focused on faith-based actors in development in 2002. The State Department's Office of International Religious Freedom continued to expand the United States' leadership role on advancing religious freedom globally and ensuring that the IRFA mandate was widely implemented.

Nearly a decade after the September 11 attacks and as the efforts to advance religious freedom expanded, another conversation grew in prominence—one focused on religious literacy and increased engagement of religious actors, as an effort that was separate and distinct from religious freedom. This effort reflected the growing recognition that religion and religious actors should not be engaged only in cases of religious persecution or only in the context of religious



violence and severe discrimination, but rather as a central part of understanding political, social, and cultural developments in any society. A push for expanded religious literacy grew.

In 2011, the US Department of State's Office of International Religious Freedom designed a course for US officials offered by the Foreign Service Institute (FSI) on religion and foreign policy (US Department of State 2011). The course eventually expanded to a week-long class on religion and foreign policy, designed to provide tools to understand religion in the foreign policy context and offer some introduction to religious literacy.<sup>3</sup> Unlike the mandatory online course on religious freedom, the religion and foreign policy class has been an in-person elective, and was not integrated into the core statecraft training. Courses on specific religions have been offered to some officers working on or in majority-religion countries, and religious freedom is addressed in the diplomatic orientation course, as well as several mandatory courses. A religious freedom course became mandatory for all diplomats, however, following the passage of the Frank R. Wolf International Religious Freedom Act in 2016. The focus on religion expanded, but full integration into foreign policy analysis was not the overall objective.

Also in 2011, Secretary Clinton launched a Strategic Dialogue with Civil Society initiative, which included religious leaders and activists as part of a "Religion and Foreign Policy" working group. Its recommendations led to the August 2013 promulgation of the US Strategy on Religious Leader and Faith Community Engagement, as well as the August 2013 launch of the Secretary's Office of Faith-Based Community Initiatives (later known as the Secretary's Office of Religion and Global Affairs). In addition to a Special Representative on Religion and Global Affairs, the office consolidated several existing offices, including the Special Envoy to Monitor and Combat Anti-Semitism, the Special Representative to Muslim Communities, and the Special Envoy to the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (while all maintaining individual mandates). This office was created to bring not only more focus on outreach to domestic faith-based actors, but to think strategically about how the US State Department as a whole dealt with the issue of religion in its efforts to promote US priorities. Despite high-level initiatives from this Secretary-designated office, efforts to integrate more understanding of religion were met with mixed views by the US diplomatic bureaucracy—with some greeting it with reluctance, some confused by "yet another" Department office focused on religion, while others actively worked around the office. In my experience, these offices continued to encounter challenges, indifference, or deprioritization.

In 2014, the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria expanded its reach and required continued and expanded US focus on religiously motivated violence and conflict. The State Department created a senior position in 2015—entitled Special Advisor for Religious Minorities in the Near East and South/Central Asia—to expand and elevate efforts to combat religious persecution, particularly as a result of the scourge of ISIS violence. As mentioned above, the 2016 signing of the Frank R. Wolf International Religious Freedom Act built upon the foundation of the International Religious Freedom Act, and made a significant amendment of the IRFA to highlight that "freedom of thought, conscience, and religion is understood to protect theistic and non-theistic beliefs and the right not to profess or practice any religion," an important distinction to ensure that protections include those adhering to religious groups and those who do not practice (Public Law 2016).

The Trump Administration took a significant step back from the United States' traditional commitment to human rights generally, and the progress that had been made on pluralism and building understanding around and between different religions. For example, the Administration's limitation on the travel of people from Muslim-majority countries—the so-called "Muslim ban"—lacked explanation, analytical consistency with the major terrorist threats in the world, and parallel outreach to Muslim communities to explain the stated security concerns. This "ban"

raised concern that the Administration sought to target these countries because of their majority faith, not according to the level of threat to US national security. At the same time, however, the Administration took significant steps on elevating and advancing international religious freedom as a policy issue. The appointment of Samuel Brownback, the former governor of Kansas and a well-respected, long-serving US Senator, as the Ambassador-at-Large for religious freedom gave the role significant prominence. In 2018, the first ever ministerial-level meeting<sup>4</sup> to advance religious freedom was hosted by the United States. Convening foreign ministers and civil society leaders from 80+ countries, this gathering—and its 2019 sequel—marked a significant elevation of the issue of religious freedom. Secretary Pompeo’s remarks highlighted the broad impact of religious repression around the world and articulated the United States’ continued commitment to advance religious freedom (US Department of State 2019). He also announced multiple efforts, including the establishment of an International Religious Freedom Fund,<sup>5</sup> and followed in 2020 with the creation of the 27-nation International Religious Freedom Alliance (US Department of State 2020).<sup>6</sup>

Increased focus and infrastructure around religious freedom and the increased global focus on religion meant that diplomats had to engage religion more frequently. The question remains, however, whether this increased focus on religious freedom and religion resulted in a more comprehensive religious literacy, and therefore more effective diplomacy.

While diplomatic engagement on religious freedom and diplomatic religious literacy have certainly and sporadically increased in the last three decades, a deeper integration of religious understanding has not yet been reached and—most notably for this book—the integration of religion into solutions is not consistent.

Meanwhile, based on my own ongoing engagement with diplomats in Washington, D.C., religion still holds a dichotomous place in Western diplomacy and foreign policy. It remains an omnipresent concept, an oft-perceived source of problem, a “necessary evil” to understand, and an inconsistently integrated concept in diplomatic work. This inconsistency exists at a time when religion is a key factor in many of the world’s most pressing challenges. These foreign policy challenges include but are not limited to:

- The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has identified non-state sanctioned religious groups as a direct threat to its power and the nation’s stability (Cook 2017). The CCP continues to intern over one million Muslim Uighurs in concentration camp-like facilities, while countless more are under heavy surveillance;
- As the competition for global and regional dominance intensifies, universal values—based on democratic norms, which include religious freedom—delineate defining differences between the great powers. As China and Russia erode democratic values and freedoms globally, religious freedom is just one of the many universal norms that are at risk;
- In the Middle East, clashes between Shia and Sunni factions are evident from Yemen to Syria and Lebanon, and between the regional powerhouses of Iran and Saudi Arabia, which back proxies and allies throughout the Middle East and North Africa;
- From Nigeria to the Central African Republic to Somalia, religion-based violence is destabilizing many African nations adding to political or economic fragility;
- Ethnic cleansing, if not genocide, continues in Myanmar against the Muslim Rohingya population, at the hands of Buddhist groups and the Burmese military;
- Religious minorities, particularly Muslims, have faced a significantly more hostile environment under Prime Minister Modi’s leadership in India;
- Migration has taken center stage as a humanitarian, political, and economic touchpoint. The movement of people of different religions, particularly from the Middle East and

Africa, into Europe has spurred tension about religious exclusion and increased dialogue and rhetoric about national identity and religion;

- The specter of religious-based terrorism remains a significant threat in most continents, threatening to spread instability, violate human rights, and undermine governments.

Religion and religious communities remain at the intersection of these international challenges, yet they are unevenly addressed in analysis and problem-solving. In addition to these aforementioned issues, there is significant polarization and rising populism in established and emerging democracies, much of which now has an element of religious division or national identity involving religion. Economic woes tend to give rise to increased divisions, scapegoating, and societal decay, which can happen along ethnic or religious lines. Populist leaders, both left and right, in every region, are seeking to exploit differences and stoke fears in society to build support for their political agenda. And the Covid-19 pandemic is exacerbating societal divisions and disenfranchisement that previously existed.

This gap between the significance of religion in current events and the prominence of religious understanding and integration into comprehensive analysis and decision-making remains. Numerous factors have contributed to the seeming disconnect between the need for increasing religious understanding and the practice of integrating that understanding into foreign policy making.

### **Why hasn't there already been a more comprehensive embrace of religious literacy?**

There are several friction points that have long existed around increasing understanding and integration of religion in diplomatic efforts.

#### ***Separation of church and state***

The foundational concept of separation of church and state in the United States Constitution prohibits certain types of government engagement with religious institutions in policymaking. The First Amendment states that “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof” (Constitute Project n.d.). Known as the establishment clause and the free exercise clause, this Amendment is often used to push back on initiatives seeking to engage more religious actors in the policy making process. Some government officials—and members of the public—see strengthening a focus on understanding religion in policy making or including religious actors in outreach to be either fully prohibited or to be too difficult legally to justify the initiative. During my time at the State Department working on religious freedom and human rights, I repeatedly heard colleagues remind of the separation of church and state as an indication of their opposition to the inclusion of religious actors in consultations or partnerships, without an understanding of the limited sphere of legally prohibited engagement.

#### ***Bureaucratic inertia***

It is challenging to bring change to any large bureaucracy, including a corps of diplomats, on any significant issue. All systemic change—to include new analytical frameworks, different stakeholders, or operating procedures—simply takes time. Any diplomatic corps, unlike some other sectors, also relies heavily on seasoned experts and leaders who have both deep and invaluable

experience and deeply entrenched ways of doing business. This dynamic can contribute to the slow pace of institutional change, when needed.

### ***Secular bias in Western diplomacy***

In their thoughtful 2015 Brookings Institution article, Peter Mandaville and Sara Silvestri discuss secular bias in Western diplomacy (Mandaville and Silvestri 2015). They point to a bureaucratic cultural aversion to engaging the issue of religion and religious actors because of a common embrace of modernization theory that posits religious issues represent an outdated, non-progressive element of society that is not worthy of engagement and will ultimately “die out” (Bennett 2017).<sup>7</sup> Mandaville and Silvestri argue that diplomats currently operate at a “distinct disadvantage insofar as they tend to operate in the realm of *realpolitik* in which issues of identity, culture, and faith are largely irrelevant, compounded by a normative bias towards secularism” (Bennett 2017).

### ***Internal cultural divides***

There is often a difference in the level of support for religious literacy between career government officials and political appointees. In the United States Department of State, there is a mix of career foreign service officers, civil servants, and political appointees—each with their own distinct culture, tenure, and incentivized promotion process—which creates a natural bureaucratic tension of interests. While each group works to advance the country’s interest, each measures its actions with different measuring sticks. Foreign Service officers, all of whom have passed the same rigorous entrance exam and follow a centralized promotion track, look to the Foreign Service “guild” for affirmation of their performance. Civil servants, who tend to be subject matter experts, look to their issue-specific community in government, their immediate colleagues, or externally for affirmation. Finally, political appointees, who serve time-limited appointments at the pleasure of the President, measure their performance primarily through the President and party. For Administrations that have prioritized religious freedom, religious literacy, and integration of religious understanding into foreign policy, political appointees have often—but not exclusively—been the primary mechanism for carrying out White House policies on religious understanding. When different approaches to policies are driven primarily by one of these three groups, the “cultural” divide impacts the receptivity to new policies by the other groups. In the case of religion, the existing “bureaucratic cultural divide” has often aligned with the divide on how religious literacy is seen, making broader change more difficult.

### ***Domestic concerns reflected in diplomacy***

In “How Will Religion Shape Foreign Policy in the Next 10 Years,” Jennifer Lang discusses the “cultural cringe,” which reflects an internal bias that stems from domestic concerns in the United Kingdom, a dynamic also found in the United States (Foreign and Commonwealth Office, 2013). Lang argues that the UK suffers from the “cultural cringe particularly in its response to Christian minority protection” because of an aversion by some to conservative Christians in the UK (Foreign and Commonwealth Office 2013). As gaps in the US grow between Americans who actively or publicly express religious beliefs and those who do not, and between the “educated elite” and the working class, this cultural cringe is likely to be exacerbated.

### ***Pace of work***

Diplomacy is a fast-paced, full-time business, with diplomats constantly adapting to new pressing realities as they analyze events and engage stakeholders. Because of this pace, it is challenging to pivot and shift an entire foreign policy mindset to incorporate a new way of thinking, even when it offers to bring significant benefits.

Each of these challenges—let alone their overlap—is real, distinct, and long-standing, and has presented an obstacle to creating a more religiously literate foreign policy making process. Ultimately, whether these challenges are worth overcoming depends on how and whether religious literacy—and ultimately cross-cultural religious literacy and covenantal pluralism—impact the efficacy of diplomacy, as well as global understanding and peace.

### **From religious literacy to cross-cultural religious literacy?**

While religious literacy and integration of religion as an analytical tool face many hurdles, in Chapter 1 of this *Handbook* Seiple and Hoover argue for not only religious literacy but also cross-cultural religious literacy. This goes a step further to challenge diplomats to understand self in order to engage religion, to approach religion with humility and partnership, and to call for working closely with—not simply understanding—religious actors. If religious literacy is a concept that has not been fully embraced in all corners of American diplomacy, is a more robust application—one that requires self-examination and mutuality—even possible? Has the problem with religious literacy's acceptance in diplomacy been its overly ambitious objective of raising awareness, or a not-ambitious-enough objective that needs teeth and tools to reach its goals?

While religious literacy—as currently defined—places inherent importance on understanding religion in international engagement, it does not necessarily equip the individual who understands religion with tools to do something with that knowledge. To some extent, it assumes that the knowledge of the other will inherently change how one engages the other. The efforts to increase religious literacy have been important and effective, but may now need additional tools to move from effective understanding to effective engagement. Perhaps the many years of working to raise awareness of the importance of religious literacy have brought us to a point where now a more robust framework of “doing” must follow the tremendous progress of “knowing.” Cross-cultural religious literacy calls for a more robust framework of doing, of self-examination, of partnership with the other, not just of knowing “religious information” about the other.

This more robust framework offers both pros and cons. On the one hand, it does build on the progress that has been made, and pushes foreign affairs practitioners to continue increasing their religious literacy while also acting on their new knowledge about religion. It provides skills to not only factually understand the other but also to build the empathic skills and emotional intelligence to engage others toward a common end. Likewise, it moves the conversation from a series of intellectual engagements of “religious concepts”—religious freedoms, religious literacy, and religious pluralism—to a skills-based tool set for engaging religion.

On the other hand, however, this framework assumes a level of equality and partnership that is not consistently felt in American diplomacy, particularly toward countries with different majority faiths, cultural traditions, and weaker economic systems. It assumes that diplomats will want to or take the time to engage with others in a way that mutual flourishing is a shared goal. It fundamentally raises the question as to whether partnership is mutually beneficial in a competitive and realist world. Diplomacy, in many ways, has struggled with exactly this question of whether partnership or competition is more appropriate at any given time. Finally, it

also assumes that there is a desire for more partnership and engagement, and that diplomats and others will recognize the need for such a framework.

Ultimately, for the diplomatic community to embrace cross-cultural religious literacy, and in turn covenantal pluralism, there has to be some mutual benefit and understanding of why this approach actually supports, not undermines, the overall objectives of each side.

### **Diplomacy, religious literacy, and covenantal pluralism**

Whether religious literacy and covenantal pluralism are necessary or useful for diplomacy requires an examination of how or whether the concepts overlap or reinforce each other. We can examine this from two different angles. First is an examination of the compatibility of the strategic objective of each. Second is examining the compatibility of the means and ends, which will be discussed later in the chapter.

The strategic objective of diplomacy is ultimately to advance a country's interests, to include its values. At times, those interests align with many others in the region or the world, and at times, they are at odds with other countries, groups, or even the entire world. As noted by Stewart, Seiple, and Hoover in Chapter 2 of this *Handbook*, the objective of covenantal pluralism is to foster both a "constitutional order of equal rights and responsibilities" and a "culture of reciprocal commitment to engaging, respecting, and protecting the other." Here is the difference: Diplomacy is inherently about advancing one's own interest, while covenantal pluralism is initially seen as about protecting "the other." Flagging this notable difference is definitively not to say that these two concepts—advancing one's interests and protecting the other—are inherently at odds. But it is to say that their starting places are very different and have to be acknowledged. When one's interests include values, as was often noted by the late Sen. John McCain, the convergence of these two objectives is far easier. Where these two concepts of diplomacy and covenantal pluralism come together, however, is where we can explore how cross-cultural religious literacy and covenantal pluralism can be beneficial to—not a distraction from—the success of a diplomat. This is the most crucial starting point for an analysis of diplomacy, religious literacy, and covenantal pluralism.

Given the diverse nature of the global community and the conflict or instability that can stem from that diversity—often because different groups are unable and/or unwilling to engage each other—diplomats are constantly considering how to navigate this diversity to avoid conflict. Seiple and Hoover argue that, "A pluralism that is 'covenantal' is richer and more resilient because it is relational—that is, it is not merely a transactional contract." This is where the possibility for a deep win-win exists: Where diplomacy with strong religious literacy allows for more effective and impactful means to navigate through conflict.

By its nature, diplomacy is a combination of both types of relationships that Seiple and Hoover describe: Transactional relationships and deep, rich relationships built on genuine understanding. It is in these deeper relationships, complex understanding, and expertise that diplomats are so extraordinarily impactful, even in the most difficult of situations. And they are so impactful because of their deeper understanding of context and culture, which most often includes some element of religious understanding. If that deeper understanding—including religious understanding—is where diplomats are most effective and impactful, it would follow that a deeper understanding of religion on a global level and as an integrated part of foreign policy would also increase the efficacy and impact of diplomats universally. By taking a crucial part of diplomatic engagement—richer, resilient relationships built over many years and borne out of deep understanding—and extrapolating the elements of these relationships to the whole of diplomatic engagement, a possibility for growth exists.

If foreign policy making broadly and the quotidian transactional relationships specifically do not fully include or appreciate the role of religion, these engagements are less effective, less targeted, less nuanced. When a diplomat understands the depth, motivations, and holistic thinking of “the other,” or how religion impacts others’ decisions and thinking, they can more effectively engage in relationship building, negotiations, and analysis. Transferring that deeper understanding of a person or situation to the entire practice of diplomacy will be beneficial for not only the field of diplomacy, but for how we navigate a diverse world. If that understanding can be the foundation to support improved navigation of pluralism, as opposed to seeing it as inherently conflictual or something to be minimized, then the global system will have greater stability and peace.

This cognitive leap from understanding religion’s importance in a particular, deeper, nuanced context to accepting it as a central component of rigorous foreign policy analysis broadly is the challenge. Here it is important to remember Seiple and Hoover’s point that covenantal pluralism can be practiced “without necessarily lending moral equivalency to the beliefs and behaviors of others.” This stance is important to overcoming the concern that greater integration of religion in analysis, training, and understanding will jeopardize an individual diplomat’s own beliefs, a country’s overall policies, or detract from “more important work.” Rather than compromising this personal view, understanding others’ religions deeply will only strengthen their ability to practice diplomacy.

Further, Seiple and Hoover’s call for diplomats and others to examine their own personal philosophy and theology is an important point. It will be important that diplomatic institutions explicitly address—in diplomatic training and dialogue—the possibility to deeply understand and internalize the impact of others’ religions while maintaining one’s own views. In this way, religious literacy moves away from endorsement of or sympathizing with another’s religion to understanding religion as a critical analytical tool.

Having looked at the strategic objectives of diplomacy and covenantal pluralism, let us now look at the relationship between diplomacy, religious literacy, and covenantal pluralism from another angle: Means and ends.

In the world of diplomacy, diplomacy is the “means” to the “ends” of stronger national security, a more prosperous economy, or other foreign policy objectives. Seiple and Hoover describe cross-cultural religious literacy as the means and covenantal pluralism as the end.

Diplomats will include cross-cultural religious literacy in their diplomatic tools when—and only when—they see and understand that religious literacy enhances their diplomatic impact and serves the greater purpose of their end, i.e., the national interest/values of their country. As noted above, increasing religious literacy can contribute to deepening understanding to make diplomacy most effective. So these two “means” of diplomacy and religious literacy align and are reinforcing.

While the means of diplomacy and religious literacy align, it is useful to see whether the “ends” of national interest and covenantal pluralism align. (And if there is a stronger linkage needed between diplomacy, broadly speaking, and covenantal pluralism, then naturally, the case for religious literacy is even stronger.)

Seiple and Hoover write that the concept of covenantal pluralism aims for “a balanced emphasis on both the *rules* and *relationships* necessary to live peacefully and productively in a world of deep differences.” If they are correct, covenantal pluralism creates an environment in which national interest can best be pursued, an environment with decreased conflict and in which the source of significant conflict—religious strife—is replaced. If they are correct, the failure to pursue covenantal pluralism is therefore a missed opportunity at creating a more peaceful and productive global order, which ultimately serves national interest. This is where the

“ends” of covenantal pluralism then align with the “ends” of diplomacy, i.e., a more prosperous and secure global community that serves national interests.

When a deep understanding of religion and advancing covenantal pluralism are seen as essential to building a world where states can operate freely and people can live peacefully and productively with their differences, then understanding religion shifts from irrelevant or situationally necessary, to being a central component of foreign policy analysis and policy making, and ultimately constructive solutions. Because diplomats seek to advance national interest within a global system, they naturally seek such opportunities to limit conflict, build understanding, and create environments where security and economic prosperity are possible.

The common current view—religion as an ad hoc issue, as a source of conflict, or as an outdated, non-progressive mode of thinking—potentially causes diplomats to miss an opportunity. When viewed as a source of conflict or outdated thinking, religion is naturally something to be tolerated, instrumentalized, contained, or combated. When it is seen as impossible to both radically disagree and also live peacefully and productively, then religion is, understandably, something to be tolerated or combated because it is inherently conflictual. When it is seen as a means to a solution, it is an important dynamic to understand.

With a framework in which religious differences are expected and accepted and the role of religion understood and integrated, engaging religious literacy and religious actors becomes a strength. With a majority of the world’s population holding views based on their faith and with religion central to many foreign policy issues, shifting the view of religion from a conflictual factor to a productive factor to build stronger societies is not just a novel shift. This shift is imperative for building a more stable, peaceful community through the practice of stronger diplomacy.

### **A way forward**

Strengthening the integration of religious understanding and effectiveness into diplomacy requires the following elements:

#### ***Leadership***

All bureaucracies and organizational cultures are adaptable with good leadership. Leadership is needed from the White House and senior political and career officials of the State Department to urge diplomats to include religious understanding and religious actors in their thinking. This cannot be done in spite of the bureaucracy; it must be done in close conjunction with the bureaucracy.

#### ***Internal advocates***

Diplomatic corps are like ancient guilds—respectful of their tradition and loyal to their members. Integrating religious literacy and covenantal pluralism into diplomatic communities must be done by and with some respected senior career diplomats. They have the respect of the wider diplomatic community and “speak the language” of the diplomatic corps.

#### ***Training***

Numerous articles have been written about the importance of increasing diplomats’ training, particularly at an early point in their career, to raise understanding of religious dynamics. Expanding mandatory training on religion and integrating an understanding of religion into core courses will



be essential to cultivating the next generation of religiously literate diplomats. Importantly, the cross-cultural religious literacy skills of engagement—evaluation, negotiation, and communication—are transferable skills to any situation, and should be welcomed by every diplomat.

### ***Thought leadership***

Diplomats look to key think tanks and thought leaders—among other sources—to inform their analyses. Increasing the religious literacy of these influential thought leaders and analysts outside of the diplomatic corps will be crucial to shifting the thinking within the diplomatic corps.

### ***Embracing the secular skepticism***

As mentioned before, the secular bias that exists is a significant hurdle to expanding religious literacy. Just as the religious literacy community advocates for acceptance and understanding of different religious communities—even when one radically disagrees—the religious literacy community must respect the “religion of secularism” that exists in many diplomatic circles, rather than rejecting it as inherently antithetical to deeper religious understanding.

### ***Nomenclature***

The term “covenantal pluralism” is not clear for those outside the religious literacy community. And quite frankly, it is not immediately clear to even those in the community, without reading the entire argument. Finding language that makes the linguistic and operational bridge between these two “worlds” is an important component to success. Adding this term to an already full deck of “religious terms” such as religious literacy, religious engagement, religious pluralism, and religious freedom, must be done in a way that makes clear *why* this concept and framework is needed.

### ***Areas of natural synergy***

There are areas in which religious literacy has obvious relevance, such as religious nationalism, religious violence, and religious peacebuilding. Engaging these areas of diplomatic work first will be key to the overall concept of integrating them into the broader discussion.

### **In closing: Diplomacy and covenantal pluralism**

Analysis and engagement of religion is, has been, and will long be a central part of the diplomat’s work. Few diplomats have practiced their trade without some engagement of religion. As our understanding grows about *how* to engage religion and religious actors as a part of foreign policy making, there is an opportunity to shift how religion is understood, factored in, and seen, in order to build a stronger and more peaceful global community. In our rapidly changing environment, increasing religious literacy is essential to effective diplomacy, greater understanding of the other, and ultimately to greater peace and stability globally. The normative vision of covenantal pluralism can help motivate and orient the process of improving religious literacy in the field of diplomacy.

### **Notes**

- 1 Moore’s definition further includes the following points. “Specifically, a religiously literate person will possess (1) 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. (2) the ability to discern and explore the religious dimensions of political, social and cultural expressions across time and place" (Harvard Divinity School n.d.).
- 2 This chapter looks particularly at an American perspective in light of the author's experience in the US Department of State and engagement with US foreign policy making, as well as academic experience at an American university which trains future diplomats from many countries.
  - 3 Co-editor Chris Seiple keynoted the first five iterations of this elective.
  - 4 Ministerial meetings are high-level gatherings of Minister level (or Secretary-level, in US terms) representatives from numerous countries. Gathering officials at that level signals a high-level focus or commitment to the issue at hand.
  - 5 See the fund's fact sheet at [www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/International-Religious-Freedom-Fund-Fact-Sheet.pdf](http://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/International-Religious-Freedom-Fund-Fact-Sheet.pdf).
  - 6 The 27 original nations pledged to "uphold (a) Declaration of Principles, solidifying (their) collective commitment to object and oppose, publicly and privately, all abuses or violations of religious freedom" (US Department of State 2020).
  - 7 Canadian Ambassador for Religious Freedom Andrew Bennett recounts a related story. "I recall a conversation I had with a colleague who had served as head of mission in various countries. This diplomat, like most of my colleagues, was well-educated and shaped by extensive experience in the field. Yet, when I asked whether a recent meeting with a bishop in a country of posting had been with the Roman Catholic bishop of the capital or the Anglican bishop, I was met with a blank stare and the response that they had no idea ... Such willful indifference would surely not be expected or tolerated if one confessed to not know whether they had encountered a country's foreign minister or the defense minister and to blame that on not possessing an undergraduate political science degree" (Bennet 2017).

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# 16

## RELIGIOUS LITERACY, CHAPLAINCY, AND SPIRITUAL CARE

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In 2019 an interdisciplinary healthcare team from the United States accepted an invitation to work with physicians, nurses, and therapists in Santiago, Chile to re-imagine what professional spiritual care might look like in a set of healthcare organizations there. As the project's Chilean hosts explained, they were grappling with the rapid growth of the "spiritual but not religious" in the region, a dramatic demographic shift they attributed to the sexual abuse scandal in this historically Catholic country. These Chilean leaders had found that people were increasingly looking for spiritual support in vulnerable moments that take place in healthcare settings, a support that they were not finding with their priest or parish. The American team spent a week with their Chilean hosts collaborating on spiritual care assessment and interventions that might be useful in their contexts. This group was organized by the Association of Clinical Pastoral Education (ACPE) and Christina Puchalski of the George Washington University Institute for Spirituality and Health. The group is working to develop a long-term program of spiritual care that they hope will grow beyond Santiago (ACPE 2018).

Also in 2019, some members of the ACPE group were invited to Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, where they laid the groundwork for an innovative approach to spiritual care for Muslim women. With a population that is 90% Muslim, most spiritual care in Malaysia is provided by imams, all of whom are men. This is challenging for women seeking to receive spiritual care from a woman or to provide such care in the specific context of Islam in Malaysia. Malaysian medical professionals invited ACPE to help think through how best to identify spiritual distress and offer basic practices of spiritual support by and for women.<sup>1</sup>

New initiatives around spiritual care like the above examples in Chile and Malaysia are emerging in complex multifaith contexts all around the world. Chaplains and other providers of such spiritual care are today expected to be what sociologist Peggy Levitt calls "global citizens" (Levitt 2008; Levitt and Nyiri 2014)—leaders for whom, we argue, cross-cultural religious literacy is an increasingly essential skill. Military chaplains are at the vanguard of this trend, as they have long traveled around the globe supporting their own and serving as cultural and religious brokers for others (Carver et al. 2014; Patterson 2014). Military chaplains have historically provided "religious support" to their personnel, from providing a place where they can worship according to their conscience to being a counselor with a listening ear. In the last 20 years, however, they have often been asked to conduct "religious engagement," using skills of evaluation,

negotiation, and communication to build relationships and partnerships with religious leaders and faith communities where they are deployed (Stahl 2017). Beyond the military, chaplains work in many sectors—prisons, hospitals, psychiatric institutions, and institutions of higher education, to name a few—where cross-cultural encounters with people of different religions and races are commonplace. In fact, the American workplace for chaplains is not so different than the workplace that US military chaplains experience overseas.

As America becomes a majority-minority country by 2048—i.e., white Protestants will no longer be the majority ethnic-religious group—chaplains will have to be literate in multiple worldviews if they are to effectively evaluate their contexts, communicate with multiple religious parties, and negotiate towards sustainable actions. As congregations continue to decline, fewer people are affiliated with any religious organization, and younger people continue to seek meaning and belonging outside of traditional religious organizations, chaplains (and all religious leaders) will need to understand the demand for their work in this new demographic reality which is infused with crises ranging from the double pandemics of Covid-19 and racial inequalities to continued political polarization to economic downturns in many regions.

Chaplains in the military, healthcare, and other sectors are rarely in conversation, and a coordinated educational response from theological schools to better prepare chaplains (and all religious leaders) for today's demographic changes and persistent social crises is limited. This lack of coordination among chaplains is puzzling given that most are engaged in complex negotiations around issues of cross-cultural religious literacy and could learn from one another (Sullivan 2014; MacDonald, Sandmaier, and Fainsinger 1993). There is also no agreement on what chaplains need to know and no common education / training for that work based on the demands they face in doing it.

As the numbers of places chaplains are working expand in the United States and around the globe, we pause in this chapter to consider the unique role chaplains and spiritual care providers occupy as facilitators of what this volume calls *covenantal pluralism*. As defined by Stewart, Seiple, and Hoover in Chapter 2, covenantal pluralism is a philosophy that strives for fairness and flourishing for all even amidst deep diversity:

The concept of covenantal pluralism is simultaneously about “top-down” legal and policy parameters and “bottom-up” cultural norms and practices . . . it is characterized both by a constitutional order of equal rights and responsibilities and by a cultural or reciprocal commitment to engaging, respecting, and protecting the other—albeit without necessarily conceding veracity or moral equivalence to the beliefs and behaviors of others.

The normative essence of covenantal pluralism is rooted in virtues such as “humility, empathy, patience, and courage, combined with fairness, reciprocity, cooperativeness, self-critique, and self-correction.” It ensures a commitment to engage, respect and protect the other without necessarily lending moral equivalency to the beliefs and behaviors of others. This pledge to engage, respect, and protect the other is also, we argue, intrinsic to the unchanging nature of the modern chaplain's identity.

If an environment of covenantal pluralism is an ideal end-state for any religiously diverse society, the competencies and skills of cross-cultural religious literacy (CCRL) are essential means to that end. Within the CCRL framework as defined in Chapter 1, personal, comparative, and collaborative competencies are accomplished through the skills of evaluation, negotiation, and communication. Together, the competencies and skills that cultivate an environment of covenantal pluralism are essential to the rapidly changing character (but not the nature) of

chaplaincy as a profession. Central to this chapter is the idea that chaplaincy *at its best* embodies all the attributes of CCRL and the ethos of covenantal pluralism and must, therefore, be central to what all chaplains learn in training. Unfortunately, however, too often today's chaplains do not have the competencies and skills that these new contexts are demanding, competencies and skills that are not being taught systematically in traditional chaplain preparation programs across the United States. When chaplains do learn about religions different from their own, they tend to acquire techne but not the kind of appreciative, integrative covenantal pluralism described here.

### **The basics about chaplains**

In the American context and beyond, there is no commonly agreed-upon definition of the role or responsibilities of chaplains. Chaplains are not licensed or institutionally regulated in the United States, which means anyone can call themselves a chaplain and seek work or volunteer opportunities as such. No less than 20 different organizations offer certification in chaplaincy, with little to no agreement among them on what one must demonstrate to complete such certification. These processes are also highly subjective, often falling to a small group of those already certified, thus creating a self-referential loop. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines chaplains along very narrow, historical lines, calling a chaplain a “clergyman who conducts religious services in the private chapel” of elite leaders and other private or otherwise constricted spaces and institutions. While some chaplains conduct religious services today, such services are no longer the marker of chaplains' work that this definition implies (Sullivan 2014). Recognizing the Christian history of the term “chaplain,” some institutions now call chaplains “spiritual care providers” or “spiritual caregivers,” given their varied backgrounds and the range of people they serve (Cadge 2012). In her book *Ministry of Presence: Chaplaincy, Spiritual Care, and the Law*, religious studies scholar Winnifred Sullivan calls chaplains and spiritual care providers “secular priests” or “ministers without portfolios,” arguing that chaplains are “strangely necessary figure[s] ... in negotiating the public life of religion today” (Sullivan 2014, ix–x).

In the United States, chaplains are religious professionals who work as such outside of religious institutions. Many have masters of divinity degrees. Some, however, have no formal training or only online training. In a study of chaplains in greater Boston, three-quarters had masters of divinity degrees, 15% had PhDs, and the remaining 10% had more limited preparation (Cadge forthcoming). While some people who call themselves chaplains spend years in degree programs preparing for this work, others complete week-long courses through organizations like the International Fellowship of Chaplains or online and also call themselves chaplains. The title “chaplain” has no consistent meaning in other words, and it is adopted by a broad range of people whose preparation, credentials, ethical orientations, and goals vary considerably.

Most of the places chaplains work are religiously diverse. Chaplains are required in the military, federal prisons, and the Veterans Administration in the United States, all of which include people from a range of spiritual and religious backgrounds, including none. Chaplains may be most organizationally integrated into the military, where they are required as part of governmental commitment to the free exercise of religion. Military chaplaincy in the United States dates to the Revolutionary War, and today chaplains support military efforts, help maintain troop morale, and provide spiritual and religious rituals and services. They are uniformed, non-combatant, commissioned officers who have rank but not command, are usually unarmed, and cannot participate in intelligence gathering (Bergen 2004; Loveland 1996; Loveland 2014; Stahl 2017; Sullivan 2014). Healthcare organizations, colleges and universities, social service groups, and many of the other settings where chaplains work are also diverse, raising questions about how chaplains develop and deploy the skills of religious literacy in their work.

How chaplains deploy these skills depends on what they do. Some have argued that chaplains' unique positions on institutional edges make a kind of marginality or organizational "in-between-ness" a defining and consistent characteristic of their work (Cadge 2012; Hansen 2012; Sullivan 2014). In his classic *Hospital Ministry: The Role of the Chaplain Today*, Lawrence Holst devoted a whole chapter to how hospital chaplains work "between worlds." What he calls the "tension" or "enigma" of this organizational position shapes the work; "each world, or structure, has its own domain and demands, its assumptions and mission" (Holst 1985, 12). Prison chaplains typically combine ministry to prisoners with support for the behavior modification outcomes sought by prisons, making role-tension or organizational "in-between-ness" also a consistent part of their work (Beckford and Gilliat 1998; Hicks 2008a; Hicks 2008b; Sullivan 2009; Sundt and Cullen 2002).

Current research suggests that chaplains' work is often improvisational, determined not just by the sector but also the specific institution within which chaplains work. Chaplains' roles range from ritual specialist to counselor to small group facilitator. Research on the mandate or basis on which chaplains do their work shows mandates ranging from legal and policy precedents to moral arguments to religious motivations (Beckford and Cairns 2015; Bergen 2004; Berlinger 2008; Hicks 2008a; Holifield 2007; Loveland 2014; Otis 2009; Sullivan 2009; Sundt and Cullen 1998; Sundt and Cullen 2002).

Recent empirical studies point most consistently to chaplains making arguments about "presence" when asked about their mandate and roles. Winnifred Sullivan explains presence as a "minimalist, almost ephemeral form of spiritual care that is, at the same time, deeply rooted in religious histories and suffused with religious references for those who can read them" (Sullivan 2014, 174). Presence is a consistent theme among the healthcare chaplains who speak of it—alongside arguments about healing and hope—when describing how they spend their time and why, and how their work is important and relevant (Cadge 2012). Presence also figures prominently in the work of military chaplains—evident in memoirs with titles like *A Table in the Presence* by Lt. Carey H. Cash, a US Navy chaplain who served with the Marines (Cash 2004). A recent study in Australia noted that students felt that their university chaplain's "broader pastoral and welfare-support role" was of much greater significance to them than the chaplain's official religious role (Possamai et al. 2015). Chaplains in prisons, sports settings, and workplaces also frequently talk about being present with people and accompanying them through a range of life transitions (Dzikus, Hardin, and Waller 2012; Miller, Ngunjiri, and Lorusso 2016). Less frequently mentioned are the character values of empathy, patience, and humility that underlie chaplains' ability to be present and the ways these values are nurtured in chaplaincy training.

Many chaplains also work around death—caring for the dying, notifying others of death, and holding ceremonies to help individuals and organizations around death (MacMurray 2011). They also celebrate and commemorate life. Healthcare chaplains may be present for births and university chaplains deliver commencement and baccalaureate addresses that bless their students as they embark upon new, exciting adventures. And chaplains work with everything in between these two milestones of the human experience. The vastness of their work demands that they nurture their ability to understand cross-cultural religious experiences and the skills necessary to foster valuable interactions.

### **Chaplains and covenantal pluralism**

Cultivating and employing cross-cultural religious competencies and skills are intrinsic to chaplaincy and its contribution to a covenantal pluralism. Chaplains must be aware of their own personal moral frameworks and able to become personally literate in gaining that self-knowledge

and self-nourishment to fortify them as they provide care for others in the midst of some of the most grueling trials—be they on the battlefield or in the emergency room—that a person may face. In ever-diversifying global circumstances, spiritual care providers must cultivate comparative competencies in ways that are directly relevant to their practice of providing spiritual care in diverse religious and cultural circumstances. And chaplains cultivate cross-cultural literacies so that they may uphold their commitments to encourage and comfort, rather than mistakenly harm or alienate, those entrusted in their care. Additionally, chaplains increasingly find the skills of CCRL—the evaluation of self and others, effective communication, and successful negotiation across lines of difference—to be valuable now more than ever before in their profession. As a diverse array of worldviews, from Muslim to Ethical Humanism, gain greater representation in a profession once dominantly Christocentric (at least in the United States), chaplains find that they must now engage with religious differences not only with the people for whom they care, but also within their own professional communities. In doing so, chaplains in all settings—from higher education to the military, healthcare to correctional facilities—assume a unique role in adopting an informed, compassionate, and covenantal-pluralist understanding of CCRL. After all, in the words of Diana Eck (2006), “religious and cultural diversity are present as never before. . . . [And] pluralism isn’t just the fact of diversity, but how we respond to it” (Eck 2006).

Most all chaplains—regardless of where they work—would agree that their job requires a certain level of religious literacy in order to be performed effectively. However, given the lack of standardized educational attainments required to enter the field, the diverse array of backgrounds chaplains may come from, and the disparate worlds/communities in which they operate, there is no consensus on precisely what it means to be a “religiously literate” spiritual care provider. Most speak about gaining comparative and cross-cultural literacy from conversations with chaplaincy colleagues on the job as well as through the training that prepared them for the work. A Jewish chaplain in a hospital, for example, explained, “One of the things I find most rewarding . . . [is that] we have real discussions about the similarities and differences in our traditions and we have them informally and formally and it is just very rewarding” (Cadge forthcoming). Most of the chaplains who work with other chaplains also mentioned these kinds of opportunities for learning and engagement. It is often through organic conversations within their professional community and the every-day lived experiences in their work that chaplains get the opportunity to develop their cross-cultural religious competencies and utilize the skills necessary to engage in a manner that builds covenantal pluralism.

Studies of chaplains in action describe them using the CCRL skills to engage various encounters in different ways and to varying degrees. In the military, chaplains tend to be clear that they are to care for the living, honor the dead, and nurture the wounded while also protecting people’s first amendment rights to practice their faith. While deployed, one chaplain described a Wiccan soldier asking him for accommodation. “I had no idea what a Wiccan was up until that point and I said, ‘what do you need?’ He said ‘I need a candle and a room,’” which the chaplain was able to arrange for him. In addition to practical arrangements, this chaplain explained, “The other thing I had to do was to make sure that [when] folks learned he was Wiccan . . . I had to intervene to make sure he was not harassed” (Cadge forthcoming). This chaplain’s commitment to growing in his cross-cultural religious literacy allowed for a productive exchange where he was able to negotiate effectively with and for someone of a different faith. Importantly, it also speaks to the chaplain’s commitment to evaluating the spiritual well-being of the other and communicating across differences in order to not defend his own personal religious paradigms, but to negotiate on behalf of the well-being of another.

Chaplains’ responses to religious heterogeneity in the military are not unanimously accompanied by such commitment to covenantal pluralism. Some chaplains apply their energies selec-



tively. For example, data provided by military chaplains seem to suggest that conditions are improving for enlisted Muslims, often due to the support of military chaplains who utilize their communication and evaluation skills to advocate for those of minority faiths. Yet, in the very same battalions, “Wiccans seem stuck in the category of irritating ‘whackos’ who are either malevolent or silly,” even to the chaplains entrusted with protecting their right to practice their faith without hostility (Hansen 2012). There is also the issue of some Christian chaplains seeing their role as primarily proselytization, which goes against their legal definition.

In healthcare organizations, chaplains have described neutralizing religious differences and code-switching, or moving between different religious languages, symbols, and practices as they do their daily work (Blom and Gumperz 1972; Goffman 1979, 1981). Chaplains also refer patients to other chaplains whose religious background matches that of the patient. In one study, chaplains were most commonly observed neutralizing religious differences by emphasizing commonalities over differences (Cadge and Sigalow 2013). They tended to speak in broader languages of spirituality, emphasizing those things they think all humans share. Scott, a staff chaplain cited in this study, explained that what chaplains most offer in hospitals is their presence.

Just somebody who walks in, takes them [the patient or family] as they are, listens to their stories, shares their concerns. . . . I think the most we can offer them is just a listening ear, and a caring heart, and somebody who takes them the way they are, who has no expectations.

Many chaplains learned to neutralize or move beyond religious differences through training in clinical pastoral education that taught them to listen without judgment and to be present with people without an agenda.

Some chaplains also code-switch particularly as they pray with patients using the language and frames of reference most familiar to them. To figure out which codes to switch to, they often try to replicate the prayer style of the patient’s religious tradition and/or implicitly read people for what pieces of prayer are important to them. “For the Christian patients,” the chaplain Scott (who is Catholic) explained,

I’ll say the Catholic version of the “Our Father” [to Catholics]. If they’re Protestant, I’ll say the Protestant version. If I’m with someone who is not religiously centered and is humanistic, I just sort of try to offer them words of peace and comfort. It gets very individual there.

Chaplains also routinely carry with them items—like rosary beads—used to pray in different traditions (Cadge and Sigalow 2013).

Some find code-switching a tactic used to avoid conflict that might arise in cross-cultural religious interaction, allowing the chaplain to defer to simple generic language instead of actively engaging in differences (Youngblood 2019). This view of code-switching insinuates that chaplains may cultivate a rich library of competencies and literacies regarding moral frameworks that they apply selectively in given settings. While neutralizing may help make chaplains more accessible, it also has the potential to (unintentionally) diminish the dignity of the seeker, and/or the chaplain.

That said, CCRL is much more than a simple linguistic exchange. CCRL works towards realizing the actionable goal of cooperatively achieving resolutions that contribute to and sustain a covenantal pluralism. Chaplains are uniquely equipped to adopt CCRL competencies and skills in a way that honors both language *and* action, theory *and* praxis. Several scholars

of ritual and materialism recommend that interreligious initiatives adjust their mission from a focus on linguistic, textual, and hermeneutical understanding to a vision centering on the ritual, hospitality, and action found in religions. They take issue with interreligious scholars who privilege the simplistic assumption that in order to understand the other, one only needs to understand their language and textual differences. These assumptions minimize the importance of rituals, performances, and practices of religious life not necessarily captured in language and textual differences (Ricoeur 2006; Cornille 2010). CCRL is a developed understanding that religious differences must be understood in the context of both linguistic and bodily exchanges (Bender 2012).

CCRL therefore is just as much about that which is behavioral, habitual, and driven by comportment and emotion as it is about a religion's language, text, and dialogue. And accordingly, chaplains do so much more than just talk across religious boundaries in order to achieve some conversational diplomatic resolution. Covenantal pluralism is not lacking, it is just that chaplains, perhaps more so than people in other professions, might deploy the CCRL skills pursuant to covenantal pluralism in a deeper, more ritualistically embodied way. And chaplains engage in covenantal pluralism just as authentically through a focus on ritual, hospitality, and actions, as in language, text, and hermeneutical understanding.

### **CCRL as framework and covenantal pluralism as goal?**

Historically, there was little education specifically geared to chaplains. Graduate education for religious leaders has tended to focus on those who will lead congregations, though it appears that is slowly changing. Since the late 1990s, there has been growth in the number of theological schools offering training specifically in chaplaincy. About one-quarter of schools in the United States and Canada offer graduate theological degrees (including Christian, Jewish, Buddhist, Muslim, and interreligious institutions) with chaplaincy or spiritual care in the name. These degree programs (which exist in addition to schools offering single classes) range from professional master's degrees in chaplaincy or pastoral care, to Master of Divinity and Masters of Arts degrees. Substantively, however, the content of these degree programs has not been standardized, meaning individuals who complete them graduate with a wide variety of skills and competencies (Cadge et al. 2020).

Even as divinity schools and seminaries add interfaith/interreligious and chaplaincy curricula to their course and degree offerings, rarely do these two lines of inquiry intersect (see for example/exception United Theological Seminary of the Twin City's Interfaith Chaplaincy track or Claremont School of Theology's Interreligious Chaplaincy concentration). With a dearth of chaplaincy and interfaith initiatives speaking to one another, interfaith course experiences may not intersect with the educational components of chaplaincy. Institutions may be slow to provide educational offerings that integrate interreligious studies and chaplaincy education as academic deans and curriculum committees navigate increasing demands within graduate theological education (of which meaningful multifaith engagement is but one of many disciplinary commitments). Additionally, it may be that as students are educated in largely theologically homogenous contexts, the kind of learning that supports authentic covenantal pluralism is not often available until one serves as a chaplain in a more religiously diverse context. Future chaplains enter their fields without strong foundations upon which they may build their CCRL. They may graduate with the personal competency necessary to understand and articulate their own worldview, but they will have only begun to think comparatively about the worldviews of different belief systems. They will possess only an inchoate notion of what it means to communicate and negotiate in constructive cross-cultural exchanges, let alone to provide spiritual care

from a posture of authentic covenantal pluralism, perhaps because many of the schools in which are trained have statements about formation from particular religious traditions.

This is partially why the military and other employers do some of their own training of chaplains. Military chaplains already trained in their traditions typically go to an intensive chaplaincy school for a few weeks with people from a range of religious backgrounds preparing to be military chaplains. One such chaplain remembered not a formal part of the training but informal learning as meals were shared with chaplains from Protestant, Catholic, Mormon, Christian Scientist, Jewish, and Jehovah's Witness backgrounds. People asked one another frank questions as they got to know each other, he remembered, about terms, stereotypes, beliefs, and practices. Most people enjoy the training. Another military chaplain explained,

they [chaplains in training] encounter in a very powerful way this diversity of religious expression and so typically the Catholics will get challenged by some Assemblies of God clergy saying "you guys are the anti-Christ" or whatever, and they figure out how they are going to live there together.

(quoted in Cadge forthcoming)

Where and how chaplains learn to be religiously competent in these training processes is an essential and largely overlooked question. Because of the number of institutions— theological schools, clinical training programs, endorsers, and sectoral trainers—involved in these processes as well as the professional associations to which chaplains belong in various sectors, lines of authority are blurred and the skills and competencies chaplains need to do their best work are not clearly agreed on across groups. A study of those educating healthcare chaplains (Cadge et al. 2020) found that theological educators, clinical educators, professional chaplains, and the healthcare organizations where they work are not operating from or educating toward a common understanding of what makes healthcare chaplains effective. Theological and CPE educators agreed on the importance of teaching students to work in diverse settings with people who are similar to and different from them; that they will work daily with people who are suffering and that insights from spiritual and religious traditions and the behavioral sciences are vital to inform their work; and that self-awareness and reflection are key to that work. They disagreed about how the skills they teach map on to the work of healthcare chaplains and what skills and competencies healthcare chaplains need to be effective in their work today.

Clinical Pastoral Education instills in its students a robust sense of self-awareness and self-insight (Jankowski et al. 2008), but it has been suggested that the programs perhaps fall short in equipping participants to engage directly with the heterogeneity of beliefs found in healthcare contexts (Massey 2014). If this gap is true, future chaplains graduate with the CPE credential without exercising and honing the skills of evaluating complex situations, communicating across lines of difference, and negotiating or advocating effectively within their contexts. CPE educators have tried over time to equip their students with the competencies and skills required of CCRL by revising standards for students in Levels I and II. But while there have been some efforts to shift the learning outcomes to be more reflective of the tenets of covenantal pluralism, they have been decentralized and the implementation has been different across units. And while the current ACPE standards themselves articulate the objective of cultivating "students' awareness of themselves as ministers" (Standard 309.1), and the outcome of making "effective use of their religion/spiritual heritage (and) theological understanding" (Standard 309.6), there is nothing requiring CPE students to become comparatively literate in the moral frameworks of other major faith traditions or cross-culturally literate by considering how these different

worldviews might intersect and interact (ACPE 2016; Ragsdale 2018). These outcomes are all the more difficult to achieve when the gaps in religious literacies are exacerbated by the lack of interfaith education that students bring to CPE.

At present it seems like much of what chaplains learn about religious literacy they learn either in CPE or on the job. In interviews with chaplains in the mid-2010s (Cadge forthcoming), a community chaplain explained,

We are working with folks who span all sorts of religions and no religion at all ... our training is really to discover the person's own language and sort of unpack that ... we are really doing a lot more of the dialogue reflective discernment kinds of work.

And a healthcare chaplain spoke at length about how she learned over the course of her career to provide support to those who are not religious, as more of them were present in the hospital where she works.

You need to use secular language and to be inclusive ... instead of asking what religious preference someone is and having that be part of one of their interview goals, you might start with narrative and explore what someone is going through. For example, "listening to you talk about the events of this last week it sounds like it has been really, really challenging and you're doing an amazing job supporting your loved one ... and I'm wondering what is getting you though? Where are you finding strength in a time like this?"

### **A demand-side approach to chaplaincy**

Chaplains and chaplaincy educators have spent a lot of time focusing on their training models but have done so largely absent good empirical data about the demand for chaplains. In other words, too much conversation about chaplains—who are very siloed by sector of work—focuses on the *supply* of chaplains, as scholars and educators debate how chaplains should be trained, what endorsements or certifications are required, and how to continue to educate them over their careers. Going forward the conversation needs to shift to *demand*. Educators cannot train chaplains well without information about where and how and *why* their work is in demand. In some settings there is demand for an actual chaplain. In other settings the demand is for the skills of presence; empathetic listening; improvisation; an awareness of spiritual, religious, and broad existential issues of meaning and purpose; knowledge and ability to comfort around death; and the ability to engage deeply across religious differences.

To assess demand, researchers and educators must start with information from those who work and engage with chaplains. A national survey conducted in 2019 found that 21% of Americans had contact with a chaplain in the past two years, just over half of them in healthcare organizations (Cadge, Winfield, and Skaggs 2019). Most were content with the contact though little is known about its content. Studies in healthcare suggest that patients who are visited by chaplains are more satisfied with their hospital stays and likely have decreased anxiety. And healthcare chaplains have started to develop typologies to link specific interventions chaplains offer to patient outcomes. Yet efforts to systematize what chaplains do and connect it to outcomes are just beginning (Rabow et al. 2004; Jankowski 2011; Fitchett 2018). In higher education, a pilot study assessing the effects university chaplains have on students with whom they work suggests that students who engage with their campus chaplains are more likely to report

integrating their spirituality into their daily life, experiencing spiritual growth, and feeling supported in wrestling with life's big questions (van Stee et al. 2021).

While religious literacy alongside skills in counseling, organizational integration, and other areas are core to the work and training of chaplains, the educational preparation for that work needs to be designed backwards—based on demand. This is very evident in the case of the United States, for example, where religious demographics continue to shift. Religious and spiritual life in the United States is changing. Congregations, traditionally the bedrock of local religious life, are feeling the effects of these changes in Americans' religious beliefs and behaviors. Congregations have been slowly and consistently declining over the past 20 years, and attendance at local congregations is also decreasing (Center August 1, 2018). Data also tell us that the number of adults who identify as Christian is in decline across a range of demographic groups in the United States (Cooperman 2015). However, a report issued by the "How We Gather" project in 2015 describes that while millennials may no longer regularly attend traditional religious congregations, they do gather in groups including athletic and activist organizations to build community, support personal growth, and cultivate a sense of purpose (Thurston and ter Kuile 2015). While these trends suggest a national population that is both less religiously affiliated and less connected to traditional religious institutions than in the past, there is evidence to suggest that Americans across all age groups are still concerned about spiritual and religious issues.

This shift in the kinds of institutions in which people connect around existential questions of meaning and purpose is taking place in the midst of deep divisions in other aspects of American life and culture. Chaplains tasked with providing for spiritual and personal needs face internal and external worlds of great complexity rife with existential anxieties that can no longer be assuaged by what some could receive as religious platitudes. It is therefore imperative that chaplains develop the cross-cultural religious competencies and skills necessary to live out commitments to covenantal pluralism. The world is changing, and chaplains offer unique skills potentially welcomed by an increasingly religiously de-institutionalized public that still yearns for deep engagement with meaning and values. Given the rapidly changing state of American religious demographics and religious trends, chaplains must prepare to engage with those of different faiths by becoming deeply familiar and rooted in understanding their own worldviews, literate in the moral frameworks of others, and keenly aware of the ways in which these paradigms might intersect productively in their work of providing spiritual care for others.

## Conclusion

To determine who chaplains are—and who they must be for the future—we first must map demand for their work. It is only from a detailed awareness of this demand that we can ensure that they are trained in ways that center on the ideal of covenantal pluralism and support the change processes required in educational institutes to adopt this transformative model. Limited integrated educational opportunities for the concurrent engagement of multifaith and chaplaincy education hampers the ability of future chaplains to become personally, comparatively, and cross-culturally competent in ways that prepare them for the work. While most chaplains obtain graduate education in religion through seminaries, rabbinical schools, and other sites of theological education, the training future chaplains receive in those settings and the additional practical or clinical training required to be hired as chaplains in different settings varies. While healthcare chaplains typically complete four units of clinical training through clinical pastoral education programs, the military requires less of this training and runs their own chaplaincy training schools by branch that chaplains must attend. Federal and state prisons have different training requirements and the need for ongoing education also

varies across settings. As chaplaincy has emerged in newer places—in municipal settings, social movements, and a growing number of workplaces—the training individuals are receiving to become chaplains is becoming even more diverse. As a result, the ways that chaplains negotiate religious differences are not standardized, meaning that they engage in cross-cultural religious encounters to different degrees and with different levels of awareness of themselves and others. And yet, as the work of chaplains spans out into new settings, the profession is poised to advance the goals of peace, equity, and mutual appreciation by cultivating a spirit of covenantal pluralism in new contexts.

There exists a long-standing awareness of internal diversity among chaplains and spiritual care providers and the implicit possibilities a more unified profession based on a shared training model and approach would provide. While it is helpful to consider how chaplains should be trained, what endorsements or certifications are required, and how to continue to educate them over their careers, these debates do not capture the very real demand for chaplains to be trained in and to uniquely embody CCRL skills pursuant to covenantal pluralism. Training models for chaplains are not set up to address these more complex issues, but perhaps we can envision a future where chaplains learn from a training model that centers on cross-cultural religious competencies and the skills necessary to embody them. This approach would be a universal training where individual chaplains could learn from and contribute to a covenantal pluralism, ensuring that all spiritual care providers in each of their diverse work contexts would understand others, understand themselves, and delicately balance their interactions with compassionate and cross-cultural competency.

Chaplains, by their presence, say they attract and draw out people who are religiously different from themselves according to interviews we conducted in the mid-2010s (Cadge forthcoming). Military chaplains talk of colleagues outside of their religious tradition seeking them out and enabling them to code-switch. “I really do believe because I was a Jewish chaplain I was able to just hear the person where they were. I knew enough of Christian thought that I could reframe” A prison chaplain spoke of a Jewish inmate she got to know who sat in the back of her Christian services and she connected him with a rabbi. Chaplains in higher education likewise have many examples of individual students and groups seeking them out to request support not yet provided by the institution. In all of such settings, chaplains engage people across lines of religious difference through an embodiment of covenantal pluralism where they seek first to understand themselves, then to know others as they intimately know themselves to be, and then take into account all that is required to engage collaboratively across whatever religious or cultural divides may exist.

## **Note**

- 1 These efforts were furthered by a member of the Malaysian team who enrolled in a year-long chaplaincy training program at Stanford University Medical Center and planned to return to Kuala Lumpur to serve as a preceptor for others seeking to develop skills to care for vulnerable women (ACPE 2020).

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# CORPORATE RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY, EQUITY, AND INCLUSION AS COVENANTAL PLURALISM

*Brian J. Grim and Kent Johnson*

Today's corporate workplace provides a powerful example of covenantal pluralism in practice. Increasingly, companies are embracing employees' faith and belief as an integral part of their diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives, which in turn have experienced dramatic growth and gained significance within the larger field of corporate social responsibility (CSR).

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) is a self-regulating business model that helps companies act in ways that advance general welfare. To that end, companies that embrace CSR apply accountability measures to ascertain and measure the impact of their operations on their employees, their partners and suppliers, the communities in which they operate and indeed, all aspects of society, including economic, social, and environmental.

Programs and policies to foster DEI are an important aspect of CSR. Almost all major corporations and employers charge their human resource officers with promoting and ensuring DEI within the company. Often, companies seek to influence their business partners, suppliers and even their customers to embrace the goals of DEI, as they do with other parts of their CSR efforts.

One example of corporate social commitment to DEI is the widespread company responses to the police killing of George Floyd on May 25, 2020, that led to national and global protests against racism in more than 60 countries, and in more than 2,000 cities and towns in the United States alone (Burch et al. 2020). In the midst of these events, global corporations pledged more than \$66 billion to support programs aimed at addressing systematic racism (Fitzhugh et al. 2020).

Race is, and has been, corporate America's primary DEI focus (Grim 2021). However, as the Religious Freedom & Business Foundation's groundbreaking research has shown (RFBF 2020b), religion is also starting to become an accepted part of DEI programs. Indeed, religion is being added to the DEI agenda because employers are coming to realize that, for many workers, their core identity is rooted in their faith. As Julia Oltmanns, a top executive with the risk management and commercial insurance company Zurich America, puts it:

Over the years, the companies I had worked for had recognized my identity as a woman, but my identity in my faith is more important to me than my gender. Once

the organization recognized that importance and supported my expression of my faith at work, I felt encouraged to be an integrated, aligned, values-driven leader in the company, allowing me to reach my full potential.

(Oltmanns 2020)

Several of America's best companies have come to understand the strategic benefit of allowing people to bring their "whole selves" to work, including their faith, and have expanded their DEI initiatives to include faith and belief-oriented Employee Resource Groups (ERGs). Some have also adopted other faith-friendly initiatives, such as corporate chaplains. These forward-looking companies include American Airlines, American Express, Texas Instruments, Intel, Target, Tyson Foods, Coca-Cola Consolidated, Google, Apple, Salesforce, Accenture, PayPal, and Walmart.

The common rationale for fostering these faith-oriented ERGs is summarized by Craig Carter, an executive at Intel: It positively impacts the three "Rs" of business: Recruiting, retention, and revenue, i.e., the ability to attract and retain diverse talent, and get that talent fully engaged, which leads to enhanced innovation and productivity (RFBF 2020c).

The rationale for corporate faith-inclusion on an even-handed basis across all faiths and worldviews is especially strong as companies increasingly globalize. Having employees who understand how faith and belief are manifested in private and public life helps avoid costly missteps and helps better tailor products and services to customer needs in particular contexts (France 24 2014). In light of the fact that religious populations worldwide are outgrowing non-religious populations 23-to-1 (Grim and Connor 2015), it should be clear that a sensitivity to religious diversity will be an important enabler for global competitiveness in the coming years. And the appeal of the religious diversity focus extends beyond individual companies' financial competitiveness. As discussed below, it's also increasingly acknowledged to be helpful for strengthening mutually respectful relationships across the world community, in a time when rancor and distrust seem to be prevalent.

Several significant commonalities between DEI and covenantal pluralism emerge from the core goal of faith-oriented DEI initiatives, which is to free employees to bring their whole selves to work, and, in so doing, to facilitate the achievement of their full potential, to the benefit of all. The following section explores these commonalities.

### **DEI and covenantal pluralism commonalities**

First, DEI and covenantal pluralism are similar in that both provide a framework to facilitate fairness and flourishing for all. Ellen Barker, Senior Vice President and Chief Information Officer of Texas Instruments, captures this framework as she explains that the company's faith ERGs have the same purposes as the company's other diversity initiatives to: (1) Promote a collaborative and respectful culture, (2) recruit and cultivate talent, (3) stimulate innovation and engagement, and (4) give back to their communities, believing that stronger companies create stronger communities and stronger communities build stronger companies (Barker 2020).

Second, both corporate DEI programs and covenantal pluralism embrace a clearly stated principle of equal rights and responsibilities applicable to all employees and citizens, a principle that individuals are committed to engage, respect, and protect the rights of the other—even where they don't agree with or ascribe moral equivalence to the beliefs and behaviors of the others. In the United States, DEI programs are seeking to put into practice the spirit and letter of equal employment law and constitutionally protected rights. The US Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) enforces Federal laws<sup>1</sup> that "protect employees and job applicants against discrimination involving:

- Unfair treatment because of race, color, religion, sex (including pregnancy, gender identity, and sexual orientation), national origin, age (40 or older), disability, or genetic information;
- Harassment by managers, co-workers, or others in the workplace, because of race, color, religion, sex (including pregnancy), national origin, age (40 or older), disability, or genetic information;
- Denial of a reasonable workplace accommodation that the employee needs because of religious beliefs or disability;
- Retaliation because the employee complained about job discrimination, or assisted with a job discrimination investigation or lawsuit.” (EEOC n.d.)

These legal principles have defined the minimum requirements for accommodation of religion and protection against oppressive work environments. As corporate America has become increasingly focused on creating environments where people can bring their whole selves to work regardless of their backgrounds, many companies are embracing diversity practices that meet and exceed those minimum legal requirements for accommodation. Their strategic focus on religious diversity comes in the wake of overwhelming research and evidence showing that a company’s bottom line grows when it values each employee’s uniqueness and equitably welcomes diverse perspectives in the workplace.

Third, DEI, like covenantal pluralism, moves beyond mere “tolerance.” Faith and belief-oriented DEI initiatives seek to foster the kind of mutual engagement that strengthens mutual respect, interpersonal connection, mutual reliance, and an enduring trust that produces resiliency, without seeking to impose uniformity. By way of example, in 2017 Salesforce launched its tenth employee resource group, Faithforce. Since then, it has become the company’s fastest growing ERG in the company’s history, with nearly 3,000 members and 17 regional hubs all around the world, from Mexico and Brazil to Australia, New York, and London, and all across the United States. Sue Warnke, the founding President of the Faithforce at their San Francisco headquarters, lays out what Faithforce is and is not (Warnke 2019). The list bears a framework similar to covenantal pluralism:

What Faithforce isn’t:

- Proselytizing: We don’t try to change others’ beliefs;
- Political: We don’t take official stances on political topics;
- Argumentative: We don’t debate theology;
- Homogenizing: We don’t merge faiths into one, but rather honor the distinctions of different faiths and worldviews;

What Faithforce is:

- Educational: We learn about different traditions;
- Philanthropic: We give back to our communities (10,000 volunteer hours last year alone);
- Celebratory: We celebrate each other’s holidays.

Fourth, the ethos of faith-oriented DEI initiatives resonates with the normative essence of covenantal pluralism. These initiatives share a spirit of humility, patience, empathy, and responsibility to engage, respect, and protect the other. Kent Johnson, former senior counsel at Texas Instruments, points out visionary gaps when companies remain silent about faith:

Something fundamental is missing when DEI is promoted without a faith and belief component. Today, conferences and courses abound on the topics like how to connect with employees’ “hearts and minds,” and how to make sure employees are “fully

engaged” in their work, and how employees should be feel free to “be their authentic selves,” and how to “lead with purpose” . . . yet few of them speak of people’s spiritual lives. The core set of beliefs and principles that defines many employees’ lives is left outside in the cold. In the very midst of impassioned appeals for diversity and inclusion, the silence regarding spirituality sends a message: When it comes to faith and belief, maybe we really don’t mean it.

(Johnson 2020)

Whether management speaks openly of it or remains silent, employees’ faith is a powerful motivational factor behind CSR programs that seek to enable employees to “do good,” to serve a “higher purpose,” and to promote human welfare beyond the profitability of the enterprise, even when nobody’s looking. Faith and belief often motivates and inspires employees to avoid unethical behavior and cover-ups, to humbly accept and even seek correction and promote others’ ideas; to appropriately speak truth to power and to promote frank and authentic communication at all levels. Many benefits flow when employees are free to speak of such core principles and beliefs—and their spiritual origins. When one openly and authentically expresses a belief that principles like these are absolute truths that govern her life, and that she is personally and authentically committed to follow them, she engages with an uncommon vulnerability and accountability. Those who hear such open expressions are also affected. They get to know and relate to their colleagues on a deeper level. And whether they ascribe to the particular faith or not, they can hold their colleague accountable to the standards she professes.

It’s not that religious people are more ethical than non-religious people. There are plenty of religious people who lie, cheat, and steal. But religious people have resources, beliefs, and practices, such as practicing the Cardinal Virtues, that help them on the path towards humility, patience, empathy, and respect.

The faith-at-work movement that is being fostered by DEI in some of the world’s most successful companies is far from “a thin-soup ecumenism or vague syncretism.” Rather, it’s a movement characterized by a positive, practical, “non-relativistic pluralism.” It is a more holistic paradigm of “civic fairness and human solidarity, global neighborliness; one with a balanced emphasis on both the *rules* and *relationships* necessary to live peacefully and productively in a world of deep differences” (see Chapter 2 in this *Handbook*, by Stewart, Seiple, and Hoover).

Kent Johnson’s Authenticity & Connection blog (Johnson 2021) provides an example of the kinds of topics faith-oriented ERGs discuss as they seek to advance civility and connection in the workplace. His blog discusses topics like:

- Authenticity at Work—Why it’s sorely needed today; and how to influence your workplace culture to promote it;
- Foxhole Relationships—How workplaces are a strategic launchpad for civility;
- Anemic Friendships—The positive impact of deep friendships on employee retention and engagement; and what’s missing today;
- Today’s Need for Greater Empathy and “Thicker Skin”—and how to achieve both in your workplace;
- Convivencia—What human resource professionals can learn today from the Middle Ages in Cordoba Spain, where Jews, Christians, and Muslims advanced civility together;
- Suppression of Individuality—How atheists and people of faith often feel “dissed” in the workplace, and why this should matter to companies;
- “Command and Control”—How to decentralize and equip diverse people to solve complex problems;

- Corporate Social Responsibility—Why and how individual workers’ diverse faiths and worldviews should be engaged to help advance good in the world;
- Navigating Ideological/Philosophical Conflict at Work—How to maximize harmony without compromising individuals’ core beliefs;
- Freedom of Expression, Faith, and Belief in Colleges and Universities—Why many schools stifle expression and drive people of faith “underground,” and signs of hope;
- Lawyers and Religious Expression at Work—Why some company lawyers are worried about religious expression at work while others are strong advocates.

Most of America’s Fortune 100 companies have well-developed DEI programs, sometimes headed by a senior C-suite director. Many also include company-sponsored employee resource groups (ERGs) that support people from these protected categories; but many haven’t yet embraced faith and belief. For many employees, it is their faith, more than any other single factor, that defines their core identity. When corporate culture constrains them from referring to their faith at work, they feel devalued, and forced “under cover.” They feel they can’t “be themselves.” They can become alienated from their work. Yet, many business leaders have no idea how to approach the topic of faith and belief in the workplace. They wonder: What are the best practices in this area? What are the pitfalls to avoid? What can/should be done? How can/should diverse employees relate with one another at work? To begin to address these kinds of questions, we’d offer the following thoughts.

### **Nine principles for building covenantal pluralism through faith-oriented DEI**

This being a *Handbook on Religious Literacy, Pluralism, and Global Engagement*, we offer and then unpack nine coaching points for companies interested in constructively opening the door to religious expression and embracing covenantal pluralism:

- (1) Make faith and belief part of a larger emphasis on valuing ALL individuals for who they are;
  - (2) Consider how freedom of religion and belief dovetails with your business priorities;
  - (3) Clearly define your intentions—why you’re doing this;
  - (4) Begin at the “grassroots”;
  - (5) Persuade your leaders. Don’t force it;
  - (6) Document a vision;
  - (7) Define reasonable processes;
  - (8) Help people of various faiths equip their own constituents;
  - (9) Seek expert advice.
- (1) From the outset, make clear that adding religion to DEI is part of a larger emphasis on valuing ALL individuals for who they are.

The big idea is that the right to “be yourself” at work extends to people of all faiths and beliefs, including atheists and others with no religious belief. A corollary to this principle is that faith-oriented communication will always be entirely voluntary. It’s up to the individual. This sounds simple, but it’s hugely important to make this clear right at the beginning.

- (2) Consider how freedom of religion and belief dovetails with your business priorities.

For example, PayPal issued a statement when it launched its interfaith ERG called “Believe.” The statement (quoted in RFBF 2020a) includes several key affirmations and objectives:

We believe all employees have the right to bring their whole self to work. Faith and worldviews are core to who we are – our values and beliefs – and to how we conduct business. The mission of Believe is to foster an inclusive work culture and to promote holistic wellbeing by providing a forum to openly exercise and celebrate all faiths and worldviews while working. Believe exists to create awareness and understanding of faith, hope, love, empathy, respect for one another, and service toward our customers, communities, and co-workers.

Believe's core objectives include creating safe environments where employees' faiths and worldviews are intrinsically valued and supported, as well as increasing understanding, awareness, and cultural sensitivity to these diverse faiths and worldviews. Activities include sharing employees' traditions and holidays, always in a way that people of all faiths and worldviews feel free to bring their whole self to work.

Becky Pomerleau, a founding member of Believe, captured the spirit of Believe on its launch (Pomerleau 2020):

Beyond grateful and blessed to work for a company that values #faithinclusion and #faithdiversity. I believe #PayPal is [well positioned to solve problems including religious and belief intolerance]. My hope is that through Believe, our employees can freely bring their source of peace, hope, love, empathy and resilience to work.

The essential point is that the focus on religious diversity should be seen as part of a bigger objective. Religious diversity and mutually respectful engagement is not about an isolated hobby horse project. It's not about stocking the freezer with chocolate ice cream because many employees like that flavor. The mutually respectful engagement essential to covenantal pluralism is core to the company's passion for its most valuable asset: Its people.

When embarking on this process, remember that it is not just about what's happening in a company. In focusing on religious diversity at work, you're building a culture of civil engagement that has legs. Companies are producing cultural byproducts that impact the world outside their workplaces. People are learning how to connect more respectfully and civilly as they work side by side. In a world wracked with bias, tribalism, and distrust, this point cannot be overemphasized. It is at the core of what CSR and DEI are all about.

(3) Clearly define your intentions.

Advocates should explain why they're enabling religious expression at work. There shouldn't be any hidden motives. In addition to the business cases just mentioned, many companies express purposes like these: (a) to support company values like personal integrity, goodwill, employee well-being, and psychological and spiritual wellness; and (b) to foster bridge-building across cultures. Adding religion to DEI is not just about making religious people comfortable; it's also about fostering cross-cultural relationships, and this bridge-building goes beyond mere tolerance.

In defining intentions, it is also important to explain what this focus on faith and belief is *not*, as seen in the previous example from Salesforce. In addition to that list, we would add that this is not a Trojan Horse designed to enable a particular group to dominate. At the same time it is not an effort to push employees to say that all beliefs are equal. DEI isn't about making everyone alike. It is about creating a culture that enables diverse employees to engage, to learn deeply about one another, to remain true to their core beliefs, and to disagree civilly.

(4) Begin at the grassroots.

Often, this focus on spiritual identity starts with informal, unofficial, grassroots events that emerge spontaneously from your employees. If you think there's no grassroots interest in faith expression, the silence of your workers on this topic may well be caused by an impression that your culture would frown on any discussion of faith at work. You'll probably be surprised to learn that behind-the-scenes religious and spiritual "skunkworks" are already underway in your companies. It's far better to have this going on out in the open than to have it take place in the shadows, as if it's something to be ashamed of.

While beginning at the grassroots is important, there's also a lot that top management can do to nurture this movement toward authenticity. Business leaders and faith leaders can officially free people to engage openly with anyone who is interested to learn about their core identity and beliefs. But the enduring and most impactful work of building trust and civility takes place outside the C-suite—in thousands upon thousands of personal interactions that are characterized by a humble desire to learn about one another's ultimate "why." The grassroots are where this transformative change happens.

(5) Persuade corporate leaders, don't force it.

It's often counterproductive to try to force leaders to permit religious expression by citing the minimum legal requirement of "reasonable accommodation" for religions, or by threatening disciplinary actions. Compulsion in this area can lead managers to "check the box" by doing the bare minimum to meet the requirement. It's far more effective when leaders are persuaded of the benefits of religious expression within a covenantal-pluralist framework, and genuinely advocate it.

So, how do persuade your leaders? Use real-life, personal examples, preferably firsthand accounts of bridge building and what that's meant to co-workers at your company or elsewhere. Real-life, personal experiences are transformative. There are countless examples of this (Grim 2020), including: Muslims, Christians, Jews, and Buddhists within companies joining together as one to help communities torn by sectarian violence; people of various faiths who joined the company, or stayed, because they felt the company cared about them enough to let them live out their faith openly; and friendships across sectarian lines and political lines, such as the example of the warm friendship between the late Justices Ruth Bader Ginsburg and Antonin Scalia (Hitz 2020).

(6) Document a vision of what it would look like, day to day, to openly enable and encourage employees to integrate spirituality into their work.

Include specific proposals, not just generalities. This can be approached in a variety of ways such as joint outreach activities among faith-oriented ERGs to the community (such as tutoring, food for poor, outreach in times of crisis), or a unified multifaith voice on topics of commonality, supporting, for instance, the rights of those who are under-appreciated, regardless of their religion, or belief system, or race, or status, or sexual orientation, or spot on the organizational chart. The point is that vision needs to be communicated with practical and visible activities that make that vision a reality.

Hosting in-company educational programs concerning relevant faith doctrines that are shared by many established faiths is another common activity. Topics of recent in-company seminars hosted by faith-oriented ERGs include:

- Integrity/ethics, truth telling, forgiveness, compassion. One faith-oriented group focuses on what they call "Integriosity"—blending both integrity and generosity;
- The "golden rule"—treating others the way you'd want to be treated;

- A high view of the value of all human beings, and human dignity;
- Principles of humility and openness to listen to constructive criticism—especially from people who are not like us;
- Holiday observances; including the rationale/history behind significant days on various religious calendars. This is not trivial;
- Invited speakers from NGOs that show how religious doctrines relate to work such as the Productive Muslim Company or Coco-Cola Consolidated's t-factor.<sup>2</sup>

(7) Define reasonable processes.

Before officially embracing religion as a component of your company's larger diversity focus, follow a defined initial decision-making process to help management weigh the issues and make appropriate plans. It is essential to consult people in companies or other experts that have experience in this arena, and who have done this well over time such as American Airlines, American Express, Intel, and Texas Instruments. It is important to consult internal company stakeholders and encourage them to raise questions and concerns early in the process, looking specifically for leaders who might be apprehensive about religious expression. Don't bypass them! Urge them to meet regularly with those who are advocates, to build relationships with one another as they wrestle with this.

Many people have had bad experiences with "organized religion." They've been hurt, felt put down, and condemned. It's crucial to listen to them, and to be careful not to offend. This vetting process is crucial. It isn't necessarily easy. Among other benefits, it serves as a demonstration of the need for a focus on religious diversity. It also serves as a demonstration of the feasibility of a focus on religious diversity. When people of different beliefs and perspectives come out the other side in unison with a proposal, that is transformative!

Be cognizant of processes governing internal communications. You need to carefully craft internal communications about the idea especially when announcing a new policy or approach or diversity emphasis. Don't just announce that your company is launching a new "faith-friendly" program. That can be misinterpreted as "open season" on so-called unbelievers. It is very important to understand that people without a particular faith, and especially those who are committed atheists, feel like they live in a world bombarding them with religious messaging, which religious folks take for granted, ranging from church steeples defining townscapes, radio stations offering preaching, and so forth.

Although this must fundamentally be a grassroots activity, success depends on having ongoing executive sponsorship and guidance. This is not to police and restrict. Executive sponsorship reinforces the fact that this is an important strategic effort for the good of the company.

(8) Help people of various faiths equip their own constituents to interact well when communicating about spiritual matters at work.

This fits well within the skill set argued for by Seiple and Hoover in the Introduction: Skills in negotiating the interconnected web of relationships between and among religious (and non-religious) people, as well as the skill of evaluation (i.e., the capacity to assess and analyze the various dynamics at play); and the concomitant skill of communication (i.e., how something is said, or not said, is often more important than what is said). Don't impose thought police; help them coach their own. Among other things, encourage them to be careful about religious jargon which is only understandable to the in-group. The ability to communicate one's deepest beliefs to someone who comes from another orientation is no simple matter and is best facilitated by being curious and interested in the beliefs of others.



For example, Sue Warnke, an evangelical Christian, tells a story she shares with anyone who is skeptical about the value of Salesforce's Faithforce (Warnke 2019):

A manager at Salesforce noticed that an employee was looking tired. So he just asked him, "What's wrong?" The employee looked down and mumbled under his breath, "I'm fasting for Ramadan." The manager said something very important: "Tell me more about that." And the employee looked up, shocked, for the first time in his career somebody cared; somebody was curious. And he said, "I'm fasting for the purpose of gaining compassion for those in need." The manager was fascinated; he didn't know about Ramadan. And then he said something even more important: "How can I support you?" They came up with a plan to change a couple meeting times for prayer, and then to tell the whole team about this so they can all learn about Ramadan. It made this person feel so seen and validated that he now brags about his manager, brags about Salesforce. He's on Twitter recruiting people to join Salesforce.

And very importantly, these processes and communications should be done in the open. Secrecy can lead to unwarranted suspicions about ulterior motives. For example, the Christian Discipleship Mentoring program at Texas Instruments was open to all, and several people of other faiths who attended gave it huge kudos (Johnson 2020).

(9) Finally, seek expert advice.

Look for guidance from companies and experts that have done this well. For an example of one resource, the Religious Freedom & Business Foundation has collected voices from across corporate America, voices of people of many faiths and backgrounds and compiled them into the conference proceedings, "2020 Faith@Work Conference" (Grim 2020). The principles identified are:

- I. It's organic, not just a program;
- II. It's good for business;
- III. It's a mosaic focused on service;
- IV. It enhances overall diversity;
- V. It's more than just ERGs, it includes chaplains at over 1,000 US companies;
- VI. It's humbly coming out of the closet, inclusive of all, cutting across all other diversity categories;
- VII. It adds ethical resources;
- VIII. It promotes authenticity;
- IX. It's good for our health, as science shows;
- X. It will not go away: Religion is one of the few social institutions that accompanies people from cradle to grave. It marks rites of passage in youth, such as baptisms and bar/bat mitzvahs, and it is present in last rites and (in most religions) the hope of resurrection – that all is not done at death.

Also, a helpful training program on "Cross-Cultural Religious Liberty" has been developed at the University of Washington's Jackson School of International Studies.<sup>3</sup>

To be competitive in today's and tomorrow's marketplaces, companies need to set this force for good free, by including religion as a full-fledged part of their DEI commitments. Companies that do this well will bolster their competitiveness and enrich the lives of their employees. Those that ignore this important facet of their employees' lives will be at a disadvantage.

## The religion dividend

There is evidence that embracing religious inclusion of the sort we've described also benefits overall inclusion. In other words, when people of faith practice covenantal pluralism at work, they are taking steps that often result in a more inclusive workplace overall.

As part of the initial launch of the Corporate Religious Equity, Diversity & Inclusion (REDI) Index, the Religious Freedom & Business Foundation (2020a) analyzed the level of attention Fortune 100 companies place not only on religion, but also on the following categories: race/ethnicity, women/gender, sexual orientation, veterans/military, dis/ability, age, and family. The study calculated scores for each category by summing the mentions of each topic on the companies' diversity and inclusion webpages along with the weighted score for the number and diversity of Employee Resource Groups (ERGs) related to each category.

The study then calculated the average score for each category among the 48 companies that do not acknowledge religion on their diversity and inclusion or ERGs landing pages as well as for the 53 companies that have some acknowledgment of religion (including images or videos) on their diversity and inclusion or ERGs landing pages. This then allowed a calculation of a "religion dividend" (an indication of the positive association of acknowledging religion with the company's commitment to the other categories of diversity) by subtracting the average category score for the 48 companies not acknowledging religion from the average score for the 53 companies that have some acknowledgment of religion, as shown in Table 17.1. Note that the range of diversity category scores reflects the amount of attention companies pay to each. Therefore, the better gauge of the religion dividend is the percentage increase in the category score.

The level of focus companies place on each of the seven diversity categories is higher among companies that acknowledge religion than among companies that do not. For example, companies focusing on religion score 69% higher on age inclusion, 63% higher on veterans/military inclusion, 60% higher on dis/ability inclusion, and 47% higher on race/ethnicity inclusion. Sizable "religion dividends" include companies acknowledging religion scoring 35% higher for women/gender inclusion and 31% higher on family inclusion. While the smallest religion dividend is for sexual orientation (scoring 4% higher), it is still notable that the relationship is positive. This also coincides with global research showing that religious freedom fosters a positive environment for LGBT people, and that LGBT rights are increasing in countries with higher levels of religious freedom (RFBF 2019).

Table 17.1 The religion dividend

	<i>Age</i>	<i>Veterans/ military</i>	<i>Dis/ ability</i>	<i>Race/ ethnicity</i>	<i>Women/ gender</i>	<i>Family</i>	<i>Sexual orientation</i>
Companies acknowledging religion (avg. score)	<b>2.9</b>	<b>5.6</b>	<b>5.1</b>	<b>15.8</b>	<b>8.6</b>	<b>2.0</b>	<b>4.8</b>
Companies not acknowledging religion (avg. score)	<b>1.7</b>	<b>3.5</b>	<b>3.2</b>	<b>10.8</b>	<b>6.3</b>	<b>1.5</b>	<b>4.7</b>
Religion dividend (raw)	<b>1.2</b>	<b>2.2</b>	<b>1.9</b>	<b>5.1</b>	<b>2.2</b>	<b>0.5</b>	<b>0.2</b>
Religion dividend (percentage)	<b>69%</b>	<b>63%</b>	<b>60%</b>	<b>47%</b>	<b>35%</b>	<b>31%</b>	<b>4%</b>

Source: Religious Freedom & Business Foundation analysis of website landing pages of Fortune 100 companies

## **Best corporate practices, and self-assessment for workplace religious inclusion**

We close by listing best practices in the area of workplace religious inclusion, and introducing a groundbreaking online self-assessment tool—the Corporate Religious Diversity Assessment (CRDA)—which enables companies to maximize those best practices.<sup>4</sup> Today’s global corporations have many tools for measuring success as they pursue more respectful, inclusive, and diverse workplaces. Efforts around religious diversity, equity, and inclusion, however, may seem more difficult to evaluate than other diversity topics. The following practices provide a checklist which all companies can use—regardless of whether they consider themselves far along in their diversity, inclusion, and equity journeys or as just beginning to proactively address the topic of religious diversity and inclusion in the workplace, workforce, and marketplace—to benchmark and shape practical policies and programs. The four measurable areas assessed by the tool can be roughly summarized as follows (greater detail is provided in the tool itself):

### **1. *Religious non-discrimination and non-harassment***

- A company should not discriminate against a job applicant if the applicant includes religious experience on a resume;
- A company should integrate its religious non-discrimination and non-harassment policy with its general non-discrimination and non-harassment policies. This should include establishing a safe, anonymous reporting system for employees who feel they have been discriminated against or harassed, including for reasons related to an employee’s religion or belief.

### **2. *Religious accommodation and inclusion***

- A company should consider freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) when implementing other policies and programs. For example:
  - Ensure that its dress code policy allows an employee to request a reasonable accommodation if the employee’s religious beliefs require certain grooming and dress practices;
  - Ensure that its cafeterias provide menu options for employees whose religious beliefs require certain dietary restrictions;
  - Allow employees to take a “floating holiday” that may be used on a date of the employee’s choice, which may include a religious holiday.
- A company should welcome inclusiveness in religion and belief, without making religion or belief a matter of coercion. For example:
  - Permit employees to form religious or faith-based employee groups, provided that the company does so on a non-discriminatory basis;
  - Where feasible without undue hardship, create designated spaces that employees may use for prayer or other religious devotional practices;
  - Take all reasonable steps, including training, where appropriate, to assure that employees don’t feel compelled or pressured to participate in religious or faith-based observances or activities. For example, if a group of employees in a religious or faith-based group chooses to have a prayer meeting on company premises, other employees should not be implicitly or explicitly pressured to attend the meeting.

### **3. *Protecting and promoting FoRB in our communities***

- A company should integrate its FoRB policy with its corporate social responsibility (RFBF 2014) program. For example:

- Where feasible, make FoRB protections part of contracts for organizations that are part of the supply chain;
  - Where feasible, pull direct foreign investment out of countries that abuse human rights, including the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion;
  - Provide resources and fundraising for NGOs that promote religious freedom;
  - Approach governments about creating social or political situations that are more favorable to expatriate employees who will be religious minorities.
- A company may consider making religious freedom initiatives part of its disclosures in its annual statements.
4. **Promoting sustainable and innovative business through protecting workplace freedom of religion or belief**
- A company should affirm that FoRB is a fundamental right;
  - A company should recognize that FoRB promotes sustainable and innovative businesses, contributes to human flourishing, and results in peaceful and stable societies;
  - A company should strive to be a leader in promoting and protecting FoRB in its workplace and communities, in order to enable innovative and sustainable economies where FoRB and diversity are respected.

By focusing on these best practices, the CRDA provides a strategic opportunity for companies to advance covenantal pluralism by pursuing the goals of faith-oriented diversity, equity, and inclusion, and measuring their progress toward those goals.

## Notes

- 1 These laws apply to all private sector and state/local government employers with at least 15 employees. Religious corporations, associations, educational institutions, or societies are exempt from the federal laws that EEOC enforces when it comes to the employment of individuals based on their particular religion.
- 2 The Productive Muslim Company focuses on helping professionals live the best version of themselves spiritually, physically, and socially through six-week online live masterclass and other programs (<https://productivemuslim.com>). Coca-Cola Consolidated's t-factor was born out of the desire that the leadership at this publicly traded corporation had to share their approach to building a God-honoring, purpose-driven corporate culture. They offer training and partner with other companies whose leaders have a desire to build a purpose-driven corporate culture (<https://t-factor.com>).
- 3 See the program's website at <https://jsis.washington.edu/religion/international-policy-institute/>.
- 4 See <https://crdatool.com/>.

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# 18

## RELIGIOUS LITERACY AND SOCIAL SERVICES

*Chelsea Langston Bombino and Stanley Carlson-Thies*

The Prophet Muhammad said, “Whoever would love to be shaded in the shade of God, let him help someone in hardship.” Muslim congregations, from the first opening of their doors, are driven by these imperatives to help our fellow humans through social services: food distribution, housing, medical transportation, eldercare. But, these groups need training to grow in areas like internal best practices, engaging government officials, and increasing public understanding of the connection between their Muslim faith and their community impact. We are partnering with the Center for Public Justice [a Christian organization] to train Islamic social services providers to advance their own distinctive faith-based missions in their operations, services, and public policy engagement. This partnership is not about teaching Islamic groups to be Christian. It is about a Christian group having resources and a willingness to equip, and also learn from, Muslim faith-based organizations as they incarnate their distinctive religious identity and freedom to the fullest.

—*Ismail Royer*

These words were shared with us by Ismail Royer, the director of the Islamic Action Team at the Religious Freedom Institute. In the past year, although we do not share the theological beliefs that Royer holds as a Muslim, we have worked closely with him to develop a plan to equip Islamic social services providers to be better able to make their distinctive contributions to the common good. Why? Because we are committed to practicing the institutional skill sets and competencies that support covenantal pluralism (CP), especially in the area of faith-based human services.

At the time of this writing, we (Chelsea and Stanley) lead initiatives within the Center for Public Justice, a Christian civic education and public policy organization, that advance both the religious freedom and the religious responsibility of faith-based organizations operating in the public sphere in the United States (Carlson-Thies and Langston Bombino 2017). Through the Institutional Religious Freedom Alliance, we advocate to the US government for the freedom of varied faith-based organizations—different in religion and different in areas of service—to have the religious freedom they need to be free to serve (Carlson-Thies 2019b). As an outgrowth of this work, we launched, with the generous support of the Templeton Religion Trust, the Sacred Sector initiative. Sacred Sector is a learning community of practice for diverse

faith-based organizations that equips them to live out their sacred missions both within their internal operations and organizational culture, and externally as they serve others (Langston Bombino 2020).

In this chapter, we will engage the strengths, opportunities, and challenges of cross-cultural religious literacy (CCRL) in the field of human services in the United States, with a focus on faith-based social services organizations. CCRL is the way to achieve the common good for which covenantal pluralism calls. The common good encompasses the flourishing of distinct and varied individuals and organizations within a society, due to their engagement of each other and the resulting service to all. This kind of pluralism must be continuously pursued by diverse individuals and by the organizations in and through which they live their lives. The common good is not uniform, but rather incorporates and respects the good—the distinctive commitments and insights—of the various religions, diverse peoples, and different organizations in the society (Carlson-Thies 2019a).

In our work with the Institutional Religious Freedom Alliance (IRFA) and Sacred Sector, we advocate for *public policies* that enable faith-based and secular organizations simultaneously to live out their distinct identities and values and contribute to the common good. We also help faith-based organizations (FBOs) become engaged in mission-true *organizational principles and practices*. And we equip faith-based organizations, including many human services providers, to engage in positive *public positioning*—shaping public understanding of how distinctive organizations contribute positively to their communities.

We refer to these aspects of organizational life as the “Three Ps.” We will suggest, in the pages that follow, how human services providers can “institutionalize” CCRL competencies. We believe that the CCRL competencies can be brought to life and holistically integrated into every area of a human services provider’s organizational life:

- (1) *Public Policy*: Faith-based and values-based human services organizations need to develop an understanding of how the public policy context in which they operate impacts their freedom to serve distinctively and how it impacts those they are serving. Human services organizations need to understand the animating values of other organizations and to be able, despite differences, to form strong coalitions in pursuit of policy that promotes the kind of pluralism described above.
- (2) *Organizational Practices*: An organization needs to have reshaped its practices according to CCRL in order to understand itself, to understand the distinctiveness of those who come to it and the organizations with which it should collaborate, and to be able to serve and partner across these differences to advance the common good.
- (3) *Public Positioning*: Distinctive human services organizations need to cultivate in the public an understanding of the connection between their religious/ethical frameworks and their positive community impact. By doing so, an organization will be helping to develop the supportive environment it needs in order to be able to operate and serve in a distinctive way, even as it partners with diverse individuals and institutions.

This chapter will focus on faith-based social providers in the United States, yet the principles outlined here surely apply to all human services organizations. Every organization has its own animating ecosystem of values—whether explicitly faith-based or not—that shapes its team members, policies, practices, culture, and services. Before we unpack the CCRL competencies within the context of organizational practices, public policy engagement, and public messaging, we will first explore two false assumptions that often undermine a clear understanding of how diversity and the common good can be mutually supportive.

### **Must organizations become more internally diverse to serve a diverse public?**

It is a rather common view that, for an organization to serve well an increasingly diverse client base, it needs to become more internally diverse. No doubt internal diversity may be useful when an organization serves a diverse community. But this is not always the case. Consider, say, a prisoner reentry program created by Muslims. Should it downplay its Muslim inspiration and practices in order to better serve returning citizens? As it happens, 30% of all African Americans in prison across the United States are Muslim, and up to 80% of all individuals seeking a new faith while in prison convert to Islam (Citizens Against Recidivism 2020). An organization with a deep understanding of and commitment to Islam may best be able to serve the distinct needs of these people as they return to the community (Citizens Against Recidivism 2020). Link Outside, for example, is an Islamic social services organization serving prisoner and returning citizen communities. Link Outside's explicitly, unapologetically, Muslim identity allows it to build trust with individuals coming out of incarceration who have converted to Islam while in prison and who lack a spiritual home (Link Outside 2020).

Social-service providers like Link Outside, which remain committed to their distinctive missions, are the building blocks of covenantal pluralism. As I (Stanley) have suggested elsewhere:

The diversity of individuals—their varied self-understandings, contrasting or conflicting moral values and religious convictions, and diverse ideals about conduct—can best be served by public policies that make a diversity of service providers possible, rather than policies that minimize or eliminate such moral or religious diversity in pursuit of the important goal of eliminating wrongful discrimination. Thus, the common good requires robust institutional religious freedom.

(Carlson-Thies 2019b)

### **Aren't CCRL competencies a matter of individual commitment?**

The importance of CCRL competence for human services professionals is evident in our complex and diverse society and yet, if only because most professionals serve through organizations, CCRL competence must also be a commitment and characteristic of human services organizations. For example, even a social worker at a secular organization needs to understand how her own values, and the values of her organization, shape how she serves her religiously diverse clients. Take the example of a social worker, Daniel, who manages a housing program at a secular agency for people experiencing chronic homelessness.<sup>1</sup> Among his organization's foundational values are inclusion and self-determination.

A few years ago, Daniel had a client, Olivia, who was experiencing trauma following a recent abortion. She had a complex relationship with her childhood Christian faith, yet she also kept seeking out social services providers that were distinctly Christian. They offered faith-integrated supports not available through the secular agency, including family preservation, child placement, and substance-abuse treatment. When it became clear that Olivia needed a support that specifically addressed the emotional challenges she had experienced as a result of the abortion, Daniel ultimately referred her to a local faith-based crisis pregnancy clinic's abortion-survivor support group.

Daniel's secular agency supports a woman's right to obtain an abortion. However, he realized through this experience that he needs to understand the specific spiritual needs and desires of his clients to help them live out their own values-based goals. And, he learned that his agency, like many social services institutions, was not well connected to a network of faith-based providers. As a result of this experience, Daniel worked intentionally within his organization to



develop stronger and more formalized partnerships with religious providers from different faith traditions to provide complementary support services to clients throughout his department. Ironically, despite this agency's commitment to Diversity/Equity/Inclusion, it was not training its staff, in a robust or systematic way, to understand, engage, and include the spiritual dimension of their clients' formation as an equally important component of serving them. Nor did the agency proactively train staff to cultivate community-based partnerships across religious and ideological differences. It is encouraging, then, that CCRL is beginning to be used in professional training (as noted in the introductory chapter).

Social services organizations need to understand their own animating values, and they must understand how others—both individual clients and peer social services organizations—understand themselves based on their own spiritual/moral frameworks. And social services providers must grow their capacity to engage in strategic partnerships across religious and cultural differences. We believe, based on both scholarship and on our lived experiences, that social services organizations can more effectively advance their missions when they enact CCRL through all three aspects or dimensions of their organizational lives.

### **Public policy**

Covenantal pluralism cannot be fully realized without legal structures that uphold the equal treatment of both individuals and institutions, of all faiths and none. For the field of human services, a fundamentally important instantiation of covenantal pluralism is the adoption by the federal government of Equal Treatment rules for its social-services funding. These regulations and laws provide for and require the equal treatment of both clients and of service organizations, of all faiths and none. Through the changes in federal government policy that are sometimes termed “the faith-based initiative” or “the faith-based and neighborhood partnership initiative,” much of government-supported social services in the United States has been reshaped in this equal treatment way, at least formally. Charitable Choice statutory principles and the similar Equal Treatment regulations govern federal social services spending, which is also a major source of the funding for state and local social services. These rules provide a pluralist framework for the government to engage and partner with diverse organizations, including distinctly religious organizations, in the provision of social services that benefit diverse services recipients. And yet, for pluralist public policies like these to be sustained and advanced, human services providers must themselves contribute to upholding and shaping the public policy framework (Langston Bombino 2020b). And they must be able to work together across differences to refine and adapt that framework to the needs of different cultural and religious groups.

Under the name “Charitable Choice,” this requirement for the equal treatment of private provider organizations (and of beneficiaries of whatever or no religion) was part of the 1996 federal welfare reform law and several subsequent laws, all adopted during the Bill Clinton administration (Carlson-Thies 2003). The same requirement was promulgated in Equal Treatment regulations during the George W. Bush administration, and then again, in slightly revised form, by the Barack Obama administration. And it was largely maintained by the Donald Trump administration.

The Equal Treatment principle requires that when a federal, state, or local government agency uses federal funds to pay a private organization to provide social services, it must allow faith-based organizations to compete equally with secular organizations while maintaining their religious identity and continuing to offer voluntary religious activities. All beneficiaries must be served, without religious discrimination, and they must be offered an alternative provider if

they object to the religious character of the first provider. When the funding is via a voucher provided to a beneficiary rather than a grant to the provider, then beneficiaries are given a choice of different kinds of providers and a provider may incorporate religious activities into its federally funded services. In broad strokes, the government develops collaborations with private organizations based on their track record of services, neither privileging nor excluding faith-based organizations because of their distinct religious identities. The inclusion of faith-based organizations is accomplished at the same time as the religious freedom of people seeking help is protected.

These funding rules enable diverse organizations to contribute to the common good. Yet to fully represent the vision of covenantal pluralism, they cannot remain merely formal rules adopted once. Provider organizations and advocates must monitor their implementation, safeguard the principles, and propose improvements. For that, diverse organizations and advocates, equipped to work together beyond differences, must collaborate. Through the Sacred Sector initiative and various advocacy initiatives of the Institutional Religious Freedom Alliance, we have had the opportunity to learn from the perspectives and experiences of organizations and religious communities quite different than our own. And, we have collaborated across these differences for the common goal of protecting and improving the Equal Treatment principle. We offer three examples of such collaborations.

#### *Beyond formalism*

In 2017, the federal Department of Health and Human Services issued a Request for Information about whether changes needed to be made to its Equal Treatment regulations and practices (HHS-9928-RFI 2017). IRFA submitted a Comment for itself proposing several regulatory refinements. And, building on previous discussions, we facilitated submission of a quite different Comment by a dozen African American Christian and Muslim congregational and ministry leaders from Prince Georges County, Maryland. Their houses of worship and faith-based non-profits offered a wide range of social services programs, including returning citizen programs, housing programs, services for domestic violence survivors, marriage strengthening programs, HIV/AIDS programs, professional skills/interview preparation trainings, urban gardens, food assistance programs, health clinics, child-care, social enterprise programs, and more. The leaders testified that their organizations “have long provided contextually appropriate services to diverse communities out of a deeply and explicitly religious calling to love their neighbors as themselves” (Langston Bombino 2017a). They were providing essential services to marginalized communities, and yet, they said, they had “historically faced barriers, and face barriers [still] today, in participating in HHS programs and receiving government funding, [experiencing a feeling of] exclusion from every aspect of the process of forming both financial and nonfinancial partnerships with government” (Langston Bombino 2017).

The subsequent Comment included the group’s recommendation that HHS must address the problems of selection bias in favor of previous grantees and larger organizations in the HHS system of determining organizations that receive federal funding for the provision of services. One Black Muslim leader stated,

I know the reality of the situation for Muslim organizations because we have been excluded from government partnerships for years. How do we make the selection process fair? Those groups who are worthy and who best know the community should be selected.

(quoted in Langston Bombino 2017a)

The leader of a social outreach ministry associated with a Black church succinctly summarized a part of the needed solution:

The government must break down the funding to a smaller, more community level. The funding always goes to the larger organizations. This federal review process favors a lot of better positioned organizations that write great proposals, but when you get to the nitty gritty of it, they are not even in the community.

(quoted in Langston Bombino 2017a)

The leaders' emphasis that their organizations maintain an explicitly religious mission and identity while serving everyone in need shows that they are implementing key principles of the Equal Treatment rules of the federal faith-based initiative. Their organizations were keenly interested in receiving federal support for the essential services they struggled to provide. The formal Equal Treatment rules enable them to compete for support, but barriers of size, marginalization, bureaucratic routine, and selection bias in fact precluded their equitable participation. It remains to be seen whether this Comment and other advocacy to HHS about non-legal barriers will result in meaningful change; what is clear is that it will take continued collaboration across differences, inspired by a common purpose and made possible by CCRL practices, to pursue such vital reforms.

#### *Maintaining pluralism*

Originally, the Equal Treatment rules only required the guarantee of a referral to an alternative provider to be offered in a few grant-funded programs. President Obama's Advisory Council on Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships, however, recommended expanding the requirement across all federal social services spending (President's Advisory Council on Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships 2010). The Obama administration made that change when it revised the Equal Treatment regulations, in April 2016 (Federal Agency 2016). In this way, beneficiaries in any program supported by federal funding were assured they would not be forced to receive services from an organization whose religious commitments were objectionable to them.

Yet, as the Trump administration pointed out in a 2019 Notice of Proposed Rulemaking—a proposal to revise the HHS Equal Treatment regulations—the Obama changes placed an unequal referral burden on faith-based providers, while, in some circumstances, also placing a burden on the faith-based provider's conscience. For example, if a beneficiary requested a referral, a faith-based provider might have no choice but to help that beneficiary connect with a provider that offered services to which the faith-based organization had a moral or religious objection. The NPRM proposed to resolve these problems by eliminating the guaranteed alternative requirement entirely (Carlson-Thies 2020b).

IRFA, along with several other organizations, submitted a Comment requesting that the problems be resolved, instead, by requiring every provider, not only faith-based organizations, to offer an alternative, while making the government, and not the provider, be responsible for making the referral. Doing away with the referral requirement would fail to safeguard the religious freedom of minority faith services recipients, or those or no faith. Why did we press for this different solution? We know that the proposal to make the requirement of an alternative be universal across programs was made to the Obama Advisory Council by representatives of minority religions, whose members are more likely than Protestant and Catholic beneficiaries to encounter a service organization whose religious identity is religiously problematic to them.

Over the years we have developed significant collaborations with such representatives and have come to understand the unique religious freedom challenges they face in the United States (Langston Bombino and Carlson-Thies 2020). The Trump administration made the changes it had proposed, despite our comment and similar comments by others. It seems likely that the Biden administration will reverse this change (Carlson-Thies 2021).

*Equal treatment must be extended*

In responding to the coronavirus pandemic in the spring of 2020, Congress included in the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act (CARES Act) a new Small Business Administration (SBA) loan program, the Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) of forgivable loans available to nonprofits as well as small businesses. Congress specified that faith-based organizations, including houses of worship, were eligible for the PPP loans—but, as legal experts and religious freedom advocates discovered, SBA programs, not originally designed for broad participation by religious organizations, included many requirements inimical to the religious identity and faith-based operational policies of faith-based service organizations, much less houses of worship (Langston Bombino and Carlson-Thies 2020). Extensive advocacy with the SBA, the Department of the Treasury, and the White House yielded solutions to these various obstacles (Carlson-Thies 2020a).

However, notwithstanding all of the discussions and collaborations across differences, it turned out that one important religious barrier had not been identified and addressed. Ismail Royer, quoted above, identified this problem in his comments in a webinar about how pandemic-response public policies are aiding or obstructing organizations of different faiths. He commented:

The Payroll Protection Program has created a dilemma for some of our Muslim leaders. PPP is essentially an interest-bearing loan, while also being forgivable if the money was used in the proper way. This is a rather technical question as whether this actually amounts to interest, that sort of interest that is forbidden for Muslims to engage in, so there's a difficulty there.<sup>2</sup>

Does resolution of this problem require an adjustment of the PPP program or only further discussion within Muslim communities? Will the different religious authorities within those communities agree on what needs to be done? This would seem to be a case where, notwithstanding the significant CCRL competencies of the community of religious freedom advocates, there needs to be more of a collaborative competency—through better skills in evaluation, negotiation, and communication—such that these kinds of issues can be resolved properly, and quickly.

## **Organizational practices**

Integration of CCRL competencies and skills into an organization's practices equips its staff to work more fruitfully and constructively with those it seeks to serve and the peer organizations with which it needs to collaborate to achieve common aims.

*Organizational self-awareness*

FBOs should be able to articulate how their own animating values and missions call them to engage in shaping public policy (Standards for Excellence 2020). Advocacy should be more than a mechanical process of conveying an organization's demands. The content and approach

of advocacy efforts ought to incarnate the organization's mission-based framework (Standards for Excellence 2020), encouraging the participation of like-minded organizations. Bishop Gary Hill reached this conclusion in his own work. Bishop Hill is the Executive Director of Exodus Covenant Ministries, a faith-based nonprofit that provides social services, and particularly educational support, for children and families in southeast Washington, D.C. He recently accepted an appointment as Commissioner advising the Deputy Mayor of Education in Washington, D.C. In reflecting on how Sacred Sector helped his organization articulate and act on its faith commitments to move from solely a service focus to a public policy focus he said:<sup>3</sup>

The Three P's framework helped me to think about my shift from pastoral care and service, to engaging public officials and local government. Sacred Sector helped me prioritize taking on additional responsibilities to advocate for [the religious freedom] of Black churches and ministries to be able to partner with local government in serving the community in Wards 7 and 8, in areas like out-of-school-time care, without sacrificing their faith.

*Knowing and serving others*

It is a natural concern that organizations deeply committed to particular values, especially to distinctively religious standards, will be unable to serve well those unlike themselves. The concern is that faith-based services providers will either turn religious others away or coerce them to adopt the religion and attitudes of the provider. However, faith-based organizations can and do find inspiration and guidance for service to those different themselves in their own sacred texts and stories.

Dr. Gus Reyes, COO of National Hispanic Christian Leadership Conference, puts it this way (Reyes 2020):

Ministry outreach to the community is an integral part of how we worship God: we are “doing church” when we are operating a community-centric food distribution program in a neighborhood experiencing food scarcity, just the same as we are “doing church” when we are gathering together to take communion.

In other words, while they are both acts of obedience to divine command, there are different audiences, activities, and boundaries when a community of faith worships inside the faith and when it serves outside its community.

*Spiritual identity and spiritual communities are not uniform*

Incorporating CCRL competencies and skill into the provision of services entails a fluency in the understanding of religious beliefs and practices “in context and as inextricably woven into all dimensions of human experience” (Religious Literacy Project 2020).

For example, while religious “nones” identify broadly as religiously unaffiliated, they are not a monolith. Pew reports that they are “far from uniformly secular,” with approximately 33% of “nones” identifying religion as “at least somewhat important” in their lives. In fact, over 75% say faith-based institutions “strengthen community bonds (78%)” and a comparable amount indicate these institutions “play an important role in helping the poor and needy (77%)” (Pew Research Center 2020).

Pastor Kerwin Webb, who both learned from and taught through the Sacred Sector program, serves as an education specialist at Interfaith Neighbors, which was founded by different faith

groups to provide services such as affordable housing, nutrition assistance, urban farming, and community restoration to the local community. Webb spoke with us directly and feels that, while young adults are generally “religiously unaffiliated,” they possess a spiritual depth. His experience also suggests that they are often trying to integrate more than one religious or cultural identity, and are open to ideas and practices from different spiritual ecosystems.

Religious and cultural competency, particularly in the service of young people who have multilayered identities, must necessarily entail becoming literate on the diversity and contradictions even within one spiritual tradition.<sup>4</sup>

As these examples illustrate, social services providers need to work to adopt CCRL-informed practices that, as Webb says, “approach issues of religious and cultural literacy like this through an institutional lens.”<sup>5</sup> The examples also illustrate the editors’ covenantal pluralist understanding that religious providers need not embrace or affirm the religious or ethical beliefs of those they are serving or partnering with in order to find common ground.

### **Public positioning**

The American public has a narrow and incomplete understanding of human services, often limited to the idea of the worthy poor receiving charitable services during times of crisis. Human services providers should reframe the public understanding of social services as the social architecture that unleashes human potential at every stage of life (Bales, Volmert, Baran, O’Neil, and Kendall-Taylor 2015). To do so, however, faith-based social services providers should integrate CCRL’s personal, comparative, and collaborative competencies into their public messaging: Communicating their own values, understanding those of the other, and effectively educating the public about the need for partnerships from a diversity of organizations. Toward this end, social services providers, and particularly faith-based institutions, would themselves be well-served in developing the CCRL skills of evaluation, negotiation, and communication in sharing the impact of social services in general, and faith-based social services in particular.

The Frameworks Institute’s Communications Toolkit for human services providers, which contains sample talking points, editorials, and legislative testimony, is an example of reframing public understanding of human services in this manner from benefiting only the individuals served to building the community’s well-being (Frameworks Institute 2020). This toolkit aligns with CCRL competencies because it explores human services professionals’ understandings of the field, then it explains the public’s very different understandings, and then seeks collaborative solutions: Evaluating which messaging strategies work best to close the gap in understanding with the public, negotiating the best messages, and communicating those messages. The National Human Services Assembly has used these resources to educate its more than 80 member organizations on how to engage in positive public positioning on human services. For example, a recent article called for human services organizations to engage in reshaping their own institutional practices and public messaging: “True reframing must be woven into the fabric of the organization ... we have to improve the public’s understanding of what human services are ... and how society benefits from our sector’s vital work” (Cyr 2018).

Helping the public to better understand the vital contributions to communities of human services organizations is especially important to faith-based services. As noted in one study: “Understanding the socio-economic value of religion to American society is especially important in the present era characterized by disaffiliation from organized religion” (Grim and Grim 2016). Faith-based human services organizations, in particular, need to be aware of common

public misunderstandings regarding the scope, variance, structure, and impact of institutional religious contributions to community well-being. Far from being a marginal and odd fringe, faith-based organizations play extensive and vital roles in the network of organizations that serve persons, families, and communities.

There is no comprehensive information collection documenting the services and activities of the hundreds of thousands of faith-based social services organizations and community-serving houses of worship in the United States. But we have data points, such as this: 20 of the 50 largest US nonprofit social services organizations are faith-based (Grim and Grim 2016, 4). Congregations provide, both formally and informally, essential social services in many communities. Grim and Grim summarize the “halo effect” a house of worship provides the surrounding community in terms of building social capital, boosting local economic vitality, and importantly, offering of human services: “providing a center for education, childcare, social events, charity, and job training, among other functions” (Grim and Grim 2016, 5). Macro-level data like this, added to information about the diversity of services at the local level, can be used by a faith-based organization to help the public and the media come to see what has been a hidden reality: Many of the community-serving activities they admire are the result of the faith-full service of religious organizations they perhaps mistrust.

Faith-based organizations also often form unlikely partnerships with other institutions. One such partnership has emerged in Columbus, Ohio, between churches and the public school system in response to the pandemic’s disruption of schooling. When Columbus City Schools (CCS) announced there would not be in-person education for the Fall 2020 school term due to Covid-19, local networks of congregations and FBOs saw an opportunity to step into the gap and meet an important need. Earlier in the year, when the schools had had to close, almost one fourth of all CCS students never received instruction through the district’s online learning system (For Columbus Kids 2020). Faith networks, led by Catalyst and the Columbus Dream Center, recognized that there was unused space in dozens of churches throughout the city each week and this offered an opportunity. The result was coordination, resource sharing, and community partnerships across multiple FBO and CBO networks to implement over 75 Learning Extension Centers (LECs). Alesia Gillison, chief engagement officer at CCS, told the *Columbus Dispatch*: “[This] is a model of engaging the entire community to address the educational and social-emotional needs of our students and families” (Danae 2020).

The formation of this unlikely partnership between the public school system and a network of faith-based organizations is an example of CRRL embodied. The FBO networks have to understand their own values, the values of the other (the school district), and how to work together to serve children. This collaborative competency required the FBO network to engage in a process of evaluation (understanding the needs of Columbus children), negotiation (understanding the resources both parties brought to the table, and the school district’s boundaries in official partnerships), and communication (how the school district and the FBO network can work together to communicate options and resources for Columbus children needing learning supports).

## Conclusion

The Bible says God took the blood of one man and made all men, so I tried to look around me to see who’s in our communities and what they needed. Regardless of color of skin, regardless of people’s religious perspectives, or whatever their perspectives are, period, we wanted to serve them. (Dugger and Langston Bombino 2020)

Pastor Harold Dugger, a leader of a historically Black church with various social outreach ministries and a participant and educator with Sacred Sector, spoke these words at a recent event on faith-based social services organizations in the Covid-19 crisis. His words bring to life the three competencies of CCRL, not just as a way of changing minds, but as a way of bringing about change through action.

This chapter has focused on faith-based social services, yet the concepts discussed apply to all human services organizations. Every organization needs to integrate CCRL practices holistically into the fabric of its organizational life in order to make possible covenantal pluralism. Covenantal pluralism cannot be realized only through individual action and interpersonal collaboration. CP requires institutions as well as individuals not only to shape their own practices but also to cultivate public policies and public attitudes that support covenantal pluralism. Relationships built on love of our civic neighbors across differences can birth and bind partnerships where we learn more about ourselves, more about our religious others, and more about how to work together toward common objectives.

This chapter's focus on distinctive human services providers fully embodying CCRL has necessarily required a focus on institutional religious freedom. Religious freedom is a prerequisite for living out CCRL competencies and skills pursuant to a vision of covenantal pluralism. For social services providers and professionals, religious freedom ought to be reimaged to go beyond understanding and protecting one's own ability to seek the sacred in everything, to encompassing the freedom of diverse clients and organizations with their own distinct religious/ethical beliefs to fully practice them, unhindered by legal or cultural barriers. In this way, CCRL enables social services providers to practice a kind of public, institutional love of our different civic neighbors, through our individual and organizational practices, through public policy, and through our public witness (Langston Bombino 2020).

## Notes

- 1 The details of this account have been anonymized to protect the identity of the social worker who recounted this personal narrative to us, as well as to protect the privacy of his client.
- 2 In June of 2020, Sacred Sector partnered with Independent Sector, a national membership organization of diverse nonprofits that works to strengthen civil society, to host a multi-faith conversation. Participants shared how public policies emerging in response to Covid-19 are either empowering them to serve their communities better or are creating additional barriers. Presenters included Sacred Sector Community collaborators.
- 3 This is a conversation from an original interview done for this book chapter with Bishop Gary Hill.
- 4 This quote is from an original interview conducted for this chapter with Kerwin Webb.
- 5 This quote is from an original interview conducted for this chapter with Kerwin Webb.

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# 19

## RELIGIOUS LITERACY AND AMERICAN JOURNALISM

### A charge to public service

*Josh Good*

The world is a very religious place. Of 7.3 billion people on the planet, according to Pew Research Center, approximately 2.3 billion are Christians, 1.8 billion are Muslims, 1.1 billion are Hindus, 500 million are Buddhists, and 400 million practice folk religions, while only 1.2 billion are religiously unaffiliated (Hackett 2017).

But for Western sociologists and demographers in the second half of the 20th century, this reality was by no means expected. During those years, the so-called “secularization thesis” was firmly entrenched, insofar as the vast majority of social scientists believed post-Enlightenment modernity would lead almost inevitably to religious decline. The argument ran that, with greater prosperity, reliance on religious faith would no longer be compelling for more and more people. Larger homes, more disposable income, new technologies, and greater leisure opportunities would replace the “hold” that the church, temple, synagogue, mosque, or other houses of worship had on individuals and communities.

One of the US’ foremost sociologists, the late Peter Berger (1929–2017), firmly subscribed to this secularization thesis, arguing in much of his prolific early career that major increases in prosperity and productivity would lead to religious decline. But over time, as he continued to look carefully at worldwide data about wealth, poverty, and institutional changes, quite a different pattern emerged: Global poverty in fact fell, sharply—but religious practice did not. Berger reflected on the world and himself:

As it turns out, the world is massively religious. In some areas of the world, it’s more religious than ever. The [secularization] theory is wrong. Now, to conclude that the theory is wrong is the beginning of a new process of thinking. I came to the conclusion some years ago that to replace secularization theory—to explain religion in the modern world—we need the theory of *pluralism*. Modernity does not necessarily produce secularity. It necessarily produces pluralism, by which I mean the coexistence in the same society of different worldviews and value systems. And that changes the status of religion.

(Thuswaldner 2014)

Of course, in some sense this “desecularization of the world” thesis is still being tested; none of us knows with certainty the future, and global trends are still unfolding. Not all the changes

are continuous: In the US, for example, religiosity appears recently to be on a downturn, with church attendance falling from its steady six-decade average of 70% between 1937 and 1998, to just under 50% in the first two decades of the 21st century (Hamid 2021).

Elsewhere in the world, different economic through-lines are renewing the wealth-and-poverty dynamics in ways that are nothing short of stunning. For example, since 1970, extreme poverty—that is, the number of people living on less than \$1.60 per day—has decreased in today's dollars by nearly 70% (Pinkovskiy and Sala-i-Martin 2009). It is a transformational achievement. And yet while over two billion of the poorest people in the world are no longer living at starvation-levels, many of the countries in which those men, women, and children live have still not yet developed the essential systems needed to protect basic property rights and shared commitment to the rule of law (Brooks 2016). When violence is unpredictable, often coming from the very officials tasked with public protection, how can children and families know their well-being is secure? (Haugen 2019). While religiosity can flourish in such settings—as the saying goes, there are no atheists in foxholes—the threat of violence in many lands also undermines a sense of religious stability and coherence.

If the story of religiosity in developing societies is still being written, some early trends nonetheless seem to be emerging. For example, in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, as Paul Freston and Philip Jenkins have demonstrated, democratization and increasing per capita income appear to be quite correlated with increases, not decreases, in religiosity (Freston 2008; Jenkins 2011). Brian Grim has also compellingly documented that growth in religious freedom frequently correlates with increases in political stability, economic development, and women's empowerment (Grim and Connor 2015). And though Jason Klocek takes issue with some of these claims, arguing that local institutional conditions always impact potential gains in political and economic freedom, it is increasingly clear that religion worldwide is on the rise, at least according to the most recent data (Klocek 2020).

While this volume assesses religious literacy in the context of that larger global story, this chapter takes a close look at some of the ways journalists in the US have understood and written about global religion, and even more particularly how journalists have covered religion *within* American life. That story has of course recently been uniquely impacted by the outsized role that white evangelicals have played in conservative politics, including the 2016 election of Donald J. Trump to the American presidency—a complex story to be sure. White evangelicalism is especially important in the American context given the size and political significance of this ethno-religious demographic in the electorate. Coverage of evangelicalism specifically, and of religion in general, has reflected at various turns journalists' bias—whether conscious or unconscious—and ignorance, but also strides toward more accurate reporting.

As with the globe, it is possible to discern some clear trends in American religious life. In recent decades, for example, growing secularization has become more firmly entrenched in the modern academy, the country's entertainment industry, and other centers of cultural power. Surveys of religious belief from both Gallup and Pew track “the rise of the nones,” that is, those of “no religion” or “none in particular.” This demographic is growing most swiftly among Millennials, those born 1980–1996, and Gen Z, those born 1997–2013 (Lipka 2015). But in spite of that uptick the country is still remarkably religious (Pew Research Center 2015): 70.6% of Americans continue to self-identify as Christian—even if that group may not be in church every Sunday. 25.4% of Americans self-identify as evangelicals, 20.8% as Catholics, 14.7% as Mainline Protestants, and 6.5% as African American Christians, among others. Adding to the mix of American Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, and those of other faiths, the US is exceptionally religious. As Berger intimated, American life is still very much a vibrant picture of religious diversity—not across-the-board secularization.

Yet for journalists who cover culture, technology, politics, and other aspects of life in the US, an apparent disconnect abides. As we will see, the very professionals perhaps best positioned to serve as de facto illuminators of cross-cultural religious literacy, enabling mutually respectful engagement of difference (as the editors of this *Handbook* define covenantal pluralism), are not always well-informed in their stories about American religiosity.

### A “knowledge class” problem

In Western liberal democracies, divides have unfortunately become common—and the US is a case in point. Contemporary Americans are divided along racial lines, as a wave of 2020 protests on the heels of police brutality clearly demonstrated, in many ways continuing the protests of the civil rights era against the Jim Crow laws. Americans are also divided along class lines, with working-class Americans without a college degree voting and forging different family structures than white-collar educated elites (Murray 2012). Divergences in recent voting patterns suggest a chasm between urban and rural Americans, too. And beyond the better-known red state vs. blue state distinctions, Robert Putnam, Charles Murray, Scott Winship, and other scholars have recently shown that family formation, class, and social capital often correlate with religious activity—and that religion may play a more important role for believers in forging character and strengthening trust than many analysts are inclined to think (Putnam 2016).

That’s because the distinctions around religious life hold an almost special quality—like spectacles, they give their adherents a kind of prism for understanding many of the other cultural divides. Religion is a kind of explanatory framework; for the devout, it is one’s (primary) identity, and therefore—theoretically, anyway—more important than material or political considerations.

However, many journalists misunderstand how these divides and correlations are, for many, shaped by religion. Recent years have seen a bumper crop of reporting or other scholarship attempting to understand or connect Americans’ religious views with broader political and sociological trends. Elite journalists, challenged to recognize their biases, work hard at getting beyond the “Acela corridor”—Amtrak’s fast train between Boston and Washington, D.C., via New York City—where they spend nearly all their working days. James and Deb Fallows of *The Atlantic*, for example, recently traveled the country with the express interest in breaking out of their own bubble, to correct some of their self-perceived misunderstandings about the country through firsthand encounters with residents from blue-collar, rural, Midwest, and western towns. They learned a great deal, writing up their experiences both in the magazine and in a book (Fallows 2018). Similarly, *New York Times* columnist David Brooks spent two years diving deep into “Trump country” after misreading—along with hundreds of other pundits—the 2016 election. He sought to uncover the “why” beneath that populist, unanticipated result (at least for elites), and like a few other curious journalists, he hit the road almost as an act of penance (Brooks 2020).

But if these journalist-trends are novel, industry realities mean that most media platforms don’t have the budgets to fund reporting outside of the major news hubs—and in the current economic climate, local news media organizations are rapidly shrinking. There is also the nature of newsroom assignments: Reporters are spurred by fast-paced editors who typically prefer regular deadlines and lowest-common-denominator pieces comprehensible to both non-religious and religious readers; that means most articles are written “for all,” rather than for a particular people-group. Moreover, the country’s top journalism schools are non-religious—to take just the top seven, as of 2021, they are Northwestern University, University of Southern California, New York

University, University of Missouri, Emerson, Boston University, and Stanford. This means many graduating reporters begin their careers with an understanding of reality rooted in the prevailing paradigm of secular higher education (which until recently, again as Berger argued, has generally failed to adequately address religion as an impactful factor in the world). Given diminishing ad revenue, contemporary journalists are often expected to bring their own social-media followings and publish quickly, routinely scored by digital tools measuring the number of reader-views and reader comments (Marshall 2016). As a result, despite America's religious diversity, broad stories with broad appeal are valued more than particular pieces catering to distinct religious audiences—let alone mutually respectful engagement that invites rather than waters down the substance of religious beliefs.

That makes a journalist tasked to cover religion somewhat like a fish out of water. *Washington Post* columnist and frequent *National Public Radio* commentator E.J. Dionne tells a wonderful story demonstrating this point. Once while covering a papal tour in the US, while traveling with the Vatican's entourage, fellow Associated Press (AP) journalist Victor Simpson turned to E.J. "and said, in mock alarm, 'What are we going to write about? There's nothing but religion here'" (Dionne 2005).

It's a laugh-line, but it has a funny way of resurging. Take what the Washington Editor-in-chief of *Real Clear Politics*, Carl Cannon, said after meeting with Saddleback Church evangelical pastor Rick Warren, alongside a group of prominent journalists in 2005:

Rick said something—it was a throwaway line—but he said, "You know, I'd sold 18 million books before I got my first review in an American newspaper." And people gasped. And the woman who was sitting next to me—I won't say her name, she's a very prominent reporter—leaned over and whispered in my ear and she said, "That is all you need know about bias in American journalism." 18 million books and nobody ever reviewed his book in a newspaper.

(Cannon and Burge 2020)

Is there a deeper reality at work when it comes to religion and elite US journalists? Some suggest it's a kind of federalism dynamic, in which the country is increasingly becoming "many Americas:" Secular New England and Pacific Northwest, the Bible Belt, Middle America, Blue California, Red Texas, and so forth. Perhaps reporters, broadcast journalists, and columnists can't report religious realities in a way that pleases *all* constituencies.

But a larger factor seems to be a lack of religious literacy and a lack of religious education among many elite journalists. On closer look, for example, many of the geographic stereotypes contain real nuance—e.g., vibrant faith communities within Seattle and Portland, oft-dubbed the twin capitals of secularism.

Some examples straight from leading American newspapers prove the point. Recall, for instance, the death of Pope John Paul II, on April 2, 2005. That week, *New York Times* reporter Ian Fisher was assigned to cover the papal funeral, and Fisher (2005) wrote a piece describing the funeral processional, stating that the body of the 84-year-old pontiff was

dressed in white and red vestments, his head covered with a white bishop's miter, and propped up on three dark gold pillows. Tucked under his left arm was the silver staff, called the crow's ear, that he had carried in public.

If you grew up serving in the Catholic, Anglican, Episcopal, or Lutheran altar guild, this story's error might not be hard to catch. But read it again: A *crow's ear*? The correct term is a "crosier," sometimes spelled crozier—and it's the staff carried by Catholic or other high church clerics,

symbolizing the Good Shepherd. But Fisher and his well-compensated team of *New York Times* news editors missed it completely.

Similar cases abound. The same day, for instance, the deck-line in a piece by a *BBC* reporter stated that as mourners gathered near the pope's funeral processional, "Karma light nuns" convened near the site. Not *Carmelite* nuns, mind you—"Karma light" (Ashford 2009).

It's not just a problem of covering the Catholic papacy overseas. *Washington Post* columnist Michael Gerson (2009) tells this story about the early days of the presidential campaign of George W. Bush, on which he worked:

In the heat of the 2000 election, then-Governor George W. Bush of Texas made an off-the-cuff statement that we ought to take the log out of our own eye before calling attention to the speck in the eye of our neighbor. *The New York Times* reported the remark as a minor gaff—what it termed "an interesting variation on the saying about the pot and the kettle." The reporter—actually a fine and balanced journalist—did not recognize the biblical reference. Neither did his editors—[albeit] taken directly from the Sermon on the Mount.

Of course, that gaffe likely isn't one that would be made by the 70.6% of Americans who self-identify today as Christian—though perhaps a decline in church attendance these last two decades is a contributing factor. It was the *journalist* who missed the reference. Biblical literacy is predominantly waning in the knowledge class, primarily because familiarity with basic religious concepts is rarely valued in Silicon Valley, in the academy, on television and in mainstream media institutions. And this trend is broadly visible when one looks at our generation's leading journalists.

The late founder of Faith Angle Forum, Mike Cromartie (1950–2017), often told a memorable story about a frantic call he took on February 1, 1993, from *Washington Post* reporter Michael Weisskopf. In a column that day, Weisskopf described those who follow television evangelical-type preachers as "poor, uneducated, and easy to command" (Weisskopf 1993). Immediately, the paper received a flood of criticism, and Weisskopf was eager that same day for background about evangelical Protestants: Just how large was their number, what did they want, and what's their engagement in American life? Cromartie recommended a book highlighting a few examples of wide-ranging evangelical cultural contributions, noting there were nearly 81 million US evangelicals at the time. Weisskopf was stunned by that figure, which is today even larger. The next morning, *The Post* issued a correction and an apology.

Several years later, this so-called "God gap" was even wider between mainstream reporters and Southern Baptists, according to Mindy Belz (2017) of *World Magazine*, a Christian magazine, who recalls a similar encounter with Cromartie:

A *New York Times* reporter called to ask Mike about a sex-and-culture debate, raging among Southern Baptists. When Mike cited Ephesians to help the reporter understand the Baptist position, she interrupted: "What was that book you just mentioned? Who's the author? Who's the publisher?"

Increasingly, Cromartie sensed that mainstream reporters might benefit from a kind of basic, remedial religion-education. "I began to get a lot of questions from really smart journalists that were really dumb," he told Belz.

For journalists, Pentecostals, often described as a sub-set of evangelicals, are perhaps even harder than other religious communities to understand. A 1996 *Washington Post* piece relays for readers

a story of a Pentecostal anti-abortion rally outside the US Capitol. At one point, a speaker said, “Let’s pray now, all of us, that God will slay everyone in the Capitol.” What he meant, of course, was that God might divinely strike Members with a more charitable view of the rights of the unborn. But only the quote made the paper, leaving readers on their own to discern the meaning when reading the piece: Was this Pentecostal pastor advocating the murder of the entire Congress? (Kovach and Rosenstiel 2001). Of course, more recently this example could seem far more threatening after the insurrection at the US Capitol advanced by Trump-supporters, QAnon adherents, and thousands of religiously motivated protestors on January 6, 2021 (Green 2021).

Journalists covering stories with a religious dynamic are often quite unfamiliar with denominational splits or attitudes about social responsibility versus the afterlife—as when a reporter confused the terms “fundamentalist” and “evangelical” in a 2005 *New York Times* story. That piece labeled the scholars in the Seattle-based Discovery Institute, a scientific, Christian research organization, as “fundamentalist” in its beliefs. But the organization’s staff uniformly rejected the term—and strongly pressed its case. The *Times*’ retraction (Wilgoren 2005) read:

A front page article on Sunday about the Discovery Institute, which promotes the concept known as intelligent design to explain the origins of life, referred incorrectly to the religious affiliation of the Institute’s fellows. Most are conservative Christians, including Roman Catholics and evangelical Protestants—not fundamentalist Christians.

Similarly, when that same year the Institute for Global Engagement (IGE) hosted the Islamist Chief Minister of the North-West Frontier Province, the *New York Times* called IGE organizers “right-wing”—even as American politically right-wing organizations called IGE “blood-thirsty bigots” for hosting a freely elected Islamist. Sometimes religious activity of any kind is categorized by elite journalists as right-wing, regardless of its goals.

The disconnect can almost be humorous. One journalist penned a piece at *The Federalist* entitled, “Will Someone Explain Christianity to the *New York Times*?” (Hemingway 2014). One example was a 2014 article about a traveling group of war-weary tourists in Jerusalem, in which *Times* reporter Matthew Kalman referred to the Church of the Holy Sepulcher as “the site where many Christians believe Jesus is buried.” Of course, the writer argues, that little verb—the difference between “is” buried rather than “was” buried—doesn’t sit as nicely with the world’s 2.3 billion Christians as it apparently slipped by most the *New York Times* online and traditional print audience of 5.8 million subscribers.

Former *St. Petersburg Times* reporter Roy Peter Clark, today a writing coach and teacher at The Poynter Institute, put the matter succinctly, and more bluntly:

I’m now taking seriously the theory that we mainstream journalists are different from mainstream America. We’re alienated, and my blind spots all too easily blot out [religious] Americans. Unfortunately, that makes me less of a citizen—and less of a journalist.  
(quoted in Marshall, Gilbert, and Ahmanson 2008)

### **Bridging the divide**

But none of this is written in stone. Among the various disconnects in American life—class, race, urban-rural, and political—how might elite American journalists bridge the existing gap with mainstream US religion? The question matters because broadcast media, cable news outlets, public radio, and top newspapers tend to establish what’s newsworthy, for tens if not hundreds of millions of American readers, viewers, and listeners.



The real work of repairing this consequential breach requires constructive, iterative work from multiple actors—including executives, not just journalists. That's because it's media executives who sign off on hires and structure and oversee department leads. It's executives who work closely with advertisers and investors to make the economics of journalism possible. Readers can voice criticism, offer their preferences, or express appreciation for factual reporting or columns, but it's executives and managers who make changes and set outlet policy.

Of course, the outlets themselves are changing, due in part to the forces of polarization in American political and cultural life that are hollowing out the political center, which has in turn substantially depleted the “broad middle” of contemporary journalism. As a result, niche outlets have quickly emerged on cable news channels, XM radio, and social media—often funded by hard-hitting donors wanting to capitalize on partisan winds that demonize their opponents. Artificial intelligence news feeds reinforce reader-biases, creating larger and larger echo-chambers that reinforce circular beliefs.

For example, in January 2021, 27% of white evangelicals in the US said they believed the QAnon conspiracy's claims about President Trump secretly battling a global cabal of sex traffickers were “completely or mostly accurate”; 62% said they believed there was widespread voter fraud in 2020; and 49% agreed that “antifa was responsible for the US Capitol insurrection” (Cox 2021). Over time, a narrowing of the “broad middle” begins to threaten not only a sense of shared facts but also the survival of established, mainstream outlets like *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, or *The Washington Post*.

Sectarian outlets do choose to cater to various tribes, including religious tribes—and when 70.6% of the US is Christian (even nominally Christian), there is money to be made and this corner of the market is far from flat. To name a few, religious outlets that run parallel to mainstream print or broadcast publications include *The 700 Club*, *EWTN*, *Christianity Today*, *Crux*, *World Magazine*, *Catholic Herald*, *Belief Net*, *The Lutheran Reporter*, *National Catholic Reporter*, and many other faith-based outlets. But catering to a discrete denomination or a religious audience tends to garner far smaller levels of readership or viewership, as evidenced by far higher audience engagement levels at mainstream outlets such as *ABC*, *CBS*, *NBC*, *CNN*, *MSNBC*, *Fox News*, *The Washington Post*, *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Los Angeles Times*, and *PBS*.

To bridge the God-gap, it's these larger outlets that need to better “get” religion. And there are numerous paths: One tack is simply to hire one or more dedicated religion reporters. If this tack has become more common in the last two decades, bringing informed religion writers to shine light on faith elements in a larger cultural or political story, at the very least religious readers typically find such stories thought-provoking, and an outlet can sometimes expand its subscription base.

*The Washington Post* was an early adopter of this strategy, publicly advertising an opportunity in 2002 for a new, dedicated, full-time Religion Reporter. It was not a seamless endeavor. Its own public advertisement demonstrated discomfort with the landscape, partly out of uncertainty about what was lawful or unlawful to advertise. Could it explicitly seek out a person of faith? In an effort to steer clear of a lawsuit for hiring impropriety, the job description said quite clearly that the prospective religion reporter “need not be religious, nor be an expert in religion”—that it was open and available to all applicants.

Yet, would a similar new position for a dedicated, full-time political reporter tasked with covering, say, a presidential campaign really be made available to someone with “no expertise in politics?” That disjunct seemed out of place. Nonetheless, by remaining committed to the position, *The Post* found and hired an inaugural religion reporter, and employs three such reporters today.

Perhaps an even more promising trend than hiring one or more full-time religion reporters is the fervor of an *executive* who embraces the importance of religion and works to help journalists throughout the entire publication transcend their own bias. Occasionally, a particular media executive genuinely appreciates religion, and knows its power, not merely from a singular divinity school class, but from his or her own upbringing. For example, current *New York Times* executive editor Dean Baquet (2016) said this just after President Trump's election:

I want to make sure that we are much more creative about beats out in the country so that we understand that anger and disconnectedness that people feel. I use religion as an example because I was raised Catholic in New Orleans. I think that the New York-based and Washington-based media powerhouses don't quite get religion. I mean, we have a fabulous religion writer—but she's all alone. We don't get religion. We don't get the role of religion in people's lives. And I think we can do much, much better. I think there are things we can be more creative about, to understand the country.

That's a compelling insight, and as Baquet and other executives at leading US papers have proven in the last two decades, religion coverage can substantially improve, starting with the expertise of those whose names appear on the bylines. A takeaway from not only the Trump years but also the national-populist elections in Hungary, Poland, England, Italy, and elsewhere is that we need to better listen to one another. Media executives serve their readers more effectively with accurate religion coverage than by stereotypes or convenient shorthand.

And progress has been even more visible in recent years. At the *New York Times* religion desk, for instance, bringing on Elizabeth Dias in 2018, and Ruth Graham in 2020, has elevated its coverage of American values, religion, and public life, bringing it closer to the standard set by Baquet in 2016. Similarly, at *The Washington Post*, Michelle Boorstein (hired in 2006) and Sarah Pulliam Bailey (hired in 2015) and have helped diverse readers better understand the practices of evangelicals, Catholics, mainline Protestants, Jews, Mormons, Muslims, and other notable traditions in American life. At *Wall Street Journal*, a regular "Houses of Worship" column written since 2001 by Naomi Schaefer Riley and others has also brought to life the diversity of American religiosity. Kelsey Dallas (2014) at *Deseret News* is another talented, curious religion reporter with a commanding sense of American religious diversity. And in addition to a wide cohort of *Religion News Service* journalists, Emma Green (hired 2012) at *The Atlantic* is one of the most serious, best-informed religion writers in the country. Each of these journalists was hired because media executives prioritized religion.

Columnists, reporters, and broadcast journalists are also adapting to other ways in which contemporary journalism is itself changing. *The Atlantic*, for example, can today reach as many as 90 million unique visitors per month, but it has fewer than one million paying subscribers. Reporters at *Religion News Service* routinely write religion stories picked up by an array of outlets—and those placements substantially impact readership levels. So if religion is to receive the more accurate coverage it deserves, the question comes back to (1) how media executives choose to prioritize—or ignore—existing religion threads in contemporary public life, and (2) how they challenge line-managers to strengthen the religious literacy and coverage of their *mainstream* reporters.

That latter challenge is a larger one, as some leaders of large-scale media companies have perceived quite clearly. For instance, Bill Burleigh, the current board chair for the Ethics and Public Policy Center, spent more than 50 years at E.W. Scripps Howard Company—including as president and subsequently as board chairman. Burleigh argues

the prevailing ethos among most of our editors is that the public square is the province of the secular and not a place for religious life and for religious messages to be seen or heard ... As a result, lots of editors still automatically think religion is out of place in a public newspaper.

(quoted in Marshall, Gilbert, and Ahmanson 2008, 150)

If this bias is real, it won't be overcome by hiring one or even several religion reporters, precisely because the scope of religion for many Americans extends far beyond the walls of a house of worship. For most believers who take their faith seriously, religion impacts all facets and dimensions of life: Stem cells, race, vaccines, polarization, education, poverty, the environment, and even US engagement in the world. Drawing out those connections is difficult, but journalists who can shed early cultural biases and learn deeper the motivations, including religious motivations, of those they are covering can write better stories—which in turn build up and strengthen healthy pluralism, rather than diminishing it.

Part of this involves challenging journalists to listen more deeply. Terry Mattingly suggests, “we must strive to get inside the daily lives and stories of the people we cover,” a tack that requires humility, ongoing learning, and time (Mattingly 2009). When more time is spent between a journalist and her subject, confidence is built—and a more substantial quote emerges. Two-way respect, between a source and a journalist, also helps readers experience more of the breadth of pluralist diversity, including not only varieties in race, gender, or LGBTQ hires, but also “viewpoint diversity.”

Put more directly, people don't live in a religious box; but they do bring their religion to all the boxes of life, from vocation to viewpoint. As *RealClearPolitics*' Carl Cannon describes,

if you don't know anything about religion and you're covering politics—to me that doesn't compute, because you need to know about religion if you're going to cover politics. Our newsrooms may be secular, but the American people are not secular.

(Cannon and Burge 2020)

Moreover, we should recognize that journalists can and do sometimes expand their view of religion, in the course of their intrinsic work. This means that advocates or educators who encourage deeper religious literacy among journalists can look for opportunities to support such growth where it is a natural outflow of existing assignments. One wonderful example is Mark Pinsky, raised in a Conservative Jewish home in New Jersey. After getting his degree at Columbia University's Graduate School of Journalism, he decided to uproot and move to Orlando in order to immerse himself in the lives of a peculiar demographic he was covering: Evangelicals. He did so, and wrote a 2006 book about the experience, *A Jew Among the Evangelicals: A Guide for the Perplexed*. After years of diligent observing, Pinsky says he discovered evangelical Americans “no longer as caricatures or abstractions,” but as real individuals who opened his mind in ways that had enduring value (Pinsky 2006).

Another is *Washington Post* columnist and frequent *NPR* commentator E.J. Dionne, referenced earlier for his 2005 quip about the novelty of covering “nothing but religion” at the Vatican. As a Harvard College undergraduate, he took a divinity school course from Professor Harvey Cox, “Eschatology and Politics,” which convinced him that religion plays a powerful role in shaping public life. But for years that interest grew dormant. Decades later, while traveling in and outside the US, as a journalist he witnessed firsthand the power of Catholicism in wide-ranging minority and low-income communities. In studying US labor disputes, he saw at

work “all the principles of Rerum Novarum, the great encyclical about labor fights and equality back in 1891” (Dionne 2021). In recent years he has returned to Harvard as a visiting professor, teaching a divinity school course about Catholicism and social justice, entitled “Religion, Values, and the Future of Democracy.”

If E.J.’s reporting experience led him to return to an early regard for faith, other columnists have been taken by far more dramatic surprise. In 2008 *New York Times* columnist Nick Kristof, for example, was shocked to uncover the quiet, laborious work of missionaries in sub-Saharan Africa. As he describes, any “fair reckoning” with their consequential work, which was “almost entirely unknown beyond that village,” ought in itself to motivate elites to cease “the fashionable mocking” of Christian evangelicals (Kristof 2008).

Similarly, Matthew Parris, an atheist writing that same year in *The London Times*, published a provocative column entitled, “As an Atheist, I Truly Believe Africa Needs God.” Like Kristof, Parris (2008) had visited nine African countries and wrote based on firsthand observation:

I’ve become convinced of the enormous contribution Christian evangelism makes in Africa: sharply distinct from the work of secular NGOs, government projects, and international aid efforts. . . . In Africa, Christianity changes people’s hearts. It brings a spiritual transformation, [striking] deep into the whole structure of rural African thought.

Parris demonstrates that a journalist who is curious can, in fact, move from religious illiteracy to religious literacy—sometimes quite sharply or unexpectedly. And since contemporary reader engagement, measured by algorithms and data-tracking software, ranks columns by their readership, reader *demand* can today also influence journalism in a way it could not, just a generation ago. It is strangely reassuring, for example, that a majority of the top 10 Associated Press stories selected each year as the “most impactful article of the year” typically have some sort of religion hook. If the secularization thesis has been largely debunked at the street-level, journalists in both the US and elsewhere are likely to keep encountering religiosity in the lives of those they cover.

And while typically smaller in scale than mainstream news publications, several educational and programmatic innovations show demonstrable promise. Religion News Service (RNS), for example, is a news agency of 28 correspondents, founded in 1934 by journalist Louis Minsky as an affiliate of National Conference of Christians and Jews. In partnership with the Religion News Association, which hosts a large annual conference open to reporters of all backgrounds, RNS augments existing coverage by reporting directly on religious, moral, spiritual, and ethical issues and then distributing press releases and articles to outlets such as *The Washington Post*, *USA Today*, and the Associated Press. In 2021 RNS employed a network of 28 staff members and correspondents.

One RNS columnist is Mark Silk, who directs the Greenberg Center for the Study of Religion and Public Life, established in 1996 at Trinity College, a liberal arts campus in Hartford, CT. From 1997–2016 the Greenberg Center published *Religion in the News Magazine*, tracing examples of how religion was covered in wide-ranging media—and how matters of religious faith and conscience were impacting society.

Occasionally, journalists who observe a deficiency find their own opportunities to contribute. For instance, after ten years at *The Wall Street Journal*, Paul Glader partnered with Fieldstead and Co. and began leading The Media Project, which provides support for journalists who write stories highlighting religious faith in world events. The program fosters an ecosystem by placing into fellowship positions new graduates of The King’s College, the McCandlish Phillips

Journalism Institute, and other feeder programs—reinforcing writing opportunities to report on faith communities outside the US.

Finally, other fellowship programs include the ICFJ Knight Fellows Program, supporting journalists based overseas; the prestigious Neiman Fellows Program at Harvard University; and a Charles Koch Foundation Fellowship, which—for approximately 40 journalists per cohort—underwrites up to 60% of one’s salary, in partnership with each journalist’s employer. In 2018, the Lilly Endowment partnered with the *Associated Press* and *Religion News Service* to expand the reach of religion reporting in US journalism. The Knight Foundation and Howards-Scripps Service have also underwritten a center aimed at fostering integrity in investigative journalism at the University of Maryland’s Merrill School of Journalism. All these initiatives—particularly fellowships or other outside support introduced in the early years of a journalist’s career—can substantially shape the trajectory of individual reporters and columnists, affecting the stories they generate for thousands of readers.

### Renewing the faith “angle”

What difference emerges when journalists more clearly understand the fact of religious diversity? How, if it all, does that shift help *tikkun olam*, or actively repair the world—in the context of large, enduring cultural and political challenges, and what norms ought to be kept in mind?

Covenantal pluralism is a viewpoint that takes seriously the fact that most citizens are deeply anchored in various faith traditions—including not only the better-known monotheistic traditions, but also secular humanism, or the philosophical commitments of Millennials and Gen Xers whose religion is “none.” Can citizens arrive at better solutions on education policy or criminal justice or foreign policy when religious views are honored, rather than ignored?

“Getting religion” is not a panacea, but when journalists more accurately grasp that wide-ranging faith perspectives are usually in play, a deeper story is typically told—bringing nuance and texture to complex issues (Seiple 2018). When religious dynamics in the lives of citizens and communities are relevant, journalists will tell richer stories if they can overcome their bias or in some cases their ignorance, bringing religious depth to their accounts. Almost always, with a well-written story buoyed by real religious traditions, readers become better equipped to engage a neighbor who does not vote or pray as they do. Though faith need not explicitly appear in every article, because its presence is often more frequently at work than many journalists describe, those who write in ways that respect its depth and nuance produce more accurate stories.

There is another path through which religious literacy among journalists can improve: Journalists themselves. Some readers may be inclined to believe that the vast majority of journalists are introverts—the “lone reporter,” staying late at the office to finish a long-form article, or hiding away in an isolated home office to write a column. But if there is a kernel of truth in this description—at some point, every journalist must sit at a laptop to write a story—firsthand experience suggests that far more journalists lead vocational lives that squarely resemble the precise opposite of a hidden-away introvert. Journalists talk. Even quiet reporters have their go-to sources, unique friendships, bosses, and patterns for quickly comparing notes or fact-checking a storyline with someone else before a story goes to press.

Social media, and especially Twitter, has also made journalism—and identifying storyboard-ing—leads for tomorrow’s piece—a far more communal enterprise. Alongside the collegiality and competition of any newsroom, Twitter, Reddit, and other online-leads make contemporary journalism less like rowing alone or playing a round of individual golf, and more like a team sport. Individual performance matters, but so much about journalism—promotions, profes-

sional associations, helping a junior colleague with a story idea, being correctable by editors and fact-checkers, even bringing to bear one's own social-media following—is communal, not individual. And as today's journalists are absorbed into a fast-changing industry that tracks reader-downloads and measures other interactions, any journalist's ecosystem and collegiality squarely impacts whether he or she succeeds.

This same dynamic shapes a program I direct, Faith Angle Forum, which helps mainstream journalists to better understand religion. Our advisory group consists of 15 columnists and reporters at the very top of their field—and whose political views span both political left and right. While most of this advisory core works in the nation's capital, the journalists who participate in our two-day educational forums typically work at leading papers in not only Washington but also New York City, Los Angeles, and other major metropolitan cities throughout the country. The initiative's goal, rather than convincing one journalist at a time to “get” religion, is to foster what James Davison Hunter describes as a “dense, overlapping network” of like-minded individuals working in the same direction over time (Hunter 2010). Participating journalists aren't asked to embrace the views of advisors or speakers; instead, the group can itself function as a network of peers, constantly inviting in new reporters, columnists, and broadcast journalists to join an engaged, energetic, unfinished conversation. New journalists are steadily invited to participate in a community that—with a podcast, monthly online offerings, and semi-annual conferences—models the kind of intellectually curious, humble approach to religion that can help deepen and benefit journalism as described in this chapter. As with covenantal pluralism, curiosity and deep listening are modeled in the context of face-to-face engagement with cutting-edge scholars and clerics.

The program hosts traditional two-day forums hundreds of miles from the Washington Beltway, where religion experts meet over sessions and extended meals with journalists—who are often surprised by what they encounter. Whether by considering carefully Mitt Romney's Mormonism during his presidential candidacy, or looking at the religious underpinnings of national populism around the globe, or the Islamic roots of the Islamic State's aggression in Syria and Iraq, or even ways faith plays into differing views about science and pandemic-vaccines, since 1999 Faith Angle has hosted 267 journalists and 65 religion scholars or clerics. Reporters or columnists will often write pieces afterwards about the presentations they heard, but the initiative's deeper goal is long-term: To help participating journalists gain a new perspective about the nature, impact, and scope of religion in the world—and to reflect that insight in their ongoing work. Since this view is in some sense more “caught” than taught, many conversations emphasize a sense of wonder and mystery, and not merely didactic learning, when it comes to the spiritual quality and challenges of contemporary life.

Finally, while most of this chapter has discussed American religiosity and the particular role of US evangelicals (especially during the Trump years), many of these observations also apply to world media attitudes about religiosity throughout the globe. When 55% of the planet currently lives in cities, respect for religion may in the 21st century become more important than ever—especially because diverse faith traditions are so proximate in cities. And if the lens of covenantal pluralism, which emphasizes rootedness, empathy, and mutual respect, squares with the needs of our time, it must also take seriously the wide-ranging inputs that shape individuals—including the media. Redeemer Church pastor Tim Keller of New York City commented recently that, in his experience in urban American life, “most Christians are just nowhere nearly as deeply immersed in scripture and in theology as they are in their respective social-media bubbles and News Feed bubbles.” Both liberal and conservative Christians, Keller argues, are living in polarized cable news-loops “for 8–10 hours a day. They go to church once a week, but they're just not immersed in the kind of biblical theological study that would nuance” their media-intake (Wehner 2019).

Whether cosmopolitan or otherwise, perhaps *minority status* is a useful way to think about religious identity in the world today—always existing alongside the shaping-identities of others. In a technological, interconnected age, our media consumption habits can either make us more polarized and disconnected, taking readers down the rabbit hole, or instead more covenantal-pluralist and curious, leading readers to better engagement and mutual understanding. Today's media outlets worldwide hold massive cultural shaping power, because for so many of us they frame, inform, and expand the larger narrative. And against this backdrop we are wise to remember that the articles and columns we read are always written by ordinary men and women—each of whom is neither firmly fixed in their beliefs nor closed to compelling ideas.

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## PART III

Where can religious literacy  
and covenantal pluralism make  
a difference? Case studies and  
practitioner perspectives



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# ENGAGEMENT AND EMBRACE—FROM APARTHEID TO DEMOCRACY

A reflection on rupture and a toolkit for transition

*Ebrahim Rasool*

South Africa's anti-apartheid struggle is legendary for inspiring one of the greatest solidarity movements in the history of the world. Reflecting on the anti-apartheid struggle and the politics of healing and renewal has important lessons. Among them are the less well-known, such as the counter-instinctive ideas and action of faith communities, both individually as Christians and Muslims, but also collectively as an emerging interfaith movement during this struggle, and at the moment of transition and reconstruction. These experiences can help ascertain the veracity and relevance of covenantal pluralism in contemporary struggles.

Apartheid reached its critical moment of rupture between 1976 and the mid-1980s when global and national factors conspired to render the status quo unworkable, the immoral system unsupportable, and popular forces for change irresistible. No such term as "covenantal pluralism" existed then, but activists grasped the power of a worldview embodied in compassionate and visionary leadership, espoused in an audacious manifesto, the Freedom Charter, and embraced by a mass population, physically battered but spiritually sustained by hope for liberation.

The notion of our unnamed covenantal pluralism emphasized the need to transform the status quo for the possibility of pluralism via the role of religion and multiple faiths—engaging each other as well as society and the state, often in a unified manner—collaborating towards a common goal for the social good. It was a daunting if necessary task in a society limited by pre-existing allegiances to one's own race, tribe, religion, and other manifestations of hierarchical difference. Another overwhelming challenge was learning how to engage and covenant with those of different beliefs who nevertheless had common values, ideas, and struggles for the common good that could withstand our deepest theological and political differences.

I want to retrace my footsteps as an anti-apartheid activist and leader to discern three moments of rupture and critical tools for a contemporary covenantal pluralism toolkit. I recount my experiences as a conscious participant in, and observer of, a great historical drama. These stories speak to my role as a religious activist, not of the majority religion, and a political leader, and show how religion can produce a literacy of liberation, transition, and co-existence against an overwhelming language of fatalism, fear of the unknown, and perpetual "otherness," fostered by an unjust regime.

## **Moments of rupture: Finding common ground for the common good**

In 1984, the apartheid state was reeling. Persistent student uprisings, growing strikes by trade unions, deepening international solidarity, and intensifying sanctions led to the formation of the broadest anti-apartheid coalition possible, the United Democratic Front (UDF). Struggles were being fought on all fronts and fear of the brutal apartheid state was giving way to an all-out effort for its defeat.

In a desperate attempt, the apartheid government unleashed its dual strategy of repressing the majority (through a state of emergency) and co-opting minorities (through sham elections for them). The political leadership of the major resistance movements was killed, in exile, imprisoned, or had gone underground. Religious leaders stepped into the breach. Reverend Allan Boesak and Archbishop Desmond Tutu began to lead, armed with liberation theology, the global renunciation of apartheid as heresy, and a church base behind them that was afraid of being caught on the wrong side of history. It was faith at its finest.

The Muslim community, to which I belong, was a small minority, about 1.5% of the national population; it was segmented into many ethnicities, geographies, classes, schools of thought, and political persuasions. Only a handful, however, opposed apartheid. Among the latter politically conscious group, were three strands: Those inspired towards an Iranian-type Islamic revolution, those historically inspired by Islamism, and those “answering” a Call of Islam. I co-founded Call of Islam in response to the apartheid government’s attempt to co-opt the Muslim community. The Muslim clergy while knowing right from wrong, neither had the will nor the courage to oppose the state. Call of Islam stepped into this leadership vacuum. We immediately affiliated with the liberation movements through the UDF and, later, the Interfaith Movement, convened by Archbishop Tutu.

Call of Islam’s battle had four different dimensions as it learned the religious literacy of engagement, always seeking a covenanted form of pluralism: (i) Determination, in a decisive manner, of the intra-Islamic struggle (Iranian-type militancy, Islamist withholding, or clerical abdication); (ii) participation in the political struggle for justice; (iii) relationship in forging partnerships across the political and religious spectrum; and, (iv) creation of a religious discourse through which devout activists had as much say in exegesis as conservative clerics.

### ***Call of Islam—Intra-faith as a means to multi-faith***

Call of Islam, launched on June 17, 1984, became the largest gathering of Muslims to explicitly oppose apartheid, the non-participation of many Muslims in the anti-apartheid struggle notwithstanding. For example, the Islamist student body withdrew its support and speaker that very morning in disagreement with our intention to work with non-Muslims—communists, nationalists, Christians, and Jews (whom they considered *ipso facto* Zionists), while the Iranian-inspired militants attended only to disrupt the rally.

Yet Call of Islam began to capture the imagination of Muslims, motivating them to resist co-optation into apartheid structures, winning critical support from leading Muslim clergy who opened the mosques for our meetings. This was the first moment of rupture. Muslims were inspired by our courage, felt proud of the ensuing growing admiration for Islam in South Africa, and were assured by our moral discipline in conducting struggle. We remembered Mahatma Gandhi's satyagraha of militant non-violence in early 20th-century South Africa, and he was our model, the golden thread in our struggle to weave a new fabric of society. Our religiously conscious liberation leadership ensured that even when necessary against the intransigent state, violence was never glorified or used wantonly.

Call of Islam, together with exceptional Muslims in other formations like the African National Congress (ANC) and the South African Communist Party (SACP)—with which they affiliated as secular Muslims—became the symbol and platform for the Muslim community. Through us, Muslims were seen by millions of South Africans as acting in concert with political and religious leadership for freedom. This perception grew despite our relatively small size and intense internal organizational contestations. Our fellow South Africans appreciated our sacrifices, visibility, presence, and stand for justice.

### ***Bridging the divides—Stepping toward multi-faith***

The second moment of rupture occurred on a bridge in Cape Town linking two of apartheid's sub-divisions of black people: "Coloureds" in Manenberg, and black Africans in Gugulethu. On a Saturday morning in 1985, the UDF prepared for the burial of ANC operatives who had been killed by apartheid security forces. The police and army closed off the bridge and effectively the townships. They had orders to kill anyone attending the funerals; the media was blacked out. An air of dread gripped Cape Town under the conditions for a massacre, and an SOS went out for religious leaders to gather at the bridge as a *cordon sanitaire*.

About 30 Christian, Muslim, Jewish, and Hindu leaders and activists gathered, in full clerical garb, with scriptures in hand to head off the disaster. We began consciously employing our faith assets to preach and distract the armed forces away from their targets, and draw the full glare of international media, which had by then arrived on the scene. We succeeded in preventing a massacre by ourselves being arrested. Held in Manenberg police station, a hundred meters from the bridge, our arrests drew crowds that the police were forced to monitor, leaving free the mourners. But the profound moment of the day came in the prison cell where the religious leaders were being detained.

Anticipating that we would remain in prison as the courts had been closed by the government, we decided to hold a service, an interfaith one. "Interfaith" was the description we gave to that moment. For the participants, it meant that we were bound by our values and our circumstances. And that we not only needed each other, but that we also needed to communicate with God—*without* sacrificing our different faiths, theologies, and religious identities that gave us our respective uniqueness and strength. We began negotiating who would perform the sermon, read the scriptures, lead the prayers, and sing the hymns. We also negotiated what aspects of our traditions to invoke to unite us and accentuate our commonalities. As the service unfolded, we found beauty and common ground with each other. Thus, the ritual of the Interfaith Service emerged as a tradition of our anti-apartheid struggle, countering the immoral isolation of apartheid while reinforcing the moral connectedness of its opponents. Again, it was faith at its finest.

That first interfaith initiative also led to searching questions: Did I as a Muslim have more in common with Reverend Boesak, a Christian clergyman, who led the sermon, than with the Imam of my mosque who had failed to show up at the bridge? Was the Hindu activist standing beside me in the cell also worthy of paradise like the Muslim simply uttering "I believe" in the cloistered safety of the mosque? That day in that prison cell, I gained a crucial insight: Faith is both a noun and a verb, both a state of belief and inspired action towards justice! I decided to invest more in those with whom I disagreed on theology but whose theology nevertheless brought them visibly and vocally to the battlefield where all creation was seeking relief from oppression. It was a turning point in my life.

### ***Kairos—Choosing sides, deepening the rupture***

The third seminal rupture occurred during my term as Secretary of Call of Islam and Coordinator of the World Conference on Religion and Peace. An exhilarating debate had started in South Africa following the 1982 Ottawa Conference of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (to which the majority of white South Africans belonged), which had declared apartheid a heresy, had suspended the white Dutch Reformed Church's membership, and elected Reverend Boesak its Moderator. The gauntlet had been thrown down.

A fly on the wall, I noted the complex positioning thereafter within the white, and within the black, churches; between them, between the different strands of Christianity, and in relationship to the other faiths and those without faith.

It was in this context that the 1986 pamphlet, *Call to Prayer for an End to Unjust Rule* catalyzed the third rupture. Written by the South African Council of Churches to commemorate the tenth anniversary of the Soweto June 16 uprisings and massacre of protesting students, it revealed the internal contestation within the white majority churches, as it did the elation of the oppressed. The white leadership of the Anglican and Methodist Churches thought this pamphlet a bridge too far, especially its implied call for the removal of the unjust apartheid rulers. Methodist President, Reverend Peter Storey, articulated the disagreement: "(T)he church should pray for one's rulers to be inwardly transformed but not that they be removed from office" (Villa-Vicencio 1988).

The disagreement echoed the orthodoxy of all faiths: Was religious freedom about the right to inner worship within our institutions, or about bringing our belief into the public square? We recognized this as a watershed moment, and a point of no return once committed. The Church, despite its dismay with apartheid, was institutionally invested via land ownership, tax breaks, and guarding against potential repression of religion; its functionaries were wary of the implications of outright opposition to the state.

Consternation soon yielded to a process of definition. The church in South Africa specifically, and religion generally, had been exposed as non-monolithic entities, despite common creedal foundations. From among the leading members of the South African Council of Churches (SACC), a drafting committee convened to chart forward the role of faith, especially Christianity, in the anti-apartheid maelstrom. Thus was begat the Kairos Document, which challenged the church and confronted the state irrevocably: "the apartheid minority regime is irreformable. We cannot expect the apartheid regime to experience a conversion or change of heart and totally abandon the policy of apartheid" (Institute for Contextual Theology 1985).

A *double entendre*, Kairos described a crisis in South Africa's political, social, and economic foundations while simultaneously accentuating the crisis in the church and religion as not only observed but experienced. It invoked the New Testament's notion of *kairos*, a time appointed by God for action, in which opportunity for transformation presented by crisis must be seized. Kairos emphasized acting on societal crisis as preceding, or at least accompanying, acting within the faith community. Beyers Naude, SACC's General Secretary, described the rupture:

I believe there is general agreement within the ranks of the SACC that apartheid is crumbling and that the clear signs are there of it only being a matter of time before the massive edifice is going to tumble and fall.

(SACC Minutes 1985)

Theology, Kairos asserted, comprised three forms: State/"court" theology that justified apartheid, church theology that mildly rebuked the apartheid state but had much to lose via a

full confrontation, and prophetic theology that understood the need for the “biblical, spiritual, pastoral and ... prophetic tradition ... in the ... apartheid situation” (Institute for Contextual Theology 1985). Christian in its focus, Kairos nevertheless reverberated across all faith and political communities. While Islamic scripture enjoins Muslims to stand up, even do battle, for justice, practice, as in Christianity, was then shaped by state and “jurisprudential” theology only, both of which refused the imperative to act against the prevailing context.

For this reason, Kairos awakened Muslims like me to further challenge the South African Islamic orthodoxy. The core challenge here, as Albert Nolan (1988) observed in *God in South Africa*, was contextuality; how to “do theology” under apartheid. The final report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) captures the ambiguity attached to religion under apartheid *and* the opportunities offered by the crisis: “As involved and implicated as they were in the past, South Africa’s religious communities also represented important sites of transformation. Different interests, perspectives, and worldviews are represented—often within the same faith tradition” (TRC 1998).

The above three seminal moments in the anti-apartheid struggle laid a strong foundation for religion to contribute a covenantal structure—within and between and among faith traditions—and home to South Africans of all races and religions, via their mutual engagement, which was also the literal and figurative embrace of each other, and therefore pluralism. This enabled a graduation in relations among the different and diverse groups, propelling them from mere tolerance of each other to deep engagement, based on respect of the right to be different.

But this pluralism that we were covenanting, through engagement and embrace, also had to stand the test: Could it live up to its own notion of prophetic truth and non-violence amidst police atrocities and palpable anger? Or would this Kairos rupture descend into an orgy of violence?

Archbishop Njongonkulu Ndungane, in *Faith in Action*, describes Archbishop Tutu’s example of the kind of leadership needed and provided by religion at the time:

[His] faith was also the source of what seemed at times to be almost reckless courage as he sought to communicate God’s love for all humanity in every situation ... I was with him once ... We were surrounded by an angry mob ... preparing to ... burn [a boy accused of being a state collaborator] to death ... Desmond convinced them to release their victim. Later ... he admitted how aware he had been of the risk we were in. We had nothing but the word of God with which to persuade them.

(Jones 2008)

Indeed, prophetic theology has enormous spiritual responsibilities and physical risks for its practitioners.

### **Transition: From a devastating old to an imperfect new**

A few days after Nelson Mandela’s release on February 11, 1990, I was delegated to accompany him to the oldest mosque in South Africa and the grave of Tuan Guru, a Muslim leader and scholar exiled into slavery from Indonesia to the Cape by the Dutch in the 17th century. Mandela was paying homage to the predecessors who had run the great relay against racial injustice over three centuries ago. As we shared a quiet moment, he addressed me: “Ebrahim, you know very soon we’ll be free. Are the Muslims ready for freedom?” Exhilaration at the release of our political prisoners and unbanning of our liberation movements had diverted our attention



from the content of the freedom we eagerly anticipated. I was put on alert about the arduous struggle still ahead.

Privy to robust debates about this transitional moment in South Africa, how might we harness this momentous opportunity for qualitative transformation from apartheid to democracy? How did one engage diverse groups to build an inclusive, non-racial, and equal society reflecting dignity? These were the raw challenges for a recipe for covenantal pluralism, the inherent values or main ingredients being facilitation of fairness, equal rights and responsibilities, and co-existence that commits citizens to engage with dignity, civility, and respect.

The rupture was palpable and had shifted the balance of forces; political and moral momentum clearly shifted towards the liberation movements; yet, apartheid still possessed a significant edge in the economic, institutional, and military dimensions. Further, our national transition fell within a bigger global one that had impacted the liberation movements. The fall of the Berlin Wall had shattered the world's ideological paradigm, had defeated the ANC's support bases in the East Bloc. The US president, George H. W. Bush, and UK prime minister, Margaret Thatcher, signaled to the South African president, F.W. de Klerk, that the moment was ripe for negotiations, failing which he was on his own.

The ANC conceived its 1989 Harare Declaration to chart the course to make the best of an imperfect situation to take political power. Some saw in this potential for the ultimate delivery of only civil rights and freedom; others were outraged, seeing betrayal of anti-apartheid ideals. Those of us who saw no alternative refused, however, to "give in" by making the perfect the enemy of the good. We argued that our freedom could be salvaged from a platform of uncomfortable co-existence between the apartheid old and the desired new democracy. In other words, there still needed to be a reckoning regarding past lack of political morality.

Even with our interfaith theology of liberation and Kairos, what theology would guide us through a transition, towards transformation? What might be a faithful response to the conundrum of transition, in which the old and new must co-exist, where the former oppressors would now have no homeland to return to but would themselves remain as reminders of centuries of dispossession, discrimination, and atrocity? What to reconcile when the victory over oppression was in a state of such incompleteness that the few would continue to retain their privileges while the many their misery? In the absence of a theology of transition and transformation, religious communities were bound to respond as diversely as did the broader society; yet, would religion maintain the moral momentum it had held through the final stretch of the anti-apartheid liberation struggle?

On and on; these and many more were the endless questions that stared us in the face. For our part, we had to return the gaze boldly, generously, and gently.

### **Convening faith communities: From liberation to transformation**

Call of Islam responded to Mandela's challenge to Muslims by immediately initiating, in May of 1990, a National Muslim Conference that called for representatives to attend from among the country's Muslim political, professional, community, and clerical diversity. Next followed two sittings of the National Interfaith Conference. Overnight, faith communities had to adjust from liberation theology informing anti-apartheid struggle to that informing/guiding transition and transformation.

In doing so, we had to manage the setbacks posed to our ideals of absolute sovereignty and egalitarianism, opting for a down payment on our anti-apartheid aspirations, with a plan that future installments would materialize. There was no illusion that this would be a near-impossible payment. We would have to (want to) learn the grace that President Mandela and Archbishop

Tutu had if we were to co-exist with the perpetrators of crimes against our humanity. Again, we needed to manage the deep disappointment felt among the faith leadership; a spirited debate opened about redemption, and *whether* to endorse the strategy of negotiations between the liberation movements and the apartheid state.

Three basic agendas were present at these conferences, reflecting the diversity of ideology and politics of the anti-apartheid struggle, attempting to shape an ad hoc and informal theology of transition and transformation. These were: (i) A minority radical agenda refusing negotiations or suspension of the liberation struggle, viewing negotiations as a compromise or betrayal; (ii) a converging agenda of all religions' orthodoxies wishing such liberation yields state facilitation of halaal abattoirs, provision of worship and burial sites, recognition of customary and personal law, harnessing of religious institutions for delivery of state services, and inscription of religious rights in a new constitution, legislative framework, and national character; and, (iii) prophetic or pragmatic protagonists seeking to forge sufficient goodwill from imperfect conditions to create a path of progressive realization of liberation.

The first agenda was considered unrealistic, but heed was taken of its warnings and its values carried into the third agenda. Orthodoxy's wish list had to be considered; while base and self-serving, it was conceded that apartheid's deprivation gave the black church and the non-Jewish minority faiths a right to seek those benefits enjoyed by the white church under apartheid—land for the black church and recognition of marriages for Muslims, as examples. These deliverables were not predicated on a primary theology of transition and transformation agenda.

It was the prophetic agenda that carried the most influence into the new South Africa, as it aimed at resolving the conundrum of transition. The conundrum—celebrating the achievement of liberation, yet anxious that it may not realize the full promise thereof—itself circumscribed critical questions that culminated in a set of recommendations to the constitution writers as well as an Interfaith Charter of Rights and Responsibilities to pave the way towards transformation too.

### **Finding a facilitative discourse for mutual religion-state engagement**

The liberation movements' founding leadership, for example, the ANC, had been majorly drawn from the black church. However, activists from the 1960s onwards regarded themselves as Marxists-Leninists, and while appreciative of the anti-apartheid role of religion, there was no role automatically reserved for religion in a post-apartheid state, partly because the clerics were regarded as a "caretaker" leadership that had ended with the return of the political leadership from prison, exile, and the underground. Indeed, Archbishop Tutu helped this assumption when he called for the Anglican clergy to return to their pastoral duties following the 1994 democratic elections.

Whether religion was going to vacate the political terrain or retain its influence on the unfolding transition and impending transformation, there was still a need for debating the relationship between religion and the incoming democratic state in terms of definition and finessing beyond received historical and global precedents. Covenantal pluralism requires and offers a platform for engagement such that, where possible, its objectives can be inscribed within a constitutional order. This is necessary for founding a society based on social solidarity and global neighborliness, and for balancing the rules and relationships for the emergence of a peaceful and productive world of difference.

Albie Sachs, an anti-apartheid activist and hero, a major contributor to the South African Bill of Rights and Constitution, and a Constitutional Court judge, addressed Muslim and Interfaith Conferences in this regard in 1990, in Cape Town and Pretoria. He raised two cardinal ques-

tions for consideration. One, how do faith leaders, especially of the prophetic pedigree, carry forward their values, mission, and passion into the new South Africa, based on their earned right to influence society's course via their role in the anti-apartheid struggle? Two, how, given the anticipated imperfect negotiated settlement, do we keep faith engaged in the unfolding transition and transformation as both shepherds (who ensure values and advocate for people's rights) and watchdogs (who hold negotiators accountable and a future government focused on delivering the installments of liberation)? In short, we had returned to the fundamental question posed at the beginning of our struggle against apartheid: Was religious freedom just about the inner freedom of conscience and worship in religious institutions, or also bringing belief into the public square as fellow citizens concerned about the governance of the common good?

Sachs laid out four options: (i) A theocratic state in which public policy is completely determined by a dominant religious denomination; (ii) an atheistic state in which religion would be actively suppressed by the government; (iii) a secular(ist) state limiting the scope of religion to the private sphere; or, (iv) a secular state ensuring freedom of religion and seeking cooperation between the institutions of state and religion on matters of common concern (Institute for Justice and Reconciliation 2004). The theocratic option appeared too much like the relationship between the apartheid state and the white Dutch Reformed Church. The atheistic option was discredited along with the Berlin Wall, viewed as likely to betray the contribution of religion to liberation.

The real debate was thus between what we called the impervious wall of *laïcité* and the porous wall of secularism. The latter won out with both faith and political leaders, and was carried through into the founding documents of post-apartheid South Africa. The specific nature of our challenges, though, would later prove that Sachs might have done well to add to his fourth option the more uncomfortable idea of critical engagement where political decay and theological sectarianism emerge.

### **The spiritual reconstruction of South Africa**

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) became the test bed for the kind of "secularism" to emerge in the new South Africa: Would it be a secularism in which the state is above and equidistant from all religions? Or the kind in which there is no state religion but where religion continues to play a prominent role in the public space—advocating for policy, holding government accountable, and exercising all freedoms (from those entailing religion to speech and association)? And there were the deeper questions of which, especially prophetic religions, theoretically, actually had something to say. For example, if apartheid's victims and perpetrators were to co-exist, co-govern, and co-own the country, they should have to do so without compromising the core struggle objective—justice. But what was justice in our imperfect settlement? How was justice to be achieved? Who would be the arbiters of justice? Who would decide what constituted sufficient redemption of perpetrators?

The very notion of justice, therefore, had to be dislodged from its legalistic and absolutist foundations, as in the case of Nuremberg after World War II. Whereas Nuremberg was about identifying perpetrators, locating them, and bringing them to justice despite time elapsed or where they were hiding, justice in South Africa needed to be infused with a more spiritual, humanistic ethic. The idea of transitional and restorative justice played a critical role in infusing justice with a dynamic objective—how to move away from the horror of the past to the ideals being strived for in the present. Also, how to substitute retribution with an undertaking of a series of restorative measures that would make life dignified and livable between perpetrators and victims?

The TRC, in search of justice, also strove for healing, redemption, and reconciliation; it avoided the use of the word “justice,” using instead “truth” to place emphasis on disclosure, confession, and closure. Most understood this approach as crucial to addressing the past in a manner that secured sufficient peace in the present—in order to make the future workable. As such, victims or their families would find comfort from knowing that their suffering was real, that the perpetrator had an identity, where the body was secretly buried, that their disclosures under torture were not because of personal weakness but rather because of the barbarity of the torture. This was the precursor to healing and forgiving. Perpetrators, on disclosing truth, could obtain legal amnesty, and maybe peace of mind, by confessing in the hope of divesting themselves of their terrible deeds and complicity in the atrocities committed.

Indeed, the new society was also being reshaped alongside the healing work of the TRC. The combination of Mandela’s political acumen and Tutu’s spiritual instinct allowed the emergence of reconciliation as enabler of the new. Reconciliation was posited as the balance between an uncompromising quest for justice and the possibility of peace, without the latter being superficial and too comfortable.

### **Calibrating a language of healing**

The demand was for the complete fulfillment of South Africans’ aspirations and needs; but there was the challenge too of complacent analysis of apartheid as simply segregation, without acknowledgment of the dispossession and degradation that went hand in glove with segregation. Thus the very process of healing had to find a way to allow this acknowledgment and expression of the deep deprivation, the partial and delayed deliverance, and tenuous co-existence of perpetrator and victim, a potential powder keg. What could constitute racial reconciliation for undergirding an inclusive yet diverse society, a united nation on the one hand, and restoration of the soul and wellbeing of those impoverished and damaged on the other?

Such self-consciousness required reflective and articulate leaders, able to communicate a narrative of healing amidst great brokenness. This proved an essential way for what we could now call covenantal pluralism to navigate a path that is an antidote to a world engaged in right-wing cultural populism which might exploit brokenness and grievance, exaggerate its impact on designated groups, and eschews responsibility to heal. We discovered that leaders are popular because they do not shy away from that which is unpopular; they are able to popularize the rightness of unpopular choices through the integrity of the messenger and the message.

The new South Africa could potentially restore to each fundamentally our human dignity, essentially our human rights and, progressively our human needs. This had to be carefully calibrated to ensure that an intangible, like dignity, was not ignored as a restoration but would enable the ability to be human, to be heard, to act with equal power, to not be defined by biological features. Human rights, while inscribed on paper, were still not there in attitudes and behavior, and thus various commissions for racial, gender, cultural, and religious rights were established as mediation and education platforms for grievance, to prevent litigation as first recourse.

However, in looking back, when the perfection of your vision meets the imperfection of reality, socio-economic rights to housing, employment, and other material needs immediately could only be realized incrementally through the establishment of a safety net of services like health, education, and social security so that none would fall through the cracks of society. At best, for a future promise to be fulfilled, such measures were crucial for buying patience from the poor and generosity from the rich, a compact essential for ensuring sufficient peace with which to rebuild a nation. This was the reality of healing we faced, and the notion of inclusivity pointed the way forward.

## Steps towards an inclusive society

Before it acquired its name, covenantal pluralism was the intent and substance we tried to construct in the South African transition—committing in covenant with those who shape your micro identities of religion, tribe, ethnicity, and culture with the responsibility and right to engage in pluralism. It emphasized the right to be diverse in lifestyle, creed, and ideology, to the point of even protecting them while being fundamentally opposed to, or uncomfortable with, such manifestations. We thus found we needed to underpin our nascent covenantal pluralism with additional conceptual and practical pointers for the challenge of an inclusive society to be realized within the powder keg of our transition, essentially a consideration of rights, needs, and responsibilities.

Such pointers included: Enabling living with multiple identities to discourage prioritizing only one which often connects the individual with only “their own” whereas multiple identities open up connections with a wider range of people and communities. Another is diversity, not mutually exclusive from unity because both, in varying proportions (often determined by the needs of the time and place) are critical for an inclusive society to thrive. Yet, too much unity hazards uniformity, and too much diversity might compromise social cohesion. Another is tolerance of difference—rather undesirable on the embrace/acceptance continuum—of the other if their lifestyle, creed, or ideology is deemed odious to the point of only mustering an ability to withhold prejudice and discrimination. The responsibility to move forward towards acceptance has to be taught and learned.

Yet another, together with the above, is the idea of inscribing precociously *avant garde* provisions and rights—such as polygyny for Muslims, civil unions for the LGBT community, reproductive rights for women, and the right to life leading to the abolition of the death penalty. These are founded on placing fundamental and eternal rights out of reach of what Mandela described as “temporary majorities.” In other words, a government, no matter how popular, is understood as a temporary majority until the next election and must not have a disproportionate, possibly permanent, influence on the future rights of people. To change fundamental values in South Africa, you would have to have a 90% majority in Parliament, while a constitutional change requires 75%, and an ordinary law, only 51%.

## Toward a toolkit for transition toward covenantal pluralism

Covenantal pluralism is more than an ideal, a vision of equipping, engaging, and embracing society (as well as those who work for the state). It has to be a means as well to overcome fragmented analysis, provide leadership and strategy, and guide disparate and desperate people and communities through the societal crisis (apartheid) and the transitional moment. Its immediate, natural constituency is the faith communities, acting as shepherd and watchdog; it does not fear rupture nor lack the tools to lead. Covenantal pluralism must therefore be visionary and strategic.

It is clear from the journey sketched above through the moments of rupture and transition that the anti-apartheid struggle enabled the competencies and skills for a fraught, yet engaged society to grapple with the challenges at each stage. These are embedded in the notion of cross-cultural religious literacy (CCRL), which are the means of mutual engagement, partnerships across divisions of difference, invitations for each and every party to leave known comfort zones and explore the lived experience of those who are different, as was so clearly evident in the South African example I lived through with others.

To be both visionary and strategic, covenantal pluralism requires a toolkit that is able to confront right-wing cultural populism (that perverts democracy, abases civility and truth, and spawns

various forms of bigotry) and extremism (which harnesses notions of exclusivism and foments terror against the other, by mobilizing victimhood). It must have tools of analysis that repudiate conspiracy but connect disparate manifestations of global crises, thus also enabling connection of a range of struggles against economic exclusion, environmental degradation, social alienation, and war against the stranger. For example, it must develop the means to act amidst a global pandemic (in which this chapter was written) that has hastened rupture, accelerated disruption, and disturbed the *status quo*, so much so that faith communities and society reach a (common) moment of insight, realization, and resolve. Such a toolkit *must* also enable faith leadership to harness a theology for managing the transition from the unsustainable towards covenantal pluralism, *while* imagining the new.

### ***Upgrading the anti-apartheid toolbox***

Many baseline lessons remain valid from the anti-apartheid playbook for other contexts; however, these require significant upgrading for action in contemporary situations. From both the anti-apartheid struggle and transition from apartheid to democracy, I venture seven basic propositions for a toolkit that is of use today.

1. The precondition is *critical in-reach* to discern within one's own community the competing interests, values, paradigms, and personalities that provide either momentum to or impede covenantal pluralism. Failing to sift internally results in two losses: The opportunity for values-driven transformation and acting against societal pathologies, often while perpetually debating compliance-based agendas internally; and prophetic possibilities for bridge-building with others outside your community who share values for the common good. It is helpful to remain aware of three basic theologies competing within any faith community: State, church, and the prophetic; evaluate the landscape and its players, according to these.
2. There must be *values-driven outreach* for leadership coherence across faiths, sectors of society, and communities confronting the same challenges or managing different components of the multiple crises. Covenantal pluralism is precisely the idea that you can be in covenant with your own community, as well as with others in a quest for the common good through coalitions for virtue—the common good sometimes taking precedence over common faith. This principle points to the need for negotiation skills.
3. The language of religion is often facilitative for a *confrontation with the adversary* because such confrontation is inevitable in a paradigm of competing truths and dogma. But the nuanced language of faith and spirituality becomes crucial in conflicts for justice and peace because it invokes the language of last resort: Heresy, *Kairos* and prayer to end unjust rule. It necessitates discernment about who and what is redeemable, worthy of compassion, in need of confession, atonement, replacement, etc. This enables establishing bulwarks against unbridled anger, rage, and desire for retribution even to the extent of faith leaders sometimes having to put their bodies on the line. This principle points to the need for communication skills that can navigate complex and sophisticated conundrums.
4. Faith / religion must resist easy binaries, choosing instead to engage in prayerful and intellectual exertion to *define the relationship with power*, mostly state power, but also between the majority ethno and/or religious group, and minorities, and therefore the policies of integration that result. Remember, faith is not, by definition, in combat with the state, nor ipso facto, subservient to it. Cooperation is easier with a benign or democratic state; the prophetic imperative should guard nonetheless against co-option. Opposition, though, should come easily where the state is oppressive or veers off democratic values even while holding

democratic legitimacy. Even in opposition, the faith community balances the prophetic and the pragmatic, the principled and the strategic; it always searches for the points of leverage, redemption, and the prospect for transformation, rather than perpetual struggle.

5. Faith *leadership remains present and engaged* in guidance through ruptures, transitions, and transformations. Faith leadership is *never* a lapdog, always the shepherd dog, and often a watchdog; always retaining the capacities for both, willing to be either, both inside your community and within broader society—thus, knowing the when, where, and what of the art of leadership. As watchdog, remain constantly vigilant for signs and sources of decay—from the perversion of democracy to violation of human rights, from prospects for corruption to the slide into fascism. In shepherd dog mode, elicit analysis, forge consensus, elevate values, exhort justice, guide struggle, and heal the damaged.
6. The intra-faith and inter-faith phenomena display enormous diversities, and must perforce, rise to the challenge of enabling *social cohesion in a fragmented and bigoted world*. This must be done along the continuum of need for cohesion and unity; where power is premised on the division of people, faith must represent the unity of creation and confront its antithesis (as in apartheid). Where the rupture has left deep wounds, faith must use its convening power for truth and reconciliation—with or without the participation of state power. Where reconciliation leads to a dispensation of co-existence between perpetrator and victim, faith must muster the means to make this tenable. Amidst these seemingly contradictory aspects, faith *possesses* the resources that ensure justice is never off the table.
7. The soft power wielded by faith leadership is often the most unthreatening arbiter of *an inclusive society*, which can assert the right for all to be the same and different simultaneously—that the world we live in must be safe for difference! It asserts this on concrete propositions that we can live with multiple identities, have a workable balance between diversity and unity, and progress from mere tolerance to full principled embrace of the other.

### **Covenantal pluralism: Meeting today's challenges**

Covenantal pluralism is not a juxtaposition of mutually exclusive opposites; its strength is in those apparently contradictory assertions—capable simultaneously of micro and macro covenants; in fact, a micro covenant can authenticate adoption of a macro one, towards its commitment and sustainability. This is the true essence of pluralism, the assertion that you need not abandon pre-existing identities but can consider adopting bigger identities resonating with your own. Covenantal pluralism can thus be the harbinger of the virtuous person, ethical institutions, and communities of integrity.

South Africa's anti-apartheid struggle taught a central lesson, germane to covenantal pluralism, that the DNA of protest must contain the consciousness and thus the conduct for engagement towards pluralism. The process and outcome of protest must never jeopardize the transition and renewal; covenantal pluralism must be a consistent thread in social consciousness at all key moments of engagement. This was the case when the liberation leadership presciently, at the height of apartheid, conceived the Freedom Charter, a vision and program resonant with a potent future of co-existence.

Many countries are today witnessing a reduction in democracy via the all-encompassing quantitative mechanism of electoral contests for, increasingly, democratically antithetical values. The devaluation of truth and civility is growing in discourse, cumulatively exacerbating a range and depth of intolerances, mainstreaming of extremisms, potential for micro and macro conflicts, and retreat from democratic achievements such as human rights and development.

Correcting these will require a concerted attempt at creating a comprehensive religious literacy that allows for critical contributions to covenantal pluralism. Affected constituencies may have to first engage in intra-religious contest, or simultaneously, towards inter-community efforts at making a better world, through the politics of protest and healing, for emergence of the values of compassion, love, and community.

Apartheid's moment of rupture was needed to ring the alarm bell to activate its victims, and to disturb and threaten its complacent beneficiaries by dramatizing the unsustainability of the status quo, and moving society towards reimagining the alternative—our mutual interdependence to accelerate the momentum for change. We learned then that believers always desire rapture but can achieve little without the precondition of rupture. Can the forces for change today grasp this initiative when the status quo heightens fear? If possible, then religion/faith must resolve to never entirely abdicate the public square, to always protect the veracity of covenantal pluralism, guide towards its objectives and realization, and develop the skills and competencies for cross-cultural religious literacy that make covenantal pluralism possible. To fulfill its prophetic role inside the domain of religion, it is incumbent on faith to also accept the challenges of society as a whole.

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## THE SECULARISM PARADOX

## Living with deep difference in the Middle East

*Shadi Hamid*

There has been—and there should continue to be—a reluctance to attribute too much causal power to religion, particularly in a region as conflict ridden as the Middle East. The risk is obvious: Essentializing an entire faith and its adherents as being somehow predisposed to violence. But this reluctance, if extended to its logical conclusion, comes with its own drawbacks. If academics and practitioners avoid treating religion—and specifically Islam—as an important explanatory variable, then addressing the complexities of inter-religious as well as *intra*-religious diversity will remain difficult if not impossible.

We might wish it were otherwise, but religion isn't going anywhere in the Middle East. Some survey research—conducted after the failures of the Arab Spring and the rise and fall of the Islamic State, or ISIS—has pointed to a decline in religiosity. One widely cited 2019 Arab Barometer poll produced a flurry of headlines proclaiming, with barely concealed glee, that secularism was finally spreading in the region (BBC News Arabic 2019). (What they failed to note was that the number identifying as “not religious” had, in fact, only increased from 8 to 13%.) The Middle East has been so disproportionately religious and religiously conservative that slight shifts are taken as harbingers of a secularizing period that never seems to come.

Such hopes and assumptions reflect a stubborn determinist logic—that, over time, reason will *eventually, somehow* gain the upper hand against religious passions. In this story, reason and revelation are in perpetual, unyielding conflict, with only one potential victor. Instead of seeing the brief heyday of secular Arab nationalism in the 1950s and 1960s as an aberration in the broader historical sweep, it sees the religious revival that followed as ephemeral. In 1974, Tareq Ismael could write that “in recent years Islam has so declined in authority and vitality that it has become a mere instrument for state policy, although it is still active as a folk religion” (Voll 1982, 2). That decade, as well as subsequent ones, would make clear that the Islamic resurgence of the post-Nasser era was very real, and it would reshape the region in ways that could scarcely be undone. But even if the revival of both religious belief and identity was real, wasn't it still possible that Islam was the product of other things that mattered more? This was an argument for the primacy of politics and economics—and that religion was both separate and secondary, shaped by ultimately secular forces.

Few today would make an argument as bold as Ismael's, that Islam is doomed to irrelevance as a political force. But the notion of Islam as a mode and a means and an instrument rather than something with its own causal power is still commonplace. While normative political theory has

been better in this regard, comparative politics has “largely neglected religion as a relevant causal factor” (Minkenberg 2007, 888).

Even when religion is taken seriously, it tends to be portrayed as a problem to be managed or, preferably, “solved” through its own marginalization. This is a broader issue in academic and popular discourse and not specific to Islam. Seeing secularism as the salve to religious conflict, particularly in light of Europe’s own trajectory, is understandable. The Reformation had unleashed a new religious diversity. However, this diversity was not engaged but resisted. Even among Protestants, the proliferation of sects led to its own spiritual chaos, resulting in “the rapid deconstruction of law, politics, and society” (Witte 2002, 2). Across the continent, a period of intense religious passion and religiously inspired violence during the 16th to 18th centuries gave way to a slow but relentless process of secularization. There had been too much blood shed for idealistic dreams or profound moral insights. Violence unleashed the possibilities for a secular political order. Perhaps, then, a period of unusually high levels of civil conflict and civil war—often with strong religious and ethnic dimensions—might lead to similar outcomes in the Middle East.

As I will argue in this chapter, the purported strength of such an approach is precisely its weakness: It sees religion as a problem to be solved. To frame the role of both religion and religious conservatism in this way—as impediments to pluralism and living with difference—betrays faulty starting premises, particularly the insistence on applying presumed Western trajectories of religious decline onto a completely different context. In a region where religion and politics are often intertwined in complex ways—among Muslims and Christians alike—the notion that they might (or should) represent discrete categories of thought and action is decidedly antiquated.

Moreover, cordoning off religion as a distraction or obstacle is impractical and unrealistic, considering the Middle East’s high levels of religiosity. According to a 2020 Pew survey, even the region’s most “secular” countries—Tunisia, Lebanon, and Turkey—retain extremely high levels of religious identification. In Tunisia, for example, 99% say God plays an “important role” in their life, while 97% say the same for prayer (Tamir, Connaughton, and Salazar 2020). With this in mind, it is better to view religion in the Middle East as something relatively constant, at least in the short-to-medium term, and to in effect “normalize” it as part of our understanding of inter- and intra-religious diversity in the region. As Adam Dinham and Matthew Francis (2015, 7) write, it is critical

to set religion and belief in their proper context as normal, mainstream, and widespread, and to seek engagement with them rather than solutions for them. After all, religion and belief are not “something else somewhere else,” despite many of the assumptions that exoticize it.

A simplistic secularism—one that either waits for religion’s marginalization or “tolerates” it during its decline—is unsuited to the challenges of accommodating deep difference. What, then, are the alternatives? As Chris Seiple and Dennis Hoover outline in this volume, “covenantal pluralism” articulates a vision of mutual respect that goes well beyond a merely transactional tolerance or the often empty platitudes of interfaith dialogue. Instead of insisting, despite evidence to the contrary, that we are all basically the same, covenantal pluralism takes as its premise that citizens will have profoundly different conceptions of the good and that they should not be asked to dilute those faith or theological commitments. As we will see, this framework, while often discussed in the context of living with deep difference in Western democracies (see for example Inazu 2016; Kaemingk 2018; Johnson 2007), has perhaps even more relevance and

applicability in the Middle East, in light of high levels of polarization around Islam's role in public life.

### Religion and diversity

Diversity of any kind is good in theory but not necessarily in practice. This gap between theory and practice is the difference between mere diversity, as a given, and a genuine and deep pluralism, as an aspiration toward mutually respectful engagement in a context of freedom and fairness for all. As Eboo Patel puts it, “dealing with diversity is not rocket science; it’s harder” (Patel 2018, 22).

These difficulties can intensify when the diversity in question is of a religious nature. Religious frameworks are both personal (in the sense of one's own responsibility before God) and collective (in the sense of group solidarity). They, by definition, deal with the most personal questions—around questions of mortality, salvation, and eternity—which also happen to be the most existential questions.

An attack on one's religion can constitute an attack not just on the body but on the “inner soul” of adherents (Fox 2000, 18). Similarly, Nathan Brown (2017, 4) writes that

religious differences can be politically frightening because they seem so deep and so unfriendly to discussion and compromise ... behind this nervousness about religion is a worry that ultimate truths are not open to argument, that religion breeds absolute thinking and even intolerance.

The notion that religious divisions are impervious to reason is so widespread that it is rarely countered in normative or empirical democratic theory. As a result, scholars and practitioners rarely acknowledge their own starting premises when it comes to the presumed intractability of religious differences; they may not even be entirely aware of them. Centuries ago, Jean-Jacques Rousseau captured the sentiment as succinctly as possible when he wrote: “It is impossible to live at peace with those we regard as damned” (2007 [1762], 82). This sounds logical and intuitive enough, but is it right?

In part as a response to the apparent irreconcilability of competing religious claims, secular governments sought to empty public space of God to the extent possible. While secularism is often defined in institutional terms as the separation of Church and State, secularism, in ideological terms, offers the more sweeping possibility of a life lived without the presence of God in everyday social, political, and economic interactions. Secularization, then, hinged on a universal premise, applied to different societies and cultures with limited regard for local context. But was that premise—captured in Rousseau's stark warning—correct?

We know that those who think the adherents of other faiths are damned *have* lived in peace throughout history, as it was for example during the Abbasid Era in the Middle East or in Andalusia before the arrival of Ferdinand and Isabella. Not only was it possible, however; in many ways, it was more the norm than the exception. In their conservative and orthodox forms, adherents of both Christianity and Islam have tended to view those of other faiths as, if not damned outright, then at least less likely to be granted salvation. Before the modern era, this exclusivist position on salvation was not at all controversial. It was orthodoxy (and often still is, even if various caveats are added to diminish offense). But this orthodoxy, on its own, did *not* inexorably lead to religious violence.

One way of addressing Rousseau's concern is not to disavow religion but to promote progressive or privatized versions of traditional religion—which, of course, in the case of Christianity

and Islam, renders them no longer traditional. A corollary to this is the idea that religions, however different in their particularities, essentially serve the same purpose of inculcating morality and promoting good behavior. Character over ritual is a constant refrain among moderns, and in some ways it speaks to something important. In the aftermath of the Islamic revival of the 1970s and 1980s, visual and “superficial” representations of piety rose in importance—one could cheat, steal, and swindle while praying, fasting, and growing a beard or wearing the headscarf. But is that what *really* mattered? Probably not. At the same time, to emphasize the universal sameness of religions as if they are interchangeable, all leading to the same endpoint, reflects this same tendency to see religious differences as something to be either papered over or transcended. Stephen Prothero (2010, 2) writes that this notion of religious sameness is “dangerous, disrespectful and untrue.”

As I have argued elsewhere (Hamid 2016), Islam is “exceptional” in how it relates to law, politics, and governance, not in a positive or pejorative sense, but as a descriptive matter. Islam has played and will continue to play a prominent role in political life. This is only a criticism of Islam if you begin from the premise that public religion is a threat to mere coexistence or democracy, or both. It might be a threat to *secular* or *liberal democracy*, but it is not necessarily a threat to a more minimalistic but still pluralistic conception of democracy. That said, to simply state that Islam plays an outsized public role tells us relatively little about the nature of that role. An Islam that is public need not be conservative or rigid. During the era of the great caliphates, the fact of Islam, imbuing nearly everything, was inescapable and, more importantly, unquestioned. Yet there was considerable diversity not only in terms of narrower questions of ritual and practice but also in competing, and sometimes conflicting, philosophical and metaphysical approaches to Islam.

There’s nothing intrinsically “bad” about an Islam that is public, unless, perhaps, one is a secularist who believes that all public manifestations of religion are, in principle, bad, whatever their specific content. Putting aside one’s normative preferences, however, it should be relatively uncontroversial to say that Islam’s resistance to secularization is a descriptive reality—and if it is a reality, then it must be contended with. For their part, Muslim thinkers in various works of Islamic apologetics have highlighted Islam’s political relevance as something to celebrate (Rida 2008; Qutb 1964)—and so too have some Christian thinkers, lamenting that Christianity unlike Islam has allowed itself to be defanged (Dreher 2017). Not all religions are the same, and not all religions are the same when it comes to their relationship to law, politics, and governance. This could also be said for the contrasts between Jewish and Christian approaches to public law. As the historian Michael Cook (2014, xv) notes, religions are not “putty in the hands of exegetes.” If they were, it would undermine the very fact of religious difference and diversity, with each faith tradition characterized by its own theological contentions, methodological approaches, and creedal requirements. And without religious diversity, a genuine, mutually engaged religious pluralism is simply not possible, in part because it wouldn’t be needed.

Diversity, then, may be understood as an invitation to pluralism. It is no mistake that all great religions have pluralistic precedents upon which to draw. The Christian pluralist tradition, for example, makes some of these premises more explicit. If the city of man is inherently broken and fallen from sin, this, in turn, means that politics must be acknowledged as a site of uncertainty, rather than certainty. Brokenness produces epistemological humility and a *suspension of judgment* until the return of Christ, since until then perfection is not possible. There are Islamic corollaries that receive perhaps even less attention. According to a famous prophetic hadith, for instance if a *mujtahid* (an authority in Islamic law) strives for God’s truth and is “correct,” then he receives two good deeds; if he is wrong, he still receives one reward. If the *mujtahids* disagree with one another, then only God knows which one of them is correct.

## Religion as a constant

Religion matters, as discussed earlier, but not in isolation. Ideas, beliefs, and convictions do not appear unmediated out of some unchanging essence, as if they always were and always will be. Ideas—and in this case religious ideas—emerge out of the complex interaction between doctrine and theology, on one hand, and the political context in which those ideas are given tangible expression.

In this sense, if religion and religious divides are always there to some degree but conflict varies considerably—with some periods being relatively peaceful while others are unusually violent—it means that religion, on its own, cannot explain why or when religious conflict erupts. This is why the view that religion is important in understanding conflict should not be confused with the related but distinct proposition that “ancient hatreds” drive modern conflicts. This view, which remains surprisingly common, is most often associated with Robert Kaplan’s *Balkan Ghosts*, which influenced President Bill Clinton and perhaps even delayed his decision to intervene in the Bosnian genocide.

“Here men have been doomed to hate,” Kaplan writes (1993). The word “doomed” suggests the kind of resigned pessimism that, two decades later, would characterize Washington’s hand-wringing in response to the failures of the Arab Spring. As recently as 2016, President Barack Obama in his State of the Union address remarked that violent change in the Middle East was “rooted in conflicts that date back millennia” (Obama 2016). There is a temporal problem with the ancient hatreds thesis, however, and it applies just as much to the Middle East today as it did to the Balkans in the 1990s. If there is something constant about a culture and its predisposition to violence, then how can we explain stark variations in civil conflict over short periods of time?

The challenge then is understanding the complex interaction between religious ideas and seemingly mundane political realities at the domestic, regional, and international levels. Changes in the political context on these three levels are what transform very real—and often legitimate—religious divides into something that is illegitimate, namely civil conflict and political violence.

For this reason, Nader Hashemi and Danny Postel argue for using the term *sectarianization*, which suggests an interactive process between religious and political context, rather than sectarianism with its static connotations. They define sectarianization as “an active process shaped by political actors operating within specific contexts, pursuing political goals that involve the mobilization of popular sentiments around particular identity markers” (Hashemi and Postel 2017, 3). Authoritarianism, they argue, is what drives the sectarianization process, or put differently, “sectarian conflict in the Middle East today is the perpetuation of political rule via identity mobilization” (Hashemi and Postel 2017, 3).<sup>1</sup> The rise of Islamism and Islamist movements in the 20th century is a story of religious conviction, but it is also a story of “identity mobilization.” After all, the very idea of Islamism didn’t exist until the modern era. It had to be constructed and created as a conscious political project. It didn’t have to become one before because Islam’s role in public life, as we saw earlier, was unquestioned. It went without saying, so it wasn’t said.

In this sense, rather than hearkening back to some idealized past, Islamism is better understood as not just a reaction to, but also a product of modernity. With the introduction of secular and liberal ideas during the colonial era, Islam’s place as a “hegemonic moral system” (Hallaq 2014, 11) was irrevocably undermined. If Islam was no longer the natural order of things, it had to be reaffirmed and reasserted. This is what Islamism was meant to do. It had to be mobilized as a distinct political identity, one that could only exist with its (perceived) opposite, namely secularism.

Identity mobilization is relevant not only to individuals, movements, and political parties, but also to states. We tend to assume that it is Islamist or Islamic governments that use religion to mobilize and manipulate in the service of regime survival. In practice, however, and in nearly every major Muslim-majority country, governments—including the most doggedly anti-Islamist ones—use and instrumentalize religion (see Mandaville and Hamid 2018). Some even feature it as a primary component of their foreign policy. Autocratic regimes are insulated from their populations, but only up to a point. Because Islam remains resonant, and because Muslim populations remain religiously conservative to one degree or another, to fail to promote your own brand of Islam is to leave an ideological vacuum. This is something that regimes simply cannot afford. Religion, then, is not merely a private matter for citizens to believe or practice as they so choose; it becomes a question of regime legitimacy and—in the eyes of the authorities—national security.

The elevation of regime survival as the ultimate end means that religious scholars and clerics are not merely coopted; they are often integrated outright and subsumed under the state. If governments must monitor and regulate religious knowledge and production, then the *ulama*, which in the idealized past of the Islamic tradition sought to maintain their distance from the ruler, play a much more instrumental role in legitimizing state authority and, if necessary, state violence.

### **The secular-authoritarian model**

Such points raise a difficult but vital question: Can authoritarian regimes which are, by definition, suspicious of dissent and free inquiry—bedrocks of religious freedom—be champions of religious liberty and pluralism? Can you have religious freedom without democracy? Arab governments appear to be saying that yes they can, and also that there is no other way regardless. A second, related question is whether religious pluralism can help pave the way for political pluralism. If “religion” and “politics” are inextricably intertwined, then to have freedom in one category but not the other is simply not possible. If certain religious interpretations are not strictly private but threats to the state’s religious legitimacy, then an authoritarian state will only be willing to allow religious expression that does not threaten the state.

In today’s Middle East, autocratic regimes—both panicked and emboldened by the events of the Arab Spring—are the missing variable in any explanation of how religious diversity can all too easily spill over into religious conflict, certainly tense and sometimes violent. This is not to say that religious conflict wouldn’t exist in the absence of such regimes, but rather that the causes and mechanisms of conflict in democratic contexts operate according to a different logic and with different consequences than they do under dictatorship.

Ostensibly secular authoritarian regimes have portrayed their authoritarianism to Western audiences and governments as a necessary evil in the broader effort to combat extremism and protect religious minorities. In this reading, a strong, relatively “enlightened” state, however repressive, represented the best opportunity to secure the freedom and safety of the two groups that tended to suffer under democratization—religious minorities and women. Arab leaders and officials were well aware of the secularization bias of Western interlocutors discussed above. If ordinary citizens were conservative and retrograde on things like gender equality and minority rights, then top-down, authoritarian leadership wasn’t a bug but a feature. All the reason then to be circumspect about the right of those citizens to vote in meaningful elections.

In a high profile 2015 speech, Egyptian President Abdelfattah al-Sissi called on the religious establishment to modernize its approach to Islamic sources as part of a wider “religious revolution” (Ford, Abdelaziz, and Lee 2015). He went out of his way to publicize his partnership with

the Coptic Orthodox Church, portraying himself as the protector of Egypt's Christian minority. Speaking at the opening of the Coptic Cathedral of the Nativity in January 2018, he proclaimed that the inauguration provided "a message for the whole world. A message of peace and love." He continued: "We present a model of peace and love among us. Love and peace will come out from Egypt and spread to the whole world ... Evil, havoc, ruins and murder will never defeat good" (al-Sissi 2018).

In reality, though, Sissi's tenure—measured not by rhetoric but policy and practice—tells a different story. Discrimination remains rampant, including caps on the number of Christians that can serve in the military, police, and other security agencies (Safi 2019). In one incident in February 2016, three Christian teens were sentenced to five years in prison for mocking ISIS (POMED 2016). They fled the country. The website Eshhad ("Witness") documents the full scope of attacks and discrimination against Christians and other religious minorities in Egypt (Rahooma 2016). Importantly, the database clarifies which actions are from state actors versus non-state actors. While the Egyptian government may argue that many of these incidents are out of its control, there are a striking number of incidents where state actors are implicated.<sup>2</sup>

Similarly, the United Arab Emirates' emphasis on being a model of tolerance has, perhaps counterintuitively, coincided with *increased* levels of repression. In 2016, the UAE established a Ministry of Tolerance. Sheikh Nahyan bin Mubarak Al Nahyan, the Minister of Tolerance, explained the country's mission: "We want to restore our real religion, which stems from our holy book the Quran, which believes in living together. It believes in the dignity of a human being" (Batrawy 2019). Ahead of his historic visit to the United Arab Emirates—the first ever Papal visit to the Gulf—Pope Francis described the UAE as "a country which strives to be a model for coexistence and human fraternity, a meeting point of different civilizations and cultures. A place where people find a safe place to work, live freely and where differences are respected" (Associated Press 2019).

In the case of the UAE, there are virtually no Christians who also happen to be citizens (most Emirati residents are expatriates), but religious pluralism operates *within* faiths just as much as it does between them. And there are only certain kinds of Islamic expression—those that de-emphasize political involvement and do not contest the religious authority of the state—that are permitted in the country. This is not "political Islam" in the traditional sense, but it is certainly a politicized Islam, where Islam "is tightly tied to state authority and subservient to it," as Gregory Gause notes (2017). In other words, in the UAE, Christians might enjoy some religious freedoms, at least relative to the other countries in the region, but *Muslims* do not.

In contexts like this, multifaith pluralism provides more appealing opportunities than either intra-faith or intra-sect pluralism, which may be undesirable from the standpoint of regimes. For the UAE, the primary adversary in addition to Shia-majority Iran is the Muslim Brotherhood, a Sunni movement. However, this intra-Sunni conflict has taken on a sectarian hue, with authoritarian regimes labeling the Brotherhood as outside the fold of traditional Sunni thought, treating it as a "sect" apart. The most notable example is former Egyptian Grand Mufti Ali Goma'a's characterization of Brotherhood members as *khawarij*, thereby making their blood licit and legitimizing the Rabaa killings of August 14, 2013.<sup>3</sup>

One of the region's most prominent clerics, Abdullah bin Bayyah, has been at the forefront of the UAE's regional efforts to challenge democracy, both in theory and practice, particularly if it comes about through revolution. There have long been arguments within the classical Islamic tradition not necessarily for dictatorship itself, but for obeying or resigning oneself to a despot (as long as the despot is nominally Muslim and does not prevent believers from practicing their religion). However, as scholars like David Warren have argued, "the very reason Bin Bayyah's version of Islamic autocracy enjoys the success that it currently does is because

he articulates it through decidedly modernist idioms of representation, self-governance, and accountability” (2020).

The non-Islamic analogue of this might be the Singaporean “model,” where democracy is viewed as an invitation to chaos. This, though, does not preclude consultation, accountability, and good governance, which are viewed as ends that do require the means of electoral competition. In such a context, the ruler decides who is to be consulted—and likewise who is to be excluded. If this can be described as “pluralism,” it suggests one that is narrow and fearful of difference. Difference, here, leaves open the possibility of factionalism, and factionalism entails instability.

### **Identity politics and intra-religious conflict**

In countries such as Egypt, Coptic Christians have experienced varying levels of discrimination over decades. As a vulnerable community, Christians have looked to the state as their protector, however much it failed in its role, in part because it was the *only* protector (see Brownlee 2013). Regimes, in turn, saw an advantage in playing both the role of arsonist and firefighter. The more Christians felt insecure, the more indispensable the state became. Among Christian conservatives in the United States, particularly Evangelicals, the narrative of Arab autocrats being the last line of defense for Christians has become commonplace, displacing almost entirely the neoconservative preoccupation with democracy promotion within the Republican Party.

The increased attention to Egyptian Christians both domestically and abroad reified their distinct religious identity as a group apart, and this would only intensify during periods of political turmoil. In the eyes of some Muslims, particularly those of an Islamist bent who were already suspicious of Christians, anger toward the regime was often redirected toward Christians and the influential Coptic Orthodox Church, which enjoyed close ties to successive Egyptian regimes. This, in turn, fueled Copts’ sense of insecurity, pushing them even closer to the regime’s camp. This further amplified anti-Coptic sentiment among regime opponents, and so on, creating a vicious cycle of distrust. We see a similar dynamic in Syria, where President Bashar al-Assad deftly portrayed himself as the guarantor of the Christian minority (as well as the Alawite community that he himself is part of) in the face of Islamist rebel threats. Protection of religious minorities, when cynically instrumentalized, is yet another means to the same ultimate end: The perpetuation of the regime at any and all costs.

To focus primarily on the interaction between authoritarianism and inter-religious diversity, however, is to miss a broader dynamic. Egypt is a relatively homogenous country, ethnically and religiously, with a stronger sense of “state-ness” and national identity than most of its neighbors. Christians are the largest religious minority, at an estimated 5 to 10% of the population. Nonetheless, religious tensions have remained central, not just between Muslims and Christians but paradoxically perhaps even more so among Egyptian Muslims themselves. In this regard, a deeper religious literacy can also give us insight into “internal” divides among those who supposedly are the same or believe the same things. But, in the Middle East, they don’t believe in the same things. And these divides can often be the starkest—and most violent. They fall under the rubric of religious diversity, because the disagreements revolve around existential and foundational convictions about that most unresolved of issues—who constitutes the “us” in a nation.

In Syria or Lebanon, the (sectarian) lines are clear for those who insist on seeing them: Sunnis are Sunnis and Shiites are Shiites. Christian and Druze communities are distinct, with their own representation in parliament and their own local leaders. In Egypt, however, it’s never entirely clear who is “Islamist” and who is “secular,” to say nothing of the many shades in between. Because their numbers can’t be defined, each side claims the vast majority of Egyptians as their



own. The conflict, then, isn't between fixed identities but rather fluid ideas of what the state is and what it should be.

## Conclusion

The reality of religious diversity in the Middle East—and the regular bouts of religious conflict that result from an inability to peacefully process that reality—means that secular political frameworks are no longer best equipped to manage religious diversity (if they ever were), let alone move these differences toward the mutual engagement of covenantal pluralism. Secular frameworks start from the premise that public religiosity—particularly when it has political implications for autocrats, which it almost always does—is a problem to be “solved.” In theory, this invites coercion. In practice, it has.

An insistence on secularism as the only legitimate framework for politics and society relies on a religious other, which is painted as illegitimate and a threat to order. Secularist solutions to the “problem” of public religion simply reproduce the problems in different forms. All ideas, if strongly held, are effectively faith-based, in that they rely on some “ultimate point of loyalty” (Kaemingk 2018). If this is the case, then it becomes a question of where individuals find that ultimate loyalty. The answer that some clerics, like Abdullah bin Bayyah, have offered is that the state, as represented by the ruler or rulers, requires a loyalty that borders on devotion. The inherent risk of finding such loyalty in a sovereign state or a charismatic leader is that they are of this world.

The modern Arab state has too often sought a decisive victory that flattens difference, and this presents a fatal paradigmatic flaw. Because they reflect legitimate differences beyond the scope of “normal” politics and rational deliberation, foundational divides over religion and identity cannot be undone or transcended. If such divides cannot be undone—and if one side cannot conclusively “win” and impose its preferences except through escalating force, and even then only temporarily—then pluralistic arrangements and, to some degree, the accommodation of conservative and even illiberal religious ideas is the only viable long-term option. A deeper, nuanced awareness of the nature of religious contestation—and how religious belief interacts with local political context—allows academics and practitioners alike to think more creatively about how to live with deep difference against the backdrop of longstanding religious tensions.

Underlying any such approach must be a theology of “the other”—whose presence is better seen not as a threat to God's plan but as a fulfillment of it. And here it is worth returning to the epistemological humility of the mujtahids mentioned earlier. They strove in good faith and deep humility to discern God's will, while knowing that they could only gesture at something that remained far beyond their comprehension. And so it was common practice to conclude their *fatwas*, or religious edicts, with the words *allahu a'lam*, or God only knows. It was as if they needed to remind themselves of an unequivocal principle, one that they knew could be easily forgotten.

Along similar lines, as one Quranic verse declares, “no one can know the soldiers of God except God.” The Islamic legal theorist Khaled Abou El Fadl argues that this verse is best understood as an endorsement of suspending judgment: No one can know, in this life, who is in fact God's soldier (2001). If only God knows, then we cannot know. The key notion in these neglected traditions is the suspension of judgment but, perhaps more powerfully, the *postponement* of judgment. For the believer, the judgment presumably comes, but it comes later. To postpone judgment means to accept—and perhaps engage, even embrace—deep difference as a reality of a life with clear questions but without definitive answers. This is an ethic that individuals can model in their own lives through a more proactive religious literacy, but it is also one

that can, and should, be reflected in how states and institutions structure and develop policies around pluralism.

## Notes

- 1 See also “De-sectarianization in the Middle East” ([www.tandfonline.com/toc/rfia20/18/1](http://www.tandfonline.com/toc/rfia20/18/1)), a special issue of *The Review of Faith & International Affairs* (Vol. 18, No. 1, Spring 2020).
- 2 The widely praised 2016 church construction law might have been considered the Sissi’s regime one concrete step was it not for its actual implementation. As Stephen McInerney and Amy Hawthorne (2019) note: “Under the new law, the Egyptian state has legalized just 24% of the unlicensed churches that have applied for formal approval and, remarkably, has approved the building of new churches at an even lower rate than Hosni Mubarak’s regime ... Under Sisi, tens of thousands of Christians have been left with nowhere to pray.”
- 3 As Ali Goma’a put it in a video made for the military shortly after the Rabaa dispersal: “When someone tries to divide you, then kill them ... Blessed are those who kill them, and those who are killed by them. We must cleanse our Egypt of this trash ... they reek. God is with you, and the Prophet Muhammad is with you, and the believers are with you ... [Oh God], may you destroy them.” See “Full video for the fatwa of Dr. Ali Gomaa on the permissibility of killing and carrying weapons of Kharijites which was introduced to the officers and soldiers,” [youtube.com](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u9WE_zBV-fw), posted by Dr. Ali Gomaa, August 25, 2013. [www.youtube.com/watch?v=u9WE\\_zBV-fw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u9WE_zBV-fw). See also Elmasry (2015).

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## TWO STEPS FORWARD, ONE STEP BACK

### Prospects for covenantal pluralism in Laos and Vietnam

*Stephen Bailey and Hien Vu*

This chapter provides two case studies from Southeast Asia, Laos and Vietnam, examining how the cross-cultural religious literacy skills of evaluation, negotiation, and communication can build mutual respect and mutual reliance. Using our personal experiences over the last two decades, we reflect on the process of creating a cultural context supportive of religious freedom through the prism of personal, comparative, and collaborative competencies, at the individual and institutional levels. We provide a grassroots perspective regarding the complexities of cultivating these competencies in the midst of religious and ideological actors often unwilling to recognize the value of each other's community.

We focus in particular on local examples of how people find the courage to change dispositions, learn about the religious other, and negotiate ways to live in religious pluralism. These examples suggest that the process of partnership can build a context for covenantal pluralism, helping to enable constitutional and legal frameworks and make sustainable progress on religious freedom and holistic development, resulting in resilient societies.

#### **Laos**

Laos is a small nation of well over 100 different languages and related cultures, of which the Lao people group is the largest but still only 53% (Census Results 2015). The Kingdom of Laos emerged sometime in the 13th century, and it, and its successor state, has been ruled by the Lao ever since. It was founded on “notions of legitimation from Indian religions (Hinduism and Buddhism)” (Stuart-Fox 1997, 6). Though the Lao have dominated the political and religious landscape, primarily as Buddhists, this association with Buddhism can overlook the importance of shamanism and ancestral rites for the many minority cultures and even for the Lao themselves, who have incorporated some Hindu deities and rituals. From the 12th century until the arrival of the French in the late 19th century, Laos consisted of a number of smaller mandalas or kingdoms which survived as tributaries to the larger Buddhist empires of the Khmer, Thai, and Burman.

Theravada Buddhism is the dominant form of Buddhism in Laos and the rest of Southeast Asia. It is an older, more conservative and difficult path of Buddhism than the more user-friendly Mahayana Buddhism in East Asia and the esoteric, Tantric influenced Vajrayana Buddhism of Tibet and Mongolia. It is not clear how Buddhism came to Laos but the earliest credible date for a Lao Buddhist dynasty is 1271. It was known as the Phraya (a Buddhist Pali term) Dynasty. King Fa Ngum, the founder of the Lan Xang Lao Kingdom was a hereditary prince of this dynasty (Stuart-Fox 1997, 9). From the start, Buddhism has had a symbiotic relationship with the State. It gives shape to the lunar calendar year of monthly festivals, and borrows from the Hindu cosmology to explain the world. Theravada Buddhism and the older Indigenous beliefs of the Lao and minority peoples of the land are tightly woven together yet serve separate ritual purposes. Buddhist rituals focus on making merit and funerals while Indigenous rituals tend to focus on fertility, healing and blessing one's life force or *khwan* (ຂວັນ).

Though Catholic priests had ventured into Laos as early as the 17th century, significant missionary efforts did not emerge until the arrival of the French in the late 19th century. The French dominated Lao politics and protected Catholic efforts from 1893 until the declaration of an independent Laos in 1945 (Stuart-Fox 1997, 6). Islam came to Laos by means of refugees and businessmen from Pakistan in 1883. Protestant missionaries arrived in 1902 in the south, and 1929 in the north under the protection of the French even though they were initially forbidden from leaving the administrative town of Luang Prabang (the ancient capital of Laos). A Bahai missionary arrived in 1950.<sup>1</sup> While these religious minorities have prompted a government discussion on religious pluralism, none of them make up even 1% of the population.<sup>2</sup>

When the Lao People's Revolutionary Party came to power in 1975, it brought an ideology that explained religion as an unscientific superstition that served to enslave people. Yet, for nearly a thousand years, Buddhism has been central to the identity of ethnic Lao—who also happen to make up most of the Communist Party's membership. Even so, from 1975 to 1989, the Party repressed all religions, including Buddhism. After new policies opened the country a bit in the early 1990s, the Protestant churches began to grow quickly. This growth resulted in severe persecution against mostly rural, ethnic minority pastors and churches. Several pastors lost their lives or disappeared.<sup>3</sup> By the year 2000, however, Laos began working to find a place in the international community. Not surprisingly, religious freedom and human rights were a frequent point of dialogue between the Lao government and representatives of donor nations and international organizations such as the UN (see for example Jahangir 2005).

This *Handbook* defines covenantal pluralism as seeking “a constitutional framework of equal rights and responsibilities for all citizens under the rule of law, as well as a supportive *cultural* context, of which religion is often a significant factor.” Anyone who pursues this goal quickly learns that the latter part is often more difficult to achieve than the former. Most countries in Asia today have constitutional guarantees of the right to believe in religion and laws and policies shaped to protect religious activities.<sup>4</sup> Yet, too often the *cultural context* required is not only missing, but so too is a plan for cultivating such a context.

This *Handbook* also identifies cross-cultural religious literacy (CCRL) as a set of competencies and skills that are vital to the process of cultivating a socio-political environment of covenantal pluralism. The CCRL concept stresses three competencies in particular—knowledge of self, knowledge of the other, and knowledge of cross-cultural collaborative contexts and dynamics. Below I (Stephen Bailey) reflect on nearly two decades of promoting religious freedom in the Lao PDR. I will narrate in terms of personal, comparative, and collaborative competencies, and how Laos has been steadily moving towards a covenantal pluralism. Given that Laos is listed as a “Tier 2” nation by the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, this progress may come as a surprise. Some might want to point to the periodic problems of

persecution of religion in Laos (USCIRF 2019). Yet, to cultivate cultural contexts for covenant pluralism requires evaluation based not on a snapshot of a context's failures, but on a panoramic view that measures change over time, recognizing that the momentum and direction of Laos is moving towards a shared religious landscape shaped by peace and mutual respect.

### ***Personal competency***

Catherine Cornille (2008, 3) has observed that, “the main obstacle for dialogue lies not so much outside as within religious traditions.” One might extend this observation and suggest that the obstacles are also internal to each human being. Peacebuilding workshops are an attempt to build a set of shared dispositions of virtue. These virtues include *humility* to accept that none of us has all the truth; *commitment* to our own faith communities; the belief in the *inter-connection* of all humans; *empathy* for the experience and history of other groups, and *generosity* for what others know and experience religiously. No one has all these virtues, but they can be learned and nurtured along the way if we—i.e., each of us—are open to it. Being open to inward change is a formidable request since it inevitably “challenges traditional religious self-understanding” (Cornille 2008, 211).

In 2012, the Lao Front for National Development (LFND) developed a peacebuilding team of trainers made up of representatives from each officially recognized religion. Over the past eight years this team has conducted more than 30, one-week workshops for government and religious leaders. One of the most significant outcomes has been leaders recognizing that respect for their own identity is tied to accepting and respecting the identity of others, even when they have very little in common.

The team guides these leaders through definitions of identity, diversity, respect, and conflict. At this stage, leaders are mostly reflecting cognitively. But then the leaders begin to get in touch with the vulnerable emotional edges of these concepts through role play. As they do so, the door opens for confronting deeply held prejudice; in some cases, prejudices directed at the identity of the person they are working with cooperatively at their activity table. In these moments, leaders are given an opportunity to visit themselves in the other. It is soul bearing work that takes courage. In stepping out of learned prejudice towards respect for the other, one can feel like *s/he* has left shore; that *s/he* is abandoning their own kin. With time, and activities designed to focus this experience reflectively, leaders are given the chance to, as they would put it, “turn our faces towards one another” (*uaynakan ອ້ວຍໜ້າກັນ*).

In one peacebuilding workshop, a small group of government and religious leaders were doing a role play about persecution in a rural village. The idea was to practice ways of advising villagers from different religious communities in ways that would lead to reconciliation and peace. A Christian woman had chosen to role play her experience of being the only Christian in a family that was so offended by her Protestant faith that they threw her out of her own home and stopped supporting her education. In the role play she was sitting with Buddhist elders and a government leader of the village seeking their counsel. As she recounted the situation, she began to relive it and tears began to roll down her cheeks as she spoke. The others in the role play were also moved and together they gently gave wise counsel, urging her to not give up, to continue to respect her parents while maintaining her beliefs. They told her that if she followed this path, she would eventually win their hearts and support as their dutiful daughter.

Suddenly, several religious minority leaders who were watching broke up the role play with complaints that while this sounded good, it was not what would really happen in a village. They had all suffered persecution in similar situations. An awkward silence followed. Not knowing what to do I suggested we break for tea and coffee. During the break I sought

out the frustrated religious leaders and asked to talk with them privately. The emotion of the moment was still on their faces. I began by acknowledging the reality of their experiences. I knew firsthand that many of them had suffered unjust religious persecution. After a moment of silence, I asked them if they felt they could put it behind them. I confessed that I had no right to make this request, but might they be willing to believe that the officials that we were working with that day might be beginning to learn about the experiences of religious minorities, and that this might begin to reshape their relationship? It was a risk to believe this, emotionally and in terms of their safety. Only they could decide. Initially, no one replied. Then, they took a collective deep breath, realized that there really was only one path forward; a path that moved them toward, not away from, their enemy. Inner transformation requires risking a change in the status quo that may cost us our anger and require the courage to keep the past out of the future.

### ***Comparative competency***

As in most religious communities, Lao Buddhists and Indigenous religious people can explain *how to practice* their religion and about their *religious experiences* but few can say much about their “*own moral, epistemological, and spiritual framework*,” as Seiple and Hoover put it in Chapter 1. One would need to talk to a Buddhist monk or an Indigenous shaman to find answers to these issues. I have conducted multi-faith workshops for Lao Buddhists and Christians who work in the same office. In doing so, I often share basic information about Buddhist and Christian teaching, pointing out their very similar ethic, the common and different ways each explains human suffering, and their very different ideas about the cosmos. I began by assuming Christians needed to know about Buddhism and Buddhists about Christianity. While that assumption was correct, it was just as true that Buddhists needed information about Buddhism and Christians about Christianity.

The LFND and the Ministry of Home Affairs (MOHA) have conducted Seminars on Religious Affairs all over the country since 2010.<sup>5</sup> It is incredibly important work in combating religious illiteracy. These seminars have underscored how little government and religious leaders—who are the key stakeholders in religious pluralism—actually know about the teachings of the official religions, or about Lao law and policy on religious activities. This lack of mutual understanding results from the fact that opportunities to engage other religions and learn the law and policies protecting religion are nearly absent outside these seminars.

At each seminar, for example, representatives of MOHA surprise many officials in rural areas with the news that the religious minority groups are all legally recognized by the government. The shock continues when they are told that the Lao PDR does not officially sponsor any religion, including Buddhism. This non-endorsement is why, unlike Thailand, there are no Buddhist images or rituals done on state properties, including schools and hospitals. Next, representatives of each religion explain their religion’s history, beliefs, practices, and important rituals and celebrations. The delegates are then given a chance to ask questions and discuss the relationship between religions and between religious communities and the government. Nearly every single religious leader I have interviewed (dozens) eagerly affirms the importance of these events and shares how they are *changing the cultural context*.

In some cases, delegates are so shocked by what they learn that they become angry and argue with MOHA representatives from Vientiane (the capital of Laos). In other cases, leaders feel relieved and in two incidents leaders have publicly apologized for making life difficult for religious minorities. Understanding the importance of certain religious beliefs and sacred practices helps us all understand our neighbors’ behavior better. But understanding the religious why of

someone's behavior does not yet tell us *how to live in the midst of religious difference*. This next step requires the ability to negotiate pathways for community life across cultures.

### ***Collaborative competency***

The challenges of different religious communities in the same village have never been easy in Laos. One reoccurring challenge has been dealing with the different beliefs and practices related to funerals. Buddhists always cremate and have elaborate rituals led by a monk to guide the spirit of the deceased out of the home and village they once resided in. A failure to perform these ceremonies correctly can result in the spirit of the deceased remaining in the area as a wandering ghost or *phi* (ผี) making local villagers ill. So, what is to be done when someone from a Protestant home dies in a largely Buddhist village? Protestants will only bury their dead and they do not share Buddhist sensitivities for how to take a body from a home to the burial ground. Misunderstandings and lack of sensitivity to these differences have caused numerous but largely avoidable conflicts.

Another reoccurring cross-cultural issue is the propitiation of local guardian spirits. Buddhist and Indigenous religious people regularly propitiate guardian spirits of homes, villages, and temples. In the case of a ceremony celebrating the guardian spirit of a village, the whole village shuts down and no one is allowed to enter or leave. Villagers believe that if some members of the village do not participate in these celebrations, the spirit will be angry and punish them with bad crops or illness. So, what are Christians and Muslims who both adhere to exclusive worship of their Creator God to do?

A third area of misunderstanding relates to the conflict between modern medicine and religious and traditional healers. Here Buddhists and Christians sometimes find themselves at odds with government officials. The government takes a strictly scientific view of illness and health. It understands claims that a monk or a pastor can chant or pray for the sick who are then healed as nothing more than superstition. But the general population regularly seeks out healers and often sees modern medicine as a last resort. In some cases, monks and local Christian leaders have been accused of teaching people to avoid hospitals. Yet in most cases, while these religious leaders do perform chants and prayers to heal the ill, they also encourage people to seek modern medical help.

These, and other issues, are ongoing conversations between leaders of different religions and the government; conversations that now have a regular venue to take place. Leaders have so far avoided uniform solutions but instead have encouraged local leaders to work out acceptable solutions that satisfy everyone as much as possible. Local solutions are important because nearly every local area in Laos is made up of different ethnic-linguistic groups and often different religious communities. In one case, a Christian agreed to cremate her mother and have a pastor officiate and pray over the area in such a way that local Buddhists were satisfied that the spirit had moved on. In another case, Buddhists agreed to allow Christians to take the body of the deceased out to their cemetery as long as they took the body out and around the village rather than pass through the village. In some places Christians have agreed to help prepare food for the celebration of the guardian spirit but did not participate in the celebration.

Life in religiously plural communities almost always requires us to learn new ways of following our respective traditions, and sometimes to compromise for the sake of peaceful coexistence. Some religious traditions can be changed or adjusted but being aware of the fault lines across which religious adherents cannot compromise is important.

In the course of gathering for seminars and peacebuilding workshops, government and religious leaders have created a whole new culture of mutual respect and understanding. In fact,



many new friendships are being made. At the end of one meeting with the LFND peacebuilding team, I finished by saying that we would all meet again in six months. But I was corrected by a Baha'i leader who explained that the multi-faith team of leaders often meet for coffee in between official meetings. Not long ago these same leaders would have refused to discuss anything with each other.

Laos' journey towards covenantal pluralism instructs us that knowing the religious beliefs and practices of other religions must be coupled with a movement toward one another. This movement entails inner transformation. Moving towards the religious other communicates that we recognize that our freedom to protect and practice what is sacred to us is tied up in the freedoms and well-being of what our neighbors hold to be sacred. This journey is not for those who are determined not to change. It will challenge and expand our vision of ourselves and ask us to accept and respect our neighbors who may fundamentally disagree with our most cherished beliefs. The path is checkered with instinctive human responses of fear, denial, and rejection. Religious persecution is unlikely to disappear overnight as people process the challenges that the claims and identities of others pose for themselves. Nevertheless, moving into covenantal pluralism offers the reward of finding a commonality that argues for mutual care and understanding that will enrich our lives.

If we are to live in religiously diverse communities in covenant relationships, we will all need to enter into relational experiences that challenge and expand our sense of what we "know" religiously. It will take a deep pedagogical experience with a curriculum that takes us into each other's sacred cognitive, symbolic, and emotional worlds. We will need a curriculum that will ask us to leave our religious homes while remaining committed to them. The journey will change us. What we are likely to fear most about negotiating coexistence with the religious other is that in allowing ourselves to change, we will surrender our religious selves. The surprise will be that rather than losing religious convictions we will visit ourselves in the other. The truth is that any religion worth being committed to must have the humility, empathy, and generosity to live in covenant with those who are not like ourselves. A Lao Protestant pastor shared her own journey of transformation with the interfaith peacebuilding team she works with this way:

Before we began working together, I would have seen no reason to have even bothered to talk to people of other faiths, but now you are all my friends, and this has changed the way I think about my own faith.

## Vietnam

One of the most common questions I (Hien Vu) have been asked by Vietnamese and American friends about my work for the Institute for Global Engagement (IGE) promoting religious freedom in Vietnam is this: *Why* would IGE, a faith-based NGO, be welcomed in Vietnam, officially an atheistic communist state, to discuss the sensitive and complicated topic of religion? The answer lies in how the organization approaches the interrelated issues of religion and governance—with each and all of the relevant parties—always seeking to provide sustainable solutions that ease the tensions between the government and religious groups.

IGE has a holistic vision of sustainable freedom of religion and belief for all—a vision very similar to the philosophy of covenantal pluralism outlined by Stewart, Seiple, and Hoover in Chapter 2 of this *Handbook*. IGE works toward this vision through an engaged form of religious literacy in its relationship-building and problem-solving with all parties. The characteristics of this process are in fact similar to those that have been so powerful in the case of Laos (as described above by my co-author Stephen Bailey). Cultivation and expression of common

virtues, investing substantial and recurring time together, demonstrating reciprocal hospitality, sharing educational experiences together, identifying and working together on common practical goals, developing sincere friendships and alliances across different religious and ideological boundaries—these and more are all part of a positive and self-reinforcing cycle, one that depends on religious literacy and builds toward a covenantal pluralist future where all have a stake.

In this section I will first provide a brief overview of the historical background to Vietnam's religious dynamics and the policies and practices of the Vietnamese government on religion. This context situates Vietnam's challenges regarding religious conflict and religious freedom, while highlighting the ongoing need for continued progress toward covenantal pluralism in Vietnam. I will then describe in more detail the philosophy and strategy that IGE has employed since 2003 to come alongside its partners in Vietnam to help them meet these challenges.

### ***Religion, culture, and politics in Vietnam: A primer***

Despite the country's officially communist identity, many Vietnamese people are very attracted to spirituality. The forms of this spirituality have been very diverse. For example, one research report states, "Despite official disapproval of superstitious practices, most Vietnamese, regardless of their professed religion, level of education, or ideology, were influenced at one time or another by such practices as astrology, geomancy, and sorcery" (Facts and Details n.d.). Moreover, throughout its history, there have not been large-scale violent conflicts regarding religion in Vietnam.

However, the country has a record of tensions between government and religion and belief. Ruling governments have sometimes explicitly used one religion to consolidate their power and/or tried to diminish one or all religions and beliefs. A quick look at government-religion relations through the development of the country will help us understand the religion and culture of the Vietnamese people today.

Vietnam was under Chinese rule for 1,000 years. There are not many documents about government-religion relations during this time. However, Vietnamese culture and belief traditions have been heavily influenced by the Chinese. Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism are the main beliefs of the Vietnamese people. These three beliefs were so popular, and similar, that they were grouped together as "*Tam giáo*," or "three religions." Most Vietnamese today are in this "three religions" group. The era of Vietnamese dynasties also made a vast contribution to the establishment of the belief system of the Vietnamese people. Most of the dynasties practiced *Tam giáo*. Minh Mang, who reigned from 1802–1820, and was known for being a strict Confucian and anti-Western emperor, severely persecuted French Christian missionaries because he was concerned that the French used Catholicism to replace Vietnamese culture and as a tool to invade Vietnam. Minh Mang separated the Catholics from the rest of the Vietnamese people. He called Catholics *giáo* meaning "religious" and non-Catholics *lương* meaning "conscience." The word *giáo* was also understood as "cults or thieves" due to the social norm of opposition to Western invasion associated with Catholicism.

The French colonized Vietnam officially from 1887–1954. Catholic missionaries had more opportunities to evangelize but did not actually receive as much support from the French colony as the Vietnamese Communist Party perceived. The Catholics did make some significant contributions to Vietnamese culture: For example, latinizing the Vietnamese language (from Chinese characters) and building many beautiful church buildings throughout the country. (Catholics are 10% of the population today.) However, most Vietnamese people still kept their *Tam giáo* throughout the nearly 70 years of the French colony.

With the Communists' ascension to power in the North of Vietnam in 1945, Vietnam's founding father, Ho Chi Minh, encouraged the unity between *giáo* and *lương* citizens. However, the Catholics did not trust him, and migrated south when they had the opportunity with the 1954 division of the country into North and South. This big migration still poses a huge question, and undergirds tension, between the Communist government and the Catholic population in Vietnam.

When the Southern government was backed up by the US, the religious picture in Vietnam was altered by the growth of Protestants in the South and in the Central Highlands where American troops stationed during the 1960s and early 1970s. Protestant missionaries first came to Vietnam in 1910, to the central region's Da Nang, but only grew in the south during the Vietnam-US war, in part due to the large number of Protestant missionaries present. After the war, Protestantism grew rapidly in the 1980s through the radio evangelism of ethnic minorities in the mountainous Northwest and Central Highlands. The Communist government concluded that the Protestants were there to support the American invasion of, and later influence in, Vietnam.

Since Vietnam's reunification in 1975 the country has been governed by a Communist and Socialist ideology, which views all religions and religious beliefs as superstition, not to mention a political threat. One of the first things the Communist government did in the south was to send those "pro-American southern citizens," including religious leaders, to re-education camps. Many religious leaders were detained in re-education camps with the officials of the previous southern government. Foreign missionaries were kicked out of the country or detained. All faith-based charities, domestic and international, were closed down. All religions and belief practices including *Tam giáo* were restricted. Most of the worshiping shrines, temples, and churches were demolished by the Communist government, under the political view of Marxism's extreme secularism.

This mindset of "religion is a threat to culture and country" continued through the mid-1990s, as established religions faced severe restriction and persecution. Professor Do Quang Hung, a historian and a prominent religious studies scholar in Hanoi, wrote: "We can say, during the thousands of years in our nation's history, there has never been any government that was influenced by secularism to the extreme, underestimating religion to the abnormality, like the one during almost half century, 1945–1990" (Do Quang Hung 2016, 440). But as much as some Vietnamese officials tried, they could not eliminate religion from society.

Thanks to the Renovation (*Đổi Mới*) policies introduced in 1986, this mindset began to change. These policies sought to take Vietnam out of poverty and toward economic development and global integration, as a responsible member of the United Nations. This approach, albeit slow, created the context through which Vietnam would join international treaties, while beginning to upgrade its policies and rule of law to international standards—including those for religious freedom and human rights.

Today, while the constitution and law on religion ostensibly protect religious freedom rights, people of faith still face challenges. Rural area officials do not always properly implement the constitution and laws. In fact, the government's unfair treatment of minority religious groups is obvious: *Tam giáo* including Buddhism, ancestor worship, and folk beliefs tend to get favors in land distribution or purchase. Religious minorities do not have as many land rights, do not get the same access to education, and their legal religious registration requests are often rejected. Meanwhile, the court system serves first the interest of the Party and the government, so the judiciary process does not usually help those mistreated. High ranking government officials claim to have no religion as a requirement to join the Communist Party, but they signal their allegiance to the majority by participating in Buddhist rituals and celebrations.

The center of the problem of government–religion relations is power competition between the majority Vietnamese–Buddhist–Atheists and the minority ethnic–religious groups. Both groups have a negative and doubtful mindset toward the other. The Communist government makes policies to first protect the communist political system. They do not necessarily fear religion, but they fear the capacity of religion to organize (against them). As a result, government officials tend to perceive people of established religions as a long–term threat to the party’s legitimacy and existence. In rural areas, established faith groups and their new converts often face discrimination by local authorities. These religious groups attract “monitoring and administering” from the government. To some extent, they are viewed as being easily lured by “hostile forces”—a very general and ambiguous term that implicitly means “to fight against the Communist Party and government.”

For example, Catholicism and Protestantism face more restrictions due to their historical association with Western colonists. These two religions are often viewed as “foreign and imported” faiths which destroy Vietnamese culture and tradition. Of course, this perception comes with a certain irony as the mainstream belief system of Vietnamese people, *Tam giáo*, comes from China, the longest imperialist invader in the history of Vietnam. This irony, however, is likely lost on most Vietnamese because *Tam giáo* has been rooted in the Vietnamese culture for so long, and because most government officials and Communist Party members practice it! As a result, faith communities outside of *Tam giáo* feel excluded and rejected by their own government due to their “difference” and religious practice.

### ***IGE’s relational diplomacy through cross-cultural religious literacy***

The above sketch highlights a major challenge facing Vietnam today: The country has religious diversity, but it does not yet have *pluralism* in its fullest (covenantal) sense. The distinction between mere diversity and robust, relational pluralism is foundational for IGE’s philosophy of engagement. And it’s a distinction that is beginning to receive wider recognition in public discussion of “diversity.” At Study.com (n.d.), for instance, the distinction is described as follows:

Diversity is simply the existence of multiple cultures alongside one another; pluralism takes diversity a step further, describing the sense of engagement and community between each of these cultures. . . . In a pluralist society, many different cultures exist alongside one another, maintaining their separate identities while working together and working equally to define their society’s culture.

IGE promotes religious freedom in Vietnam with a peacebuilding methodology that allows it to convene all parties to talk about the issues, and how to tackle them, *together*. This approach requires, first and foremost, acceptance by stakeholders, mutual trust, and consistent engagement. From its early stages, IGE founder Robert Seiple, and long-time President Chris Seiple, led the organization with this motto: *Respect, reconciliation, and religious freedom*. This motto itself conveys IGE’s commitment to take solid steps with the understanding that religious freedom progress doesn’t happen overnight. The engagement process starts with another axiom: *First understand then engage*. This step begins a shrewd strategy that is transparent and cooperative, seeking win-win solutions.

The primary means IGE uses to carry out the strategy is academic training, which is safe for the Communist Party and government. This approach is augmented by people-to-people relations that IGE helps facilitate due to the trust that both the US and Vietnamese governments have in IGE.

IGE has been engaging Vietnamese government and faith groups on promoting religious freedom in Vietnam through convening all stakeholders for education and relationship-building since 2003. These efforts, though not formally named as such, have been the practice of cross-cultural religious literacy toward covenantal pluralism. Through academic training of government officials and faith leaders, IGE and its local partners provide knowledge about theology and religious practices of the main religious groups, while exploring the positive contribution that people of faith often make—if they are given the freedom to do good according to their religious teachings. These discussions are rooted in a rule of law context that further examines the risk of religious retractions and unequal treatment, as well as the risk of not having religious freedom written into the country's law and constitution (in accordance with international standards). These programs also make time for all participants to visit different religious sites at the training locations. During these visits, many government officials and religious leaders, living in the host town, share that such discussions and local visits of religious sites are their first.

The distinctively relational character of IGE's religious freedom diplomacy has four characteristic contrasts:

### ***Process-focused not products-focused***

For many years IGE has facilitated formal training and education programs in Vietnam. While the academic content of these programs is important and much-needed, equally if not more important is the relationship-building and trust-building that happens during the process. IGE's yearly training programs provide opportunities for government officials and faith leaders to talk and to listen to each other, to build trust, and to maintain communication with each other.

The ongoing process results in changed mindsets about the other, as well as improved policy making and policy implementation at local levels. Mindsets about religion change from negative to positive; policies change from restriction to recognition (of the spiritual needs of citizens); and laws change from the prohibition of having faith or converting to another faith, to protecting and promoting the contributions of faith communities to society. This approach becomes sustainable as a network of emerging scholars, policy makers, government officials, and faith leaders own the process of making religious freedom progress for them, for their own family, for their faith group, and their own citizens.

In other words, IGE shares its vision, motivation, and good intentions with local partners (at their invitation), then gets feedback from them, as they and IGE craft a plan of action to tackle issues together, based on common interests, mutual respect, and win-win solutions. IGE understands that when it invests time in the process that respects presence and involvement of all stakeholders, it will gain trust and friendship. At the end of the day, the relationship begins and ends with trust.

### ***Practical not ideological***

The training programs that IGE provides in Vietnam—often in partnership with the International Center for Religion & Law Studies at Brigham Young University—are new and practical to the needs on the ground. The knowledge, pedagogy, methodology, and materials of the training are valuable and appreciated by local partners, as the country is generally lacking in religious literacy and research. Indeed, the long-time restrictions on religion have created a tremendous lack of religious scholarship. Religion-related printing and imports from other countries were also subject to government's strict censorship.

Scholars, government officials, and faith leaders need educational concepts, materials, case studies, and comparative models (to include lessons learned) from other countries, so that they themselves can draw their own lessons. IGE brings religion education to Vietnam and gives key partners firsthand experience of religious freedom environments in other countries, including the US. One of IGE's partners, a former director of the Institute for Religious Studies at the Vietnamese Academy of Social Sciences, once told IGE: "IGE opened windows for us to reach out to the world."

Different ideologies can create distance between people. Practical ideas can bring them together.

### ***Relational not rationalistic***

IGE builds and nurtures relationships by listening to all stakeholders and understanding their position, expressing clearly its response, and suggesting win-win solutions for consideration. That said, there are two informal rules of thumb about building trusted relationships in Vietnamese culture that IGE observes carefully as it promotes religious freedom in the country. First, trust takes a long time to build and the building process must be in-person, not from distance. Second, trusted friends don't cause their friends to lose face (especially through the criticism of the other's country). IGE keeps these rules in every conversation, every dialogue, informal and formal, about either positive developments on religious freedom or negative reports about religious harassments, with its partners.

In a relationship-based culture, a strictly "rational" accounting of problems and assigning of blame can make people feel manipulated, attacked, and shut down. Relational diplomacy brings forth trust, practical solutions, and peacebuilding, because they are developed together.

### ***Consistent not opportunistic***

IGE has visited and conducted training events in Vietnam at least twice a year over the past 14 years. Training at central and local levels includes religion and the rule of law, the positive role of religion in holistic development, and religion and peacebuilding. IGE also organizes and/or takes part in making arrangements for religious freedom study tours between the US and Vietnam. Its programs are always deepening and expanding. In addition, IGE maintains a hotline with related agencies in Vietnam. It makes itself available for timely consultation, as needed, on religious freedom policies, religious harassment reports, and US-Vietnam relations to government and non-government organizations in both countries.

Presenting the organization as a Christian non-government organization, autonomous and assertive, IGE remains consistent and constructive as it convenes people to make religious freedom progress and reduce tension between government and religious groups. Its programs are culturally owned, politically accepted, and respectfully partnered. IGE's constancy and reliability are key reasons it keeps getting invited back to do still more innovative programs in Vietnam.

### ***Progress toward pluralism***

Significant gaps remain between official religious freedom policy and actual implementation at all levels in Vietnam, and there continue to be significant needs for research and educational resources in Vietnam on religion and religious freedom. Nonetheless, Vietnam has made significant progress, and IGE has been privileged to play a part in it. Dr. Hoang Van Chung, who heads the Theories and Policy Department at the Institute for Religious Studies in Hanoi, said: "IGE

helps to raise public awareness of significance and importance of the right to religious freedom, which is very much important to the development of a nation which is sustainable.” When asked to send a message to the financial donors of IGE, he said: “You are helping not just IGE, but you are helping Vietnam to shape its future and secure its future as well” (IGE 2018).

At an alumni meeting of IGE’s Religion and Rule of Law (RROL) training programs in 2018, one government official working on religious affairs in Central Highlands said:

When I first worked on religious affairs I thought people of faith is crazy. After years working with them, I changed my thinking about them, positively. It hit me, one day, with the thought that I’m becoming like people of faith. Now I think I’m crazy like them ... Let me tell you this: religion can be contagious, I mean, the good way. It can change you to be better. Training programs like this contributes and confirms this changing process. We need this kind of training (RROL) at all localities in the country. (IGE 2018)

One of the participants told me this government official used to be a hardliner at public security, the government agency that has the power to restrict religious practice in the name of “public order” and “national security.” He has changed a lot (positively) after years working with people of faith because he now believes religion can motivate people to do good.

Transformational stories like this one bring hope to those who believe and put efforts in applying cross-cultural religious literacy toward a future of covenantal pluralism for all. The process, as presented above, requires people of faith and no faith to be good neighbors. This doesn’t necessarily come naturally or easily, especially in contemporary conditions of globalization. As John Witte and Johan Van der Vyver (1996, 514) foresaw, “the world is increasingly interconnected and interdependent as well as differentiated and pluralistic, and is known to be such, in its media, its international organizations, its politics, its economy, its technology and its awareness of a common ecological destiny” (John Witte, Jr. and Johan DVan derVyver, 514). But the long-term results are worth the investment. People of faith learn about their own faith, and learn about showing respect to other faiths and about engaging their own government about their religious rights. Government officials and policy makers see the benefits of including people of faith in decision making when it comes religion-related matters. And capacity is built for faith leaders to participate in academic settings and public policy discussions such that there is a stronger faith representation in these fields.

## **Conclusion**

In both countries, colonialism, war, the religious legitimization of power, foreign missionary proselytism, and scientific materialism have worked together for decades as the justification for communist oppression of religion. Almost a half century after the rise to power of the communist parties in Laos and Vietnam, the two governments appear more traditionally Asian than communist in polity. Both countries have growing free-market economies overseen by paternalistic authoritarian governments that demand unity and forbid open dissent. Open criticism is dishonoring and a lack of respect for leadership at any level of these societies often brings swift rebuke and isolation. But these traditional patterns, while still in play, are being influenced by globalization. The ease of communication and access to information in and outside these countries is opening up a growing number of new indirect means of giving feedback. Public discussion—of an Asian sort—is thriving in these indirect channels. And through these channels, mindsets of negative prejudices and caution on religion have been slowly changing to accept-

ance of spiritual needs of people, recognition of the positive role of religion in developing moral standards, and interest in creating policies supportive of religious contributions to the country's stability and prosperity.<sup>6</sup>

The experience of diversity in a globalized world is challenging the narrative that there is only one way to be Lao (Buddhist) and Vietnamese (*Tam giáo* or three religions). Minority religions in both countries are making their case for proudly claiming their Lao and Vietnamese identity via other minority religions. There is much at stake in this discussion about the possibilities for covenant pluralism. If a respectful and peaceable plurality can be accepted in religion, what does this suggest for other spheres of social life? The stories of Laos and Vietnam's courage in wading into these conversational waters and the implications they carry for living in plurality generally should speak to us all. Not only is religious freedom the first freedom, but the accomplishment of a peaceable and mutually respectful covenant pluralism should point the way forward for often contentious global conversations about what counts as a legitimate identity. Religious covenant plurality can teach us the principles for peaceably and respectfully living with and for others whatever the differences. The process might take longer than we expect, but it is worth it to invest in building a foundation for sustainable freedom.

## Notes

- 1 The Lao PDR officially recognizes Buddhism, Christianity (Catholic Church, Lao Evangelical Church, and 7th Day Adventist Church), Baha'i, and Islam (LFND 2015).
- 2 Rough estimates of the numbers of religious minority groups are as follows: Catholics 50,000–60,000; Protestants 150,000; Bahai 1,300; and Muslims 1,000 (Bailey 2019; LFND 2015).
- 3 In the late 1980s new Party policies began to allow for foreign investment and partnerships with foreign development organizations. This created enough freedom for the re-emergence of religious activity. Most notable was the resurgence of Buddhism and the growth of Protestant communities. The Lao government and Party allowed the renovation of Buddhist temples and the return of community ritual life at the temples. At the same time, it took drastic measures to slow the spread of Protestantism. Churches were closed, pastors arrested and some were given long sentences; tribal Protestants were forced off their land and forced to sign statements denouncing Christianity as a tool of the “enemy” (a reference to America). A few pastors lost their lives. The different responses to these two religious communities was due in part to the fact that most Protestants were from tribal minorities and some of them had fought alongside the Americans during the war that led to liberation and founding of the Lao PDR.
- 4 For a survey of Asian laws and policies related to religious freedom see Bailey and Autry 2013. See also the special theme issue of *The Review of Faith & International Affairs* on “Religion, Law, and Society in Southeast Asia” (*The Review of Faith & International Affairs* 2016).
- 5 At the end of 2019 MOHA had conducted 57 three-day seminars in 15 of the 16 provinces of Laos for more than 4,300 government and religious leaders. Many of these seminars were conducted in districts where there has been significant religious persecution in the past.
- 6 For further discussion of engagement of Vietnam and Laos, see Vu, Bailey, and Chen 2016.

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# CROSS-CULTURAL RELIGIOUS LITERACY, COMPETENCIES, AND SKILLS

An Indonesian experience

*Matius Ho*

Covenantal pluralism, as defined in the Introduction by Chris Seiple and Dennis R. Hoover, has been the foundation of Indonesia since its inception, even before the nation's independence on August 17, 1945. Although 87% (Pew Research Center n.d.) of its 267 million (World Bank n.d.) people are Muslims, Indonesia does not have a state religion and remains as one of the world's most religiously diverse countries (Johnson and Grim 2013, 103). Indonesia is the world's largest Muslim majority country and third biggest democracy.

These statements are not accidental. One moment, in particular, illustrates the intentional connection between the past and the present, i.e., the strong desire for unity. On October 28, 1928, the Youth Congress in Batavia (now Jakarta) laid the foundation for the independence of the unity-in-diversity nation of Indonesia. Up to that point in time, with the exception of the Indonesian Association (“Perhimpunan Indonesia”) in the Netherlands, another youth movement, the name “Indonesia” was largely unknown. For centuries the archipelago that later became modern Indonesia had been referred to as the Dutch East Indies. However, the youth leaders in the 1928 Congress not only took up the word “Indonesia” in their meetings, but in fact used the name in their joint declaration that is now known as the Youth Pledge. The declaration said: We are one nation, the nation of Indonesia. We have one homeland, the homeland of Indonesia. We uphold our language of unity, the Indonesian language.

But why is it relevant to the concept of covenantal pluralism? Because the youth leaders did not just come as individuals. They represented a diverse group of well-established ethnic and religious youth organizations. There were Islamic Youth, Javanese Youth, Sumatran Youth, Ambonese Youth, and many others in that congress. Any of us who has been in a meeting trying to unite a diverse group with a single identity, especially when it comes to ethnicity, race, and religion, knows how hard it is to fashion common understanding, let alone common purpose. But these youth leaders agreed on one uniting identity: Indonesia. It took humility from each of the leaders to accept the fact that their shared objective was higher than their individual objectives and therefore required them to bind themselves together in a new identity to be able to achieve it. Without empathy, they would not have been able to accept one another. Without a tremendous sense of responsibility, persistence, and especially patience, we would not have seen

many of them actually become the founders of Indonesia 17 years later in 1945. The Youth Congress in 1928 was a miniature example of covenantal pluralism with its characteristics as described by Seiple and Hoover.

Pancasila, the state philosophy of Indonesia, is another example that illustrates the covenantal pluralism concept. The first principle of Pancasila—the Sanskrit word for “Five Principles”—is the belief in One and Only God (though its literal translation is closer to “One Lordship”). It is enshrined in the Preamble of the 1945 Constitution, which was ratified on August 18, 1945. The initial draft of the first principle of Pancasila ended with the phrase “with the obligation to practice Islamic shariah for its adherents.” Before the ratification, there came an objection from the non-Muslims in Indonesia. Let us pause for a second and note that even at that time Islam was already the majority religion in Indonesia. Most of the Constitution’s framers, even those who later became the first President and Vice President of Indonesia, Soekarno and Mohammad Hatta, were Muslims. They could have proceeded with the original draft with the “shariah phrase.” Instead, they all agreed to drop the phrase, so that the non-Muslims would have no reservations to join the newly born nation. Like the Youth Congress in 1928, it took humility, patience, and empathy for the framers of the Constitution to embrace that decision. All of them took the responsibility to engage, respect, and protect the other, even at the expense of letting go of something personally important to them in that decisive once-in-a-lifetime moment.

Both examples, the Youth Pledge in 1928, and the adoption of Pancasila in 1945, show the importance of a covenant to unite people with diverse identities to achieve a common goal. As Max De Pree, a leadership guru, said, “Covenants bind people together and enable them to meet their corporate needs by meeting the needs of one another” (De Pree 2004, 15). Not just any covenant, but a covenant that acknowledges, embraces, and affirms the plurality of identities of the people entering into the covenant. Therefore, the “pluralism” in covenantal pluralism does not mean that the diverse groups must leave their individual identities at the door before entering the covenant. Neither does it mean that they must accept the full tenets of the others’ beliefs, religious or non, before agreeing on the covenant. As Seiple and Hoover write, they enter “without necessarily lending moral equivalency to the beliefs and behaviors of others.”

After declaring the 1928 Congress’ decision on one nation, homeland, and language of Indonesia, the participating youth organizations still proudly bore their identities as Islamic, Javanese, Sumatran, Ambonese Youths, and so on. After Pancasila was adopted without the “shariah phrase,” the framers of the Constitution were still free to embrace their different religions wholeheartedly and for the Muslims to pursue the implementation of shariah in all aspects of life. Covenantal pluralism leaves enough space for all individuals and groups to work out their own details to understand, affirm, and implement the covenant in both private and public lives. It is worth noting that Pancasila has only five principles and the 1928 Youth Pledge has only three points.

However, there is a fragile side to the covenantal pluralism concept. Covenant depends on the people who agree to bind themselves with the covenant. Therefore, covenantal pluralism is a very dynamic concept. People’s perception and commitment to it could change over generations, or according to their interactions with outside influences. This is especially true in today’s world where ideas and values easily cross national borders. They can either affirm or challenge the underlying principles of the existing covenantal pluralism. This is also a challenge facing Indonesia.

For example, in 2017, a video of a student’s conference on March 27, 2016, in West Java went viral. More than a thousand university students got together at a meeting hall in the Bogor Agricultural Institute, taking their oaths to establish the Islamic Caliphate State in Indonesia. It was not an isolated event. In the same year, a national survey of Islamic teachers and students of

senior high schools and universities showed that 37.71% agreed that jihad was a war primarily against non-Muslims, and that 23.35% agreed that suicide bombing was a form of jihad (PPIM UIN Jakarta 2018). Among K-12 teachers, a national survey in 2018 showed that 63% of them had intolerant opinions (PPIM UIN Jakarta 2019). Among the general population, a study done by the Indonesian Institute of Sciences in nine provinces showed that 54% would be wary of people from different faith backgrounds and 73% had more trust in leaders of the same faith (LIPI 2018).

Those are just some examples that point to the erosion of covenantal pluralism in Indonesia. Despite the existence of Pancasila as a pluralistic state philosophy since the foundation of Indonesia, the covenant is never static, but can change over time. It could become stronger, or weaker, or even disintegrate completely. It also provides a background to show that cross-cultural religious literacy is vital not only to establish covenantal pluralism in the first place, *but also to sustain and nurture it*. It is this last part that I will focus on in the remainder of this chapter.

The growing religious exclusivism and intolerance have actually brought me closer to people of different religions than mine. Many of them are Muslim leaders and scholars. We learned to trust each other because we realized that this growing concern was our shared concern. This in turn stems from our shared respect and commitment to humanity. Covenantal pluralism is about respecting our differences as unique individuals with human rights, but at the same time committing ourselves for the common good as a community. At the heart of covenantal pluralism is our reverence for human dignity as the basis of our diversity and unity. Therefore, any threat to our covenantal pluralism is a threat to our humanity.



In recent years, my work at the Leimena Institute has focused more on multifaith collaboration to strengthen covenantal pluralism. Or, in the words of Indonesia's national motto since its independence, I am working for *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* ("Unity in Diversity"). Reflecting on my experience both individually and organizationally, I will use the rest of this chapter to discuss the three competencies and three skills of cross-cultural religious literacy in practice. First let us look at the three competencies. I will spend more time discussing the collaborative competency, because building our collaborative competency will provide the context, motivation, and direction for our efforts to build personal and comparative competencies.

### **Personal competency**

It was November 2011. The threats facing Pancasila and Indonesia's unity were the focus of the roundtable discussion at the Leimena Institute. It was an intense discussion among Christian, Muslim, Buddhist, and Indigenous belief leaders. As the executive director, I was co-chairing the meeting. I remember leaving the meeting with questions in mind. We came to the meeting with our different religions and faiths, had an in-depth and open discussion about our shared concern for the country, and then left with our individual religions and faiths still intact. Was it right? More importantly, was it right *for me* as a Christian? Did I just compromise my faith?

A bit of my background may provide the context for why those questions came to my mind. Throughout my educational years, I was surrounded mostly by friends of the same faith. I studied in Christian schools in Indonesia from kindergarten to twelfth grade. Then during my undergraduate and graduate studies in the United States, I spent most of my time within the Christian community. My extracurricular activities revolved around the Christian student

organization that I was involved in. I had very little deep and meaningful interactions with the non-Christians.

Reflecting on the meeting in November 2011, it is true what Seiple and Hoover say in the Introduction chapter that “at times the other is not met out of altruistic desire, but out of the practical self-interest of a common challenge.” Were it not because of my responsibilities at the Leimena Institute, I would not have had the opportunities to not only interact, but also collaborate with people of other religions or beliefs than mine. In fact, I was not only presented with opportunities, but was also required to take on those opportunities due to my roles and responsibilities. Something that begins with a “practical self-interest” could actually lead to an “altruistic desire,” because when the thing that you do touches your soul, it could transform the inner motive.

It is also true, as Seiple and Hoover said, that the self is often under-emphasized as a starting point in someone’s traditional religious literacy upbringing. How we view the world and other people around us is shaped by values and beliefs, religious or nonreligious, that are oftentimes instilled upon us by our community. In the case of religious literacy, generally when we become part of a community of faith, we will be educated with a set of religious traditions, norms, and beliefs that define the community, including how we read and interpret our holy texts. The believers are usually expected to conform to teachings not only of the holy texts per se, but also of their traditional interpretation (which is usually considered equally divine and sacred as the holy texts themselves). The primary concern in most traditional religious literacy education is understanding the community of faith into which a believer would integrate, therefore it is understandable if the self is often under-emphasized.

Looking back, I now realize what a privilege it has been to engage intensely and deeply with people of other religions or beliefs through various activities in my capacity at the Leimena Institute. In particular, as a Christian, I have been struck by how “the greatest commandment” has been emphasized in many traditional Christian teachings that I encountered. In response to the question of “which is the greatest commandment in the Law?,” Jesus’ answer was twofold with equal weight: Love the Lord your God and love your neighbor (Matthew 22:37–39). In my experience, there has been a lot more emphasis on the first than the second part in many Christian teachings, whether in literature, sermons, or otherwise. I learned quite a bit about knowing and relating to God, but very little about knowing and relating to my neighbors who were non-Christians. They were mostly referred to as “unbelievers” or “nonbelievers” which emphasized differences and reinforced the sense of ingroup vs. outgroup. It is mostly through my later work in multifaith dialogue and multifaith collaboration regarding common challenges that I have learned to view and engage with people of other religions or beliefs as fellow humans that share a lot more in common than just religious differences. Learning to love my neighbor has built up, not watered down, my Christian faith, because it is part of the greatest commandment that Jesus taught.

### Comparative competency

Ahmad Syafii Maarif, an Indonesian Muslim scholar, writes:

Converting from one religion to another or choosing not to have a religion is a basic human right that must be respected. Classic Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*), which condemns apostates to death, must be reexamined, as it goes against the spirit of the Quran, even if Allah is angry at those who change their faith.

(Maarif 2018, 219)

This statement went directly against my knowledge of Islam, particularly on the issue of apostasy, that had been shaped mostly by non-Islamic sources. These sources treated all observant Muslims as having a monolithic belief that apostasy was a grievous sin punishable by death. It was eye opening to me because Maarif was not just any scholar, but one of Indonesia's most prominent and respected Muslim scholars and former chairman of Muhammadiyah, the world's second largest Muslim organization with tens of millions of followers in Indonesia.

That and other similar experiences have taught me the importance of what Seiple and Hoover said that when we want to develop our comparative competency, we need to understand "the moral, epistemological, and spiritual framework of one's neighbor *as s/he does*." Even though there could be many resources available that talk about our neighbor's religion, we need to study the literature and other references that are generally accepted as authoritative or credible from "their" perspective. This approach reflects one of the fundamental characteristics of covenantal pluralism: Empathy. If we want to genuinely develop our empathy in our comparative competency to understand our neighbors, then we need to learn to see the world using their lenses, the lenses of our neighbor's faith, not ours. Doing so is important to build not only our comparative competency but also our rapport with our neighbors as a foundation for our collaborative competency.

But this is one of the challenging parts of developing our comparative competency. Since most religions, especially monotheistic religions, have exclusive truth claims, it is not easy to empathize as an outsider. Even between religions that have a shared ancestry such as Judaism, Christianity, and Islam as Abrahamic religions, it is difficult to build mutual respect and empathy. History shows that bitter enmity has persisted between them, since each has its own claim of truth over the same ancestry. Holy wars have been waged both to defend and to promote the truth claims. Therefore, it takes humility, courage, and certainly persistence to learn to become an empathetic student of other religions while remaining to be a faithful disciple of one's own.

Another challenging part is to decide which school of thought to study and how much is sufficient. For the latter, of course there is no limit to study. Building our comparative competency, like any other competency, is a lifelong learning. However, our time and energy are limited to learn from the virtually unlimited written and unwritten resources. Therefore, we need to decide not only how much to study, but also which school(s) of thought or traditions of a particular religion to focus on. While each of the world's major religions has a set of core tenets, internally, it also has a diversity of doctrines and traditions. With Christianity, do we mean Catholics or Protestants? With Protestantism, do we mean Methodists, Pentecostals, Evangelicals, etc.? In Islam, do we mean Sunni or Shia? In Sunni, do we mean Shafi'i, Hanafi, Maliki, or Hanbali? And so on.

These questions may come up as we begin to "understand others as they understand themselves," because our purpose in building our comparative competency is to achieve cross-cultural religious literacy. This motivation might seem to complicate life, since it pushes us to take a deep dive into some issues, but at the same time it gives us the criteria to decide which areas to study and how much. Our intention to understand the others is not simply for a personal enrichment or an academic pursuit. Our comparative competency is a building block for our collaborative competency. We need to build it with a bias toward a collaborative action with the others that we are trying to understand. Without this in mind, we could easily remain at this stage and not build our collaborative competency for fear that we do not have enough knowledge to do so.

In fact, in my experience, my comparative competency had often grown when there was a collaboration or its prospect to pursue. As explained in the beginning, Indonesia is built upon a foundation of diversity in religions, ethnicities, and races. Nurturing Indonesia requires nurturing diversity—which means, among other things, that multifaith collaboration is vital. This

has motivated me to understand others who are of different religions from me in their own perspectives and their view of engaging me. It also gives an idea of what to learn and how much is needed. Living in a nation that is almost 90% Muslims, Islam is naturally very important if I want to understand my neighbors and to collaborate with the larger society. With regards to the references, I am fortunate to have many top-notch scholars who have been willing to share their knowledge and advice with me, while knowing full well that I am not a Muslim.

A final note on comparative competency is to remember that the “others” could also mean those of the same religion or belief with us. As a Christian, I also need to understand the “others” in my own Christian community, especially my colleagues and stakeholders in the multi-faith collaboration. Their view of engaging the other and of their co-religionist like me who is engaging the other could have a significant influence on whether and how I could engage the other in a multi-faith collaboration. Such potential collaboration could fail not because the other does not accept me, but because my own co-religionists reject it or even view me as a deviant.

### Collaborative competency

Leiden, June 29, 2018. It was a great day for me and Ahmad Syafii Maarif, the distinguished Muslim scholar whose book I quote above. The English version of the book, originally written in Indonesian, was finally launched on that day at the Leiden University. The book, entitled *Islam, Humanity, and Indonesian Identity: Reflections on History* (Maarif 2018), was a collaborative project by Ahmad Syafii Maarif and the Leimena Institute. Its publication was lauded by many international scholars of Islam and Indonesia. In the introduction, Herman L. Beck said that “finally, a book by one of Indonesia’s most prominent intellectuals has been made available in an English edition to a wider Western public. This is quite exceptional, for works by Indonesian intellectuals and philosophers are rarely translated into English” (Maarif 2018, 18–19).

The book project has taught me that the collaborative competency is a function of personal and comparative competencies with the additional component of leadership. Having a collaborative competency, according to Seiple and Hoover in the Introduction chapter, means that we have “knowledge of the particular place where two (or more) different moral frameworks, usually informed by two different religions, meet as two individuals and/or institutions that also have to accomplish a specific task.” Knowing that “particular place” requires some degree of personal and comparative competencies, because it means we need to know, approximately at least, where we and our potential partner(s) can meet and work together. I had to have some personal competency to assess whether I could collaborate with Syafii Maarif to publish his book while maintaining my integrity as a Christian. I have to be accountable to myself and be able to explain it to my co-religionists if they ask why a Christian would go all the way and invest in translating and publishing a book on Islam by a Muslim scholar.

Of course I would not just publish any book. I had a compelling reason why the book deserved a wider audience beyond Indonesia. This is where the comparative competency helped me to make a decision. I first read his book in 2014. ISIS was on the rise, and there was the increasing public perception of Islam as a religion of hate and violent extremism. The book, originally released in 2009, immediately struck me with its firm dismissal of violence, terrorism, and authoritarianism in the name of Islam because these practices were against the Qur’anic principles. Instead, the author argued for peace, tolerance, human rights, and democracy based on Islamic teachings and the history of Islam in Indonesia. Yet even so, knowing about the book is only one part of the comparative competency needed for an effective collaborative competency. Anybody can write such things just to make a best-selling book. I had to know whether the author had the credibility to make that powerful argument about Islam. I am for-

fortunate because, as I mentioned before, the author, Syafii Maarif, is a prominent Muslim leader in Indonesia with a proven track record that is publicly available and consistent with everything he said in the book. Understanding the author and myself was the combination of personal and comparative competencies that helped me identify the place where two different moral frameworks (i.e., the author's and mine), informed by two different religions (i.e., Islam and Christianity), could meet to accomplish a specific task (i.e., book translation and publication).

The same principles apply, though in more complex ways, when the two entities are institutions, instead of individuals. This is where understanding the relevant organizational cultures becomes very important in collaborative competency. Pursuing collaboration implies that we need to understand the cultures of at least two organizations, theirs and ours. It will determine whether the particular place where we envision the two different moral frameworks could meet is actually feasible for both organizations to reach.

This assessment is important, because as Seiple and Hoover write, a collaborative competency is necessary to cross-cultural and religious barriers for the sake of practical action. We need to remember that to have a successful multifaith collaboration, it usually takes both sides, not just ours, to cross-cultural and religious barriers. Therefore, we need to understand not only the other's organizational culture, but also to some extent their personal and comparative competencies, in order to understand their readiness to collaborate and whether the collaboration itself is suitable and feasible for them.

However, sometimes the collaboration cannot proceed not because of our potential partner's lack of competencies or necessary organizational culture, but because of external factors. Therefore, collaborative competency should also include the ability to assess the external environment for the benefit of both sides in the collaboration. The environment should be favorable for a win-win partnership. Our external assessment will inform us whether we need to modify, postpone, or cancel the collaboration.

All of these mean that we need to be able to evaluate ourselves, the other, and the context where the two different moral, epistemological, and spiritual frameworks are supposed to meet and collaborate. Sometimes we need to negotiate with ourselves or the other to define the meeting point. Whenever we evaluate or negotiate with the other, communication is key. If we treat communication only as "us" communicating to "the other," then we will fail in both evaluation and negotiation, because we miss a communication fundamental which is understanding the other. These three skills—evaluation, negotiation, communication—are so important that Seiple and Hoover rightly regard them as required skills for cross-cultural religious literacy.

I will return to the three skills later, but for now let us consider who the "other" is. When we talk about institutional, not individual, collaboration, there are different entities involved in the "other," each potentially with its own moral framework. The three primary ones that need to be considered:

1. Potential partner(s);
2. Our team or colleague(s);
3. Other key stakeholder(s).

If "collaborative competency" means understanding the particular place where two (or more) different moral frameworks meet to accomplish a specific task, as Seiple and Hoover write, then in an institutional collaboration, it oftentimes means that the moral frameworks of our team (or colleagues) and key stakeholders also need to be taken into account. We need to have a sense of the personal and comparative competencies of our potential partners, team members or colleagues, and relevant key stakeholders, to understand if we are all ready to cross some cultural



and religious barriers of our own to arrive at that multifaith collaboration place. If not, then it could be an indication that we need to move the place to make it more reachable for everyone involved.

Let me illustrate with an experience from the Leimena Institute's collaboration on the Abrahamic religions initiative with the Ministry of Religious Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia. My first encounters with Muslim-Christian-Jewish interfaith dialogues (or trialogues) were in 2017 when I co-organized a small delegation of Indonesian Muslim scholars to visit the United States to talk about Indonesia's peaceful Wasatiyyah ("middle way") Islam. Among other groups, we had roundtable discussions with Jewish groups such as the American Jewish Committee, Simon Wiesenthal Center, and Tikvah Fund. It was fascinating, because the Jewish community in Indonesia is very tiny, reportedly only a couple of hundreds (in a country of more than 260 million people), so such dialogues were almost impossible in Indonesia.

That experience has led me to learn more that even though Christianity, Islam, and Judaism are called Abrahamic religions for their shared ancestry in the patriarch Abraham, throughout history the followers have been involved in some of the most atrocious conflicts that have shaped the negative view of some, including in my own religion, towards the other both inside and outside the Abrahamic religions (personal competency.) From my conversations with the Indonesian Muslim scholars and the officials at the Ministry of Religious Affairs, I also learned that we shared the same concern. In fact, the Qur'an often talks about Jews and Christians as the People of the Book, so it is an important subject for Muslims (comparative competency).

I began to understand that the communication breakdown between Muslims, Christians, and Jews over the centuries, oftentimes due to political and economic ambitions, has led to a lot of tensions and conflicts threatening all humanity. The problem is more acute in Indonesia where most people do not have the chance to meet any Jews in real life, so they depend on the news media which is generally negative toward Jews. In relation to Jews, the news is oftentimes limited to Israel-Palestinian conflict. No wonder that the nationwide survey in 2017 showed that 57.78% of schoolteachers and university lecturers on Islamic religion and 53.74% of students agreed that Jews were enemies of Islam (PPIM UIN Jakarta 2018). Understanding and evaluating this context was important to know what multifaith collaboration, if any, was possible to address the problem.

Eventually in early 2020, together with the Ministry of Religious Affairs, we identified the first important step was to build a better communication between Muslim, Christian, and Jewish leaders and scholars, and in so doing provide a counter narrative to the negative stereotypes and religious hatred being spread in the public. The concrete step that the Leimena Institute and the Ministry of Religious Affairs took was hosting a series of public webinars on the theme of Abrahamic religious family. This is the "place" that the two institutions agreed to collaborate where different moral frameworks could meet to accomplish the task which was to build a better communication and to educate the public. To ensure that we involved the key stakeholders, the webinars featured leading Muslim, Christian, and Jewish scholars from Indonesia and other countries as panelists. Between October 2020 and January 2021, the series completed with four international webinars, each drawing thousands of enthusiastic participants and plenty of positive news coverage.

### ***Leadership***

Going back to Seiple and Hoover's definition that collaborative competency is understanding "*the nature and requirements of leadership* [emphasis added] in crossing cultural and religious barriers for the sake of practical collaboration," we should then ask: What are the nature and requirements of the leadership needed in a collaborative competency? It is important because

without the right leadership, we will never get the collaboration off the ground. Our personal and comparative competencies may continue to improve but only for our self-development without leading to any concrete collaborative action.

Therefore, I think leadership in cross-cultural religious literacy is an important subject that deserves further study on its own. I will not pretend to have sufficient knowledge or space in this chapter to discuss it in substantial depth, but let me share the little that I have learned from my experience.

One thing I have noticed is that leadership often grows in a tension when we try to balance, and sometimes synthesize, two good but opposite qualities. The tensions that I have often faced in developing multifaith collaborations that need and nurture our leadership are between:

1. Humility and confidence. People need to see our confidence in the collaboration, but at the same time our humility to learn from them who are of different religions from us;
2. Macro and micro perspectives. Crossing cultural and religious barriers is no small thing, so we need to have the vision (macro) and the knowledge to execute it (micro) to get everyone on board;
3. Passion and patience. Passion is the energizing fertilizer in a collaboration, but growth still takes time, especially in a multifaith setting, and therefore patience is necessary. We want all stakeholders to grow organically with the collaboration.

All of these qualities feed into one important foundation for any multifaith collaborations: Trust. This social capital is critical because we often have to deal with many prejudices and stereotypes between people of different religions, faiths, and worldviews. The “other” needs to see our sincerity in the endeavor that we are doing it to serve others, not ourselves.



Now that we have discussed the three competencies, I will turn my attention to the three skills—evaluation, negotiation, and communication—that, in Seiple and Hoover’s words, are “critical to the process of assessing and analyzing within the three competencies.” My experience confirms this assertion and provides the basis for the following elaboration of these skills.

### **Evaluation skill**

A bald, white bearded, and soft-spoken elderly man, Hajji Awath Ternate was animated when he spoke about the newly renovated mosque in his village. He was the chief of Batumerah village in the Moluccas province in the eastern part of Indonesia. His predominantly Muslim village has a sister-village called Passo that is predominantly Christian. Their history goes back centuries. When we met at his home, he talked very eagerly about how the Christians from Passo village helped his village in renovating the mosque. In fact, he said, he gave them the honor of putting the pinnacle on top of the mosque to inaugurate it. He ended his story with the following eye-opening statement for me:

Both of us in Moluccas, Muslims and Christians, are very fanatic. However, we can cooperate because of the commands from Jesus and Muhammad. Jesus said, love one another as you love yourself. The same with Muhammad, love one another as you love yourself. You can have any religion, but we need to live as brothers and sisters. Helping one another, loving one another.

(Personal communication, October 11, 2014)

The practice of Muslims and Christians helping each other out in building worship houses is still fairly common in the Moluccas and other parts of Indonesia. The story from Batumerah village shows that the Muslim-Christian collaboration was not in spite of their religions, but because of them. It is a case where religion plays a positive role in the society. However, when I shared that story with my fellow Christians, even though they found it inspiring, it poses a difficult question of whether it is theologically acceptable to help build another religion's worship house. Our failure to grapple with such questions, individually and collectively, could easily lead to a comfortable position of "It's good, but not for me." With that position, our growth in cross-cultural religious literacy could stop.

In our process of developing personal, comparative, and collaborative competencies, we will be confronted by new facts, experiences, or other religious teachings that contradict our preconception of the other religion or even our own well-established religious understanding. We need to learn to evaluate the facts, experiences, and teachings, and then evaluate ourselves and the others in relation to those. This exercise will grow our personal, comparative, and collaborative competencies and keep them relevant to the context of our engagement.

### **Negotiation skill**

The encounter with Hajji Awath Ternate in Moluccas impacted me deeply, because I never expected to hear from an unpretentious modest chief of a small Muslim village, who was also a hajji (someone who has completed the Hajj pilgrimage to Mecca), that Jesus and Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) taught the same principle of loving one another as yourself. People can have endless theological debates about it, but the same principle was affirmed by hundreds of international Muslim scholars in a document called "A Common Word Between Us and You."

That is just one of my many similar experiences with Muslims, ranging from the lay people to national and international leaders and scholars. Reflecting on them, I had to negotiate with myself who had been brought up in a manner that said there was nothing in common between Christians and Muslims. "What fellowship can light have with darkness?" had been a constant reminder to maintain religious purity. The self-reflection and negotiation process, encouraged by the experiences, has helped me better understand my own and other's moral, epistemological, and spiritual frameworks, which in turn helped me identify the place where the different frameworks could meet to accomplish a specific task. The process also helped me to be more sensitive with the others, because to reach the place of collaborative action, sometimes they also have to negotiate with their own religious understanding and communities. So, the negotiation skill can help us develop our own personal, comparative, and collaborative competencies and at the same time help others develop theirs.

For the faithful, of any religious tradition, negotiation does not mean that we or the other have to surrender our fundamental religious beliefs or principles. Internal negotiation, to use Seiple and Hoover's term, is not an attempt to water down our faith or to syncretize beliefs. Sometimes our internal negotiation brings us to confront our own stereotypes and prejudices. In other times it gives us a more granular perspective of things negotiable and non-negotiable. As a matter of fact, internal negotiation properly done usually leads to one's richer and stronger faith, because it has been exposed to different perspectives and experiences.

### **Communication skill**

Listening is critical in communication. Seiple and Hoover put it aptly that "An elicitive and empathetic ear is crucial to talk that results in trust." I have already emphasized the importance

of trust as a social capital in our multifaith collaboration. Effective listening in cross-cultural religious literacy requires an attitude that we want to listen not to judge the others, but to understand who they are, their struggles, and how best to help them address our shared concerns. In this context, the Apostle James's reminder is spot-on, "Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry."

I have often found that I speak better after a better listening. Listening helps calibrate our articulation. This is especially true with regard to cross-cultural religious literacy, because when we listen carefully to others of different religions or beliefs, we will often have to evaluate the new information, which sometimes leads to negotiation with our own beliefs and understanding. A good communication skill can improve our evaluation and negotiation skills and vice versa.

One of the things that has improved my communication skill in cross-cultural religious literacy is spending time with those of different religions and beliefs from me. Reading literatures written from their perspectives is important, but nothing can substitute direct interaction with them, learning how they communicate with one another, both verbally and non-verbally. It is worth noting that in some cultures like in Indonesia, non-verbal communication can be more important in some instances than verbal expression.

Furthermore, an effective communication skill that strengthens covenantal pluralism is not primarily about us, but about encouraging and helping others to engage in a constructive communication that can lead to collaborative endeavors.

## **Conclusion**

My ventures into the areas of the above competencies and skills were not driven by an intellectual curiosity. They occurred naturally as part of my journey in promoting multifaith collaborations that can strengthen civic solidarity in a religiously diverse society. This is how I understand covenantal pluralism as defined by Seiple and Hoover. However, I went through all the experiences that I described in this chapter without knowing covenantal pluralism and cross-cultural religious literacy that Seiple and Hoover introduced in this book. When I learned about this theory, I was pleasantly surprised that to a large extent my experiences fit into it. On the one hand, the theory provides a framework for all of us, like the authors in this book, to learn from one another and grow further. On the other hand, my experience has taught me that theory should assist, not restrict, our growth.

Having reflected on my experiences within this theoretical framework, I have become even more convinced that understanding cross-cultural religious literacy and covenantal pluralism is vital as our world's population is becoming more, not less, religious. Many extremist groups have successfully manipulated religions to cross national, cultural, and other barriers and create havoc in various parts of the world. Those of us who still believe that religions should bring peace and progress to humanity have our own barriers to cross. Cross-cultural religious literacy can help us build our competencies and skills to cross the barriers.

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## “SALAD BOWL” SECULARISM

### India’s covenant to preserve pluralism

*Tehmina Arora*

Close to midnight on the eve of August 15, 1947, India’s first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru addressed the Constituent Assembly, which was to draft a constitution for the nation of India after the end of British rule. Nehru’s historic speech pointed to India’s ambition to “build a noble mansion of Free India where all her children may dwell” (Constituency Assembly of India Debates 1947).

This free Indian nation was aspiring to unshackle itself from the historic heavy burden of discrimination rooted in caste, gender, religion, and ethnicity. Instead, this new India would build a home where the Constitution guaranteed each citizen “Justice—social, economic and political; Liberty of thought, expression, belief, faith and worship; Equality of status and of opportunity; and ... Fraternity assuring the dignity of the individual and the unity and integrity of the Nation” (Constitution of India 1950).

However, the framers of the Constitution recognized that these words alone would not mean much as democracy was mere topsoil for a largely undemocratic India—where people were frequently targeted for their caste, gender, and religion. Recognition of the basic human right to justice, liberty, and equality in the Constitution alone would not protect these values; rather what was needed was fraternity.

Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar, the chairperson of the Constitution Drafting Committee, in his speech on November 25, 1949 stressed:

These principles of liberty, equality, and fraternity are not to be treated as separate items in a trinity. They form a union of trinity in the sense that to divorce one from the other is to defeat the very purpose of democracy. Liberty cannot be divorced from equality, equality cannot be divorced from liberty. Nor can liberty and equality be divorced from fraternity. Without equality, liberty would produce the supremacy of the few over the many. Equality without liberty would kill individual initiative. Without fraternity, liberty would produce the supremacy of the few over the many. Without fraternity, liberty and equality could not become a natural course of things. It would require a constable to enforce them. (Constituent Assembly of India Debates 1949)

The fraternity was described by Dr. Ambedkar as “a sense of common brotherhood of all Indians—if Indians are seen as being one people. It is the principle which gives unity and solidarity to social life.”

Fraternity does not require an absorption into a whole, but rather respect for the other based on the principle of common brotherhood and dignity for each person. Fraternity must undergird all human relationships for freedom, justice, and equality to truly flourish.

This need to build and protect the spirit of fraternity—as reflected in the debates that ensued on the Constitution—subsequently helped enshrine within the Constitution a framework to guarantee the right to equality and freedom from discrimination based on religion, race, caste, sex, or place of birth to all persons in India. The chapter on Fundamental Rights in the Constitution of India placed a strong emphasis on individual rights, collective rights, as well as the rights of minorities. The Constitution of India recognized the fundamental right of “any section of the citizens residing in the territory of India or any part thereof having a distinct language, script, or culture of its own shall have the right to conserve the same.”

### **Religious diversity: India’s cultural heritage**

The steadfast resolve to protect vulnerable communities such as “untouchable” Dalits, tribal, or aboriginal people, and religious minorities from discrimination, and ensuring that they have equal opportunity and space to flourish, came at the time of tremendous religious conflict. In 1947, with the demand for independence from British rule finally coming to fruition, the sub-continent was partitioned into India and Pakistan based on the religious demography of the two regions.

Millions of people were forced out of their homes due to fear or violence. Hundreds of thousands more were brutally killed in the communal conflicts that ensued between sections of Hindus and Muslims. Resources, both financial and human, to address the situation were limited. The violence that both preceded and followed the Partition strengthened the notion of competing religious identities and sowed lasting seeds of doubt and mistrust between Hindus and Muslims in both Pakistan and India.

Yet, the framers of the Constitution rejected the idea of India being a nation where one religious belief had pre-eminence over the others under law. Instead they sought to protect the religious diversity.

Addressing the Constituent Assembly on its third sitting, S. Radhakrishnan, then a member of the Constituent Assembly and later the President of India (1962–1967), noted:

India is a symphony where there are, as in an orchestra, different instruments, each with its particular sonority, each with its special sound, all combining to interpret one particular score. It is this kind of combination that this country has stood for. It never adopted inquisitorial methods. It never asked the Parsis or the Jews or the Christians or the Muslims who came and took shelter there to change their creeds or become absorbed in what might be called a uniform Hindu humanity. It never did this. ‘Live and let live’—that has been the spirit of this country. If we are true to that spirit, if that ideal which has dominated our cultural landscape for five or six thousand years and is still operating, I have no doubt that the crisis by which we are faced today will be overcome as many other crises in our previous history have been overcome. (Constituent Assembly of India Debates 1946)

## Dialogue and dissent

Amartya Sen, a renowned scholar and Nobel laureate, attributed Indians’ tolerance toward multiple faith traditions to a culture of dissent and dialogue that has evolved in India over the centuries. Sen noted that the great Indian epic Ramayana contains dissenting characters who critiqued the actions of Lord Ram, the hero of the epic who is worshiped as an incarnation of God by millions of Hindus (Sen 2005, 159).

Rather than being an exception, dissent and conflict was the norm. Hinduism draws within its ambit many diverse, and often conflicting, traditions and beliefs in six schools of thought. Far from being one monolithic block, each of these groups is further subdivided into numerous denominations and sects. Sikhism, Jainism, and Buddhism were each a critique of the popular Hindu thought and philosophy, especially the caste system. Similarly, the *Bhakti* and *Sufi* traditions, often critical of the orthodox teachings of Islam and Hinduism, flourished thanks to such Hindu and Muslim saints as Kabir, Ravidas, Dadu, Khwaja Nizamuddin Auliya, and numerous others.

Another example from Indian history is the Buddhist Councils set up after the death of Gautama Buddha from the 4th century BCE onwards. These councils sought to resolve differences on social, cultural, and religious practices by dialogue and debate. Emperor Ashoka, one of the most formidable rulers of the Maurya Dynasty, also drew on this principle in the 2nd century BCE. Although the initial years of his reign were marked by terrible bloodshed and the killing of thousands of people, his subsequent conversion to Buddhism gave him a deeper understanding of religious tolerance and harmony. His subjects were informed of the principles of his rule by way of edicts, carved in stone and placed in various locations across the dynasty. In the text of the famous 12th Edict, we find principles of religious tolerance where he called for a deeper understanding of different faith traditions and sensitivity towards the faiths of others (Sen 2005, 15).

In the 16th century, the Mughal Emperor Akbar, a Muslim, sought to draw from the teachings of various faith traditions, including Hinduism and Christianity, to build harmony among his subjects. Akbar’s openness to other faith traditions drew criticism from the Muslim orthodoxy on one hand and created space for dialogue and discussion on the other. Akbar proposed the concept of *Sulh-i kul*, an Arabic term for unity and peace among all human beings. *Sulh-i kul* had respect for the “other” as its central theme and called for openness to dialogue and debate in matters of religious beliefs.

Eminent historian Tara Chand (1922, i) has noted that

Indian culture is synthetic in character. It comprehends ideas of different orders. It embraces in its orbit beliefs, customs, rites, institutions, arts, religions, and philosophies belonging to strata of society in varying stages of development. ... The complexity of Indian life is ancient, because from the dawn of history, India has been the meeting place of conflicting civilizations.

This intermingling of cultures and religious traditions has left a lasting imprint on every aspect of Indian life—from food to attire, music, architecture, and language.

## ‘Indian’ secularism

In the years after the adoption of the Constitution, the Supreme Court of India incorporated this understanding of religious pluralism into an Indian definition of secularism. Through a



series of landmark decisions, the doctrine of secularism was defined not as a negation of religion from the public space, but rather as “*Sarva Dharma Sambhava*” (equal respect for all religions and beliefs) and principled distance from religious faiths.

The State, under the Constitutional framework, was expected to build trust and solidarity between faith traditions. The State was also allowed to critique certain social practices that were enmeshed with religious beliefs to ensure liberty, justice, and equality for all citizens of India (Dhavan and Nariman 2004).

Indian secularism, as articulated by the Court, aims to prevent religious communities from dominating other faith traditions as well as re-build trust and solidarity when riots and hostility break the peace. It nurtures and protects plural spaces and builds, as Ambedkar had said, “social life.”

In the 1962 case of *Sardar Taheruddin Syedna Saheb v. State of Bombay*,<sup>1</sup> the Supreme Court held:

Articles 25 and 26 embody the principle of religious toleration that has been the characteristic feature of Indian civilization from the start of history. The instances and periods when this feature was absent being merely temporary aberrations. Besides, they serve to emphasize the secular nature of the Indian democracy which the founding fathers considered to be the very basis of the Constitution.

In *Kesavananda Bharati v. State of Kerala*,<sup>2</sup> the Court reiterated that secularism was part of the basic structure of the Constitution—that which cannot be changed even by an Act of Parliament.

This understanding of secularism was further developed in the 2008 case of *T.M.A. Pai Foundation v. State of Karnataka*,<sup>3</sup> where the Court held that:

The one billion population of India consists of six main ethnic groups and 52 major tribes; six major religions and 6,400 castes and sub-castes; 18 major languages and 1,600 minor languages and dialects. The essence of secularism in India can best be depicted if a relief map of India is made in mosaic.

The judgment additionally observed, “The Constitution as it stands does not proceed on the ‘melting pot’ theory. The Indian Constitution rather represents a ‘salad bowl’ where there is homogeneity without an obliteration of identity.”

Sadly, however, despite these repeated and public affirmations to secularism and religious pluralism, the call for a “Hindu Nation” has persisted, a hundred-year-old concept that has rapidly strengthened in the 21st century.

### **Hindu nationalism: At odds with the vision of India**

The idea of a Hindu nation was first outlined in the writings of Vinayak Damodar Savarkar in the 1920s during British rule. In his 1923 booklet, *Hindutva: Who is a Hindu?* Savarkar defined an Indian or a Hindu as someone whose holy-land and fatherland was India. The ideology known as *Hindutva*, or *Hindu-ness*, created a two-tier system—those who worshiped Indian gods and those who worshiped “foreign” gods. The Hindus, according to Savarkar, were not merely bound together by one culture, but also by history, geography, blood, and religion. For Christians and Muslims to be “Indian,” they must embrace the Hindu culture and think of India as their Fatherland and Holy-Land (Savarkar 1969).

These basic tenets of *Hindutva* continue to underpin the Hindu nationalist movement, which has gained strength under the leadership of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS, an umbrella Hindu right-wing organization) (Noorani 2019). The deep mistrust and suspicion of Indian minorities, especially Muslims, is evident from the numerous writings and speeches given by various *Hindutva* ideologues. In his book, *We or Our Nationhood Defined*, M.S. Golwalkar, a senior ideologue of the RSS, presented his model of a Hindu nation or *Rashtra*, drawing inspiration from the holocaust of Jews in Germany.

It is worth bearing well in mind how these old Nations solve their minorities’ problem. They do not undertake to recognise any separate elements in their polity. Emigrants have to get themselves naturally assimilated in the principal mass of population, the National Race, by adopting its culture and language and sharing in its aspirations, by losing all consciousness of their separate existence, forgetting their foreign origin ... From this standpoint, sanctioned by the experience of shrewd old nations, the foreign races in Hindusthan must either adopt the Hindu culture and language, must learn to respect and hold in reverence Hindu religion, must entertain no idea but those of the glorification of the Hindu race and culture, i.e., of the Hindu nation and must lose their separate existence to merge in the Hindu race, or may stay in the country, wholly subordinated to the Hindu Nation, claiming nothing, deserving no privileges, far less any preferential treatment –not even citizen’s rights.

The impact of *Hindutva*, which pits itself directly against the notion of an inclusive and robustly pluralistic India, has been devastating. Its proponents have frequently been accused of using violence to build a Hindu nation, in which religious minorities would be, at best, second class citizens. Anyone who has stood in their way has been treated as expendable. For instance, Mahatma Gandhi, who advocated for nonviolent resistance for India’s independence from British rule and was later considered the Father of the Nation, was assassinated in 1948 by Nathuram Godse, a man sympathetic to the cause of a Hindu nation.

There was a temporary ban following the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi on the RSS, according to the official government communique, restricting their activities, for engaging in “violence involving arson, robbery, dacoity, and murder and have collected illicit arms and ammunitions” (Islam 2014). In more recent times, the role of the *Hindutva* groups in fomenting violence against religious minorities is well documented. The *Vishwa Hindu Parishad* (VHP) and the *Bajrang Dal*, both offshoots of the RSS, have been classified as religious militant outfits in the CIA’s World Factbook (*The Wire* 2018).

However, its influence has grown significantly and it has several affiliates and offshoot organizations representing students, tribal communities, labor classes, and women. With a strong educational wing, the RSS has permeated the minds of many children and young people. But its most successful affiliate is perhaps its political wing, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which emerged from the Bharatiya Jana Sangh political group in 1951, but was officially launched as the BJP in 1980. Since 2014, the BJP has been the governing party at the central government—led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the former Chief Minister of Gujarat State. The BJP also heads the governments in many states (Vaishnav 2019).

### Culture of impunity

As the BJP has strengthened its control at the national and state levels, non-state actors have often used violence to further their cause, apparently with the complicity of the state. In many

incidents of religious identity-related violence, vigilante mobs have acted with complete impunity. The victims of the communal and targeted violence have repeatedly accused the state machinery, especially the police, of failing to protect them (Jafferlot 2019).

In 2002, in the western state of Gujarat, an estimated 1,000 people, mostly Muslims, were killed in a spate of communal violence. Thousands of Muslim homes and businesses and places of worship were destroyed, and roughly 100,000 people were displaced. In its report, titled “We Have No Orders To Save You,” Human Rights Watch (2002) pointed to glaring failures by the police to protect Muslims. The report quoted activists who found graffiti on the walls of a burnt madrasa in the city of Ahmedabad which “boasted of police support: *Yeh andar ki bat hai, police hamarey saath hai* (This is inside information, the police are with us).”

Mr. Modi, then Chief Minister of Gujarat, was accused of being complicit in the violence against the Muslims and was denied a visa to the USA under the International Religious Freedom Act. The courts, however, found that there was insufficient evidence to prosecute Mr. Modi. (See Mann 2014, and Stanford Law Clinic Report).

As a young lawyer in 2008, I experienced this firsthand as the faith-based group I was associated with assisted the victims of the worst-ever violence against the minority Christian community in India. In Kandhamal, an impoverished district in the eastern state of Odisha, close to 100 people, mostly tribal Christians, were killed, over 50,000 people were displaced, and at least 5,000 homes and churches were burnt in two spates of targeted violence from December 24 to December 27, 2007, and from August 25 to August 28, 2008, and beyond this period with sporadic incidents of violence. The victims shared gruesome stories of family and friends being burnt alive, sexually assaulted, hacked to death, and of homes and churches being burnt while the police stood and watched.

Though I had heard graphic stories of violence previously, this was the first time that I met the victims and looked into their eyes as they told me their stories. I stepped into burnt homes and churches and stood in the hallway where a nun had been raped. I felt the fear as I slept in an orphanage that had somehow escaped the mob’s fury. The horror of it hit home like never before.

The spate of violence, which lasted for close to two months, had erupted after a local Hindu nationalist leader, Swami Lakshmanananda Saraswati, and his associates were murdered by Maoists, or extreme Marxists.<sup>4</sup> Area Christians were accused of orchestrating the murder, and a target was pinned on their back allegedly by the *Bajrang Dal* and the *Vishwa Hindu Parishad*.

The local administration initially refused to file criminal complaints against the attackers. The survivors were threatened, lawyers were refused entry into the violence-hit areas, and investigations were slow, according to media reports (which were corroborated by the survivors that I met).

Despite these many hurdles, the tenacity of the victims was inspiring. I met Ludhia Diga, a young mother, in one of the refugee camps that were built for the displaced Christians. She told me in gruesome detail how she had watched a mob attack and kill her husband, a pastor. She stood resolute in her pursuit for justice and testified against some of the members of the mob despite a threat to her life and that of her young son. Her testimony led to one of the two convictions in the many murder cases.

In the years that followed, justice for the victims seemed elusive. Cases fell by the wayside due to poor investigation by the police, open threats to the witnesses, and slow processes in the courts. Out of the 828 criminal complaints that were finally registered with the police, only 512 were investigated. Out of the 31 murder cases tried by the prosecution, only two resulted in convictions for murder.

The promise of equality, justice, liberty, and fraternity made in the Constitution was broken. But this was not the first time, and sadly, it was not the last. Incidents of violence against religious minorities, both large-scale violent attacks and sporadic incidents, have occurred frequently across India.

To take another example, the Muzaffarnagar district of the northern state of Uttar Pradesh witnessed violence against Muslims in 2013, which resulted in over 60 deaths and 50,000 people being displaced. An Amnesty International India (2017) report on the violence, titled “Losing Faith: The Muzaffarnagar Gang-Rape Survivor’s Struggle for Justice,” highlighted the failure of the police not only in protecting the gang-rape survivors, but in taking action against the accused. Media reports on the violence also suggested that the prosecution of the accused was lax. As of March 2016, of the 1,475 accused in cases of murder, rape, arson, and dacoity in connection with the violence, only 37 had been convicted and were behind bars. Thirty-nine of the accused were acquitted and the others were released on bail (Sahu 2016).

The Supreme Court, in the 2014 case of *Mohd. Haroon v. Union of India*,<sup>5</sup> held that it is the responsibility of the State administration, in association with the intelligence agencies, to prevent recurrence of communal violence. Any negligence on the part of any officer responsible for maintaining law and order was to be dealt with strictly within the ambit of the law.

In the 2016 case, *Archbishop Raphael Cheenath S.V.D. v. State of Orissa* (now known as Odisha),<sup>6</sup> the Court observed that the state government should enquire into and find the causes for communal unrest. It further stated that strengthening of police infrastructure would help in curbing any recurrence of such communal violence.

In July 2017, in the case of *Anurag Modi v. State of Madhya Pradesh*,<sup>7</sup> the Supreme Court had to intervene when the police in the central state of Madhya Pradesh failed to produce evidence before the trial court concerning the role of the accused in a case of mob violence against members of a minority community. (See Press Trust of India 2017.)

These directions by the Court have changed little on the ground.

For example, instead of rectifying the failures of the prosecution and the police in the anti-Muslim violence in Muzaffarnagar, the Uttar Pradesh government in March 2018 initiated a process to withdraw 131 cases, where Hindus were named as the main accused—including in 13 murder and 11 attempted murder cases (Sahu 2018).

In February 2020, at least 52 people, mostly Muslims, were killed in the three days of communal violence in Delhi, about 20 kilometers away from the Parliament building. Over 200 people were severely injured, and property, including homes, schools, businesses, and places of worship, was destroyed in targeted attacks by mobs (Human Rights Watch 2020). In the following weeks, the police were accused of protecting the alleged Hindu rioters and refusing to file or investigate complaints made by Muslim victims (Hannah and Rahman 2020). Media reports indicated that some Delhi police officers not only refused to intervene during these riots but also joined in the violence against Muslims (Gettleman and Yasir 2020).

On social media, a video emerged of police officers beating five Muslim men. They were kicked and hit with batons and sticks until they appeared motionless. As the wounded men lay almost dead on the street, the police forced them to sing the national anthem “properly” to prove their allegiance to the nation (Jain and Varma 2020).

### **Violence has electoral benefits**

This failure, and even complicity, of the state machinery is a betrayal of the constitutional mandate.

Repeated interventions by the courts in India have often fallen on deaf ears. Political expediency seems to be the primary reason why violence continues to occur, goes unpunished, and

is even rewarded. Research suggests that riots can be politically beneficial to certain political parties and that state governments allow them to continue depending on electoral calculations concerning the loss or gain of votes (Wilkinson 2004; Brass 2015).

Author and academic Paul Brass argues that the maintenance of communal tensions, “accompanied from time to time by legal rioting in specific sites, is essential for the maintenance of militant Hindu nationalism, but also has uses for other political parties, organizations, and even the central and state governments” (Brass 2015). Brass also found that riots or pogroms are more often the result of deliberate actions on the part of a few concerted individuals as opposed to being spontaneous outbursts. Riots are fueled through an “institutionalized riot system” by “fire tenders” who are individuals seeking political gains from such divisions in society and whose responsibility it is to deepen the existing fractures or fault lines (Brass 2006).

Similarly, there are several examples of the “otherizing” of non-Hindus to portray the religious minority identity as a threat to the Hindu majority.

For example, the Ram Janmabhoomi Campaign of the 1990s called for the establishment of a temple for the Hindu god Ram at the very site where a mosque built by the Mughal Emperor Babar stood; the Hindu nationalist calls for a ban on cow slaughter, which have resulted in vigilante violence, including the lynching of members of Muslim, Dalit, and tribal communities who engage in bovine trade; and calls for “anti-conversion” laws, which seek to regulate religious conversions.

The electoral success of the BJP can be directly linked to the Ram Janmabhoomi Campaign. The leaders of the campaign argued that the mosque, Babri Masjid, was an affront to Hindu sentiment as it was supposedly built on the birthplace of the Hindu god Ram and therefore must be demolished. On December 6, 1992, the mosque was brought down by a violent mob. The BJP has since gained the position of being the defenders of the Hindu faith and way of life.

Similarly, the Hindu nationalists’ national campaign against religious conversions helps build a narrative that Christian missionaries induce “gullible” Hindu Dalit and tribal communities to Christianity, destroying their Hindu culture and traditions. The anti-conversion laws serve as a constant reminder to Hindus that religious conversions need to be investigated as they are deceitfully conducted by offering money or charity to the poor.

This pattern of divisions being in part manufactured, and then exacerbated by weak institutions, including the legislature, the executive, the judiciary, and the media, underscores the urgent need for the recovery of a robust, *covenantal* pluralism in India. This holistic vision, which is fully consonant with India’s founding ideals, offers hope through a combination of “top-down” and “bottom-up” initiatives—namely, strengthening the rule of law and building fraternity.

### **Rule of law: Ensuring justice, protecting equality and liberty**

The rule of law ensures the principles of justice, equality, and liberty, guaranteed under the Constitution, to find expression in the everyday life of citizens. A robust legal system requires an independent judiciary and a vigilant civil society. These are critical to protection of covenantal pluralism. However, many challenges remain.

### ***Justice***

After the violence in Kandhamal in 2008, several Christian faith-based organizations started systematically documenting and tracking attacks on Christians. Websites such as MapViolence.in and annual reports on incidents of violence emerged, which helped identify hotspots and trends and take early action against violations. Similar efforts to document violence against Dalits and

Muslims also began.<sup>8</sup> Concerted efforts to verify violations and pursue legal remedies available under the law have helped to build public awareness about such violations.

Legal recourse can, however, be expensive and not well-understood. Therefore, building the capacity of a community to understand their constitutional rights and legal processes is critical. Providing legal support and training to victims and vulnerable communities is a proven method to build resilience and strengthen the rule of law. Research suggests that legal empowerment leads to dispute resolution and change in policy by increased community participation (Goodwin and Maru 2017).

### ***Equality***

There is also a greater need for parity in the compensation and reparations for victims of targeted violence. While there can never be adequate compensation for the loss of a loved one or for the sense of fear and trauma that such violence leaves within the hearts of victims, compensation is critical in helping victims find their footing again.

The victims of mob violence in the states of Odisha, Gujarat, and Uttar Pradesh are still waiting for the paltry compensation awarded to them by the state and central governments years after the violence erupted. Ludhia Digal received rupees 500,000 (a little over US \$7,000) for the brutal murder of her husband in the Kandhamal violence of 2008, which was later enhanced to 800,000 (approximately US \$11,500). Victims of the 2020 Delhi violence received one million rupees (approximately \$14,200) for the death of a family member.

These measly sums are a grim reminder that just like the violence, the compensation is also driven by political factors. For example, in the aftermath of the 2002 Gujarat violence, the state government refused to provide compensation to the mosques that were damaged. It finally paid a small amount as compensation, and only after a petition was filed before the Supreme Court.<sup>9</sup>

Civil society and scholars have regularly articulated the need for a comprehensive law for reparations in India to check State biases and protect the rights of victims (Chopra 2017; International Human Rights and Conflict Resolution Clinic at Stanford Law School 2014).

### ***Liberty***

As noted above, the Constitution of India pays careful attention to religious freedom and the rights of minorities. The Constitution guarantees the freedom of conscience; the right to practice, profess, and propagate the religion of one’s choice; the rights of religious denominations to establish and maintain institutions and to own and administer property; protection from being taxed for promoting or maintaining any religion or religious denomination; freedom from religious instructions in any government educational institutions; and protection of religious minorities against discrimination in state educational institutions and the rights to establish and maintain educational institutions of their choice.<sup>10</sup>

Yet, the enactment of laws regulating religious conversions in several states has severely restricted the freedom of conscience of individuals. These laws require conversions to be registered with the government before a “ceremony of conversion,” penalizing noncompliance. Due to poorly defined terms such as “force,” “fraud,” and “allurement,” even acts of charity could be viewed as a violation. Christians, for example, are routinely arrested and even physically assaulted because of these anti-conversion laws.<sup>11</sup>

However, in a 2012 challenge to the law in the northern state of Himachal Pradesh, the state’s High Court struck down the requirement to inform the state of one’s religious conver-

sion before it takes place, as oppressive and violative of the Indian Constitution. In the *Evangelical Fellowship of India v. State of Himachal Pradesh*,<sup>12</sup> the court held,

A person not only has a right of conscience, the right of belief, the right to change his belief, but also has the right to keep his beliefs secret ... Why should any human being be asked to disclose what is his religion? Why should a human being be asked to inform the authorities that he is changing his belief? What right does the State have to direct the converttee to give notice in advance to the District Magistrate about changing his rebellious thought?

This decision in Himachal Pradesh is a step in the right direction towards checking state overreach and ensuring that each person can enjoy the liberty of thought, belief, faith, and worship. Such legal challenges are a critical component in the struggle to safeguard fundamental freedoms.

### **Building fraternity**

Fraternity is built by seeking to befriend the “other,” recognizing past hurts, seeking to move forward, and building other common identities. This does not always come easily, especially in a country with deep divisions. However, there are many powerful examples of people being able to transcend divisions and build bridges.

#### ***India’s future runs through its past: Befriend the “other”***

Perhaps, the most iconic of these examples is that of Mahatma Gandhi. Gandhi’s call for a non-violent struggle against British rule was augmented by his call for unity between communities from different faith traditions. In his *ashram*—or a place of religious retreat—prayers and readings from the Gita, the Bible, and the Qur’an were incorporated into attendees’ daily lives as a way to build respect for the other. Amid ongoing horrific incidents of Hindu-Muslim violence, his presence at some of the bloodiest sites and his insistence on bringing warring factions together helped quell the violence at the time. His example of respect and camaraderie with the “other” continues to inspire people around the world.

In the wake of communal violence in the western city of Bombay in 1993, similar attempts to reduce animosity and bolster dialogue and peace were made by fostering bonds of friendships between religious communities. Local committees (known as *mohalla* committees), usually comprising local residents from various communities, worked together to take up common issues affecting the neighborhood—from the cleanliness of common spaces to water supplies to sports tournaments. They also acted as a buffer when tensions brewed (Thakkar 2004). The success of such initiatives was evident when young Muslim men joined with Hindu youth to organize religious celebrations (Puniwani 2017).

More recently, valuable lessons were offered by *Karwan-e-Mohabbat* (A Caravan of Love), a campaign initiated by social activist Harsh Mander and comprising citizens from various faith backgrounds. Over a year, the *Karwan* visited survivors of incidents of violence and Muslim, Christian, and Dalit victims of cow-related attacks (cows are holy to many Hindus) as a process of atonement and healing.

One of the incidents documented by the *Karwan-e-Mohabbat* website, as of May 16, 2020, highlighted efforts made to break the cycle of violence in the southern city of Mangalore. Several people had lost lives in retaliatory violence, including a 28-year-old Hindu man, Deepak

Rao, and a 47-year-old Muslim man, Abdul Basheer, the owner of a fast-food eatery. Both men were brutally hacked to death, and the city was on edge. However, instead of allowing the tensions to simmer, Basheer’s brother, Hakeem, appealed to the angry crowds that had gathered that they should not resort to violence over the death of his brother. Hakeem’s words and their refusal to parade the body through Mangalore saved the city from going up in flames. The family chose a quiet burial in the courtyard of a local mosque, and thousands gathered peacefully for Basheer’s last journey (New Indian Express 2018).

When the *Karwan-e-Mohabbat* team met Rao’s family, along with a group of local women and men of Muslim, Christian, and Hindu faiths, they realized the need for legal assistance to help secure the release of Rao’s motorcycle that had been compounded by the police. Rao’s family was struggling to make ends meet, and could not afford a lawyer. With the help of a volunteer Muslim lawyer, the motorcycle was released two days later.

By meeting the survivors, the *Karwan-e-Mohabbat* team helped express solidarity with them, creating an opportunity for the hurt to be vented. Basheer and Rao’s family helped break the cycle of violence by recognizing the hurt and refusing to be enemies.

In the backdrop of repeated violence and hostility among religious communities, creating space for dialogue, allows for prejudices to be replaced with a greater acceptance for the other, even genuine friendships.

### ***Building common, Indian identities—Rooted in each other***

Two examples of solidarity emerged in protests against the National Citizenship Register (NCR) proposed by the central government, and in the response to the Covid-19 pandemic.

In 2019–2020, protests erupted across India after the enactment of the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) by the Parliament. The CAA called for the expediting of citizenship for foreigners who have been persecuted for their faith in the countries of Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Afghanistan. The law consciously left out Muslims from its purview.

The law was enacted in conjunction with a call to create an NCR—which seeks to identify the bonafide citizens of India while marking the rest as “illegal” immigrants. A similar exercise had been conducted in the eastern state of Assam earlier in 2019. The survey left more than 1.9 million individuals as “doubtful” citizens, many of whom were Muslim. Many believed that the CAA was meant not only to protect Hindu immigrants but to prepare the way for the NCR at the national level. The possibility of millions of citizens, especially Muslims, being left out of the NCR was real and palpable.

Muslim women, who find themselves doubly vulnerable as women and as members of a religious minority, were at the forefront of the protests against the CAA-NCR. But they were soon joined by men, women, children, students, laborers, farmers, religious leaders, and political groups. Many of the protest sites featured speakers from the civil society and faith communities who articulated the constitutional vision for an inclusive India.

Media reports carried stories of how at one of the protest sites in the capital city of Delhi, Shaheen Bagh, a small sit-in led by some Muslim women represented “*sarva dharma sambhava*”—a multi-faith prayer ceremony where Christians, Sikhs, Hindus, and Muslims sat adjacent to each other as they spent time in individual prayer and scripture reading. On the steps of the grand mosque Jama Masjid in Delhi, groups gathered to sing “Abide with me,” a Christian hymn that was a Mahatma Gandhi favorite. In the southern state of Kerala, a Christian choir led the worship service in their church dressed in hijabs instead of choir gowns. In another example, a local mosque doubled as a venue for a Hindu wedding with Hindu rituals being performed inside its premises. In the eastern city of Kolkata, several hundred Christian, Hindu, and Muslim laity



and clergy joined to form an “all-faith” human chain, calling for the protection of all refugees, irrespective of their religious backgrounds.

The Covid-19 pandemic has also created an ongoing opportunity for people across the country to work together in deeper recognition of their shared humanity.

Media reports covered how Sikh communities set up *langars* (free food counters), Muslims used the Ramazan/zakat offerings to distribute food packets and helped procure ventilators, and Christian hospitals and other health facilities offered their premises and staff to treat novel coronavirus patients. There were also heartwarming stories of how Hindus and Muslims assisted each other in burial services when families could not, or did not, want to undertake the burial due to fear of infection, and of members of the Sikh community sanitizing the Jama Masjid in Delhi before the Eid celebrations, which fell in the middle of the nationwide lockdown.

While such acts of kindness are often overshadowed by violence and hate that alone make the headlines across the world, we should not forget that it is in these seemingly smaller efforts that cultures are built and nurtured. Each of these instances was a powerful statement of multi-faith solidarity, done to claim rights as citizens, but recognizing the duty they had towards fellow citizens.

This embrace of the “other” in social contexts builds trust and solidarity. It creates opportunities to learn and be challenged by the “other.”

Our engagement with the other comes from a position of strength and openness. It is an expression of comfort in our faith traditions while having an openness and curiosity for common ground and truths. It allows for pride in one’s religious identity and offers opportunities for real dialogue between faith communities.

On the other hand, it is also a position of humility which allows the other to instruct and challenge you. But most of all the spirit of fraternity recognizes that our common struggles require new solidarities and ways of working together for the common good.

## **Conclusion**

India’s history holds valuable lessons on how communities can, and why they should, work together. Believers of various faith traditions in India have repeatedly displayed the ability to hold on to their faiths with a deep commitment, but with an openness to the “other.” This is evident in the cultural traditions, architecture, music, language, attire, and food, among others. This inter-faith solidarity has fueled national movements that have shaped the course of our history.

However, the present challenges that India’s religious pluralism faces due to Hindu nationalism are real, though not new, and require concerted efforts at the social front as well as better protection under the legal framework. Our fraternity is rooted in our understanding of human dignity and respect for the other. A culture of respect must be undergirded by a robust legal system, and the rule of law requires a culture where the values of justice, equality, and liberty are upheld or honored. One cannot flourish without the other.

This requires a robust civil society, religious communities’ willingness to be vulnerable and open to others, an independent judiciary, a vigilant media, and a State committed to the Constitution of India.

The future of India as a nation depends on our ability to persevere in protecting and promoting the vision of an inclusive India as laid out in the Constitution. The question is, as Nehru said in his speech on August 15, 1947, “Are we brave enough and wise enough to grasp this opportunity and accept the challenge of the future?”

## Notes

- 1 All India Reporter 1962 Supreme Court 853.
- 2 (1973) 4 Supreme Court Cases 225.
- 3 (2002) 8 Supreme Court Case 481.
- 4 The Maoist or Naxal movement in Indian are the revolutionary stream of Indian Marxism, with the aim of capturing control of the Indian state through armed struggle rather than parliamentary democracy. See Sundar 2011.
- 5 (2014) 5 Supreme Court Cases 252.
- 6 (2016) 9 Supreme Court Cases 682.
- 7 Special Leave Petition (Civil) No.-002851-002851 / 2015.
- 8 See tracking tools such as MapViolence.in; Evangelical Fellowship of India’s Annual Report, Database of the oppressed [www.dotodatabase.com/](http://www.dotodatabase.com/).
- 9 *State of Gujarat v. Islamic Relief Committee of Gujarat*, (2018) 13 SCC 687.
- 10 See Constitution of India 1950, Article 25–30.
- 11 See *State Anti-conversion Laws in India*, Library of Congress (2018) available at [www.loc.gov/law/help/anti-conversion-laws/india-anti-conversion-laws.pdf](http://www.loc.gov/law/help/anti-conversion-laws/india-anti-conversion-laws.pdf).
- 12 2012 Supreme Court Cases OnLine HP 5554.

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# RELIGIOUS LITERACY AND PAKISTAN'S PLURALIST POTENTIAL

*Minhas Majeed Khan*

A diverse and pluralistic society is one that amiably accepts and engages people from all social, cultural, linguistic, racial, ethnic, political, and religious backgrounds. In the era of globalization, an extremism born of fundamentalism (within all religions) has kept the world hostage. Tolerance is eroding due to fundamentalism in countries where clergy encourage their communities to remove themselves from the world, if not demonize those not like them. Cross-cultural religious literacy is necessary to fight this trend in order to protect, preserve, and promote a pluralistic society where people believe, accept, and respect each other despite different beliefs, ethnicity, etc.

Some Pakistani intellectuals have argued that this kind of pluralism is fully compatible with Islam. For example the Pakistani Muslim theologian Javed Ahmad Ghamidi<sup>1</sup> emphasizes dialogue and engagement in a Muslim society (Khan 2015). This approach seeks to not offend religious feelings of religious or non-religious quarters, by giving reference to the Qur'an (especially its support for diversity and pluralism). However, most people in Pakistan consider even religion-friendly or neutral forms of "secularism" as disbelief, even unIslamic. Mufti Taqi Usmani<sup>2</sup> (2015) responded to Ghamidi's approach as advocacy for a "godless" secularism that is inconsistent with Islam. Unfortunately, but nevertheless illustrative of the current context in Pakistan, Ghamidi received death threats for his "moderate" views and left Pakistan for Malaysia. Another Islamic scholar and Vice Chancellor of Swat University, Dr. Muhammad Farooq, was assassinated for his views against radicals.

"Religious literacy" can have different meanings in different faiths and contexts. However, in a conservative Muslim society, generally speaking, it is understood to mean someone who is literate in religious (Islamic) education. This raises many important questions: If an individual is religiously literate, would s/he accept and tolerate a multi-faith society? Will s/he be able to encourage and engage others in the society to accept and respect diversity and pluralism as a function, even requirement, of his/her own faith? Are religiously literate people able to discuss religious issues without fear of discrimination? These and many other questions lead us to ask ourselves whether or not it is possible to have cross-cultural religious literacy in a religiously conservative state defined by a majority religion.

Some believe that religious literacy enables individuals to make informed choices about beliefs which increase and influence their moral understanding, respect, and tolerance for

different beliefs, and responsibility for political and civil engagement. Others believe, however, that religious literacy is merely attention-grabbing. That is to say that religious leaders respected by the public use the public spotlight solely for the purpose of increasing their influence by critiquing various issues as it relates to their religion (not on behalf of different religions) (Ashraf 2019).

Pluralism can also be interpreted differently in various societies, and at various times. The term “pluralistic society” was discussed by John Sydenham Furnivall (1948, 304) as, “comprising two or more elements or social orders which live side by side, yet without mingling, in one political unit.” In contrast, in chapters one and two of this *Handbook*, “covenantal pluralism” is defined in a way that requires constructive engagement across difference, not mere side-by-side coexistence.

David Nah (2012, 7) notes that,

[W]e are living today in a period of increasing religious plurality. It is becoming more common for persons living in urban and suburban cities in the United States and around the world to have neighbors and acquaintances that are Jews, Muslims, Hindus, or Buddhists.

Yet, in Pakistan, the debate about a pluralistic society is interpreted mostly as an idea of the West to undermine Islamic values, ignoring the fact that Islam stresses unity of humanity, recognizes human diversity, and delivers principles to deal with ethnic, racial, and religious differences in society (Musofer 2012). For example, Chapter 13, Verse 49 in the Holy Qur’an mentions:

O humankind We [God] have created you from male and female, and made you into communities and tribes, so that you may know one another. Surely the noblest amongst you in the sight of God is the most God-fearing of you. God is All-Knowing and All-Aware.

(49:13)

The Qur’an highlights the plurality of religious communities too and says that Allah has purposefully created different communities, or else He could have made all humanity one community (Musofer 2012). Unfortunately, this pluralistic aspect of Islam is too often ignored in Pakistan, despite its significance for society. It is important to understand the pluralistic aspect of Islam so as to realize and appreciate peaceful coexistence and harmony for the growth of any society. Explaining diversity, we can say that it is a natural part of human society and an important aspect of human identity. The nobility of a human being depends on one’s actions and Allah is the only one who can judge the piety and nobility of a human being (Musofer 2012).

In other words, Islam has always been a global religion respectful of diversity, and equipped to engage it. Today’s “globalization” should then be, in general, a natural for Muslims. Yet some people see globalization as a source of conflict between various global ideologies and believe that ideological conflict caused the incident of 9/11. The main effect of globalization is that people become aware of divergent values, ethics, cultures, and societies as they start comparing their values, ethics, and cultures with the newly introduced ones. The subsequent effect is that people start availing themselves of the opportunity of choice, of accepting one value and rejecting another. The same treatment is meted out to ethics and cultures. Thinking in this way paves the way for democratic pluralism entering society. So, in this context, democratic pluralism is about diversity, cohesiveness, and that a state should not represent any distinct racial, ethnic, linguistic, cultural, religious, or sectarian community (Rashid 2014).

Discussing statehood, democratic pluralism as an abstract idea is opposite to the nation-state concept, wherein the latter identifies the state with one homogeneous nation. Globally, the nation-state concept began failing with the start of World War II. However, Pakistan, after independence, tried to identify as a nation-state on the basis of religion, which its political leadership has tried to do until at least 1989, when the Cold War ended. In the latter years, Rashid (2014) argues that globalization and modernity—as defined by education, media, and consumerism—are the main sources of democratic pluralism in Pakistan.

After 9/11, when the world was grappling with the fear of ideological war between Islam and the West, Pakistan under the military ruler, General Pervez Musharraf, embraced modernity. The government opened up its economic policies which led to an inflow of money from expatriate Pakistanis, which tended to bolster the culture of consumerism and modernity (Rashid 2014). Despite this influx, Pakistani society remained traditional as it liked homogeneity, which is naturally opposed to engaging across difference (i.e., pluralism). For example, Pakistan is an agrarian state where 64% of the total population is rural and 36% is urban. The rural population is mostly illiterate because of poverty. But the local leaders—e.g., the sardars, maliks, and khans—are generally unwilling to expose them to education. To do so would make these Pakistani citizens aware of their rights and thus challenge the authority of the local leaders. However, democratic pluralism did spread to urban areas, affecting the local culture in Pakistan (Rashid 2014; Akbar 2012).

In urban areas, the mushroom growth of the English medium private education system in schools, colleges, and universities, private electronic media channels telecasting Western dramas and movies and introduction of various social media platforms resulted in discussing most topics. The right-wing political and religious political parties campaigned against this form of modernity, but they failed and surrendered electoral space to center-right and center-left political parties. An authoritarian political thought gained popularity by 2007 under General Pervez Musharraf, but later collapsed, temporarily, after the assassination of Benazir Bhutto on December 27, 2007. The subsequent transition to a civilian led democracy caused many to believe that political liberalization and democratic pluralism were being strengthened in Pakistan (Rashid 2014). Unfortunately, however, almost all governments in this time period failed to deal with the opponents of modernity, who were still there. These groups were appeased by the leadership of various political parties from time to time, as each party used the anti-modern parties for their own purposes (Akbar 2012). They did so according to the pattern of Pakistani politics.

For example, from General Zia's presidency (1977–1988) till Musharraf's regime (2001–2008), it was a common factor for the state to support and fund religious parties; which, in turn, resulted in the strengthening and expansion of the madrasah sector. The liberal/modern forces always condemned this pattern; however, their voices were silenced through different means, sometimes under the Constitution and in other instances blaming them for insulting Islam. Ironically, the US as the global advocate of democracy and human rights ignored the military dictators' authoritarian rule and suppression of supporters of democracy and democratic political parties. In fact, the US financial and military support for Cold War jihad in Afghanistan against the Soviet Union helped increase the standing of religious political parties. Now, the extremist students graduating from many of the madaris funded by these right-wing groups are carrying on jihad against the dissidents within Pakistan. This issue is at the heart of moving Pakistan forward, and thus how cross-cultural religious literacy might be applied.

### **An analysis of religious literacy and pluralism in Pakistan**

Since the creation of Pakistan in 1947, it has been a permanent flashpoint of one form of ethnic, linguistic, or religious crisis or the other. Mutilation and killing of persons, and loss of busi-

ness activities and properties, characterized these crises. According to the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 96.28% of the population is comprised of Muslims with 85–90% Sunni, 10–15% Shia, 1.59% Christians, 1.60% Hindus, 0.22% Ahmadi, and 0.07% others. The data show religious diversity but not pluralism. In fact, the incidents of religious intolerance are on the rise in the form of hatred, violence, and extremism towards religious minorities, other minority sects, and even towards Muslims. The extremist elements play on the religious sentiments of the masses and incite mobs (Khan 2013). For example, in April 2017, Mashal Khan, a student of Mass Communication in Abdul Wali Khan University Mardan, was murdered on false allegations of blasphemy (*BBC News* 2018).

Unfortunately, media coverage is not always present, or accurate, given the various sensitivities of the political actors—e.g., political authorities in the capital do not want to risk the perception by some that they are less than Islamic by paying too much attention to minority faith traditions. In this context, intolerance, discrimination, and violence against religious minorities, madaris, and their curricula take place. In particular, the Blasphemy Law, Hudood Ordinances, and the lack of democratic institutions and processes encourage such actions.

Field work on religious pluralism within Islam in Pakistan comprised of interviews and surveys from 500 people of diverse economic social setups from the four provinces of Pakistan (Kugelman 2011) mentions that less than 7% of the population embrace the value of diversity within Islam. However, most respondents rejected the notion of difference and stated that “when people are exactly the same, ‘equality’ is greatly enhanced.” Supporters of this viewpoint, for instance, prefer that all Muslims say their prayers in the same way. This “denial of difference” is not tied to common demographic indicators, such as socioeconomic status. In fact, the data revealed that as wealth rises, people are somewhat less likely to support diversity (Kugelman 2011). Since the study, Pakistan has witnessed more intolerance, providing one of the best case studies of religious intolerance that leads to extremism and violence. While many factors lead to religious intolerance and subsequently violence in Pakistan, the signs of religious extremism, and its impact on social, economic, and political spheres have become a permanent feature of Pakistan, leaving no space for a pluralistic society.

It was not always so. During the inauguration of the Constituent Assembly on September 11, 1947, founding father Mohamed Ali Jinnah declared his vision for Pakistan:

You will find that in course of time Hindus would cease to be Hindus and Muslims would cease to be Muslims, not in a religious sense because that is the personal faith of each individual, but in the political sense as citizens of the state.

Mr. Jinnah unequivocally said that:

in any case Pakistan is not going to be a theocratic state—to be ruled by priests with a divine mission. We have many non-Muslims—Hindus, Christians, and Parsis—but they are all Pakistanis. They will enjoy the same rights and privileges as any other citizens and will play their rightful part in the affairs of Pakistan.

(Jinnah 1948)

So, what happened? Why is Pakistan not a pluralist society? Unfortunately, the nature of the political system has not remained consistent due to constant breakdowns of the Constitution and political order, lack of democratic institutions and processes, the increasing role of the military in politics, and the rapid expansion of the bureaucratic elite.<sup>3</sup> Experts believe that the military has identified enemies among its fellow-citizens, like Baloch, Bengalis (and now Sindhis

and Pashtuns) and has used religious elites when and where there was opposition or intervention by elected representatives to the policies that were under military influence. These factors have proven catastrophic and self-destructive to the founding vision of pluralism and tolerance (Akbar 2012).

Specifically, many point to the rule of General Zia ul Haq (1977–1988) as a principal reason why religious extremism spread in Pakistan, resulting in today's intolerant society. There is a strong belief that it is the fallout of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan (1979), fueled by a Shia-Sunni proxy war between Iran and Pakistan, and intensified by Pakistan's assistance to the Mujahedeen in Afghanistan under Zia, that finally accelerated after 9/11. In the Zia era, the incidents of inter-religious conflicts involving Sunnis, Shia, Ahmadis, Christians, Hindus, and other minority religious groups increased in Pakistan. Earlier, many sects co-existed, but in a way that reinforced identity markers, heightening sectarian divisions and promoting sectarian conflicts.<sup>4</sup>

Zia brought changes in the legal system, to include establishing Shariah courts to try cases under Islamic law. Islamization was promoted through print media, television, radio, and mosques. Zia's Islamization was meant to gain domestic legitimacy and undermine his political opposition, the moderate, mainly secular, mainstream political elite (ICG 2002). Zia included Articles 298B and 298C in the Pakistan Penal Code (PPC) in 1984,<sup>5</sup> which prohibited Ahmadis from adopting a Muslim identity. In 1985, he introduced a separate electorate<sup>6</sup> for religious minorities as an essential part of his plan to turn Pakistan into a theocratic state. Later on, through Executive Order 24 of 2002, General Pervez Musharraf put a joint electorate in place. The joint electorate lifted the requirement to declare religion when registering to vote. Millions of Hindus and Christians in Pakistan were listed along with Muslims, who could vote in general elections. However, a supplementary voters list was created for Ahmadis. Also, despite having representation in the Provincial and National Assemblies, religious minorities were not allowed the same legislative power as Muslim representatives.

Further, to get credibility, Zia with the support of the religious elites, wooed Dini Madaris—private and state-owned religious schools that teach Islam—through a package of enticements. The 1979 education policy envisaged 5,000 mosque schools and established a National Committee for Dini Madaris (religious seminaries) to transform the madaris into an integral part of the educational system (ICG 2002). These madaris serve the poor strata of society but they are also a source of radical fundamentalism, and thus extremism and violent conflict. Many opinions and editorial writings in the West have also highlighted the role of madaris in propagating intolerance and extremism (Khan 2015). During this time, modern texts of Pakistani history included an ideology of Pakistan as a historical force that motivated the movement for Pakistan, depicted Jinnah as a religious leader who sought to create a theocratic state, and presented the ulema (Islamic scholars) as heroes of Islam because they rejected a liberal interpretation of religion (Hoodbhoy and Nayyar 1985).

Various circles express that textbooks present a distorted history of the origin of Pakistan in which exclusion of facts and inclusion of official narrative of Pakistan as an ideological state is presented that shaped one religious identity resenting others. Zaidi (2013) quotes madaris as a medium for promoting extreme religious, sectarian, social, and political views. Hence its education rejects diversity and inculcates intolerance and radicalization in society that leads to militancy. On the contrary, Imran Sajid, lecturer in the Department of Sociology at the University of Peshawar, told me that in his research he found that madaris do not indoctrinate or teach hate and violence. He said that the madaris role during the Soviet invasion was for political purposes, and after 9/11, there was a call for jihad but there is no evidence as to which schools of thought of madaris are involved. Similarly, Shia-Sunni clashes manifest in all provinces of



Pakistan (Khan 2017a). Recently, activists of Ahle Hadees Ittehad Council protested during an anti-Shia rally in Karachi, on September 20, 2020 chanting *Shia Kafir* (Shia's are non-Muslims).

In this overall context, religious education has been a compulsory subject in schools in Pakistan. But it has not helped in inculcating religious literacy as its focus is the learning of basic knowledge about Islam without going into the details of different sects of Islam and the differences among them. The division of Muslims into Sunni and Shia and the further division of Sunni tradition into different sects<sup>7</sup> is an enormously significant dimension in sectarian violence in Pakistan (Ashraf 2019). There remains a need for evaluation and improvement of the teaching and learning about religions in schools in order to explain misperceptions about practical application as well as to engage religious education with diversity (Brown and Terry 1995). Different sects have different madaris and their own madrasa network, controlled by a Wafaq (board).<sup>8</sup> Every board has its own system of education and a Talib (seminary student) after passing his/her annual exams is rewarded with a certificate (Zaidi 2013). Even though religious education does not support sectarian [or minority religions] differences, individual opinions about sectarian [religious] differences are still a major component of divisiveness in Pakistani society (Ashraf 2019).

Due to criticism of the madaris, reform efforts have been made. However, the government not only resisted them, they acquiesced to the religious elites and allowed more narrowly Islamic religious content from the madaris to be placed into the existing curricula of public schools. Also, as a source of indoctrination of youth, there is no check on madrasa curricula and registration, and sources of their funding (Khan 2012).

According to Brown and Rose (1995), the teachers of religious education in schools teach religious literacy in class. Their view, however, does not reflect social cohesion or religious inclusion because they are not in agreement on providing equal rights to all students of different religious beliefs. In reality, most public school teachers practice and teach their personal ideology centered on their own particular religious sect—most of which reject the concept of religious literacy (Brown and Rose 1995). In other words, in Pakistan today, many religious teachers cannot claim to be religiously literate. Also, a mosque's imam (who often does not actually qualify to be an imam because he is religiously illiterate) in some cases incites people for violence, taking advantage of his respect in society.

The trend in intolerance and radicalization has also gripped schools, colleges, and universities where many innocent people have lost their lives because of false contentions, hatred, and personal vendetta. Dozens of people accused of blasphemy have been murdered in recent years. The intolerance due to radicalization through educational, especially madari platforms is present throughout the country. Supporters of reforming the blasphemy laws have been killed by common people, as many applauded the killers as heroes. As referenced above, Abdul Wali Khan University witnessed the lynching of one of its students, Mashal Khan, for allegations of blasphemy. The truth, however, was that he criticized university administration for mismanagement. The police investigation also reported no evidence of blasphemy by Mashal, only that he supported freedom of speech. Despite protests demanding justice for Mashal (*BBC News* 2018), and debates on the use of blasphemy allegations to settle personal grievances, the government could not do much fearing reaction from conservative elements.

In another incident, a college student killed his teacher for organizing a reception of new male and female students. The killer was praised in many quarters. Similarly, in Peshawar High Court where a young boy killed someone claiming to be a prophet, the killer was hailed and garlanded in a subsequent court hearing by far right supporters. In yet another incident, a young Christian high-school student was humiliated and punished by his teacher on the first day of school for not wearing a uniform. The Christian was killed by his classmate on the second day for drinking water from the same glass as other Muslim students.

The political discourse on mainstream and social media is also polluting the people's minds and is promoting a culture of intolerance, rigidity, and abuse. Not unlike most countries around the world, Pakistan is witnessing increased intolerance on social media sites like Facebook and Twitter. There is no check on individuals' and groups' accounts that are openly spreading misinformation about sensitive religious issues. I remember I retweeted a tweet about Pakistan's first Nobel winner Abdus Salam, who was Ahmadi. Within minutes, a follower sent a direct message saying that he is deleting me because I was promoting an Ahmadi. People are cautious of discussing religion in public. In schools, colleges, and universities, everyone is opinionated about religion, and saying something opposing or correcting their views can be lethal for a teacher.

Because of social discrimination and religious intolerance, religious minorities, particularly Hindus in Sindh Province, and Christians and Ahmadis in Punjab Province, become victims. Most of the religious and political leaders, including representatives of religious minorities and government officials during interviews with me said that intolerance is not the result of society but extremist religious groups perpetrating violence against religious minorities. For example, a report of the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) in 2017 linked the rise of the Taliban and other extremist groups with the suppression and oppression of the minorities and anyone else who dared to express/live religious beliefs different from the radicals. In my own experience, I once met a Hindu shopkeeper who told me how Hindu girls were abducted and forced to convert to Islam. No one could do anything because of the potential for blasphemy allegations against the Hindu community.

Marvi Sirmed (2020) writes, "The mere accusation of blasphemy has become a license to kill in most of the Muslim world, particularly in Pakistan." She further states that at least 18 people convicted of blasphemy are on death row, while another 19 are serving life sentences. More than 70 people were killed before appearing for trial. During one 30 days stretch in July and August 2020, 42 cases of blasphemy were registered. During the most recent spike in blasphemy accusations, a coalition of clergy filed dozens of blasphemy cases against several individuals from the minority Shia community which is unprecedented (Sirmed 2020).

And so we have a certain irony in Pakistan: Those who are against intolerance and support a pluralist society are labeled non-religious by religious radicals who are not religiously literate. If some of these are asked to translate a verse of the Holy Qur'an, they would not know its interpretation. In a society when there are few religious scholars and many religiously illiterate imams, it is very difficult to express views on religion and interpret the scripture in a politically moderate way. The extremists reject the notion of diversity, pluralism, and peaceful coexistence. Sirmed (2020) argues that during the increasing intolerance, judges, lawyers, politicians, law enforcement officials, academicians, and human rights activists operate in an environment of fear because they know that they can be targeted. Many religious scholars have been killed or fled the country to save their lives because of their support for mutual respect and peaceful coexistence. Such is the bottom-up grassroots environment in Pakistan. But we must also discuss the evolution of the top-down government and the constitution.

### **The constitutional lapses**

In a consistent democracy we see engagement of multiple political parties' representatives as role models, and the laying of foundations for pluralism. But Pakistan has not been consistent. As mentioned above, Pakistan saw some democratic pluralism in the post-1989 era through the forces of globalization. Yet the government could not lay a strong foundation for democracy, mainly due to frequent military interventions and corruption. The two democratic tenures of the leaders of the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) (Benazir's husband—Asif Ali Zardari<sup>9</sup>) and

Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PMLN) attempted to decrease military interventions in politics. But Nawaz Sharif could not complete his term while PPP completed his five-year term but was charged with corruption (as was Nawaz). Unfortunately, leaders of almost all political parties align themselves with the military and give up on policy making decisions so as to complete their tenure.

Within Pakistan a significant number of scholars (as discussed above, to include the textbooks in schools and universities),<sup>10</sup> term Pakistan to be an ideological state, created for Islam. But the founding members were secular and progressive in their approach and did not aim for a theocratic state. Some scholars argue that Islam is the cementing force creating a national identity in Pakistan, which otherwise, stands divided along ethnic, provincial, cultural, religious, class, and linguistic lines. Thus a national curriculum, they insist, promotes unity by using religion as the boundary between self and other (Bajoria 2012; Durrani and Dunne 2010). This opinion is based on the view that Islam was imposed to hold together an artificially constructed nation of feuding ethnic groups (Kaplan 2009). Pakistan found it difficult, even decades after its independence, to determine its identity, mostly because the weak liberal leaders could not dare to offend the tough orthodox leaders and clergy in the initial days of Pakistan. It is also argued that this search of collective identity since 1947 is reflected in the disparate and sporadic approaches to educational policies and curricula.

The Pakistan Tehreek Insaf (PTI) government tried to change this approach with its so-called “Single National Curriculum” (SNC), which was introduced in 2020. The curriculum is set by the federal government, though education is a Provincial subject, per the 18th Amendment (2010) to the Constitution (which undid the provision that military dictators had introduced to tighten their grip on power to legitimize their coup). Critics say that SNC will undo the 18th Amendment at the behest of the military, which is against it, so as to indoctrinate the already conservative society (Torwali 2020) through their alliance with clergy for prolonging their rule.

Pakistan was declared an Islamic Republic under the Objective Resolution (1949), which also guaranteed equal fundamental rights for all and protection against any discrimination.<sup>11</sup> The three constitutions—1956, 1962, and 1973—reiterated this guarantee (Khan 2017). However, the ground realities say otherwise. As far as the Objective Resolution, few believe that there should not be any relationship between religion and state as envisaged in the Constitution since it creates a feeling of second rate citizens among the religious minorities (Peters 2016).

There are provisions in the Constitution that state only Muslims can become President, Prime Minister, and Governors; all of which make it more difficult to encourage pluralism. The two Constitutions of 1956 and 1962 had clear protection of minority rights but not the 1973 Constitution. Under the 1973 Constitution, the Ahmadi group was declared as non-Muslims through an Amendment, by Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, on the insistence of religious political parties like Jamat-i-Islam (JI), the Deobandi Jamiat-Ulema-e-Islam (JUI), and the Barelvi Jamiat Ulema-i-Pakistan (JUP), the center right Pakistan Democratic Party, and Pir Pagara’s Muslim League. Following the anti-Ahmadi violence in 1954, the government appointed a special court of inquiry. The Munir Commission<sup>12</sup> report concluded that religious experts should stay out of constitution-making, while government should stay out of the business of defining who is a Muslim or how to enforce Islam as the state religion.

Despite that, at present the persecution of Ahmadis is rising and the media mostly do not report the harassment and/or persecution of religious minorities. Sattar (2011) claims that the increasing intolerance results from the government’s years of sponsoring militant extremism, which, in turn, has been followed by another government that is unable or unwilling to stop the extremism. Freedom of expression is the victim in all sectors of society. The recent spike in sectarian violence has also resulted in target killings of religious leaders from both sects

and Ahmadis in different parts of Pakistan and even in the theologically conservative Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province (Sattar 2011). Recently, more than 10 Ahmadis were killed in Peshawar<sup>13</sup> and its peripheries only, but most of the cases were not reported in the media.

The Financial Action Task Force (FATF) located in Paris, in June 2018 placed Pakistan on its “gray list” for terror funding and money laundering and was given a plan of action to be completed or face the risk of being blacklisted. Sadly, the deadlines given have expired though Pakistan made some progress on an action plan. Out of 27 action items, Pakistan has addressed 14, having different levels of improvement on the rest of the action plan. FATF urged Pakistan to speed up on the action plan by June 2020 and, as of this writing it has failed to do so. Pakistan was also placed on the US State Department’s “Country of Particular Concern” (CPC) list for violation of human rights, particularly discrimination against religious minorities. In 2019, the US Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom Samuel Brownback met the Pakistani Foreign Minister, who told the US Ambassador that it was a mistake to put Pakistan on such a list as Pakistan was a multi-religious and pluralist society where the Constitution gives all equal rights without any discrimination (*Daily Patriot* 2019).

### **Pakistan's pluralist potential**

This chapter provided an overview of the general concept of tolerance in the context of Pakistan, to include its potential to stimulate cordiality and understanding rather than sustained hostility, suspicion, and violence in various ethnic and religious identities. Presently, however, disharmony due to religious extremism, intolerance, and refuting diversity are grave challenges for the state and its security. Religious literacy and pluralism in Pakistan have remained issues of great concern and debate globally. The (violent) incidents of extremism and radicalism in Pakistani society demonstrate the deep roots of intolerance. There are arguments in academic and social circles that the mixing of religion in politics is the source of all ills in Pakistan. Consequently, some suggest the exclusion of religion from politics. While many disregarded the notion that religion has anything to do with intolerance and hence violence, it is nevertheless a fact that religion has been used in all incidents.

Pulling up the roots of intolerance is a long-term process requiring commitment, mutual consensus, and collective efforts from all stakeholders at the government and grassroots levels

(Sarwar 2011). It is only possible in a strong democratic society, one in which the rulers are answerable to the voters, who empower people who are able to influence their governments on crucial issues. More importantly, building strong and viable institutions takes time. For a sustainable democracy, collective efforts of political and religious leaders, civil society, academia, the judiciary, and the media are required.

Texts in books inciting hate and biases against sects of Islam and religious minorities should be removed from public schools and madaris. It is important to take tangible measures to revise, modernize, and regulate madaris syllabi and advance public education on Pakistan's diversity, and thus enable pluralism. Moreover, there should be an oversight body to monitor the progress of madaris on reforms to their curricula and to keep a check on mosques and particularly the Friday sermons through local communities. The imam in a mosque should be madrasah qualified and appointed by the government (Khan 2013). The Education Ministry has to advance public education on Pakistan's diversity and should introduce courses in educational institutions on related issues.

After the attack on the Army Public School in Peshawar by militants in December 2014, killing around 150 students and teachers, the government initiated madrasah reforms while scrutinizing the religious materials in order to prevent the spread of hate. However, despite these

measures, missing links exist between policy making and policy implementation, which need to be addressed to guarantee and ensure religious tolerance and a pluralist approach in government laws—for the benefit of everyone, and above all, for security as well as for a stable and peaceful Pakistan. It is important to note that some religious and political leaders are aware of these problems and many privately express openness to bringing changes in laws like the blasphemy law, but they are reluctant to talk about it openly, fearing opposition and violent reaction from conservative elements. Moreover, nearly all the secular political parties made attempts to amend the blasphemy laws, but no progress was made due to sensitivities of the issue even as political leadership did not want to antagonize religious political parties (Khan 2015).

To curb religious extremism and intolerance and to promote religious literacy and pluralism, the government should engage and support civil society organizations, academia, religious scholars, and the media in their efforts to promote inter- and intra- faith harmony, because it has significantly eroded Pakistan's image globally and its citizens have suffered greatly. Due to this, the government took steps to engage all stakeholders in dialogue through conferences and seminars, introduced various bills to curb the menace, started military operations in the former tribal areas (these were merged with Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in 2018) which were successful to some extent, but it was no solution to intolerance ingrained in society.

To inculcate the true meaning of religious literacy and pluralism in society, there should be a top-down and bottom-up effort. The laws to address the issue need to be implemented in letter and spirit to cope with the situation of intolerance. Unless and until there is will of the government to address the weaknesses in the existing legislation and their implementation that fails to protect its citizens, the issue will continue to result in violence. In Pakistan, it is important that the federal government should make the small provinces equal partners in the political system for provincial harmony. Moreover, it is high time to implement National Action Plan (NAP) in letter and spirit to effectively choke terror outfits and cut off their financing sources, curb militancy and hate speech against minority sects and non-Muslims, strengthen the National Counter Terrorism Authority (NACTA) and prevent abuse of social media.

A harmonious, religiously literate, and pluralistic society is only possible with efforts of the government catalyzing and convening coalitions of different ethnic, linguistic, and faith groups to actively engage in cutting edge research, convene seminars and workshops for further capacity building, and create space for exerting influence on policy making from their expertise in respective fields for peaceful coexistence. It is only possible in a strong democratic society, which empowers people who are able to influence their governments on key issues and hence create a national identity. Finally, the rehabilitation programs for the indoctrinated youth, such as those used in Swat in 2009 under the supervision of the Pakistan Army, Counter Terrorism Departments, and in collaboration with NGOs, should be introduced.

Despite the many challenges, I as a human am optimistic and hopeful about the future of Pakistan if efforts for peaceful coexistence are made. Within Pakistan society there are individuals and groups that support tolerance and a pluralist society, e.g., Pakistan Council of World Religions–Faith Friends (PCWR–FF), Interfaith Youth Action (IYA), Faith Matters, and many others. (There were some international organizations, but they were asked to leave Pakistan because of allegations of conversion.) These individuals and groups joined hands with religious minorities, and various multi-faith organizations, in their struggle for a tolerant pluralistic society. The transition and continuity of democracy, awareness among the masses about the importance of education, women's empowerment and their inclusion in different sectors, and social media activism are positive signs.

For example, while the killer of Governor Salman Taseer was revered by many religious hardliners, the swiftness of justice for the killer by Pakistan's Supreme Court is now the benchmark.

(The killer was tried in 2011 and executed in 2016, whereas previously he likely would have died in jail.) Similarly, the acquittal of Asia Bibi (who spent eight years wrongfully accused on death row in a blasphemy case), Rimsha Maseeh (who was charged with blasphemy in 2012 and acquitted and flown to Canada in 2013), and other like cases are very encouraging signs that suggest the presence of unbiased judges who will help strengthen Pakistan's institutions. The Chief Justice of Pakistan's Supreme Court, Asif Saeed Khosa, after acquitting Asia Bibi said: "Tolerance is the basic principle of Islam, if our religion comes down heavily upon commission of blasphemy, then Islam is also very tough against those who level false allegation of a crime."

Therefore, it is important to explore the possibility of engaging with religious literacy and religious education to explain the purpose, contents, and practical application of religious education so as to ease the existing challenges linked to religion in Pakistan. It is important to create a national counter-narrative and its acceptance by all to refute the extremists' narrative by inviting religious literacy as a means of engagement, and as a theory of change, pursuant to a covenantal pluralism.

## Notes

- 1 Founding President of Al-Mawrid Institute of Islamic Sciences and its sister organization Danish Sara.
- 2 He remained Member of Islamic Ideology Council (1977–1982) and was involved in drafting Hudood Ordinance, and was Judge of Federal Shariat Court (1981–1982).
- 3 The three main bureaucratic elites are military and military dominated civilian governments and authoritarian and narrowed based management, who are the actual actors involved in decision and policy makers in Pakistan.
- 4 During this era, a majority of the Shia population in Pakistan supported Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto as he was believed to be from the Shia sect. General Zia in his attempt to legitimize his rule and the Jihad against the Soviet Union supported Sunni sect acts of violence against Shias, particularly the Deobandis. Since then, there has been an increase in hatred against Shias. For details see: <https://tribune.com.pk/story/505605/shia-sunni-conflict-one-mans-faith-is-another-mans-funeral> and <https://lubpak.net/archives/132675>.
- 5 Section 298 of the PPC deals with the criminal offense of "uttering words, etc., with deliberate intent to wound religious feelings"; Section 298-A concerns the "use of derogatory remarks, etc., in respect of holy personages." These sections do not, like the sections introduced in 1984, specifically refer to the Ahmadiyya community. For details, see, [www.amnesty.org/download/documents/196000/asa330151991en.pdf](http://www.amnesty.org/download/documents/196000/asa330151991en.pdf).
- 6 Under the separate electorate, all religious minorities including Ahmadis were required to declare themselves non-Muslims in order to gain limited right to vote for only the 5% minority seats of the National Assembly of Pakistan.
- 7 For example, Deobandi and Barelvi schools of thought.
- 8 There are five madrasa boards or Wafaq ul-Madaris which are: al-Arabia (Deobandi), Tanzeem ul-Madaris (Barelvi), Wafaq ul-Madaris al-Salafia, (Ahl-e-Hadith), Wafaq ul-Madaris al-Shia (Shia), and Rabita ul-Madaris al-Islamia (Jamaat-e-Islami)
- 9 He signed 18th Amendment that stripped the power of a president to remove a democratic government.
- 10 The hateful material and nationalistic and militaristic ideologies in language and social studies textbooks were also exposed by scholars, like Saigal (1993), Yasmeen (1999), Husanain and Nayyar (1997), Nayyar and Salim (2010), Bano (2007), and several other studies confirmed the content bias in textbooks. They pointed out the conflicts and violent acts referred to in the educational process, and analyzed social studies and civics textbooks that claim that Pakistanis are Muslim alone. These studies confirm that the state of propagandist content in textbooks has remained the same over the years.
- 11 The Objectives Resolution was adopted by the Constituent Assembly of Pakistan on March 12, 1949. Prime Minister, Liaquat Ali Khan, had presented it in the assembly on March 7, 1949. Out of 75 members of the assembly, 21 voted for it. All the amendments proposed by minority members were rejected. Pakistan has experimented with an array of constitutional arrangements. None, however, has discarded the Resolution and every constitution has embraced it as its preamble with minor alterations.

- 12 For details see: [https://archive.org/stream/The1954JusticeMunirCommissionReportOnTheAntiAhmadiRiotsOfPunjabIn1953/The-1954-Justice-Munir-Commission-Report-on-the-anti-Ahmadi-Riots-of-Punjab-in-1953\\_djvu.txt](https://archive.org/stream/The1954JusticeMunirCommissionReportOnTheAntiAhmadiRiotsOfPunjabIn1953/The-1954-Justice-Munir-Commission-Report-on-the-anti-Ahmadi-Riots-of-Punjab-in-1953_djvu.txt).
- 13 An official told on the condition of not disclosing the name.

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# GEO-RELIGIOUS LITERACY, ORTHODOXY, AND PLURALITY IN RUSSIA

## Prospects for covenantal pluralism

*Katya Drozdova*

*Trust in God, but till your lot.*

—a Russian proverb

Understanding and engaging Russia requires not only cross-cultural but also geopolitical religious literacy—or “geo-religious literacy.” Indeed, religious geopolitics have created and sustained Russia’s unitary state. For nearly 1,000 years, rulers claimed power from God—or in opposition to God during the atheist Soviet times—while governing multi-confessional, ethnically diverse, and culturally distinct peoples of Eurasia. The state needed compelling national ideas and unifying institutions to survive and thrive. Patriotism and faith filled the ideational need; Eastern/Russian Orthodox Christianity provided overarching state-linked institutions with managed allowances for select other systems of belief and religious organizations.

Citizens of Russia have always navigated cross-cultural relations shaped by religious traditions, even when the state suppressed religion. Post-Soviet resurgence of religious diversity in Russia testifies to the enduring skills and emergent competencies of religious literacy as well as the potential for covenantal pluralism, as defined in Chapters 1 and 2 of this *Handbook*. Practical necessities of life have often taught people to respect and bridge their differences for the common good. The skills of evaluation, negotiation, and communication (fundamental to religious literacy as well as broader cross-cultural interactions) have facilitated the culturally complex multi-ethnic society. However, because the USSR extinguished nearly all knowledge and practice of religions, the competencies of personal, comparative, and collaborative religious literacy have had to be rebuilt.

This emergence brings riches and risks. Despite limitations on individual liberty, the current multi-confessional religious freedoms have become quite permissive *relative to* Russia’s largely authoritarian and recently atheist history. Not only the Orthodox Christian, Muslim, Jewish, and Buddhist traditions inherent to Russia have resurged, but also Catholic, Protestant, various Asian, Indigenous, and other beliefs are making headway. There is more to learn personally, respect comparatively, and engage collaboratively. The chance to fill new spiritual needs has galvanized domestic believers as well as foreign missionaries and educators. However, the state has

moved to curb perceived foreign influence by regulating religious activities, justifying restrictions with national security and cultural priorities. Resulting controversies color covenantal pluralism prospects. Cross-faith interpersonal relations and constitutional equality provisions have demonstrated progress, but state protections have faltered in practice.

In principle, cross-cultural religious literacy (CCRL) imbues civil society with the knowledge, tools, and networks needed to expand liberty, including freedom of conscience. Attention to particular constraints and opportunities of diverse social contexts enables the practical effectiveness of this approach. This chapter analyzes the extent of, and prospects for, CCRL in Russia, and how it has helped (or could potentially in the future) cultivate an environment of covenantal pluralism in Russia. The discussion addresses how Eastern Orthodox Christianity, and the Russian Orthodox version thereof, relates to all this, both positively and negatively.

The analysis builds around a salient story of transformation of a core national holiday as a window into the resurgence of faith in Russia, as shaped by the state and experienced by the people. The story shows current progress in religious freedoms, competencies, and skills, while elucidating how the government uses religion strategically to advance domestic stability and global relations (see Drozdova 2021). An innovative state ideology has emerged around age-old religious strategies mixing geopolitics with cultural traditions and historical interpretations. To wit, the government replaced the archetypal Soviet-era celebration of the atheist 1917 Socialist Revolution with an apparently secular and pluralist National Unity Day. However, the new holiday was initiated by the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC)-led Interreligious Council of Russia representing the country's Orthodox Christian, Muslim, Jewish, and Buddhist communities (Smirnov 2020). The State Duma (parliament) of the Russian Federation supported the initiative. The date was moved back by three days from November 7 to 4; the *cause célèbre*—by about 300 years from 1917 to 1612. The observance organizes around events in 1612, when the homeland was defended against foreign intervention—all of which, in turn, catalyzed the rise of the Romanov czars and their eventual state ideology of “Orthodoxy. Autocracy. Nationality” (Uvarov 1833/2016). The official celebration presents the state's version of religious literacy for Russia, even as the Russian people have had to develop their own cross-cultural religious literacy by critically interpreting Russian history and religious diversity in the context of new strategic realities in, and resulting requirements of, the Information Age.

### **Replacing the revolution: Pluralist unity or Russian Orthodoxy?**

The Soviet Union dissolved in 1991. In 1996, the Russian government decided that the Bolshevik revolution would no longer be televised, nor celebrated. No more official demonstrations with red flags and red carnations would formally mark Red October, the 1917 Great October Socialist Revolution holiday, celebrated on November 7. (In 1918, the Bolsheviks changed the calendar from Julian to Gregorian, aligning with western Europe. Notably, the ROC has continued to use the Julian calendar, named after Julius Caesar. The Eastern Orthodox Church has maintained the latter since the Byzantine Eastern Roman Empire was led by Constantinople, the origin of Russian Christianity, thus enabling Moscow's continued self-identification as the “Third Rome”<sup>1</sup>—a critical CCRL per the below discussion.) Meanwhile, there are no more ubiquitous portraits of Karl Marx and Vladimir Lenin, who banned religion as, per Marx, “opium for the people” (Lenin 1905).

A 1996 decree by then President Boris Yeltsin renamed November 7 the Day of Covenant and Reconciliation (Kremlin 1996). This decree also ordered the restoration of monuments to all victims of revolutions, civil war, and political repression (regardless of their political affiliation), and the creation of a state award for meritorious conduct in the peaceful resolution

of political, interethnic, and religious conflicts. In 2004, November 7 lost its holiday status; November 4 became an official federal holiday, the National Unity Day (Federal Law 2004), dissociated from the controversies of the revolution. The new holiday marks different historical events while pursuing the same strategic purpose of building state unity among the diverse and sometimes contentious peoples of Russia. The new official celebration has given an emphatic yes to religion, as represented by state-approved religious institutions.

The National Unity Day strategically communicates ethno-religious plurality and patriotic unity of society. At the inaugural 2005 celebration, President Vladimir Putin explained that the occasion marked the “glorious and heroic events of 1612” when “people of different faiths, different nationalities [and] social-stations united in order to save the Motherland, to defend the Russian statehood. It was real national unity for the future of our country” (NEWSru.com 2005).

Commemorations have since included Putin as well as religious and civic leaders presenting (red) flowers to the citizen Minin and prince Pozharskii monument in Red Square. Minin and Pozharskii led the 1612 civil uprising that freed Moscow from Polish-Lithuanian invaders, ending a tumultuous interregnum between Russia’s two czarist dynasties known as the “Time of Troubles” or, more literally, “Murky Time” (Soloviev 1851–1871). In the monument’s classical composition, the citizen hands a sword to the nobleman, whose shield is adorned with a likeness of Jesus. Christian and other religious representatives take part in the celebration. In 2015, for example, the ROC Patriarch of Moscow and All Rus’ joined with the Chairman of the Council of Muftis of Russia, Chief Mufti and Chairman of the Central Spiritual Directorate of Muslims of Russia, Chief Rabbi of Russia, Head of the Russian Old Believers Church, Catholic Archbishop of Moscow and Head of the Conference of Catholic Bishops of Russia, as well as Head of the Buddhist Traditional Sangha of Russia (Kremlin 2015). During the ceremony, the Patriarch flanks Putin as *primus inter pares*, stepping forward from among the leaders of the Russian Federation’s other prominent religious confessions, together representing strength of unity in diversity.

However, many question the relevance of the 1612 events to cross-confessional national unity. Scholars and politicians have pointed to discord among the peoples of Russia at that time, a dearth of ethno-religious diversity in the uprising, and November 4 being rather an established Russian Orthodox Christian holiday honoring the Mother of God icon of Kazan’ (Smirnov 2020; Zhukov and Sorokin n.d.; NEWSru.com 2005). Moreover, the current celebratory displays of religious diversity do not include all traditions practiced in Russia. Thereby they fall short of fully conveying the essence of pluralism: Mutual engagement. Nevertheless, this select representation of religious leaders and traditions demonstrates a vast improvement over Soviet oppression of all religions as well as over the monarchist preference for the ROC.

It is necessary, however, to understand Russia’s socio-historical context in order to make sense of these developments and their covenantal pluralism implications, relative to a realistic cultural baseline.

### **A Russian Game of Thrones: Multi-faith origins and evolution of the State**

Historical context sheds light on the National Unity Day as a dual microcosm of religious revival in Russia, as well as strategic resurgence, since the collapse of the USSR. Underlying the eternal message of patriotic unity in diversity, the 1612 events marked the conclusion of a dangerous period of instability, crisis, and disintegration of the Russian state in-between two religiously fortified autocrat dynasties. These dynasties were the Riuriks (who ruled from the ninth to late 16th century, becoming Orthodox Christian in the 10th century), and the

Romanovs (who ruled as Orthodox czars of a multi-confessional empire from the 17th century until 1917).

The Russian game of thrones began in the 9th century. Feuding Slavic tribes invited some Viking (Varangian) strongmen to rule over them. The Varangians were a dominant seafaring military clan, famous as Byzantine *spetsnaz*—the elite guards of Eastern Roman Byzantine Empire in Constantinople, then a global Christian and strategic superpower. A Varangian warrior named Riurik became the first ruler of Kievan Rus' (ancient Russia). His 10th century descendant, prince Vladimir, sought a religion to help organize the people and defend the Russian lands, which grew along the trade-route from the Norsemen to Constantinople. After considering Islam and Judaism, Vladimir accepted Greek Orthodox Christianity from Constantinople and Christianized Rus'. That is, he mandated conversion and used it to consolidate diverse originally pagan populations (Karamzin [1818–1829] 2012, 72–83; Kliuchevskii [1904] 2012). Subsequent Russian rulers diversified Vladimir's religious strategies. The Russian Orthodox Church emerged to validate and support the political rule, while elites of other faiths and cultures, notably Muslim, played important roles.

Vladimir's descendants split the state. (Another lesson of the National Unity Day is that fragmentation begets defeat.) Weakened, it fell to the Tatar-Mongol invaders, who dominated Russia militarily for about 250 years and collected monetary tribute for centuries yonder. These Turkic nomads from Central Asia had their native faith traditions, but many adopted Islam over time. The Tatars settled in Crimea and eastward, raided Russian lands, and governed by proxy. Other Turkoman nomads moved onto Anatolia, eventually founding the Ottoman Empire. Crimean Tatar Giray khans were the vassals of Ottoman sultans, in line to the Ottoman throne as descendants of Genghis Khan. Reciprocally, the Ottoman golden-age sultan, Süleyman the Magnificent, was possibly a son of a Crimean Tatar princess (Stone 2017). He later married a Slavic convert-to-Islam (formerly a Christian slave from Rus'), whose progeny would rule from Istanbul until the Republic of Turkey. These deep ties still affect Russian cultural and geopolitical relations with Turkey as well as with the West and the world (Drozdova 2019).

Constantinople became Istanbul in 1453, conquered by Muslim Ottoman Turks. The Christian Eastern Roman Empire, known as Byzantium, thus ended, having outlived its Western (ancient) Rome progenitor by nearly 1,000 years. The last heiress to the Byzantine throne, Sofia Palaiologos, fled to Rome. The Pope married her to the ruler of Moscow, hoping she would help reconcile Orthodox Russia with Roman Catholicism. Instead, she maintained Orthodoxy, accepted the Russian version, and linked Moscow with Byzantine heritage (Kostomarov 1896–1903). Along with the DNA, she brought the Palaiologos dynasty's double-headed-eagle heraldry still reflected in Russia's current state symbols. Since Constantinople fell to Islam, Russia has sought to inherit Constantinople's Christian and geopolitical glory.

Sofia's son and heir to Moscow's throne inspired the famous epistle, wherein a scholar-monk, Philotheus (circa 1523–1524), wrote the words that have become Russia's strategic geo-religious worldview: “Two Romes have fallen, but the third stands, and a fourth is not to be.” Philotheus explained: Ancient Rome fell to sin. Constantinople, known as the Second or New Rome, fell to Ottoman Turks. Russia remained the Third and final Christian stronghold, destined to shine “in place of powers of Rome and Constantinople.” Indeed, the Nicean Council of 381 gave Constantinople the moniker New Rome. The Russian concept of the Third Rome was officially articulated in 1589 upon establishment of the Moscow Patriarchate, in the presence of the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople and Greek Orthodox clergy. The Third Rome meant not only Moscow, but the state of Russia. (Sinitsyna 1998, 11)

Sofia's grandson was Ivan the Terrible—the first to call himself Czar of All Rus' (the Russian word “Czar” is a cognate of ancient Rome's “Caesar”). By then, Moscow became the center

of resistance to the Tatar-Mongol and other invaders, using Orthodoxy, patriotism, and brutal repression to motivate homeland defense. The Tatar-Mongol influence solidified even as Russia's subservience gave way to Christian absolute monarchy. Muslim Tatar customs and elites permeated Russia's governance and society. By the late 16th century, Ivan the Terrible absorbed Kazan' and Astrakhan' Khanates, reaching into Siberia. By conquering or co-opting his adversaries, he fashioned the multi-confessional Eurasian nation ruled by an Orthodox Christian autocrat from Moscow. This formed the foundation of successive Russian cultural developments and political regimes.

Ivan's sons were inept, and thus Riurik's dynasty ended. False claimants to the throne and foreign intervention marked the interregnum Time of Troubles. The 1612 uprising led by Minin and Pozharskii saved the day, bringing about the Romanov dynasty and the Russian Empire.

### **Religious and geopolitical expansion**

The Romanovs reigned from the 17th to early 20th century, winning Crimea from the Turks and the Tatars, and further expanding the Orthodox-led multi-faith empire to incorporate more Muslim, Buddhist, and Indigenous Asian traditions, as well as various Christian and Jewish communities of Eastern Europe. Among the notable Romanov czars, Peter the Great became the first to call himself Emperor of Russia in 1721 (Kostomarov 1895–1903). He built Russia's northern European capital, St. Petersburg, and opened Russia to Western modernizing influence. The state attracted European specialists and fostered respect for Western religious traditions and migrants. The government especially encouraged German colonists, including Catholic, Mennonite, and Lutheran (Filatov 2009, 27–30). Catherine II, the Great, was German by birth, Lutheran by upbringing, and Russian Orthodox Empress by *coup d'état*—against her husband, Peter's descendant. She provided economic incentives and relative religious freedoms to facilitate European Protestant migration to Russia.

European-Russian-Ottoman disputes about the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth sparked the Commonwealth's partition and Catherine's Russo-Turkish wars. As a result, Crimean Muslims became Russian subjects by 1791, along with ethno-religiously diverse populations north of the Black Sea (Kostomarov 1895–1903; Soloviev 1851–1879). In Eastern Europe, not only Orthodox, but also sizable Protestant and Catholic communities as well as the largest-in-Europe Jewish diaspora fell under Russian sovereignty (Beliakov 2016, 316–345). The 19th century "Orthodoxy. Autocracy. Nationality" concept arose as a patriotically inspiring upgrade to the monarchical rule of the multifaceted empire (Uvarov 1833/2016). But the monarchy fell in 1917. A civil war followed wherein the Christian-led monarchist Whites battled the atheist communist Reds. The latter won and founded the Soviet Union in 1922, initially led by Lenin.

### **Soviet atheism and the covenantal pluralism ethos**

The 1917 Bolshevik revolution overturned centuries of governance validated by the ROC and based around obedience to God and the czar. Soviet policies declared that God did not exist, destroyed or shut houses of worship, exterminated or deported ethno-religious populations, confiscated property, and persecuted clergy and believers of all confessions. The ROC collaborated with Soviet authorities and was infiltrated by security services. Anti-Soviet Orthodox believers split from the "godless" Moscow Patriarchate in 1927, forming the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad; a dissident Catacomb church emerged domestically (Khodnev 2021).

Political repressions victimized 10–20 million people of all creeds, ethnicities, and occupations. Many died for their faith or their conscience; most were innocent victims of political per-

secution. At the height of the Stalinist Great Purge in 1937, the census found that the majority of USSR citizens (56.7%) still believed in God (Chumakova 2012). The range of their religious affiliations revealed deep-rooted diversity that had formed through centuries of geopolitical expansion and cultural evolution. These affiliations ranged from Christian—including Russian Orthodox, Armenian-Gregorian, Catholic, and Protestant of different movements, particularly Lutheran, Calvinist, and Anglican—to Jewish (Ashkenazis, Karaites, Judaizers, and Subbotniks), Muslim, Buddhist, Lamaist, Brahmanist, Confucian, as well as shamanist and others (Chumakova 2012). Soviet policies targeted and nearly wiped out all of these practices.

This violence against the human spirit backfired in the sense that it elicited cross-faith relations and bonds consistent with the ethos of covenantal pluralism, introduced in Chapter 2 of this *Handbook*. Religious literacy competencies, however, have had to be rebuilt.

### **Post-communist resurgence and religious literacy competencies**

Religious diversity has returned to Russian public life, raising demand for CCRL competencies—including personal (understanding oneself), comparative (understanding others as they understand themselves), and collaborative. The latter involves understanding the spiritual, ethnic, or organizational cultures relevant to working together with diverse partners from the Russian Federation as well as the Near Abroad or worldwide. In addition to the interrelated nature of these competencies, discussed in Chapter 1, the challenges and opportunities of developing them in Russia span three socio-cultural dimensions:

- First, bridging (while remaining respectful of) the differences between open believers and others could be difficult, but potentially beneficial for all involved. The others include a range of citizens who may be atheist, agnostic, undecided, or simply skeptical about the potentially disingenuous expressions of religion. Personal interactions suggest that well-educated individuals of vast general goodwill may find religious engagement intrusive or otherwise undesirable (e.g., due to unpleasant experiences or inherent caution). With the return of faith to politics and the public square—in addition to much good that has come with this spiritual revival—people have also encountered unwelcome proselytizing, corrupt or hypocritical religious officials, and recently-atheist politicians propagandizing religion. Schooled under communism, people have grown weary of falseness or propaganda, be it atheist or religious, communist or capitalist, critical or patriotic, foreign or domestic. Thus an important value that CCRL competencies could bring to Russia is the ability to distinguish, bolster, and engage *genuine* religious sentiments;
- Second, engaging in cross-confessional relations comes with negatives and positives. Russia's cross-cultural literacy context includes overcoming the legacy of Soviet-era prejudices and oppression. Although ethno-religious violence that followed the disintegration of the Soviet Union has largely subsided, conflicts still trouble the post-Soviet space. Ongoing economic hardships associated with foreign sanctions and Russia's controversial international relations, including its ties with the Near Abroad, have contributed to societal discontent, risking ethno-religious frictions. On the positive side, however, there are also challenges of riches. The sheer vastness of how much must be (re)learned from virtually zero about so many different religious traditions—now represented and emerging in society as well as accessible from abroad—is amazing;
- Third, navigating relations with the Russian Orthodox Church remains a challenge in light of historically formed as well as modern developments, but opportunities hold promise. Although the state is formally secular, and the Constitution protects equal rights of

all citizens and all religions, the ROC has regained political influence, and the majority (68%) of Russians identify with Russian Orthodoxy (Levada 2020). Experiences vary for religious minorities. Functioning mosques, synagogues, and other houses of worship as well as churches—and various displays of prayer or other religious activities—have become common across Russia. Despite ongoing limitations, religious freedoms have become more permissive relative to Russian history and vastly expanded over the Soviet-era persecution of all faiths. CCRL development efforts must be aware of the ROC, which tends to be protective of its flock and weary of perceived foreign influence. Nonetheless, the Russian people are well-known for their hospitality, and the Russian Orthodox believers can be productive partners and conduits for engaging with their and other faith communities in Russia.

Religious communities have outgrown pre-revolutionary levels since the 1990s, suggesting progress in all three competencies. Regional variation shows patterns of diversity across the Russian Federation. Traditional Orthodoxy prevails in central Russia around Moscow. The northwest including St. Petersburg is more welcoming to Protestants, Catholics, and foreign interactions. Western Siberia, mid-and-lower Volga regions, and the Urals have returned to their poly-ethnic and multi-confessional roots. Muslim Tatar and various Christian communities there have become more socially active. Eastern Siberia and the Far East have remained relatively less religious, with notable Protestant gains. Islam is strong in north Caucasus, particularly in Chechnya and Dagestan. Orthodox Christianity of the Cossack heritage has also revived (Filatov 2009, 18–39).

### ***Personal competencies***

Public opinion indicates growing personal competencies as people choose to self-identify with and practice religion. According to the Levada Analytical Center (2020), a Russian non-governmental research organization that scientifically monitors public opinion in the Russian Federation: Atheism has plunged from Soviet-era ubiquity to 6% by 2020, whereas 79% of the population self-identified with religiosity at least to some degree (cumulative of 28% “not-much,” 42% “somewhat,” and 9% “very” religious). From 1990 to 2020, self-identification with Russian Orthodoxy rose from 33 to 68%; with Islam—from 1 to 7%, constituting about 10.2 million Muslims. Followers of Buddhism, Hinduism, and Judaism as well as Catholicism and Protestantism have remained around 1% each (Levada 2020). Protestant communities have quadrupled in number and grown to represent many denominations (Filatov 2009, 15–17).

### ***Comparative competencies***

Attitudes toward different faiths suggest exposure and goodwill toward people of varied religions. This dynamic facilitates comparative competencies and collaborative potential. A 2017 poll conducted by the Levada Analytical Center (2018) found cross-confessional amity, with improvement toward non-Christian minorities: Positive attitudes toward Jews, Hindus, and Buddhists increased from 39 to 44%, 40 to 46%, and 41 to 47%, respectively, from 2008 to 2017 (neutral attitudes stayed around 35%, and negative attitudes did not exceed 10%, for each of these religions). Strongly positive attitudes toward Christians reduced from 52 to 45%, but somewhat-positive rose from 23 to 31% (with neutral remaining under 20% and negative around 1%). While the overall affability toward Muslims continued from 2009 to 2017 (50 to 49% positive, and 32 to 31% neutral), somewhat and strongly negative responses rose from 8 to 14%.

However, relations with Muslim ethnic groups have improved. Muslims have been most positive toward compatriots of other religions and most negative toward atheists. 72% of Muslims favored Christians; the reciprocal Christian attitude was 20%—points lower (Levada 2018). When asked, how do you relate to people of other religions, only 3% said “very badly” and 14% “warily;” all other answers were non-negative (positive or neutral), including 4% “very well,” 19% “amiably,” and 58% “without any particular emotions” (Pipia 2017).

### ***Collaborative competencies***

At the state level, events like the National Unity Day—originated by the Interreligious Council of Russia—underscore the contribution of Russia’s traditional religious institutions to implementing inter-faith collaboration. At the local level, people are growing accustomed to encountering different religious practices in daily life, as houses of worship and previously repressed religious activities have become the norm (Filatov 2009, 11). Field research reveals increasing pragmatic acceptance of not only historically Russian traditions (Christian, Muslim, Jewish, and Buddhist), but also Jehovah’s Witnesses, Mormons, and Hare Krishnas preaching in public (Karamurza 2017). Societal acceptance sets the stage for multi-faith collaboration at the local level, beyond the state-orchestrated events. This may be the initial metric for CCRL and covenantal pluralism prospects in Russia. Increased acceptance and familiarity among individuals of diverse cultural and faith traditions raise the possibilities for working together for the common good in one’s shared community. As people observe and learn, they could interact more effectively in shared projects, leveraging the fundamental social skills that apply to cross-faith engagement.

### **Evaluation, negotiation, and communication skills**

Chapter 1 explains how CCRL skills of evaluation, negotiation, and communication facilitate the movement toward the other such that shared goals can be identified and implemented. In the culturally complex Russian society, these skills have developed through interpersonal interactions as well as in relations between the society and the state. Whether applied to religion or other matters, the skillset necessary to survive, work, and thrive in the multi-confessional context has been the same. Thus it was not lost—and was perhaps even honed by overcoming shared hardships—during the Soviet times. These skills are sustaining the current religious resurgence. The Russian context offers interesting nuances for thinking about and promoting CCRL skills.

#### ***Evaluation***

Under the constraints of censorship, propaganda, and limited individual liberty, people have learned to evaluate information, read between the lines, and observe beyond the obvious. In modern cyber-age terms, attentive people have developed a healthy skepticism and thus immunity to fake news and political persuasion. These critical skills enable learning more than meets the eye from strategic events such as the National Unity Day. This includes learning genuine CCRL competencies even from the choreographed displays of controlled unity among select representatives of government-approved diversity. For all the political theatre, the display of cross-confessional accord is a positive and valuable step forward for religious freedom in Russia. The ability to observe numerous leaders of different religious communities working together in an event of national significance offers a chance to learn about them—how they look ethnically, dress traditionally, behave officially, and carry symbols of their faith; what they profess, practice, believe, and represent. Even if limited, this is important and largely unprecedented in Russia’s



long history. Then, by critically evaluating what they see, observers can extrapolate what is not seen—but becomes obvious by exclusion. Observers may note what other religions are not represented, yet encountered in daily life, online, in literature, cinema, travels, etc. And one can learn about them just as well. The internet in Russia is largely open to such searches; educational materials abound; people are willing to engage.

### ***Negotiation***

Such critical evaluation of self, others, and the context, encourages one to sort out the political theatre from the underlying (genuine) personal, comparative, and collaborative implications for engagement. One negotiates cross-cultural engagements by building partnerships, considering innovations, and leading interactions. Mutual reciprocity may stem from agreement or develop through negotiating disagreements and learning something new together. Broader leadership starts with leadership by example—by sharing one’s perspective and being open to the others as well as respectful of their space. From this angle, Russian attitudes toward the ROC are instructive. Despite the ROC’s ascendance and strong following in Russia, 68% of citizens believe that the church should *not* influence state decision-making—40% say “definitely not” plus 28% “probably not” (Levada 2020). The official displays of ROC leadership in state functions have not swayed public opinion. People have also resisted the calls to incorporate Russian Orthodox education into mandatory schooling. In effect, people have favored relegating religion to family and individual choices—as part of negotiating a space for freedom of conscience. In the context where religion is often a matter of government strategy (Drozdova 2021), people wish to retain independence from religious dogma in their lives, whether in private or civic relations.

### ***Communication***

The National Unity Day example communicates strategic uses of religion, while revealing deeper personal interpretations. Verbally and non-verbally, the state celebration conveys patriotic unity of historic proportion. Geopolitically, it commemorates multi-ethnic cross-religious solidarity in the defense of the nation. However, historically educated people are aware that there was little multi-ethnic or religious diversity to the underlying occasion. And religiously educated people note that the date has more to do with Russian Orthodoxy than other religions or civic events. The skeptics note the closeness of November 4 to the original November 7, giving the country a habitual holiday without the revolutionary angst. The Russians have developed skills to handle this with grace. They may acknowledge (or ignore) the strategic communication, while appreciating the day-off, together, in the company they choose.

### **Conclusion: Covenantal pluralism prospects**

A Russian proverb teaches one to trust in God, but do one’s part—be self-reliant and help others. This seems to be revealing of the current state of religious affairs. Religion has resurged, but people do not want it to be pushed upon them, nor constrained. They value a relative chance and space for more freedom of conscience, which has been historically fleeting.

The current Constitution of the Russian Federation (adopted in 1993, amended in 2020) formally guarantees equality and individual liberties, including the right to practice any religion or no religion. The state is secular. All individuals and religious entities are equal under the law. Censorship is outlawed; freedom of expression and information—protected. Agitation, propaganda, or armed incitement of social, racial, national, and religious hatred and enmity are

banned. However, state priorities temper liberties. In effect, recent counterterrorism legislation has curbed religious expression, missionary and worship activities have been constrained, and laws against insulting believers have contravened other freedoms. Many prosecuted cases involve activities in cyberspace (Litvinova and Korobov 2020). Even for legitimate purposes, pursuing national security and law enforcement in cyberspace may challenge basic rights, including religious expression, given the growing reliance on the internet, cybersecurity problems, and the potentially invasive nature of advanced information technologies (Drozdova 2021).

Nonetheless, albeit limited and state-controlled, the current resurgence of religious plurality and relative religious freedoms in Russia is a starting point for negotiation. Cross-cultural religious literacy offers the tools and skills for further expanding that space. It is important to remember that the current status is a vast improvement over Russia's thousand-year historical baseline. That many Soviet limitations were formally removed 30 years ago also speaks to the work to be done.

Ironically, the ongoing potential for covenantal pluralism draws inspiration and experience from the Soviet-era dissident movement (Drozdova 2021). Whether knowledgeable about religions or not, the dissidents valued shared humanity and were willing to risk their lives to defend the truth and one another. Repression by the state against all members of society bolstered solidarity and mutual assistance. When non-believers stood up for believers, when Orthodox Christians defended Muslims, Jews, or others, and vice-versa, they were standing side by side "to expand the space of freedom ... and the love of freedom" (Yakov Krotov in Kara-Murza 2017).

## Note

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# TRANSITION AND TRANSFORMATION IN WESTERN EUROPE

## Possibilities for covenantal pluralism

*Sughra Ahmed*

Modern day Europe is home to an eclectic mix of communities with roots from across the globe, struggling to find a balance between rising populist narratives and integration models seeking to build connection and belonging within European nations and with Europe itself. Seemingly a continent of mixed cultures at ease with its diversity, today's Europe is deeply wrestling with its identity, threatening, perhaps, a return to the 1930s and its right-wing movements. Individualism, erosion of trust, and a full throttle drive towards preserving one group's sense of security or safety, at the expense of all others, has, at times, led to aggressive narratives and even violence. A parochial definition of who belongs and who does not, leaves little to no room for communities to engage in getting to know each other and learning to live together.

"Covenantal pluralism" offers an alternative way to building understanding by exploring the power of religious and cultural literacy, moving towards an intentional commitment to respect and protect each other. As such, covenantal pluralism creates a culture where people from different backgrounds can learn, work, and thrive, together. Covenantal pluralism "entails the obligation, the responsibility, and intentional pledge to engage, respect, and protect the other's liberty of conscience, without necessarily lending moral equivalency to the other's resulting beliefs and behavior" (Seiple 2018). This model can help Europeans to unpack and respect ties of political history, colonization, imperialism, and the modern day, giving voice to new stories about belonging, citizenship, and what it means to create a national story fit for the 21st century.

In this context, this chapter explores the role and impact of religious literacy in plural societies, in particular: France, Sweden, Germany, the Netherlands, and the UK. I explore religious literacy, pluralism, and European Muslim integration, examining implications for covenantal pluralism in these geographical contexts. Contemporary Muslim communities include a multi-generational mix of long-time citizens with recent waves of refugee and asylum-seeker migration. Recent migration patterns into Western Europe have created complex factors impacting all Muslims across Europe. The chapter concludes with case studies about how a religiously literate, grassroots activism is challenging Western Europe and continues to creatively and boldly devise narratives of social cohesion, which push against the rising tide of right-wing cultural populism and its attendant anti-Muslim hatred or Islamophobia.

## **Who, and what, is European?**

From the early 20th century, communities migrating from Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, and other places arrived in Europe with their individual cultures, languages, and religions. Early settlement after World War II often prioritized a hierarchy of needs where both newcomers and their neighbors worked towards creating a culture for all members to feel at home and thrive. Part of this settlement and integration process included exchanges of religious values, spiritual expressions, and what it meant to belong to a cultural group. It had its challenges and with consistent commitment on the part of most, different tribes created collective identities they could all respect. For example, communities sought to understand new forms of expression by reaching out to their neighbors on festive holidays, sharing cards, food, and conversation, and in so doing gave light to the power of cross-cultural religious literacy and exchange.

Urban markers reveal how this period of integration impacted the local environment. As communities have fused together over the last 75 years, landscapes have become key indicators of local diversity—from restaurants and shops selling everyday cuisine and ingredients, to local services designed to provide for various rites of passage. These included religiously and culturally sensitive services and spaces for burial, study, marriage venues, and places of worship where communities gathered. In particular, since the 1960s, the free movement of people, at least in Western Europe, has enriched diversity in major cities such as London, West Berlin, and even Alicante or Malaga! The free movement of people more broadly has also significantly led to the creation of hyper diverse cities (University of Manchester 2013).

Today, Europeans hotly debate what it means to be European, who is European, and what Europeans “look like.” As right-wing cultural populism has grown, attempts to define “European” have become contracted and restricted, rather than expansive and creative. In recent years, populist rhetoric used in political debates has had the power to incite racial and/or religious hatred, putting at risk communities across the continent (Zeyrek 2021). Public speeches about these groups, often Muslim, are underpinned by tones of xenophobia and heavily affect public opinion on socio-cultural and religious values (Hackett 2017). Rather than building social bonds across communities, political campaigns seeking public mandate tend to be divisive, erode trust, and raise levels of fear—an effective strategy that has been used in many countries. This process can diminish any appetite for communities to get to know one another and leaves little opportunity for creating intentional mutual respect and trust. Instead, this fearmongering has resulted in communities becoming increasingly siloed and disenfranchised.

European countries must move through this period, towards a time when people can have the confidence to come to know each other for who they are and build intentional trust. This strategy will drive them to know themselves, know each other, and learn to build new stories about what it means to live together. Creating safe spaces (online and in person) is a key element to building and sharing stories, songs, cuisine, and conversation about who people are, their values, and how they seek to contribute to the greater good. Essentially, they will create strong bonds of friendship, allyship, and social cohesion which often lead to a stronger sense of wellbeing and belonging for all who live together.

On the other hand, minimizing people’s experiences can have the reverse effect. Reducing “the complexities involved in understanding and appreciating a community” leaves whole populations dehumanized, furthering dangerous narratives through reductive images and language (Ahmed 2009). Shared on mainstream and social media, political campaigns across Europe capitalized on this fear during key political moments such as the EU Referendum in the UK (Lawrence 2019), as well as recent national elections in the Netherlands (Kleinpaste 2018), Sweden (Duxbury 2018), Germany (Chase 2017), and Italy (de Benedetti 2018). A common

theme of these elections was the idea that “foreigners” (read: Muslims) are coming to change our way of life and threaten our “civilized values.” Few saw the elections as an opportunity to deal with domestic challenges such as the economy, governance, and social justice.

A case in point is anti-Muslim bigotry, which has aggressively asserted the idea of a white, Christian Europe that seeks to defend itself against “infiltration.” But what does this “infiltration” mean? Is it the economic migrant, asylum seeker, or refugee who, according to populist narratives, has nothing to offer, and instead, deliberately seeks out Europe to take “our” jobs and homes? Or is it fourth generation South Asian, North African, Turkish, and other ethnic groups who are doctors, teachers, lawyers, and engineers serving all of society? Interestingly, Muslims are a small population in Europe, representing roughly 5% of the total population (Hackett 2017). While the majority of people across Western Europe identify as Christian, Muslims are minorities in France (9%), Sweden (8%), Germany (6%), the Netherlands (5%), and the UK (6%).

Major environmental shifts such as drought, poverty, civil unrest, and violence in countries around the world, as well as the role of Western governments, have led to millions of people seeking asylum or refuge in Europe. According to statistics produced by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), “Germany is home to the most refugees by far in Europe—1.4 million in total. By comparison, France and Sweden have 402,000 and 328,000 respectively” (McCarthy 2018). In “2018 there were 126,720 refugees, 45,244 pending asylum cases, and 125 stateless persons in the UK. The vast majority of refugees—4 out of 5—stay in their region of displacement, and consequently are hosted by developing countries” (UNHCR n.d.). With refugees at their highest level since World War II, this kind of movement is likely to continue.

European countries, especially Germany under Chancellor Merkel, have received both praise and criticism for the number of asylum seekers and refugees granted entry and subsequently supported. Under her leadership, Germany accepted around 1 million refugees (from 2015–2016). A year later, she set a cap on incoming asylum seekers to 200,000 per year. Positive stories about German refugees include that of Mohammed Hallak—a 21-year-old from Syria who arrived as an unaccompanied minor—who learned German and gained the top mark in his high school exams. More than 10,000 refugees have mastered the German language since 2015, more than half are in work and pay taxes, and more than 80% of young people “say they have a strong sense of belonging to their German schools and feel liked by their peers” (Oltermann 2020). In addition, Jean-Claude Juncker, former EU President, credited Merkel for her open approach to the refugee crisis. “History will prove her right, if she had closed the German borders, Austria and Hungary would have collapsed due to the high number of refugees. That’s the truth” (Goebel 2019).

On the other hand, Merkel was criticized heavily for her refugee policies, which catalyzed a fierce debate on national identity. But she overcame competition from Germany’s populist anti-immigration party, Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), which was open to working with far-right groups such as Pegida, regarded by most as racist, antisemitic, and Islamophobic, particularly under the leadership of Frauke Petry.

France, however, is a different story, with a less favorable outlook on welcoming refugees than its neighbor, Germany. In 2014, France used the forest to create one of the largest refugee camps, with extensive security measures, in Europe. The “Calais Jungle,” holds approximately 10,000 people from across the world in a makeshift “home” for the displaced. The Jungle was also a measure to hold and block asylum seekers and refugees from crossing the English Channel to reach the UK. (The British government funded much of the security measures.) The “Jungle” has often been attacked by local police. Tents and personal items belonging to refugees were set

alight in attempts to dislocate the community (Choose Love 2018). Stories have emerged from within and outside of Calais (where the dislocated were often forced to move) of families living on streets facing regular harassment and bullying by local people and the authorities. On many occasions, the police had been known to regularly *take* tents, sleeping bags, and refugee property, effectively intimidating them (Marquis 2020). This type of intimidation influences the way in which wider communities, through news stories, understand and judge refugee and asylum-seeking communities—often in unfavorable terms.

Other European nations have set up similar camps holding numbers ranging from hundreds to over 10,000 people. These include Greece's Moria camp and Lesbos, Lampedusa camp in Italy, and detention centers in the UK such as Harmondsworth, near Heathrow airport. Interestingly, in mid-2020, Turkey became the largest refugee-hosting country in the world, with 3.58 million refugees (mostly from Syria and Iraq), followed by Colombia with 1.7 million and Pakistan with 1.4 million refugees (Statista 2020).

The Open Society Foundation suggests Islamophobia has “been fueled by public anxiety over immigration and the integration of Muslim minorities into majority cultures in Europe.” Islamophobia has also been rising due to high profile terrorist attacks carried out by extremists in the name of Islam much to the horror of the overwhelming majority of Muslims and wider communities. The same report goes on to say

the 2017 EU Minorities and Discrimination Survey found that on average one in three Muslim respondents faced discrimination and prejudice in the previous 12 months, and 27 percent experienced a racist crime. Research also shows that Islamophobia can especially impact women—in the job market, for example, as is highlighted in recent research by the European Network Against Racism.

(Open Society Foundations 2019)

Such examples illustrate the current contestation of European identity, to include the presence of a minority defined by Islamophobia. The absence of religious literacy and lack of approaches that build covenantal pluralism, among government officials as well as those who fuel the rising tide of intolerance through publications, debates, and policy agendas, combine to give license to vitriolic narratives devoid of any real (or basic) knowledge and experience of European Muslims.

People can learn about each other, most powerfully, by encountering each other, sharing and listening to each other's stories, experiencing their food, art, culture and so on. The skills and framework needed to lead this type of community building exist, albeit only in part. Among other factors, urban residential patterns are one reason why this work is harder than it ought to be.

### **A closer look at settlement patterns**

In countries like the UK, minorities seek places to settle where their socio-cultural and other needs can be met—affordable housing, food, and places of worship to name but a few. In Stockholm (Sweden), however, the areas of Rinkeby and Tensta are home to Somali communities, and the Parisian districts of Jaures and Stalingrad are home to African /South Asian communities. All four of these areas are outside of the major metropolitan region where migrant communities are often purposefully housed. This type of settlement pattern acts as new “borders” built within cities forcing communities into unsuitable conditions at considerable distance from the metropolis. A closer look at the geographical and economic barriers in countries

like France, Sweden, or the UK, reveals that minorities or newcomers are rarely afforded the opportunity to overcome these barriers. Cities are designed in such a way that minorities are almost guaranteed to live on the siloed fringes. For people forced to live in such spaces, it can be challenging to easily access public transport, get to the “center” of a city for employment and other opportunities, to meet people outside of their own community and to engage deeply in their new society.

As a result, new communities effectively become invisible in cities. Spatial confinement also restricts and controls information flow between communities, meaning “exchange[s] of ideas are less likely to occur” (Kibreab 2007). “It is this lack of symbiotic exchange that makes spatial segregation a two-way encampment” (Weinstein 2017). Structural residential segregation of this kind leads to the separation of one group from another and isolates communities from equal opportunities, resources, and networks that affect their socio-economic and cultural integration in this new place (Murdie and Borgegard 1998). It is one thing not to have a vision for covenantal pluralism, and another not to have the cross-cultural religious literacy skills to engage—but it is something entirely different to have no chance, literally, for a vision of a common community, let alone the opportunity to engage the other.

Parisian suburbs share similar patterns where structural ethnic segregation has led to the isolation of Africans and forced many new arrivals to sleep on the streets waiting for the system to process their paperwork. Similar to Rinkeby and Tensta, Stalingrad and Jaures are “home” to minorities. In these areas, police presence is strong and oppressive, often fencing in communities, taking their belongings, or separating people by forcing them onto buses to be taken elsewhere, out of sight (Meddeb 2018). These models of segregation between older and new communities in Europe diminish possibilities for people to become acquainted or even friends with one another. By roping off communities, governments create a culture of separation which directly impedes integration and negatively impacts societies as a whole.

There are exceptions, of course. In 2018 a young Malian man, Gassama, was hailed a hero after he risked his life by scaling a building to save a four-year-old child hanging from a balcony. The Mayor of Paris praised Gassama and expressed her wish to support his efforts to settle in France (*France 24* 2018). Later, this chapter will explore three case studies where people are working to combat segregation and mistrust by enabling new communities to tell their stories and finding ways to share these with the wider world, raising levels of trust, respect and meaningful engagement, despite difficult circumstances.

## **European Islam and Europe’s Muslims**

Just as the movement of people to Europe is literally changing the face of the continent, as has always been the case when refugees arrive, Europe is also changing the face of Islam. Historically, most European Muslims have hailed from Muslim-majority nations. Whether new arrivals or fifth and sixth generations, many Muslims have a heritage from countries where faith was upheld by policy and even constitutions. Migrating to Europe over the last century has encouraged Muslims to creatively and thoughtfully consider their new context (place, time, and culture) as they negotiate their religious and spiritual values without relegating them to the state.

Over the last century, Western religious scholars, including Muslim scholars, have grappled with modernity, particularly as people moved from majority to minority contexts and suffered a deep leadership crisis (Hussain n.d.). Today, millions of religious adherents think critically for themselves about how they negotiate day-to-day responsibilities such as spirituality, finance, families, responsibilities to the neighbor, and how cross-cultural religious literacy skills pursuant pluralism’s mutually respectful engagement can be powerful tools through which they can



honor their values and live faithfully, side by side. Traditional Muslim scholarship encourages a deep engagement with local cultures and customs and offers a theologically rooted narrative about how Muslims infuse the old and new, creating contemporary, rooted expressions of faith which only make sense in their local milieu. For instance, British Islam and German Islam have cultural differences which are often located in their domestic experiences and embraced as unique to their context. The majority of British Muslims have South Asian heritage and the majority of German Muslims hail from Turkey. This exchange in culture and values of old and new inevitably occurs when two things come together in allyship and friendship.

Historically, many European Muslims hail from regions where Western Europe held significant power for centuries. These Muslims came to a second home of sorts, where in a post-colonial world, they expected to be met with respect and understanding, particularly those who came through forced economic migration or more recently through unrest. For instance, today's fashion industry has sought to reach new demographics by designing modest clothing such as hijabs and abaya's. Coco Chanel (and many others) have "experienced stalled growth as a result of declining global luxury sales, spurring the French fashion house to shift its attention toward new target demographics and enhanced digital strategies" (CCPLUXURY 2016).

Furthermore, Islamic scholarship has expressed the need for practical, differentiated manifestations of religious expression. The works of Khaled Abou El Fadl (2001; 2006) explore Islamic Jurisprudence through the lens of the context of time and place particularly when exploring legal issues related to women, while Mohammed Arkoun (1994) calls for a rethinking of the whole Islamic tradition in light of contemporary challenges. Dilwar Hussain's works on Islamic reform draw our attention to the importance of moving beyond literal interpretation and towards a contextual theology as a means of retaining Qur'anic values. Hussain argues that by "promoting ideas that are more open and more progressive, ideas that speak to the reality of Muslim life in Europe," European Muslims can begin to reflect the spirit of Qur'anic verses (Hussain n.d.).

In relation to religious literacy and European Muslim integration, Islam's encouragement of reaching out to and understanding plural societies is a manifestation of the covenant which adherents have pledged to God. Through textual and historical examples Muslims are clear about the importance of moving from encountering to knowing others. In Qur'an 49:13 God reminds readers that humanity is purposefully designed with difference so that we may come to know one another:

O mankind, We have created you male and female, and appointed you races and tribes, that you may know one another. Surely the noblest among you in the sight of God is the most righteous of you. God is All-knowing, All-aware.

Muslims are inspired by such verses to purposefully connect and get to know one another, to honor their promise to respect and protect a collective liberty of conscience and freedom as a means of mutually honoring faith and tradition. This way of being connects deeply with Seiple's (2018) definition of covenantal pluralism:

If we can pledge individually to respect, protect, and engage the other—without watering down our beliefs—then we can build a faithful patriotism that encourages, equips, and enables our capacity and skills to show respect for another, building multi-faith relationships as we integrate toward "a more perfect union."

Whether through law, policies, or community engagement, the role of the state is one of protecting all of its peoples and creating space for them all to feel respected and valued. An engagement

model applied in varying ways in the UK and France is that of the state taking a position on whose responsibility it is to engage in pluralism and religious literacy: Whether the state itself should remain “neutral,” if indeed such an idea is possible. In their book *Islam, Religions, and Pluralism in Europe*, Ednan Aslan, Ranja Ebrahim, and Marcia Hermansen (2016) argue that many models of integration can be found in a Europe with complex histories. They explore the relationship between state education, pluralism, and ethics and write that “all religions are treated in the same distancing manner as an expression of objectivity. The state takes full responsibility for this subject.” However, this is different from the multi-faith model of religious education in England and Wales which “clearly allows for an influence from the religious communities and from other members of civil society, most of all through the so-called SACREs—the local Standing Advisory Councils for Religious Education—which are responsible for the syllabi for religious education” (Aslan, Ebrahim, and Hermansen 2016).

Each European country has adopted its own integration model based on a range of domestic factors particular to them. Ideally, the whole (Europe) values the parts, and the parts (communities) look to the whole as they create meaning about what it is to belong and to feel European. Similarly, integration models adopted by select European leaders (including Merkel) and religious/secular groups striving towards social cohesion value themselves and each other when negotiating identities. By understanding people’s different beliefs, they also understand themselves and how they relate to others. Instead of fear of the other, and the perceived advantage that may bring to populist agendas, cross-cultural religious literacy accelerates a productive, collaborative model which allows “practical collaboration by building mutual respect, eventually generating consensus for political outcomes that allow all to flourish” (JSIS. n.d.). This model of coexistence holds true for progressive and thoughtful leadership which, despite the rise in populism and (presumed, and, hopefully, temporary) decline in religious literacy, continues to work towards building understanding and respect by engaging in and celebrating pluralism wherever possible.

### **Overcoming right-wing cultural populism and moving towards respect**

In this section, I will explore case studies of activists whose leadership is creating meaningful, pluralistic change, serving people and acting on behalf of them with love, understanding, and respect for humanity. They employ cross-cultural religious literacy as a tool to build respect and understanding across society. In some cases, this tool is used to defend and protect the rights of others as a priority. This is especially interesting when a group whose own rights are protected uses its voice to advocate for the rights of others, moving to covenantal pluralism where mutual respect is built between groups.

One such person is the journalist and documentary maker Hind Meddeb. She takes a deep dive into Stalingrad’s communities and explores how systemic xenophobic policies create an atmosphere of mistrust, fear, and desperation for those who seek to be seen and heard by the state. She describes her documentary, “Paris – Stalingrad,” as “an eye-opening exploration of the migrant experience in the French capital’s Stalingrad district,” and takes the story of Souleymane, a young refugee from Darfur, The Sudan, whose poems transfigure the violence of the situation (Meddeb 2018). Despite the horror Souleymane has experienced, he uses poetry as his survival tool, trying to seek humanity while he finds himself in the bleakest of situations. In the absence of an opportunity to meet the people of Stalingrad—and other districts with ethnic minority concentrations—Meddeb provides a unique way to build religious and cross-cultural literacy, a mechanism through which one can appreciate the full humanity of someone like Souleymane. Meddeb’s film deepens our empathy for refugees

and leads us to realize that refugees, around the world, deserve better treatment than they are currently afforded (Meddeb 2021). By viewing the film “Paris Stalingrad,” we not only overcome structural separation which has made meeting these communities almost impossible, we are also able to understand Souleymane as a person—his language, culture, art, values, and personality. The act of building empathy and understanding each other better is a mechanism of building bridges and Meddeb is able to do this through a platform where audiences can use cross-cultural religious literacy as a means to build bridges, in an interview about the film, she says “We create this solidarity. It’s not a film about refugees, it’s a film about human beings” (Walsh 2019).

The online platform and voice Meddeb (and others) give to Europe’s minorities creates renewed potential to understand difference, in this case how we can better understand Muslims from different parts of the world. By addressing complex and sensitive issues with those of different beliefs, her work looks to the vision of covenantal pluralism such that communities living alongside each other, illiterate of the other, can work towards building integration, social mobility, respect, appreciation, and feelings of safety and security for all. In the absence of shared creative spaces through which communities can meet one another, Meddeb’s approach creates an opportunity for anyone with a device to engage with the “other” (which, in this case means people living nearby, depicted as uncivilized and dangerous), to get to know them for who they are with genuine curiosity and good intentions. In this way cross-cultural literacy creates pathways for covenantal pluralism, enabling a movement from fear to respect, homogenous to heterogenous, and simplicity to complexity. She enables Souleymane to share his story with artistic freedom through which the viewer can experience deep engagement as a starting point in getting to know their neighbor.

Another important example, as discussed above, is the “Calais Jungle” (dismantled in 2019), which attracted volunteers from all around the world. People of different religious and cultural backgrounds, including British volunteers, acting as aid workers, have reported harrowing stories about the treatment and reputation of refugees in France. These include teachers, counselors, activists, artists, cooks, cleaners. Two playwright friends visited the Jungle to explore how they could use the power of theatre and art to provide workshops for people of different backgrounds and generations. Their company—the Good Chance Theatre, established in 2015 when it built its first theatre in the Jungle as a place for people to come and express themselves—uses storytelling and performance to tell complex human stories: “The world is on the move, our climate is changing, a pandemic keeps us apart. We’re working with artists from around the world, bringing communities together to tell bigger stories of hope and humanity” (Good Chance n.d.). Murphy and Robertson worked with a wide range of dispossessed communities (coming from Kosovo, Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, Somalia, Eritrea, etc.) to write a play about life in the Jungle and build a theatre where the audience become participants in their own story. The story is about moving encounters between refugees and volunteers from around the world (Murphy and Robertson 2018) and the experience became transformative for those living in the Jungle as well as people who were unlikely to experience the everyday life of these communities. The play toured in London and the US where theatre goers encountered human stories about refugees as told by refugees themselves. Through the medium of art, Murphy and Robertson created a compelling narrative which propelled voices from inside the Jungle to other parts of the world. Utilizing the tool of cross-cultural religious literacy and by touring the play, the playwrights overcame artificial barriers and are sharing human centered, compassionate, and respectful narratives about who these people are and how they see themselves.

Across the English Channel, a national network of British Muslim and Jewish women, akin to the American Sisterhood of Salaam Shalom, was founded by two friends, Siddiqi and Marks,

in 2015. Nisa-Nashim (n.d.) focuses on the power of bringing people together and working towards friendship. It seeks to bring

communities together and promote ways in which Jewish and Muslim women can understand that their similarities are greater than their differences, through a range of shared initiatives that support their leadership journeys and encourage them to form meaningful personal relationships, while benefiting the wider society in which they live.

Siddiqi and Marks began this work at a time of hostility and hate towards minorities in the UK. They were motivated to create a network of Muslim and Jewish women who were passionate about moving beyond pejorative notions of the other to conversation, respect, and action. Inspired by their faiths of Islam and Judaism, they have a genuine interest in learning, growing, and inspiring deep relationships of love and understanding in their members who in turn share with their neighbors/colleagues, creating a ripple effect across the country. For example, during a national conference on antisemitism, a Nisa-Nashim Muslim trustee tweeted: “I pledge to stand, in word and deed, against antisemitism towards women” (Nisa-Nashim 2018). They invited people to pledge and become an Active Ally for anyone experiencing discrimination. The network inspires members to move through their own theology and work towards the human rights of each other, building a world in which all people are safe and free from Islamophobia and antisemitism—a vision motivated by their respective covenants with God.

The power of Nisa-Nashim made the local press in Birmingham when a Jewish woman out for a walk came across antisemitic graffiti on a wall. She contacted her local chapter of Nisa-Nashim and the police, and together they set to work to remove the graffiti and fill the space with a rainbow—a symbol of hope and gratitude for the National Health Service (a commonplace gesture since the arrival of Covid-19). While, until recently, dialogical frameworks for religious literacy have been an important part of Europe’s journey in understanding the self and each other, it is often when those deep bonds of respect lead to effective action in the public square that societies benefit from the outcomes of covenantal pluralism. An intentional pledge to understand ourselves, gain the skills to engage each other, and move towards respectful understanding creates a safer public square for everyone.

Indeed, the former Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, articulates the relevance and importance of faith in order that society may flourish in his *Faith in the Public Square* (Williams 2012). Theos (2012), a Christian thinktank, summarizes his argument, that for any

society to flourish it must permit—indeed encourage—its religious citizens to draw on their faith for the wider public good. Conceptions of the state that are neutral or aggressively secular or unduly rational or monopolistic are not only unjust in themselves but are, in the long term, unsustainable, damning the well-spring of moral commitments that they need in order to survive.

As the impact of divisive, populist sentiment increases, we see creative and courageous ways in which communities navigate their way in the struggle for equality and justice. Community groups, often inspired by faith, have been at the forefront of navigating new pathways and building narratives of trust and respect. In Western Europe these models are rooted in local contexts where creativity is used to identify new ways of being together and learning what it means to belong together.

Muslims continue to be compelled in their pursuit of engagement often because they envision a future of coexistence. As Europeans and people of faith, they (like others) are inspired to work towards peace, particularly during a time when a minority of their co-religionists have pernicious intentions to cause harm. These leaders seek to unpack the complexity of what it means to be compassionate Europeans in modern day Europe. Whether a primary aim or a positive consequence, these case studies draw links between cross-cultural religious literacy, covenantal pluralism, and European Muslim integration, a powerful intersection useful for engaging different kinds of people in debates about who belongs and feels safe or secure in today's Europe.

## **Conclusion**

While countries like France and the UK have sometimes taken steps to restrict the human rights of their own people and those of their neighbors, we can take inspiration from countries such as Germany where a more confident and open approach has spoken volumes about its values towards change. Nationalistic, ill-considered, knee jerk reactions to change often become barriers to the long-term benefits progressive change can bring to communities. Countries such as the UK have manifested a sense of confusion about the role of new communities. For instance, while Europeans and others were compelled to leave the UK after the EU Referendum, the emergency of Covid-19 brought into sharp focus the role of these key workers on Britain's frontlines to keep medical services and food supplies from coming to a halt. In fact, many of these people were encouraged to remain or return to the country in order to fulfill these shortages.

Europe and Islam have a long history which can be traced back over centuries. Today's European Islam has deep roots in European society and cannot belong anywhere but in Europe. This rich heritage of pluralism adds to the tapestry of who is European and, should European countries shift to more realistic and fair narrations of Islam and Muslims, there is much ground to be made up in the rebuilding of trust and respect. A meaningful or intentional engagement between civil and civic society, across communities, will unlock collective values faith communities have to offer in building a strong and confident Europe fit for the modern age.

The pursuit of individual desires leaves very little room to feel as though one's needs are being met, because meeting large scale needs requires collective approaches and action. It requires a conversation on how a state governs its people. The European countries cited above require meaningful systemic changes, not superficial gestures which add to mistrust, division, and separation, ensuring the democratic process of including the rights and responsibilities of all is fulfilled. The recent rise of right-wing populism has meant that political overtures were made in the name of justice or human rights but often, the real agenda was to win elections by playing to what is disparagingly referred to as a "stupid" electorate, but is in fact a society fighting for protection, autonomy, and agency.

In a changing context, as populist narratives grow, pluralistic societies engaged in religious literacy as a means of building social cohesion are working creatively to diminish the power of these narratives. They provide space to engage in dialogue which doesn't shy away from the challenges, and instead seeks to make wide-ranging citizens feel at ease with difference and change. They strive to show the power of what can happen to a group when trust, respect, and other benefits of covenantal pluralism can be realized. Societies are shown to be heterogeneous; difference becomes a positive marker of their landscapes, social structures, and day-to-day life. They learn to share in each other's stories, recognizing the power of coming together and how this doesn't change a person's beliefs but enriches their life experience.

A groundswell of this type of change has the potential to restore the reputation of a diverse Western Europe at ease with its sense of self as a progressive and inclusive home for all its inhabitants, no matter short-term political agendas. A strong and confident Europe will need to reclaim definitions of what it means to be patriotic or nationalistic by creating room for all Europeans to engage fully in civic and civil life without fearing persecution or threat from the state or each other.

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# RELIGIOUS LITERACY, RACIAL LITERACY, AND LATIN AMERICA'S OVERDUE RECKONING WITH DEEP DIVERSITY

*Raimundo C. Barreto*

Despite the rise of secular Latin American states in the 19th century and the subsequent growth of anticlerical liberal movements, Latin America has remained a deeply religious region of the world. Two centuries after the struggles for independence from the Catholic colonial Iberian empires, the region is still home to nearly 40% of all the world's Catholics, despite the Evangelical Protestant boom of the past three decades.<sup>1</sup> According to a Pew Research Center report from 2014, about 20% of the Latin American population identify as Evangelical, and those numbers keep climbing. They are even more impressive when one realizes that three decades ago Evangelical Protestants did not represent even 5% of the population.

While much has been said and published about the rapid Evangelical growth of the past decades, such a phenomenon must be examined in light of the broader picture of an increasing religious pluralization in the region. For a long time, Latin America was considered a "Christianized" continent. During the colonial era, Catholicism was enforced throughout the region. Little room was left for the public practice of other religions. The Holy Inquisition was operative in Latin America until the early 1800s, targeting blasphemers, Protestant sympathizers, *conversos*, and recalcitrant Indigenous people (Feitler and Freston 2016, 133ff). Even in such an intolerant and suppressive religious environment, other religious practices—particularly among immigrants, merchants, enslaved Africans, and Amerindians—survived. While those religions remained constricted and marginal, they continue to exist in the region. Not only have they survived, but they have also contributed to reshaping Christianity in many ways. In the search for creative ways to live on, they often blended with Catholicism, giving birth to several branches of popular religion.

Among those marginalized traditions, Indigenous and African-derived religions are key components of Latin America's religious landscape. With the political changes that took place in many Latin American countries towards the end of the 20th century, the region has experienced a revitalization of Indigenous and African-derived religions, existing side-by-side with the rise of new forms of Indigenous Christianities (Steigenga and De la Vega 2016). On top of that, several forms of Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, and other religions continue to be practiced in



different parts of Latin America and the Caribbean. Such increased religious plurality has been accelerated by globalization, mass migration, and the rise of new religious movements.<sup>2</sup>

One of the important issues raised in connection with this increased religious diversity is the relationship between Christianity and Indigenous and African-derived religions in the region. This issue connects religious and racial/ethnic differences, calling for a multilayered pluralism; i.e., one that addresses not only religious and ethnic/racial differences, but also the lingering impact of the colonial matrix of power (Quijano 2007) which continues to shape the region.<sup>3</sup> While this is true of Latin America as a whole, this chapter focuses specifically on the Brazilian case.

Brazil is the largest Latin American country, with a population of over 200 million people. It occupies roughly half of the South American territory. Its economy ranks among the top-ten in the world. Due to the size and history of its diverse population, Brazil is home to a large variety of religions—old and new (Schmidt and Engler 2016). It has the largest Catholic population of any country, and one of the world's largest Evangelical/Pentecostal concentrations. Brazil is also home to the second largest Jewish population in Latin America, while also possessing the greatest number of followers of Spiritism anywhere in the world.<sup>4</sup>

At the same time, Brazil is a country of enormous racial and ethnic diversity. Despite the decimation of its Indigenous populations during the Portuguese colonial period, and the continuous aggression against them,<sup>5</sup> 252 different Indigenous groups remain, speaking 150 languages. Due to its role in the transatlantic slave trade, Brazil also became the world's largest center of the African diaspora. On top of that, since the end of the 19th century, Brazil has received several waves of migrants from Europe, Asia, Africa, North America, and from its Latin American neighboring countries. As a result of racial miscegenation, 43% of all Brazilians self-identify as *pardo* (brown or mestizo). The complexity of racial relations in Brazil remains puzzling. The understanding of (inter and intra-) racial dynamics is crucial to the future of Brazilian society. In such a context, religion and race are important factors for Brazil's self-understanding. In considering its increasing religious diversity and racial makeup, "Brazil offers a fertile ground for the study of tensions and interactions" among its multiple religious manifestations (Schmidt and Engler 2016, 6). It is also a unique laboratory for the understanding of cross-cultural religious literacy.

### Cross-cultural religious literacy

As Chris Seiple and Dennis Hoover state in the introductory essay, this volume advances a view of cross-cultural religious literacy which builds on the emerging field of religious literacy, underscoring the demand to acquire knowledge of religious traditions as pivotal for developing healthy multi-faith societies that engage difference with respect and openness to learn from others.<sup>6</sup> Considering the surge of religious and secular nationalisms throughout the world, the pluralism fostered by cross-cultural religious literacy must be active, engaging, and transformative, going beyond mere religious tolerance. The moral demands of an increasingly polarized world make cross-cultural religious literacy and the "covenantal pluralism" it promotes imperative for our times. That is why "a normative philosophy of pluralism that does more than paper over the challenges of diversity with bumper-sticker slogans of tolerance" is called for (see Chapter 1).

While arguing for the relevance of religious literacy to address contemporary conflicts and tensions around the world, the editors of this volume are deeply aware of the importance that context plays in such a process. In the North Atlantic, religious literacy primarily counterposes the situation of religious illiteracy that results from misunderstandings about religion disseminated by secularization proponents. As Diane L. Moore (2015, 27) affirms,

For a variety of reasons dating back to the Enlightenment (including Christian-influenced theories of secularization that were reproduced through colonialism) there are many commonly held assumptions about religion in general and religious traditions in particular that represent fundamental misunderstandings.

Among those fundamental misunderstandings, Moore names the assumption of the decline of religious influence in the public sphere. While the push towards the privatization of religion has been debunked, many of the Western institutions still operate under its influence. In such contexts, the backdrop for the religious literacy project is the impoverished understanding of the pervasiveness of “the religious” in secularized societies (Dinham and Francis 2015).

But what does religious literacy look like in a highly religious society like Brazil? What are the compelling reasons for cross-cultural religious literacy in such a context? What emphases should it highlight? What challenges must it respond to? Since religions influence all areas of life and are embedded in all dimensions of culture (Moore 2015, 28), religious literacy conveys “the importance of understanding religions and religious influences *in context* and as *inextricably woven into all dimensions of human experience*” (Moore 2015, 31).<sup>7</sup>

In other words, religious traditions cannot be understood in abstract. A religious literacy project in the Brazilian context, therefore, must examine the intricacies of the complex history of Brazil and the particular ways religion—and the religions—impact the multiple dimensions of Brazilian culture and society. Among other things, the following emphases are important: (1) In Brazil, religious literacy cannot be dissociated from racial literacy; (2) religious literacy must contribute to exposing and dismantling the colonial matrix of power that still shapes the structures of the Brazilian society, privileging some religions while subalternizing others; and, in such a multireligious milieu; and (3) religious literacy must include inter-religious and intercultural literacy. While cross-cultural interactions are necessary, they may not be effective if asymmetric power structures remain untouched—and those asymmetrical power dynamics are inextricably tied up in the legacy of colonialism and racial injustice in Latin America.

### **Religious literacy in Brazil**

While a comprehensive religious literacy project is still to be devised in Brazil, some efforts in that direction must be noted. In Brazil, such conversations have taken place mostly in the context of *ensino religioso fundamental*.<sup>8</sup> The guiding principles behind Brazilian religious literacy projects are *laicidade* and religious freedom.

*Laicidade* is the Portuguese equivalent to the French *laïcité*. Recalling the origins of the modern state and the separation of church and state, *laicidade* refers to the quality of a state born from a long process of emancipation from “dogmas, the clergy and, above all, the power of the Catholic Church” (Neto Domingos 2009, 47). It emphasizes the non-clerical, or that which belongs to the public, not to the ecclesiastical hierarchy. Such concern with neutrality on matters of religion emerged from the experience of religious intolerance seen in the colonial Catholic exclusivism that affected Indigenous peoples, African descendants, Jews, and Muslims.<sup>9</sup> The first Brazilian constitution (1824) conserved the privileges of the Catholic Church, only allowing other forms of worship in private. It took 67 years and another constitution (1891) for the separation of church and state to be secured. Brazil was finally a *laico* or secular state in thesis.

The principle of *laicidade* is intrinsically connected with the acknowledgment of religious plurality. As Marília De Franceschi Neto Domingos (2009, 50) puts it,

The principle of *laicidade* is, at the same time, that of moving religion away from the political and administrative domain of the State, and of respect for the right of every citizen to have or not to have a religious conviction and to profess it. Its ideal is equality in diversity, respect for particularities, and the exclusion of antagonisms. Equality in diversity means equal respect for all religions and for those who do not profess any religion. The same principle refers to respect for particularities. The exclusion of antagonisms reflects not only respect, but mainly tolerance to the other, their beliefs, and practices.

*Laicidade*, therefore, goes beyond “the refusal of religious control over public life,” meaning also “the recognition of religious pluralism,” as well as “the possibility of the individual to live without religion, and the neutrality of the State, which does not favor any belief, religion, or religious institution” (Neto Domingos 2009, 52). Freedom from state intervention and control and coexistence within a pluralistic religious reality are two complementary faces of religious freedom. In Brazil, the state is not anti-religion. In theory, it is for religious pluralism. From the perspective of the state, the teaching of religion in public schools, which is authorized by the Brazilian constitution and regulated by federal statutes, must be understood in light of the state’s presupposition of religious freedom and religious plurality. By rejecting “confessional, proselytizing religious teaching,” the state seeks to protect the freedom of minoritized religions to worship as they wish (Neto Domingos 2009, 53–54).

In this context, *ensino religioso* can be seen as facilitating religious literacy. It is meant to be a subject in the curriculum in public schools to educate the citizens of a religiously, ethnically, and culturally plural state. That has not always been the case, though. In many ways, *ensino religioso* has become a battleground. While many public officials, schools, and educators understand the importance of teaching religion in a nonsectarian fashion (from a phenomenological or religious studies perspective), others, especially religiously militant public officials and educators, try to take advantage of the opportunity to teach religion from a Christian normative perspective (Moore 2015), favoring their own religious preferences and convictions.

While the ideal of state neutrality and the equal treatment of all religions in the public sphere has never fully materialized,<sup>10</sup> it has left some marks on the structures of the Brazilian state. That is probably one of the reasons why Brazil is perceived in international circles as a country with limited government interference on the practice of religion. Brian Grim praises Brazil for its high level of religious freedom. According to him, “The high level of religious freedom in Brazil is notable as the country arguably undergoes one of the most dynamic religious shifts in the world today, with no religious or sectarian conflict.” More specifically, he states that Brazil has the lowest legal restrictions on religious freedom among the 26 most populous countries (Grim 2016).

Elsewhere, Grim suggests that the decrease in legal restrictions leads to the decline of religious grievances against both the state and other religions due to the free religious competition that the lack of state interference encourages (Grim 2011). As one considers the situation of religious freedom in Brazil vis-à-vis the Afro-Brazilian and Indigenous experiences, however, it becomes clearer that a more nuanced discussion of religious freedom in the Brazilian context is needed.

Grim also refers to social restrictions—those perpetrated not by the state but by social and religious groups. While legal and social restrictions on religion seem to be connected, in certain contexts, despite the lesser number of legal restrictions a religious group may face, religious individuals and institutions might still be targeted by restrictions coming from other social and religious groups. For example, as discussed, racial inequalities and prejudice must be factored in.

An understanding of *laicidade* and religious pluralism that fails to address the pain and discrimination racialized religious minorities have historically faced and continue to endure in Brazil is of little help. A cross-cultural religious literacy project in the Brazilian context must, therefore, take race and cultural differences seriously. In other words, it must be, concomitantly, a project on religious, racial, and intercultural literacy.

### **Religious literacy as racial literacy<sup>11</sup>**

In contrast with the increasing religious diversity underscored earlier, Brazil largely remains a Christian country. 90% of its population identify (although not always exclusively) as Christian. The world that the Iberian colonizers encountered in the 16th century was religiously plural. Despite all the damages colonization caused to Indigenous lives and cultures, it was never able to erase pre-Columbian cultures and religions.

During the conquest, Indigenous and African peoples were forced into a strange religious system. Those violent colonial encounters are at the root of the Brazilian religious landscape. In particular, the various responses from formerly colonized subjects and communities are to be credited with much of the religious diversity that emerged in Brazil. They are equally important when one considers ways for a more harmonious interreligious coexistence to fully emerge. In what follows, I will show how religion and race are intertwined in Brazil, paying particular attention to the suppression and silencing of African-derived and Indigenous religious traditions, while pointing to a possible path towards a healthier intercultural and interreligious *convivência*.<sup>12</sup>

Home for the world's largest African diaspora, Brazil, like in the United States, struggles with a pervasive racism, which has normalized racialized hierarchies and “diverts the unequal distribution of resources and power” (Guinier 2004, 114). The formation of Brazil took place in the context of the rise of a racialized world hierarchy.<sup>13</sup> This racialized order shaped Brazil's self-perception and influenced its racial relations.

In an attempt to hide their racist inclinations, Brazilian elites created the myth of the Brazilian racial democracy, which disseminated the distorted image of a nation that had supposedly overcome white supremacy (Ciconello 2008). That distorted image of a society where racial relations are harmonious and mutually tolerant masked a reality of discrimination against black and brown Brazilians, which continues to this day (Silva and Paixao 2014). The cumulative impact of slavery and racial discrimination has profoundly influenced the makeup of socioeconomic inequality in the country (Cleary 1999). The line of poverty in Brazil has basically become a color line (Skidmore 1992). Black and brown Brazilians constitute the majority of the working class in the country. In tandem, they also constitute two thirds of all unemployed.

The impact of structural racism is devastating and touches every aspect of life. Non-European ways of living, thinking, and knowing are often perceived as inferior. As Anibal Quijano notices, Latin America was the first space/time of a world system that globally codified “the differences between conquerors and conquered based on the idea of race. The Iberian conquistadors assumed this idea as the constitutive, founding element of the relations of domination that the conquest imposed” (Quijano 2000, 533). Unfortunately, those epistemic structures continue to inform life in the entire region. It is worth noting that the concept of race as it is generally understood nowadays is a modern construct, which cannot be fully comprehended apart from the notion of “whiteness,” a word that, as Willie Jennings (2010) has noted, began to be used in a racialized manner towards the end of the 15th century, when Columbus described the natives he encountered in his third voyage to the New World, comparing them to “negroes.” While some narratives focus on how the notions of race and whiteness were constructed in the US context,

and others focus on the rise of a notion of race in British writings from the 19th century, some Latinx and Latin American scholars have pointed instead to the rise of a new racialized world order already by the turn of the 16th century. That is the beginning of a new global order, which Quijano calls modernity/coloniality. As Walter Mignolo (2005) states, “colonization and the justification for the appropriation of land and the exploitation of labor in the process of the invention of America required the simultaneous ideological construction of racism,” which “prompted a specific classification and ranking of humanity.” In such a context, race does not refer only to skin color or pure blood but becomes a way “of categorizing individuals according to their level of similarity/proximity to an assumed model of ideal humanity.” Therefore, the subsequent racialization of the new world order “applied not only to people, but to language, religions, knowledge, countries, and continents as well” (Mignolo 2005, Kindle location 353 ff).

The point here is not that every single culture in the world has the same understanding of race and racial hierarchy, but that in the globalized order we all are part of (voluntarily or not), this broad racialization that started with the European expansionism in the 16th century remains operative. Particularly for those peoples who have been pushed down to the bottom of such a hierarchized global order, the acknowledgment of the lasting impact of the colonial/modern matrix of power is an important step in any attempt to overcome this pervasive fissure that continues to inform our societal structures and social relations not only in the United States, but in other parts of the world, including Brazil. The decolonial interculturality proposed in this essay acknowledges varied differences while seeking to uncover the mechanisms that have made particular voices and traditions invisible or silenced. At the end of the day, there can be no genuine religious literacy as long as those stories remain ignored and those voices and traditions are not fully heard and valued.

By examining the indexes of mortality, access to education, housing, and employment conditions, Abdias do Nascimento demonstrated the impact of systemic racism on the demographics of the black Brazilian population (Ramos 2019). Based on that study, he called racism a genocide. On top of other forms of violence, he underscored the discursive effort to erase “the black element of the Brazilian population” through the altering of the racial classification of “the children of interracial unions” (Ramos 2019). Fearing that the association of mestizos with blacks would lead to making the white contingent a minority, Brazilian authorities in the early 20th century began to associate them with whiteness in an attempt to decrease the growing African presence and influence in the Brazilian society.

Those born of unions between people of brown and black color are classified as white; and through reclassification the black group loses a large amount and earns very little, the brown group earns much more than they lose, and the white group wins a lot and doesn't lose anything.

(Nascimento 1978, cited by Ramos 2019)

This “whitening” took place on several levels—through migration, education, religion, and demographic censuses—deeply impacting Brazil’s self-perception and self-understanding, and limiting the flourishing of the black population (Almeida 2018).

Religion was also a factor in that process. Since their arrival in Brazil, the Portuguese perceived their colonial enterprise as “a sacred trust so that they could bring their religion to the benighted people in these lands” (González and González 2007, 3). By the end of the 17th century in Brazil, Christian norms regulated slavery and guided Christian slaveholders’ treatment of the body and soul of enslaved Africans (Benci 1977). On the religious level, racial prejudice took the shape of rejection or dismissal of Afro-Brazilian religions as pagan or superstitious. The

first references to African-derived religions in 1680 were associated with the Holy Office of the Inquisition. At least 235 criminal cases were recorded by the Tribunal of the Holy Office against inhabitants of the state of Bahia, often in connection with witchcraft or “black magic” (Mott 2010, 106). While the republican constitution of 1891 abolished the idea of an official religion, it did not prevent Afro-Brazilians from continuing to experience religious discrimination and persecution. The juridical system, the police, and even the agency of sanitation control were often used as repressive instruments (Campos and Rubert 2014). Despite the separation of church and state enshrined in the 1891 constitution, Afro-Brazilian religions were criminalized in the Penal Code of 1890, which continued in existence until the early 1940s. According to *Babalorixá* Rodney de Oxóssi, “in the first decades of the twentieth century ... all African cultural traits were hard-pressed, including capoeira, samba, and Candomblé, which were always deeply intertwined” (De Oxóssi 2017). As late as 1976, Candomblé houses still had to apply for police permission to celebrate public ceremonies (Serra 2018).

While the constitution of 1988 has protected religious freedom, Afro-Brazilian religions continue to be the target of religious intolerance (Campos and Rubert 2014, 297–298). Cases of discrimination, intolerance, and violence against Afro-Brazilian religions continue to happen in astounding numbers. A recent report shows that, in the city of Rio de Janeiro alone, 697 cases of violation of religious rights—mostly against members of Afro-Brazilian religions—were reported by the police between 2011 and 2015 (Santos et al. 2017).

For example, on July 15, 2020, the bust of Mãe Gilda de Ogum, a respected Candomblé *Iyalorixá*, was vandalized in Salvador. A similarly malicious act also happened in May of 2016. She was the founder of Ilê Axé Abassá de Ogum, a Candomblé house located near Lagoa do Abaeté, in Salvador, state of Bahia. She was also a social activist who “stood out for her strong personality and great participation in actions to improve the neighborhood of Nova Brasília in Itapuã” (Silva 2014). A victim of religious intolerance and defamation, she got ill and died on January 21, 2000. Her daughter Jaciara Ribeiro dos Santos replaced her as an *Iyalorixá*, and sued the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God (IURD) for moral damages and misuse of her mother’s image, in a case of defamation. Unfortunately, stories of aggressions against Candomblé, Umbanda, and other Afro-Brazilian religions abound. These events took place despite President Lula da Silva’s sanctioning of January 21, the day of her death, as the National Day of Struggle Against Religious Intolerance.

Despite all the intolerance they faced, the African ancestors who were enslaved and taken to Brazil never ceased practicing their traditional prayers, songs, and dances. Through those practices, Afro-Brazilian traditions were born (Nascimento 2010). Those African-derived religions have contributed to the reconstruction of “identities and the maintenance of the African world culture, philosophy, and vision” in Brazil (De Oxóssi 2017). The first *terreiros* formed “under the aegis of confraternities and brotherhoods of black Catholics,” which were “protected by the syncretism with the saints of the church” (De Oxóssi 2017). Even when Afro-Brazilians converted to Christianity they did not necessarily move away from the African religious traditions.

Those efforts to preserve traditional religious beliefs and practices also contributed to the rise of a *moreno* (brown) or popular Catholicism. Catholic confraternities or *irmandades* created spaces where black Brazilians preserved their traditions and interpreted Catholic devotions as their own. In those popular devotions, elements associated with Indigenous and African-derived traditions were interwoven with the devotions of Catholic saints. Catholic devotions involving African-derived symbols, saints, food, dance, and music reconnect Afro-Brazilian Catholics with their African roots and identity (Burdick 1998). Many *irmandades* were associated with the devotion to Our Lady of the Rosary. In the *Igreja de Nossa Senhora do Rosario dos Pretos*, in the city of Salvador, and in other predominantly black and brown Catholic parishes across the

country, such practices are embraced as an expression of *negritude* or blackness in the context of the Christian faith. Thus, *irmandades* became cradles for the formation of racial consciousness, a forum where different ethnic identities could reinvent themselves. They contributed to preserve the African traditions that would later give birth to Afro-Brazilian religions such as Candomblé (Negrão 2008, 223).

Among progressive Catholics, black agency can be seen, in particular, in the rise of *Agentes de Pastoral Negros*—APNs (Silva 2017, 18). The rise of the APNs in Brazil was part of a growing self-awareness among Afro-Latin Americans. A number of continental and national encounters in the 1980s discussed the centrality of the social and cultural identity of black people in the Americas and their role in the future of the region (Silva 2017, 18). The APNs' pastoral practices have contributed in numerous ways to a renewed theological understanding of God's revelation, based on the experience of Afro-Brazilian communities, paving the way to a fresh openness toward renewed intercultural and interfaith relations (Soares 2003).

Similar developments have taken place within Brazilian Protestantism. One of the significant initiatives in that context led to the formation of the Evangelical Black Movement (*Movimento Evangélico Negro*—MNE) in 2003. The MNE brings together Evangelicals and Pentecostals of African descent interested in resisting racism and promoting racial justice. The origins of the MNE can be traced to the formation of CENACORA, the National Ecumenical Commission for Combating Racism, in 1973 (Silva 2011, 12). Another landmark in that journey was the formation of the Forums of Black Christian Women in 2001 (Burdick 2005).

In addition to being a public forum for self-conscious black Evangelicals and Pentecostals, the MNE has worked to improve relationships between black Pentecostals/Evangelicals and the Unified Black Movement (MNU). Up to the mid-1990s, most Evangelicals and Pentecostals did not participate in the MNU, mostly because of its ties with Afro-Brazilian religions. The Black Evangelical Movement, however, exhibits a more open attitude towards members of other religions. Such openness allows the MNE to look for common ground with people of non-Christian traditions on the level of forming alliances in the struggle for the human rights of black Brazilians. Black Evangelical initiatives like the MNE, therefore, are pioneering a Brazilian Evangelical/Pentecostal “theology of African roots,” while articulating “an anti-racist message in clear, theologically sophisticated, and biblical terms” (Burdick 2005, 325). Their rise as new theological subjects contributes to the process of resituating their own Protestant tradition, de-linking it from imperial roots.<sup>14</sup> While a significant number of Pentecostals and Evangelicals continue to discriminate against Afro-Brazilian religions, the MNE offers an alternative perspective to those relations, which acknowledges the deep-seated racism imprinted on Brazilian culture, society, and churches.

The MNE is just one strand of a multifaceted network through which black Protestants have responded to racial prejudice and the pain it causes. Ecumenical agencies such as *Coordenadoria Ecumênica de Serviço* (CESE) and *KOINONIA Presença Ecumênica e Serviço* are other spaces where Christian churches work closely with *quilombola* communities, black NGOs, and Afro-Brazilian religious leaders to promote interfaith relations and fight religious intolerance (Moura 2013). These initiatives strengthen the commitment to stand in solidarity with members of other religions in the struggle for social and racial justice, while encouraging greater openness to other forms of wisdom and experiences of the divine.

### Religious literacy as decolonial interculturality

While, as discussed earlier, the colonial/modern matrix of power remains operative in Latin America and continues to produce an exclusionary notion of totality “that negates, excludes,

and occludes the difference and the possibilities of other totalities” (Mignolo 2007, 451), a decolonial approach to religious literacy not only unveils the limits and problems of such exclusionary totality, but also uplifts alternative forms of knowledge and knowing such as those from the Afro-Brazilian and Amerindian religions as well as those found in forms of Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, and other religions in Brazil which continue to be reinvented and relocated by the means of renewed encounters with popular agency—another way to refer to the notion of indigeneity as seen, for instance, in Sanneh (2003). Indigenization, however, is not an exclusively Christian prerogative. The histories of Islam and Buddhism in Brazil, for instance, confirm the impact of Indigenous agency in shaping local expressions of global religions.

The critique of the Eurocentric paradigm of modernity/rationality is an important interpretative tool for formerly colonized peoples to free themselves from distorted images imposed on them. Epistemological decoloniality, then, is key “to clear the way for new intercultural communication, for an interchange of experiences and meanings, as the basis of another rationality which may legitimately pretend to some universality” (Quijano 2007, 177). Cross-cultural religions literacy, therefore, must uplift intercultural communication, liberating it “from the prison of coloniality” (Quijano 2007, 178).

How is that possible? Part of the task, as I have shown throughout this essay, is to unearth silenced histories and narratives. There can be no genuine intercultural communication as long as those who have been suppressed for the past five centuries cannot speak for themselves (Spivak 1994). If properly conceived, initiatives such as the Brazilian experiment with *ensino religioso*, which in the past two decades has also been complemented in some schools with classes on African and Afro-Brazilian history and culture, can contribute to a genuinely pluralistic religious education of new generations, enabling them to truly hear, in particular, the voices that were silenced for so long. But the burden to promote a decolonial interculturality is not only on the shoulders of government secretaries of education and schools. Willingness to engage in deep listening and meaningful dialogue can take place also among clergy and religious practitioners from all faiths. In the Brazilian case, where approximately 90% of the population identify as Christian, there is a particular responsibility among churches and Christian clergy to take such initiatives.

Pope Francis’ call for a Pan-Amazon Synod (2019), pointed the way for the kind of meaningful initiatives that can help overcome religious and cultural prejudice in a region with the history I have outlined in this article. In lieu of a conclusion, I turn to that recent event in the hope that it might shed light on such a possibility. Between October 6 and October 27, 2019, bishops from the nine South American countries met with Pope Francis in Rome to assess the relationship between the Church and the peoples of the Amazon, and discuss a new way to think about evangelization in the region. This gathering, known as the Special Assembly of the Synod of Bishops for the Pan-Amazon Region, produced a document calling for “an integral conversion” to a new spirituality based on listening to the cry of the poor and the cry of earth: “Our pastoral conversion will be Samaritan, in dialogue, accompanying people with the real faces of indigenous people, peasants, afro-descendants and migrants, young people, city dwellers” (Amazon Synod 2019). The pastoral conversion called for

an open attitude of dialogue, fully recognizing the multiplicity of interlocutors: the indigenous peoples, the river dwellers, peasants and afro-descendants, the other Christian Churches and religious denominations, organizations of civil society, popular social movements, the State, finally all people of good will who try to defend life, the integrity of creation, peace and the common good.



Pope Francis wrote the Apostolic Exhortation *Querida Amazonia* (Francis 2020) in response to the synod and as a way to bring its findings to bear on a broader scale. Both the synod and Pope Francis identify the colonial roots of the devastation of the Amazon environmental system and its peoples, calling for true openness to interreligious and intercultural dialogue that recognizes all subjects, especially the Indigenous peoples, the river dwellers, peasants, and afro-descendants.

In his exhortation, Francis reminded his readers that colonization has not ended. Despite being changed, disguised, and concealed in many places, its contempt for the life of the poor and the fragility of the environment persists (Francis 2020). The Synod likewise acknowledged the persistence of the structural sin of coloniality, calling for a cultural conversion that has also social and ecological implications. In its social dimension, conversion means that priority must be given to the rights of Indigenous peoples and the other Amazonian peoples. Acknowledging that they are the subjects of their own liberation, the Church is invited to stand in solidarity with them as an ally. The Church is no longer at the centerstage. Its role now is that of “an ally of the Amazonian peoples in denouncing attacks on the life of the indigenous communities” (Amazon Synod 2019). Pope Francis uses the expression “social dialogue” to refer to a relationship that not only favors “the preferential option on behalf of the poor, the marginalized, and the excluded,” “but also respects them as having a leading role to play” (Francis 2020).

At the cultural level, this conversation demands the full recognition of the cultural plurality in the Amazon biodiversity. In an unprecedented way, the Catholic Church acknowledged that the Amazon system and its peoples possess “teachings for life,” and an integrated “vision of reality.” The synod also acknowledged the importance of *teologia india* or Indigenous theology, as “a theology with an Amazonian face” developed in dialogue with “the indigenous world, its culture, and spirituality” (Amazon Synod 2019). Pope Francis, for his part, highlighted the autonomous value of the Indigenous peoples’ cultural identity, apart from any interaction with Christianity or the West.

Both documents see culture as part of the symbiosis that constitutes the broader environment. Thus, an ecological conversation is called for. “If the ancestral cultures of the original peoples arose and developed in intimate contact with the natural environment, then it will be hard for them to remain unaffected once that environment is damaged” (Amazon Synod 2019). In tandem, the synod proposed a new relationship with the Amazon’s peoples, which both cares for nature and restores ancestral wisdom.

The future of the Amazon is in the hands of us all, but it depends mainly on our immediately abandoning the current model that is destroying the forest rather than bringing wellbeing and is endangering this immense natural treasure and its guardians.

In his response, Pope Francis urges his readers to follow the lead of the Indigenous cosmologies and stop seeing the forest as a resource, seeing it instead as a being or multiple beings “with which we have to relate” (Francis 2020).

Whatever the limits of these two documents, they seem to indicate a turning point in the Catholic—and more broadly, Christian—relationship with the peoples and cultures of the Amazon,<sup>15</sup> acknowledging the value of Indigenous ancestral knowledges in the aspiration for a common future. That dislodging of Western epistemologies, which are now paired with Indigenous ways of knowing and knowledge, is in itself a decolonial move. It also reflects the epistemic impact of Francis’ Latin American formation. An intercultural dialogue that seriously engages the ancestral knowledges of Indigenous and other traditional communities of the

Amazon, acknowledging that they are in the position to lead the way seems to be a good place to start building a new path for a future marked by more equitable relations.

Like *teología india*, popular religion, the black pastoral agents, and the Evangelical Black Movement, the Amazon Synod embodies the possibility of renewed intercultural and inter-religious relationships in Latin America and beyond. It advances an epistemological humility (Maduro 2015) that enables Christians to listen and learn from Indigenous and black religious traditions in the Amazon. Furthermore, the synod responds to the outcry of the Amazonian peoples. The words of these documents reveal the practical journey of two years of engagement between the Latin American bishops and the Indigenous and traditional communities of the Amazon in sustained dialogue. Around 80,000 people participated in the assemblies, forums, and meetings that elaborated the pre-synodal document. Representatives of 179 of the 390 peoples who live in the pan-Amazonia attended those encounters. The product of a participatory process in which the peoples of the Amazon played a prominent role, the synod shows how cross-cultural religious literacy can help reshape interreligious relations tainted by the distorted images disseminated through colonial and neocolonial structures of power. It points to an epistemological and cultural turn that brings the ancestral wisdom of the peoples of the Amazon and multiple Christian traditions together as full collaborative partners of dialogue and praxis in the construction of another possible world.

## Notes

- 1 Such a boom is more prominent among Pentecostal churches, although most historical denominations have also seen the upsurge of charismatic branches. One of the significant expressions of such Pentecostalization is found in the Roman Catholic Charismatic Movement. As Paulo Barrera Rivera has rightly noted, “the category ‘Pentecostal’ does not stand for a homogeneous reality” (Rivera 2016, 121). He cautions against triumphalist analyses focused exclusively on the idea of continuous growth, reminding us that not all Pentecostal churches are growing. Therefore, more than focusing on its numbers, it is important to examine how Pentecostalism “has changed and branched into new forms” (Rivera 2016, 117). This is, however, a task for another essay.
- 2 For more on the diversity of Latin America’s religions see Garrard-Burnett, Freston, and Dove (2016).
- 3 While the colonality of power, the power matrix of the modern/colonial world, produced a global racial hierarchy by placing the European man as its point of origin and reference, race is not the only criterion in decolonial analysis. Decolonial thought addresses the complexity of entangled global hierarchies, including class, race/ethnicity, gender/sexuality, religion, languages, and the production of knowledge (Grosfoguel, 2007). This chapter, though, focuses mostly on religion and race.
- 4 The term Spiritism, or Espiritismo, in Portuguese, is used in Brazil to refer to mediunic religions like Kardecism, Umbanda, and other similar religious practices, in general, or, more specifically, the term is used interchangeably with Kardecism, the Brazilian transplant of 19th-century French Spiritism. For more on Kardecism, see Engler and Isaia (2016). While numerically small, if compared to the number of Catholics or Pentecostals in Brazil, Spiritism has a sizable and growing presence in the country. According to the last two Brazilian censuses, the number of Spiritists in the country increased by 65%—from 2.3 million in 2000 to 3.8 million in 2010 (Bernardo, 2019).
- 5 While the most drastic decimation of Indigenous populations in Brazil happened between the 16th and the 19th century, the continuous invasion of Indigenous lands and killings of Indigenous people has perpetuated what many of them call a genocide. According to the UNHCR, “a reported 87 Indigenous groups were exterminated in the first half of the twentieth century through contact with expanding colonial frontiers.” The report also shows that “between 1964 and 1984 foreign companies and international lending banks tightened control over Brazil’s economic structure, continuing to expand the colonizing frontier.” The construction of “roads stretching across the Amazon basin forced the removal of 25 Indigenous groups at the time and the same trends continue.” In fact, those trends have intensified in recent years, with the increased “pressures to expand the Brazilian economy” through policies that continue “to aggressively erode the Amazon” (Minority Rights Group International 2007).

- 6 While the editors of this volume use the term “covenantal pluralism” to emphasize the intentionality of the engagement of difference, my choice to use simply “pluralism” follows Peter Berger’s understanding of this term as implying engagement with difference as a necessity. For Berger, “it makes little sense to speak of pluralism if people do not talk with each other.” Sustained conversation is a necessity “for pluralism to unleash its full dynamic” (Berger 2014, 1).
- 7 *Italics* mine.
- 8 Fundamental religious learning or education, the idea that religion must be part of the curriculum in public schools. Here there is a contrast with the religious literacy project in the US and the UK, which tends to focus on higher education.
- 9 Protestants would also face the impact of an altered form of exclusivism after the formation of the Brazilian state in 1822.
- 10 Particularly at a time when the Brazilian state is in the hands of religious nationalists (as it is today).
- 11 Pointing to the insufficiency of racial liberalism, Guinier (2004) advances racial literacy as a more dynamic framework to understand and respond to the pervasiveness of racism.
- 12 This overview overlaps with two more extensive essays addressing the issue of religion and race in Brazil. For those expanded discussions, see Barreto (2019) and Barreto (2020).
- 13 As Ramon Grosfoguel (2016) points out, this hierarchical world order is at the root of racism, which is defined as “a global hierarchy of superiority and inferiority along the line of the human that has been politically, culturally and economically produced and reproduced for centuries by the institutions of the ‘capitalist/patriarchal western-centric/Christian-centric modern/colonial world-system.’”
- 14 As Lamin Sanneh highlights, in the era of world Christianity, the appropriation of faith by different Indigenous Christian communities gives birth to new and creative theological insights. The appropriation of Christian images and symbols by Indigenous or other suppressed non-Western cultures becomes an instrument to keep their spiritualities alive, even if adjusted to new contexts (Sanneh 2003, 2008).
- 15 While this was a Catholic Synod, Protestant observers also participated in it, including Pentecostals, who had an opportunity to engage with both the bishops and Pope Francis in intrafaith conversations.

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# CROSS-CULTURAL RELIGIOUS LITERACY AND PLURALIST LEADERSHIP IN THE UNITED STATES

*Stephanie Summers*

I don't mean to be pig-headed about this. I want you to know I am open to hearing you on this, now, or if you want to come back later. I think I'm right. But I really want you to know you can disagree.

We are mid-meeting, and since we are in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic, we're looking each other in the eyes as much as can be done via screen. The statement has just been made to me by the head of policy reform advocacy with a major US organization. I deeply disagree with this man on a specific public policy matter, and he with me, but we agree on numerous others. Regardless of our significant disagreement, I deeply respect him.

Our last conversation ended at an impasse, so I am understandably anxious, but now also hopeful given what has just been said. I take a second to remind myself to respond in a tone that is low and slow, both clear and warm. "Yes," I say. "Something I appreciate about knowing you is that you are the kind of person who wants me to make sure to do that. So yes. Affirming that you can count on me to tell you when I think you're wrong."

We're on our sixth discussion about our disagreement: A public policy matter that has potentially devastating consequences for a large number of faith-based social service organizations in the United States. Over our series of discussions, the specifics of our different understanding of the problems and solutions have become far clearer. During the months we've talked, the debate among advocates for both sides, as well as the public, has become increasingly ugly. We begin to discuss again the case that will soon be argued before the US Supreme Court over the issue, starting with where we have common ground: Our shared lament that the inevitable outcome of the case is already clear. One side will win. This necessitates that the other side loses. Even though we don't agree on all of the specifics, we both know that the solutions that are needed to address the problems must be far more capacious than a narrow and decisive declaration of a victor.

It is exactly this undesirable outcome that brought us together over a year ago, before the nation's highest court agreed to hear the case that will change the interaction between faith-based foster-care providers and the state. We've covered *a lot* of ground on this journey, which

might be best characterized as an ongoing and candid discussion between an agnostic pragmatist (his self-description) and a principled pluralist (me). We agree that faith-based foster-care organizations provide substantial services in partnership with state and local governments. Along the way we've discussed what happens when these partnerships are terminated by the government. For example, when Illinois passed a law ending partnerships with faith-based foster-care organizations in 2011, Illinois lost 5,352 non-relative foster families over the next seven years (Becket Law 2020).

We also agree that regardless of which side wins or loses at the court, in many places around the country, trust has already been massively eroded between the child welfare community and faith-based foster-care providers and the parents they support, who uphold a traditional religious understanding of human sexuality. While we use different language to describe this divide (and what appears here is mine), we agree that at best, future cooperation between state child welfare agencies and many faith-based foster-care providers will be difficult. At worst, faith-based providers could be dismissed by or coerced by the state to cease their services in partnership with the government (US Supreme Court 2020 and Michigan Department of the Attorney General 2019). And we agree that whether through ongoing acrimony or a decision of a court, it is the kids who will lose the most.

And it is that reality—that many of our nation's most vulnerable children will be the ultimate losers of our diverse country's failure to embrace public policy solutions that advance and protect pluralism—that motivates organizations like the one I lead, the Center for Public Justice, to keep coming back to the table, trying again and again to figure out the better way forward.

This chapter will proceed as follows: First I will discuss the concept of cross-cultural religious literacy and how it is essential for organizations who aspire to lead public policy, in any sector, in a manner that is consistent with the goals of those policies: A deepening and expanding pluralism of engaged and mutually respectful, even irreconcilable, difference. I will then offer reflections on some ways we develop cross-cultural religious literacy among the Center for Public Justice's team, as well as how it is manifested in our praxis. Finally, I will provide examples of our efforts towards the development of pluralist public policy as models to be modified by other faith-based or secular organizations seeking to provide pluralist public policy leadership.

### **Catechesis for cross-cultural religious literacy**

I serve as the CEO of the Center for Public Justice, a nonpartisan, independent think tank based in Washington, DC, known for being distinctively Christian, yet committed to working across lines of deep differences in the diverse society that is the United States. We listen to understand problems, train, and educate the leaders of faith-based organizations for hope-filled political engagement, advance public policy solutions for upholding a pluralistic society, host conversations to shape hearts and minds, and convene people across differences to heal divisions.

Every part of our work in public policy development across lines of difference is predicated on the development of what is termed *cross-cultural religious literacy*. Chris Seiple (2018a; 2018b), president emeritus of the Institute for Global Engagement, identifies cross-cultural religious literacy (CCRL) as a set of competencies that go beyond merely instrumental apprehension of "facts" about religion to instead emphasize *applied* literacy about lived religion in multi-faith contexts. According to Seiple CCRL requires three interrelated competencies: 1) Self-knowledge competency (i.e., understanding one's own worldview, and what it says about engaging the other); 2) comparative competency (i.e., understanding others' worldviews, and what they say about engaging the other); and 3) collaborative competency (i.e., understanding the process of collaboration, of moving toward the other, in particular spiritual, ethnic, religious,

and organizational contexts). My contention is that to best advance and protect a pluralistic society, these three features must be embodied in organizations. Seiple's three features require organizations committed to a pluralistic society to develop a pedagogy for and praxis of cross-cultural religious literacy. In other words, pluralists aren't born this way, they must be formed this way.

When it comes to the work of an organization like the Center for Public Justice, our organizational pedagogy for cross-cultural religious literacy mirrors Seiple's three distinct components. The first, a competency in religious self-knowledge, is reflected in our team's commitment to embody the moral framework and implications of orthodox Christian faith. I refer to these commitments as the fence that reminds us to Whom we belong and where we live, not the fence that keeps our neighbors out. As an organization, we put the convictions of our faith and the implications of our beliefs for our corporate and individual practice in writing. These are codified in our employee policies and operationalized in how we hold one another to account. When we plan to add new members to our team, we share the written codification prior to conducting interviews with otherwise qualified job applicants, who are given the opportunity to indicate they agree to embody our convictions and commitments. Qualified candidates move forward after we receive their clear affirmation, or a candidate may request to withdraw from the process, no questions asked. Our staff members are required to review and reaffirm their commitment to our articulated commitments on an annual basis, as well as self-report should they find they are no longer upholding them.

This ongoing process is not the only element of our commitment to religious self-knowledge. It also means we deliberately work to understand and advance the particulars of the Reformed theological (Wolters 2005) and philosophical (Skillen 2014) traditions in which the Center for Public Justice stands. At the Center for Public Justice, there are numerous Reformed theological and philosophical concepts that animate how we engage the other in our public policy development. I will highlight here five because of their particular importance in how they provide the foundation for our commitment to engaging the public square in a manner consistent with our faith, to include how we treat those who do not believe as we do—thereby protecting, building, and advancing a pluralistic society through public policy. These five concepts are part of every public policy engagement we undertake: (1) worldview; (2) sphere sovereignty; (3) common grace; (4) co-belligerence; and (5) convicted civility.

I will discuss each of these, in order to provide examples of what this dimension of our organizational pedagogy for self-understanding looks like in practice, which includes our efforts and the second competency required by CCRL, that of comparative understanding. Organizations aspiring to pluralist public policy leadership may not possess the same grounds for pluralism nor the same praxis, but the examples provided are an effort to model the deliberate extent to which CCRL must be fostered at the organizational level.

Key to our religious self-knowledge is the Reformed theological understanding of *worldview*, articulated by Al Wolters (2005) as “the comprehensive framework of one's basic beliefs about things.” Wolters expands upon this definition, and what he calls “things” actually means that one's worldview has implications for *everything*, i.e., every area of life. This Reformed concept of worldview means that before engaging across differences, we must seek to understand and articulate our own worldview and its implications. At the Center for Public Justice, this approach means our policy team comprehensively articulates and identifies the implications of our worldview for any public policy issue we consider for engagement. To provide some sense of what this process looks like, discussions about God-given norms, and the right roles and responsibilities given to various institutions in society, characterize nearly every discussion held among our policy team. This worldview-level discussion is not a “how” conversation about tactics, rather it is focused on the what and the why.



Key also to the understanding of worldview from a Reformed perspective is that others have other worldviews. While I will say more later about worldview as it relates to comparative religious understanding, as regards our religious self-understanding, it is because of our concept of worldview pluralism that these differences ought to be protected under law. As theologians Bruce Ashford and Dennis Greeson (2021) write,

a proper philosophy of society allows for ideological pluralism, not in the ideological sense of affirming multiple “truths,” but in the pragmatic sense of allowing individuals to align their lives with their deepest convictions and do so freely, openly, and without fear.

The ability for other worldviews to exist alongside Christianity in the public square is not something to be resisted, but to be protected. We are to be for the protection of the other. Why? As former Michigan Congressperson Steve Monsma (2011) said, “Obedience and love, given when there is no possibility of anything else, is neither.” Reformed theology counsels that Christians should work to protect in law worldview pluralism in the public square. No one should be forced by the state to accept any worldview. This includes what we as Christians know is the Truth, which is also to be protected, and is to be freely given and freely received. To provide some sense of the application of this thinking, as an organization, on these grounds we work for the equal treatment of faith-based organizations in the public square (Monsma and Carlson-Thies 2015).

Another Reformed insight that is key to our religious self-understanding is that of sphere sovereignty, articulated by former Dutch prime minister Abraham Kuyper (1931), which forms the foundation for an institutional, rather than individual or autonomy-based, approach to public policy engagement. In short, sphere sovereignty affirms that God created diverse institutions to justly fulfill their *distinct* purposes—for example, families are not businesses, nor should they be run that way. These institutions should respect and yield room for one another. In keeping with this example, at the point when economic activity overtakes and endangers families, the state bears the responsibility to protect the institution of the family from the institution of the corporation. In the concept of sphere sovereignty, we see that the state is to ensure proper respect for the diversity of institutions in civil society, protecting them proactively or responsively under law. To uphold this responsibility for ensuring public justice, the state must also articulate the limits of its own authority, not intruding into the ordering of other institutions as they fulfill their God-ordained purpose. In practice, for our team this understanding means we always consider and articulate the answer to the question *who is responsible for what*, and we share our answer as we work alongside others to formulate and advance needed public policy solutions.

Another Reformed concept that is key to our religious self-understanding is that of common grace, best articulated by the Reformed theologian Herman Bavinck (Van Leeuwen, 1989, 35–65) who taught that it is an act of religious responsibility to recognize that God has gifted men and women who do not know God with the ability to serve God’s good purposes. John Calvin, a principal in the development of Reformed theology, argued against Christians “neglecting God’s gift,” writing that all of humanity is served “by the work and ministry of the ungodly” in the sciences, arts, and society (Calvin 2001). To Calvin’s list I add politics. As I have written elsewhere (Summers 2021), in a Reformed theological understanding, it is by this common grace of God that men and women who do not know Christ as their savior have the capacity to work towards pluralistic societies which promote justice and the common good. A simple caveat: This interpretation does not mean that they will do so—any more than it

means Christians will. Within the context of our team's ongoing development of religious self-understanding, it means we anticipate discovering God's gifts and service towards God's good purposes from among those who do not share our worldview.

Based on this Reformed understanding of common grace, and our anticipation of its presence, we work alongside those who do not share our faith as we seek to advance and protect a pluralistic society. This working together is termed co-belligerence, and it forms the fourth key concept in our self-knowledge. By "co-belligerence" we mean collaborating on public policy initiatives or in coalitions with those with whom we do not have a shared worldview, in order to advance and protect a pluralistic society. Reformed theology counsels that Christians may welcome and permissibly practice co-belligerence. Yet Reformed theology also teaches that we must demonstrate wisdom and prudence as we engage in co-belligerence. As I have written elsewhere (Monsma and Summers 2012), in our day, where the leaders of faith-based organizations are used for photo ops or where holy words are routinely co-opted by speechwriters on all sides in order to gain political advantage for their party's candidate, great are the dangers of dishonoring our Lord and being used by political operatives more worldly wise and cynical than we are.

At the Center for Public Justice, we recognize there is no imperative to reject partnerships across deep differences when our political goals find alignment, even though our motivations may often be quite different. But we do tread this path with care. One way in which we embody and make transparent our religious self-understanding is to put in writing for prospective partners an articulation of our areas of alignment as well as areas of known disagreement, with the basis for our beliefs, as well as an articulation of our understanding of what we think it looks like to advance and uphold a pluralistic society.

The Reformed understanding of co-belligerence also finds a concrete expression in our team's praxis relative to the CCRL comparative and collaborative competencies—and there is so much that is intertwined and non-sequential that I must take a short descriptive detour. When we share this type of document with prospective partners, our team invites these prospective partners to do the same. We also say something along the lines of, "And we get 'it' if you read this and in the end decide we should not move forward together." Rather than only envision *our* answers to the questions of "who is the other" (an instrumentalist exercise in comparative religion) and our own preconceived notions of "what might we do together," we invite *them to tell us about themselves*, and to share *their* vision for what *they* think we can do together.

In dozens of engagements over the last decade, we've experienced four consistent results from this practice. First, we've found that the time it's taken for this type of deliberate articulation and the discussion that follows has without exception led to exceptionally generative co-belligerence, where what we've been able to do together (or what we will not do together) has become clear quite quickly, in part due to our initial vulnerability and transparency. For example, I recall an initial discussion between the principal of a secular policy organization interested in working with us on an area of needed reforms on which we had substantial agreement (albeit different motivations), where at the bottom of the hour the principal began exploring other potential areas of co-belligerence and lastly said, "I know I may be pushing you now. Death with dignity?" I replied, kindly but firmly, "We've just spent nearly an hour talking about how the God-given worth of every human person is what motivates our criminal justice work. We are definitely against euthanasia." His response: "But I said death with dignity." Mine: "I heard you. Did you hear me?" That hour, with that level of clarity and candor about the limits of our co-belligerence (and our respective understanding of the limits of pluralism), resulted in an enduring relationship of trust and candor that has helped advance pluralistic public policies in

areas of agreement, as well as respectful candor about policy developments in areas where we will never align.

Second, we've found that articulating our grounds and limits for co-belligerence leads to partnerships that can endure beyond the initial people involved. In many cases, our written document has been passed along to successors who come to our first meeting with a folder containing our paper, ready to ask their own questions about what they'd read, and share their own thoughts.

Third, having this document and discussion framework has led to robust defenses of our organizational integrity and calls to commit to more robust cross-cultural engagement by our co-belligerents to their own colleagues, even about areas where we disagree quite significantly. More than once we have been defended by someone in a co-belligerent organization against someone else there who had become frustrated with us because we would not join a policy effort that we had originally identified as an area where we disagreed at the level of principle. I vividly remember watching a woman tell her boss (the CEO),

These people were respectful enough to tell us that they would not work on this [issue] from the very beginning. We told them that was acceptable to us. I don't agree with them about a bunch of stuff. But they're the ones with the integrity here, and we're the ones being disrespectful. We need to keep the commitment we made to them.

Lastly, our articulation of our foundations for co-belligerence has helped to nurture or solidify a commitment to advancing or protecting a pluralistic society. Our co-belligerents, who are often pragmatists rather than pluralists at the outset, have often come to understand that even though they may still find much about our worldview and our resulting way of life to be at best quaint and at worst deplorable, in the end understand the fidelity to our theology and philosophy that is being expressed, and come over time to be willing to work to protect far more of it than maybe our initial agreement to work together on one issue might have augured. A recent example of this is our work in drafting and advancing a legislative approach to protect the civil rights of LGBTQ citizens, *and* to advance protections for the religious freedom of faith-based non-profits who hold traditional views on human sexuality, so these organizations remain free to serve (H.R. 1440, 2021).

It is clear that co-belligerence done rightly does not mean that our articulation of our convictions is done once in writing and put into a drawer. Nor does it mean we abandon, downplay, or remain silent about our convictions. It does mean we respect the requirements for *how* we share our convictions with others who do not share our worldview. In Reformed theology this is what the neo-Calvinist philosopher and ethicist Richard Mouw (1992) refers to as "convicted civility," a three-fold approach requiring that one listens with care, expresses one's own convictions, and does so with civility. Convicted civility is the fifth key feature of our organization's standing commitment to religious self-understanding. Mouw's approach is grounded in the Reformed understanding of each person as created in God's image (*imago Dei*), which requires a posture of respect for God as their Creator. As I have written elsewhere (Summers 2021), our respect for the *imago Dei* is not conditioned on our respect for someone's views or their actions. Nor is it conditioned upon receiving respect from them in return. It is grounded in the inherent dignity of the God-given image they bear.

### **The praxis of comparative understanding and cross-cultural engagement**

While it is clear from my description of the five features of Reformed theology that I am highlighting that they are not exactly sequential, the fifth feature (convicted civility) is often a

specific point where in our team's practice we move from the personal to the "comparative," i.e., the posture of knowing the other's beliefs, to include what they say about engagement. Our Reformed understanding of worldview extends to our understanding of the other. We acknowledge that they also have a worldview—a comprehensive framework of basic beliefs about things—whether they would identify it as religious or not. CCRL requires not only that we understand our own worldview, but that we deliberately choose to learn about and understand the worldview of the other. And in order to do that, it requires more than desk research (although we do that). It most importantly requires conversation, a not-trivial investment of time. It requires vulnerability and transparency in asking the kinds of questions that invite the other to share with us their worldview as well as how they see the problems and the needed solutions.

Mouw sequences convicted civility to begin with listening, and it is wise counsel in a society where we do little of it. In practice though we have found that most people are so accustomed to expecting a fight that comparative understanding develops better when we make a few remarks at the beginning to help situate the conversation. Some willingness to be vulnerable and some clarity about where we hope a conversation is headed helps the other know that s/he is really in a conversation, not being put on the spot to defend themselves.

When we engage others in a conversation, we share what I call an up-front "contract" of respect, which we see as a way of embodying and making transparent our religious self-understanding. The up-front contract includes us telling the other person "Thank you for coming (or inviting us). Here is why we are at the table." We want the other person to understand that we do not view them as the problem to be solved (Hamid 2020). I often explain that the hospitality I was shown by Jesus motivates me to show hospitality to others, including people who don't believe what I believe, often quoting the Reformed theologian Matthew Kaemingk (2018): "The hospitality I was shown by Jesus invites me to build bigger tables, not construct bigger walls." I often explain in plain, non-theological language what I believe about every human (i.e., *imago Dei*). And sometimes I explain common grace. And then I ask, "What motivated you to be here?"

It is important to note that what ends up being said in the up-front contract is nearly always personal, a revelation of one's respective personal self-knowledge, rather than a revelation of one's institutional or policy commitments. And what is called forth as a result is most often a robust mutual enhancement of comparative understanding, where the worldview of the other is shared with great candor.

And regardless of what is shared, whether it is thick or thin, I will say, "Thank you. I'm sure I'll have more questions for you. And I want you to know I want you to ask me any questions you have as we go along."

This development of a competency in comparative understanding most often leads seamlessly to what Seiple terms "collaborative competency," examining how we might be able to move toward each other—enough, in a given context—in order to work together practically. As we move into exploring this kind of collaboration, I always raise the uncomfortable but important idea that in the end we might "achieve disagreement" (Murray 2005) but that itself will be an achievement indeed.

We have also learned to raise the uncomfortable but important concern about who might be upset with them for talking with us, since this person will likely be the trusted ambassador within their community for our co-belligerence. We have found that it is helpful at the outset to acknowledge that this conversation likely will cost them something with those who share their worldview—and that we know it may cost them more in the future. We want them to think about what they will do if they receive opposition from within their own community.

We want to make sure the person knows that if they have to walk away at some point, that we understand, and that as far as we are concerned, they are always welcome to come back to the table.

We rarely if ever talk about our perspective on the problem first. Following Mouw's counsel, we ask the other to help us understand the problem or issue we're meeting to talk about from their perspective first. And the conversation(s) continue from there. Sometimes we achieve disagreement, finding places where there isn't room for agreement (e.g., the ending of human life). As I've shared earlier, we take care to name what we've achieved, and explain why there is a limit here. This clarification has always been respectful and respected, and in some cases, over time, our different way has even been actively protected or defended by those with whom we have achieved disagreement. Yet more often we find places where we agree at the outset, and can commit to take additional steps together, journeying together into the mutual experience of CCRL.

### **The path forward**

Returning to the story at the outset of this chapter, I mentioned that our previous conversation had ended at an impasse. In fact, it was worse than that. My co-belligerent and I had been discussing the competing amicus briefs our organizations had signed on to in the case, and he'd asked me a pointed question about what ours said, to which he responded, "I think we should not talk again until after [name of court case]."

Yet he came back to the table; in part because while we do not see eye-to-eye on many things, we do agree that there's a problem and our organizations need one another to achieve a durable way to solve it. Otherwise, the cycle never ends as a proliferation of court cases re-litigate similar questions if we can't achieve a public policy solution that recognizes and upholds pluralism. But he also came back to the table, in part, because at the Center for Public Justice we have a rule: If someone goes away mad, it's your job to follow up. After seeking advice from my colleagues, we agreed on what I'd send in an email inviting a reengagement of our previous discussion, to which he replied with a calendar invite for a video call, and a note that said, "I thought of something we can do together."

CCRL as advanced by Seiple contains three competencies that at the Center for Public Justice we believe are imperative to be embodied by organizations seeking to advance and promote pluralism through public policy solutions: Self-knowledge, comparative understanding, and a collaborative multi-faith/multi-worldview engagement. We believe that CCRL is the key to advancing and protecting pluralistic societies that not only avoid chaos but thrive.

Applied to organizations, Seiple's formulation of CCRL demands that organizations are deliberate in their pedagogy of the theological or philosophical grounding for their advancement of pluralism. CCRL demands that organizations are proactive in their pursuit of those who do not share their worldview, seeking to understand the other from the other's own point of view, including their own articulation of their worldview. And CCRL ultimately demands that organizations embrace the spirit of collaboration across lines of difference, examining what potential exists for engagement of public policy in a multi-faith/multi-worldview society through co-belligerence. I have provided concrete examples of each component of CCRL in this essay in order to catalyze the thinking of other scholars and practitioners, with the hope that additional practices continue to emerge, be identified, and put into service by those committed to upholding room for organizations, often of deep difference, to continue to make their fullest contributions to the well-being of pluralistic societies.

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# UNDERSTANDING—AND BRIDGING—RELIGIOUS LIBERTY TRIBALISM

A case study in talking about Muslims' rights  
with Christian conservatives in America

*Asma T. Uddin*

After the release of my book *When Islam Is Not a Religion: Inside America's Fight for Religious Freedom* (Uddin 2019), I spent months touring the US. With each group, I outlined the range of threats by politicians, lawmakers, judges, and private citizens against Muslims' full and free exercise of religion. I addressed diverse audiences—liberal, conservative, Muslim, Christian, and multi-faith—but my engagement with Christian conservatives was the most eye-opening.

Consider, for example, what happened at the 2020 Convention of the National Religious Broadcasters (Montgomery 2020), a group of conservative Christian media professionals. Moments before my talk, the well-known anti-Muslim agitator, Frank Gaffney, took the stage and said this about me:

We do not support shari'a supremacists themselves or their enablers or their apologists.

And it pains me beyond words that this program that will be coming up after the attorney general's remarks, you have such an individual who will be presented to you, I'm afraid, as someone who is a perfect example of moderate Muslims and a perfect interlocutor for us in interfaith dialogue and bridge building and the like ...

I hope that you will not be misled into believing that this individual—I've nothing against her personally—but this individual and what she stands for and most especially what she is doing with organizations like the Council on American Islamic Relations (one of the most aggressive Muslim Brotherhood front organizations in the country) must not be endorsed, even if it's implicitly, by this organization.

I had hoped that she would not be given a platform. She is. I trust you listen attentively. But I hope that you will not give her yourselves a platform.

I was watching the speech on the TV screen set up in the green room, my mouth agape, "Is this actually happening?!" It was my first time at NRB and I was already feeling a bit anxious about what to expect from the crowd when I went on stage for my panel presentation.

Dread welled up in my chest as Gaffney warned the audience “to not give her yourselves a platform.” Gaffney is well-known as a leader of what the Center for American Progress calls “Fear, Inc.” (Ali, Clifton, Duss, Fang, Keyes, and Shakir 2011), a billion-dollar industry that strategically pumps out anti-Muslim messaging, organizes anti-Muslim protests and rallies across the nation, and drives efforts to strip American Muslims of legal rights (Soltani 2019).

“What are they going to do to me?” I wondered frantically. Was Gaffney rallying his troops, people who liked him and would follow his lead? Would they boo me off stage or empty out of the room—or worse? Engage in mockery, maybe violence?

As I sat paralyzed by the various imaginings of audience insurrection, NRB Chairman Janet Parshall (and the moderator of my panel) came running into the green room. “I can’t believe he did that! This is so upsetting!” Then, her expression changed from anger and alarm to genuine remorse. “I am so sorry, Asma. I will fix this.”

She came through moments later when we took our seats on stage. “[Gaffney’s comments] were ill-timed, inappropriate and hurtful,” she said. Standing and looking out over the audience of several hundred, she pressed, “Do I make myself clear?” She then turned to me and apologized again. In that moment, I was reminded in a powerful way of what I had always hoped to be true: Even in the face of blatant hostility, there are possibilities for peacebuilding.

Janet and I were joined on stage with Steven Waldman, the author of *Sacred Liberty: America’s Long, Bloody and Ongoing Struggle for Religious Freedom*, and Craig Parshall, NRB’s General Counsel and Janet’s husband. Titled “Many Faiths—One First Amendment,” our presentation was about the need to protect religious liberty for all Americans.

Our message stood in stark contrast to Gaffney’s. To borrow a term from social science, Waldman, Parshall, and I were trying to reduce “intergroup bias,” and Gaffney was trying to make it worse. According to reams of empirical studies, group (or tribal) identity is core to who we are as humans. So much so that loyalty to our group affects us both psychologically and physically. Rejection, stigma, or social isolation literally trigger a physical assault on our body; on the flip side, when we are loyal to our group and receive its affirmation, we feel confident and happy (Mason 2018). But tribal membership can also become toxic if our group (the “in-group”) feels threatened by the out-group. Studies show that feelings of threat lead to hostility, ranging from prejudice to a desire to strip rights from the out-group, and in extreme cases, even violence and genocide.

That’s exactly what Gaffney, as a member of the in-group (NRB’s conservative Christian audience) was trying to do: He was evoking bogeymen like “Muslim Brotherhood” and so-called “shari’a supremacists” to make the rest of his group feel threatened so that it would react to a member of the out-group (me) with hostility. Luckily, Parshall foiled his plan.

Before I even became acquainted with the science of group identity, I had developed my own principles of prejudice-reduction. These were based on my extensive interactions with conservative Christian audiences around issues of religious freedom. In the NRB context, I applied them this way:

1. **Center the human; decenter the politics:** This is not a special interest pleading. Gaffney’s demonization of me is a proven partisan tactic, used by all sides. But we are not those caricatures. We are people with real spiritual yearnings whose right to exercise those beliefs must be respected.
2. **Utilize legal literacy:** Gaffney is deeply wrong in pitting Muslims’ and Christians’ rights against each other. The very nature of human rights, including the right to religious freedom, is that protection for some is protection for none. If the government selectively protects religions that it likes and does not protect the ones it doesn’t like, all beliefs are vulnerable to the arbitrary discretion of those in power.



3. **Avoid condemnation/judgment:** I understand that people's fears of seemingly foreign Muslims might make one more receptive to Gaffney's message—particularly at a time when the world presents so many uncertainties and potential threats. While I worry about the fear manifesting in problematic actions, I understand the fear as fundamentally human.

After I started reading about intergroup bias and prejudice-reduction strategies, I was pleasantly surprised to learn that I had been on exactly the right track. Without knowing the words for it, I had developed a strategy that de-escalated feelings of threat, expressed empathy, and focused on what social scientists call “superordinate goals” (in this case, a robust conception of religious freedom).

This approach created an environment where my audience didn't take Gaffney's bait; they chose bridgebuilding over tribalism. To use the words of Brene Brown, a social psychologist who specializes in vulnerability, I had created space to “have a hard conversation in a soft place” (Brown 2019).

This peacebuilding model in many ways mirrors the approach of “covenantal pluralism” (see Chapters 1 and 2 of this *Handbook*): (1) It builds toward an “inclusive notion of citizenship;” (2) it “seeks a level-playing field where all beliefs—all faiths, and none—contribute to the common and growing good of society;” and, (3) it utilizes both a “*constitutional* framework of equal rights and responsibilities for all citizens under the rule of law (the top-down), as well as a supportive *cultural* context (the bottom-up), of which religion is often a significant factor.” Most importantly, my approach is about moving past mere toleration toward respect, and true (mutual) empathy.

For example, I told the NRB audience about the very serious threats to Muslims' religious freedom in the US today. The claims that “Islam is not a religion,” that it is instead “a dangerous political ideology” and that therefore Muslims' religious exercise should not be protected by the First Amendment, undergirds a broad array of anti-Muslim efforts, especially among conservative evangelicals (as evangelical pastor Bob Roberts confirms in chapter XX of this *Handbook*).<sup>1</sup> It's what animates the nationwide anti-mosque controversies faced by almost every mosque construction project in the US. These mosques have to labor for years for basic zoning approvals because of protests by neighboring residents.

If they manage to build the mosque, Muslim communities then need to worry about it surviving, since many mosques have been firebombed or burned to the ground. In 2011, a mosque in Wichita, Kansas, suffered more than \$100,000 in damage because of an arson attack. In 2012, portions of mosques in Joplin, Wisconsin, and Toledo, Ohio, were set on fire. In 2016, the same Joplin mosque had its roof burned down, and then a month later, the entire mosque was burned down. In 2017, fires raged at five mosques, burning down properties in places like Ypsilanti, Michigan; Victoria, Texas; and Bellevue, Washington (ACLU 2018).

The idea that “Islam is not a religion” is also behind a stunning 217 “anti-Sharia” laws proposed in 43 states since 2010 (Pilkington 2017). These laws purport to stop some sort of shari'a bogeyman, but their actual result is to limit how Muslims order their personal lives, write their wills, or effectuate their divorces. The purported dangerousness of Islam helps justify national security policies that require widespread surveillance of Muslims, including as they enter and exit mosques—making Muslim worshippers reluctant to even go to mosque. The attack on Islam as a religion helps create a culture where even wearing Muslim religious garb becomes suspect—and Muslim women in headscarves are left fearful for their safety and their livelihoods.

These are concrete hindrances to the most basic forms of religious exercise. That such things are happening in the US, with its expansive constitutional and statutory protections for religious exercise, should concern all Americans—particularly those who champion a broad definition of

religious freedom, as many conservatives do. Unfortunately, those are exactly the places where criticism is all too rare (and support for anti-Muslim measures too common).

One explanation for this apparent hypocrisy: Religious liberty in the US today has become a partisan tool. In the face of demographic and cultural threats, religious liberty is used to protect the interests of the in-group and oppose the out-group.

As such, and as in any culture, anywhere, any approach to peacebuilding across this religious liberty divide has to be sensitive to tribal dynamics. Put differently, peacebuilding in the face of deep differences—the kind of identity-level conflicts that are increasingly common around the world—requires an understanding of the requirements of robust or “covenantal” pluralism, as well as the sensitive skills of cross-cultural religious literacy needed to build this kind of pluralism.

It requires understanding basic human impulses to form groups and then protect that group—including with hostility if they feel their group is threatened. If we know that people act in these predictable ways across a diverse set of circumstances, when we see the group dynamics emerge, we can address the threat.

And the way we address the threat makes all the difference. Tolerance is a starting point, but to genuinely work toward an environment where Americans are secure with each other, we have to act with humility, patience, and empathy, while also appealing to basic norms of fairness, reciprocity, and the Golden Rule in debates over public policies. This is covenantal pluralism.

### **Religious freedom as an in-group shield**

The transformation of religious liberty—from a human right available equally to people of all religious and political persuasions to a partisan tool—is an accelerating process largely rooted in demographic changes. The changes are significant, and they are recent.

First, and for the first time in US history, the statistical dominance of whites is on the decline. In 1965, white Americans constituted 84% of the US population. Since then, there has been an influx of immigrants, with nearly 59 million arriving in the last 50 years alone. Between 1965 and 2015, the American Asian population went from 1.3 million to 18 million, and the Hispanic population went from 8 million to almost 57 million (Pew 2015). America’s complexion is “browning” and in several states—including America’s most populous ones, Texas and California—whites are already a minority. National Public Radio reported in 2016 that non-white babies now outnumber non-Hispanic white babies (Yoshinaga 2016). In 2020, the majority of Americans under the age of 18 were nonwhite. Pew says whites will be a minority by 2055; the US Census says it will happen even sooner, in 2044 (US Census 2015).

Second, and also for the first time in US history, white Protestant Christians are a minority in America. A 2017 Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI) study found that white Protestant Christians constitute only 43% of the US population. The “end of White Christian America,” is what Robert Jones, the founder of PRRI, calls it. To understand the gravity of the shift, consider that in 1976, eight in ten Americans were white Christians, and 55% of Americans were white Protestants. In 1996, white Christians still made up two-thirds of the population. Today, they don’t even constitute a majority. Among white Protestants, white evangelicals have also seen a precipitous drop. In the 1990s, white evangelicals constituted 27% of the US population; today it’s somewhere between 17% and 13% (Sherwood 2018).

Third, the statistical decline of white Protestant America has brought with it an end to “the cultural and institutional world built primarily by white Protestants that dominated American culture until the last decade.” This, Jones says, has precipitated an “internal identity crisis” that has generated tremendous “anger, anxiety and insecurity” (Jones 2016).

In recent years, nothing encapsulates the end of white Protestant America more than the 2015 Supreme Court case, *Obergefell v. Hodges*, which legalized same-sex marriage. Christian conservatives have objected to providing services that would implicate them in the celebration of same-sex weddings, and even as they have won a few legal challenges, the social and cultural attitudes are largely against them. As *Vox* explained it, “it’s a sentiment that is very strong on the religious right, fueled by where they see culture and politics going in America” (Lopez 2017). A standard example is *Masterpiece Cakeshop v. Colorado Civil Rights Commission*. That case involved Jack Phillips, a Christian baker who refused on religious grounds to bake a wedding cake for a gay couple. Phillips was fine with the couple buying a cake off his shelf, but he argued that making a cake specifically for the occasion would implicate him in the celebration of the union. That, in Phillips’s view, was out of the question because to celebrate a same-sex union would be to violate his religious beliefs about marriage being between one man and one woman.

The Supreme Court in its *Masterpiece* ruling sidestepped the question of whether Phillips could legally refuse service. But the courts of public opinion ruled on the matter decidedly. Phillips’ lawsuit was widely discussed as an attempted assault on anti-discrimination laws. The ACLU said it was about “licensing discrimination not just against lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people, but against anyone protected by our non-discrimination rules.” In its view, the case was not about a cake but about “turn[ing] people away because of who they are or whom they love. They might as well have posted a sign in the shop saying ‘No cakes for gays’” (Esseks 2017). About these types of cases generally, the *Daily Beast’s* headline, “Let’s Call ‘Religious Freedom’ by Its Real Name: Poisonous, Anti-LGBTQ Bigotry,” captured the sentiment (Teeman 2019). About the conservative white evangelicals who bring these claims, *Huffington Post* summed it up: “Evangelicals Reaffirm Their LGBT Ignorance and Bigotry” (Rymel 2017).

*Masterpiece* was deeply polarizing. What’s more: Most of those challenging it were aligned with the Democratic Party, and most of those defending it were aligned with the Republican Party (Blankenhorn 2018). In 2018, PRRI found that “59 percent of conservative Republicans favor allowing business owners to claim religious exemptions from serving gay and lesbian customers,” while 76% of Democrats and 60% of independents are opposed (PRRI 2018).

*Masterpiece* helped catalyze the mapping of religious freedom onto the partisan divide. Though there are exceptions today (for example, African American Democrats who are supportive of traditional marriage), how Americans define religious liberty (that is, whether we think it should protect Christian conservatives’ beliefs about sexuality) is increasingly a function of tribal identity within the domestic US context (which is also to say, that Americans’ understanding of religious freedom generally does not account for the global context where, ironically, Christians and Muslims are both being persecuted in India and China, among other places).

### Religious freedom as an out-group sword

The overlap of religious and partisan identities is even starker when you look at the Muslim-Christian divide. Conservative white evangelicals are generally Republicans and most Muslims are Democrats. And the animosity—or intergroup hostility—really heats up when Democrats vociferously champion Muslims’ rights.

Consider the scenario: Christian conservatives feel attacked by Democrats. Simultaneously, they perceive that Democrats are favoring Muslims over Christians. When Presidential candidate Joe Biden stated in July 2020 that he wished “we taught more in our schools about the Islamic faith,” prominent Christian conservatives like Christian Broadcasting Network analyst David

Brody tweeted, “Christianity and its history/values are being eliminated/distorted in public schools and @JoeBiden wants MORE teachings on Islam?” (Smith 2020).

Another classic example: Senator Marco Rubio’s 2016 comments on then-President Obama’s first mosque visit. He dismissed Obama’s statements about Islamophobia and said that if Obama really wanted to talk about religious discrimination in America, he should have addressed Christian groups whose “traditional values ... are being discriminated against.” The idea was that Democrats—like Obama—only cared about Muslims’ rights but oppressed Christians’ interests. This in turn made Rubio (and his conservative constituency) dismissive about anti-Muslim discrimination.

Popular conservative commentator Michelle Malkin exhibited this dismissiveness in the conservative *National Review*, where she wrote that Islamophobia is actually Islamofauxbia (Malkin 2017). Others say Islamophobia is mere political correctness, a liberal tool to stifle conservative viewpoints. Rubio captured this best when he said in 2016 that anti-Muslim sentiment is as trivial as sports rivalries: “We can disagree on things, right? I’m a Dolphins fan, you’re a Patriots fan.”

One poll sums up the general sentiment. A 2015 poll by the Associated Press and the N.O.R.C. Center for Public Affairs Research found that Americans favor protecting religious liberty for Christians over other faith groups, ranking Muslims as the least deserving of this right. 82% voted in favor of protecting religious liberty for Christians, while only 61% said the same for Muslims (Zoll 2015).

A 2017 survey by PRRI asked Americans who they think faces more discrimination in the US: Christians or Muslims? Democrats were four times as likely to believe that Muslims faced greater discrimination than Christians. Republicans were “about equally as likely to say both Christians (48%) and Muslims (45%) experience a lot of discrimination in the US today.” But self-identified white evangelicals, who are predominantly conservative, stood out as the only religious group to say Christians faced more discrimination in America than did Muslims (Cox and Jones 2017). 57% of white evangelicals said that anti-Christian discrimination is widespread in the US while only 44% said the same thing about anti-Muslim discrimination.

The political climate appeared to contribute to their responses. Polls from several years or even a year before the 2016 presidential election found that fewer white evangelicals thought they faced more discrimination than Muslims. A 2013 PRRI survey found that 59% of white evangelicals thought Muslims faced more discrimination than evangelicals did; 56% responded that way to an October 2016 poll. By February 2017, that number had dropped 12 percentage points (Green 2017).

So, there’s a general tendency to belittle Muslims’ experiences of marginalization. Some Christian conservatives go even further. As noted earlier, Muslim religious liberty across a wide range of religious practice is contested on the basis that “Islam is not a religion” but instead a dangerous political ideology undeserving of First Amendment protections. A version of this myth that aptly reflects the Christian-Muslim dynamics are conservative Christian challenges to religious accommodations for Muslim students in public schools. For example, in May 2019, the Freedom of Conscience Defense Fund, whose webpage states that it was created to “halt the secular progressive agenda of harassment and intimidation of people of conscience,” issued a cease-and-desist letter to a Washington School District to end its accommodations of Muslim students who were fasting for Ramadan (Freedom of Conscience Defense Fund n.d.; Miller 2019). In its fight against secularism, the Fund apparently only sees Christian “people of conscience” as needing protection.

Numerous politicians at the federal and state level have echoed this hypocrisy. During the 2016 presidential campaign, candidate Ted Cruz called the election the “religious liberty elec-

tion,” stating that religious liberty issues were front and center in determining who the next President would be (Kumar 2015). Candidate-Trump promised on the campaign trail that the “first priority of my administration will be to preserve and protect our religious liberty” (Groppe 2018). Yet, even as Cruz and Trump were rallying for religious freedom on the campaign trail, they were proposing staunchly anti-Muslim measures. Trump promised to establish a database to track Muslims and suggested shutting down mosques, and Cruz advocated for surveilling “Muslim neighborhoods” (ACLU n.d.). Other presidential candidates chimed in, too; Ben Carson declared that a Muslim “absolutely” could not be president (Demaria 2015), and Rick Santorum said the US Constitution does not protect Muslims, because Islam “is different from Christianity” (Obradovich 2015).

Conservative Christian state politicians otherwise dedicated to the protection of religion and religious freedom have no qualms about cutting Muslims out from that protection. John Andrews, founder of the Western Conservative Summit and a former Colorado Senate president, stood on the Summit stage in July 2019, under a banner proclaiming the importance of religious liberty, and said: “The simplistic approach of simply granting unconditional ‘freedom of religion’ to a religion that doesn’t believe in freedom—and never doubt me, Islam does not—that approach is civilizational suicide, friends” (Wingertner 2019).

Jody Hice, US representative from Georgia’s Tenth District, argued:

Most people think Islam is a religion, it’s not. It’s a totalitarian way of life with a religious component ... It’s a movement to take over the world by force. A global caliphate is the objective. That’s why Islam would not qualify for First Amendment protection since it’s a geopolitical system ... This is a huge thing to realize and I hope you do. This will impact our lives if we don’t get a handle on it.

Hice also emphasized what he saw as a fundamental conflict between Islam and the US Constitution:

These things are in no way compatible with the U.S. Constitution ... Islam and the Constitution are oceans apart ... The number one threat is to our worldview and whether we chunk it for secularism or Islam.

Similarly, in a January 2018 press release, state senator of South Dakota, Neal Tapio, a Republican running for a spot in the US House of Representatives, questioned whether the First Amendment applies to Muslims. Many other GOP politicians have done the same (Uddin 2019).

The religious freedom double standard was also evident during America’s response to the Covid-19 pandemic. In the early weeks of the Covid-19 shutdown in March of 2020, Trump repeatedly said the country would be open in time for Easter, when he’d love to see “packed churches” (Bailey 2020). US Attorney General William Barr also issued strong words against church closures, saying that “in recent years, an expanding government has made the Free Exercise Clause more important than ever” (Long, Balsamo, and Pettus 2020). The head of the conscience division at Health and Human Services, Roger Severino, said that the Center for Disease Control and Prevention guidelines on reopening treated churches as especially “dangerous or worthy of scrutiny than comparable secular behavior” (Goodnough and Haberman 2020). Trump appointee, Judge Justin Walker, used particularly dramatic language to describe the Louisville, Kentucky, mayor’s restriction on drive-in Easter church services: “On Holy Thursday, an American mayor criminalized the communal celebration of Easter” (Volokh 2020).

Meanwhile, in April 2020, days before the Muslim holy month of Ramadan commenced, President Trump retweeted Paul Sperry: “Let’s see if authorities enforce the social-distancing orders for mosques during Ramadan (April 23–May 23) like they did churches during Easter.” Sperry is the co-author of the conspiratorial *Muslim Mafia: Inside the Secret Underworld that’s Conspiring to Islamize America*. When Trump was asked about his retweet during a White House coronavirus task force briefing on national television, he responded:

I’ve seen a great disparity in this country. I’ve seen a great disparity ... I would be interested to see that because they go after Christian churches, but they don’t tend to go after mosques ... I am somebody that believes in faith ... our politicians treat different faiths very differently ... I don’t know what happened with our country, but the Christian faith is treated much differently than it was, and I think it’s treated very unfairly.

(Al Jazeera 2020)

The contrast in rhetoric between this statement and the plentiful other ones about Christian churches once again emphasized that some Christian conservatives (the politicians themselves and their constituencies) were using “religious freedom” as a religiously biased and partisan tool. (It should also be noted that there were plenty of pastors saying stay home, wear a mask, etc.)

More to the partisan point, a study by political scientist Andrew Lewis found that conservatives and liberals respond to religious liberty claims differently depending on how the information is presented to them. In one survey, respondents read about Muslim truck drivers who had to choose between transporting alcohol in violation of their religious beliefs or losing their jobs. Respondents then learned that either a well-known liberal or conservative law firm was representing the truck drivers in court (Dallas 2016). Lewis found that Democratic respondents were more supportive of the religious freedom claims when they were told a liberal law firm represented the drivers. They were also more likely to support Christian conservatives’ claims after they were exposed to religious freedom claims by Muslims. As for conservative respondents, they were less likely to shift attitudes in support of Muslims but were marginally more likely to support them if a conservative law firm was defending the Muslim claimants versus, say, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU). For conservatives, the ACLU is an indisputable member of the liberal out-group—and when it defends Muslims’ rights, those rights have to be opposed.

### **Engagement across the tribal divide**

The tribal approach to religious freedom ultimately rests in the deprivation (or perceived deprivation) of Christian conservatives’ rights. That feeling of persecution is further accentuated for them when it is contrasted with the apparent liberal championing of Muslims’ rights. The idea is that Muslims are already well-protected, and Christians are persecuted, and in that comparison, many conservatives find cause to dismiss, even oppose, Muslims’ rights.

I have found therefore that, to move the multi-faith conversation forward with Christian conservatives, it’s important to both start with their concerns and also clarify that my advocacy for Muslims’ rights is in no way special interest pleading—I am not advocating that minorities have rights while the majority (Christians) be stripped of their rights. The covenantal pluralism approach insists on equality for all faiths (and no faith at all). So, in response to conservatives’ concerns that Muslims’ rights are somehow favored, I tell them: I’m not here to favor any group; I’m here to advocate equality for all of us.

Of course, the messenger also matters. For this approach, I derive courage from religion generally, and my religion specifically. Religious polarization is not just another flavor of polarization—when it comes to the Muslim-Christian divide, we have as external references God, holy texts, and thousands of years of religious tradition. We are reminded of our own fallibility; as much as we may think we are right, we are in the end, I believe, just fumbling toward the truth.

Religion also gives us a different perspective on tribal loyalties. For example, the Qur'an says: "O mankind, indeed We have created you from male and female and made you peoples and tribes that you may know one another" (49:13). The verse is literally talking about tribes and telling us—just as social scientists do—that tribal identities are not in and of themselves a bad thing.

Even when tribal loyalties become toxic, I know not to despair because God, in that verse, says not only that it is possible to mend the divide but also that mending the divide is the very purpose of our differences. We have been made into tribes so that we "may know one another." My work on tribalism is thus focused on searching for a solution that I know exists.

And my personal and professional experiences have given me an idea of what that solution might be. I approach religious freedom and the relevant actors from a place of compassion. I see the Christian and Muslim divide as bridgeable. I see at least a particular subset of the opponents as persuadable. Those are people who are driven by fundamentally human concerns, and it is on the basis of this shared humanity that I work with them.

The compassion comes from my work on a variety of legal matters on behalf of people of all religions: A to Z, Amish to Zoroastrian (Becket n.d.). That work has taught me about the law and the basic fact that, to adequately protect the legal right to religious freedom, you have to protect it for everyone. As the saying among advocates goes, "religious liberty for some is religious liberty for none," because the precedent created in one case, with one set of facts, applies in subsequent cases, too—regardless of which religious group brings the claim.

In *Free to Believe*, my former colleague, Luke Goodrich, elucidates this concept to his evangelical readership under the subheading "Self-Interest." He explains how legal cases involving diverse houses of worship support each other, but also notes that the principle holds true even when cases seem to be completely unrelated (Goodrich 2019, 120–122):

Take my law firm's victory in *Hobby Lobby*, where the Supreme Court ruled that the owners of a family business couldn't be forced to pay for abortion-causing drugs in violation of their conscience. The court of appeals ruled in our favor based primarily on a case called *Abdulhaseeb v. Calbone*, which involved a Muslim prisoner who was denied a halal diet in prison. According to the court, just as the government had forced the Muslim prisoner to choose between violating his faith and not eating, so also the government was forcing the owners of Hobby Lobby to choose between violating their faith and paying multimillion-dollar fines ...

The same principle also works in reverse: a loss for non-Christians often leads directly to losses for Christians ... In a very real sense, if we ignore religious freedom for Muslims, Native Americans, Jews, and others, we're undermining it for ourselves. And if we defend religious freedom for non-Christians, we're defending it for ourselves."

He also offers a simpler way to understand the legal concept with this modified version of Martin Niemoller's poem about the Holocaust:

First they came for the [Muslims], and I did not speak out—Because I was not a [Muslim].

Then they came for the [Native Americans], and I did not speak out—Because I was not a [Native American].

Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out—Because I was not a Jew.

Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me.

Self-interest matters, but the focus, again, is on the human at the center of each story, each legal case. Religious freedom has a fundamentally universal ethical component. It is central to human autonomy—indeed, to the human experience—because it helps us stay true to our quests for purpose and meaning in our life. That philosophical basis of religious freedom, the view that centers the human who is trying to live according to his or her deepest beliefs, is absolutely key in an era where strong partisan forces politicize religious freedom and seek to shift attention away from people to purportedly nefarious agendas.

This focus on the human as human—not merely a party to a transaction—is the normative essence of the covenantal pluralism approach. Covenantal pluralism requires real *relationships*. Accordingly, I don't see my advocacy for equal religious rights as just a way to win rights for my own co-religionists; I see it as advocacy—as a function of my faith—for, and solidarity with, diverse people with diverse stories, experiences, hopes, and fears.

In centering the human, covenantal pluralism also recognizes a basic truth of intergroup dynamics: to reduce prejudice, it is really important that groups are not made to feel like their identity is being threatened or minimized. People have to be able to hold onto their distinctiveness even as they let go of their prejudices (Hewstone, Rubin, and Willis 2002). Covenantal pluralism does not require us to accept or even approve of others' religious beliefs and practices; the point isn't to erase differences but to live among and with diversity through mutually respectful engagement.

Given this legal, philosophical, and socio-psychological understanding, I approach religious freedom from a non-partisan angle and advocate for parties across the spectrum. I have supported Christian cases that so many Americans think involve hateful religious liberty claims: Christian marital counselors and adoption agencies who do not counsel or adopt to LGBT couples; Christian for-profit and non-profit entities who object to paying for employee health insurance that covers some or all contraceptive drugs, and so on. I defend one and all because I see the human at the center of the case. As so much of our national political discourse continues to paint Christian conservative claims as mere covers for bigotry and their religion as nothing but a pretext for hate, my engagement with many Christians shows me something else: I see people who are deeply sincere in their faith and are genuinely worried, even scared, about the world that they are living in, and what it portends. They bring these religious claims to court as a way of carving out a space for themselves in a fast-changing world.

These understandings undergird my three main principles:

1. **Center the human; decenter the politics:** We're all in it together. I am not advocating that Muslims' rights take precedence over Christians' rights or that minorities have unique or preferred access to human rights that members of majorities do not.
2. **Utilize legal literacy:** In fact, I work in very concrete ways to help make sure your rights are protected, too. I have advocated for those rights in the courts of law and the courts of public opinion. Only with coherence and integrity can we protect rights for everyone.
3. **Avoid condemnation/judgment:** And your fears, the ones that make you hostile to Muslims' concerns about attacks on their constitutional rights—I just want to say, I understand. Dramatic changes in the world have left you in a vulnerable place, and your reaction—while deeply problematic in its effects—comes from a place that is, at its core, very human.



Each of these principles echoes an important aspect of covenantal pluralism. Legal literacy makes clear the importance of a constitutional framework that protects everyone's rights and levels the playing field. Centering the human helps us move beyond the merely transactional to the necessary relationships. And avoiding condemnation understands that this process involves basic facets of intergroup dynamics. At our core, we are not warriors for our respective tribes—we are people going through things that any person could go through and reacting as any human would.

My three principles offer a method that is in marked contrast to the prevailing, partisan approach. It is a method that actually works.

## Conclusion

At the February NRB engagement, I saw the concrete effect of my three principles. With each argument, I saw people in the audience nodding. The people in the front row smiled up at me warmly. Several people found me after the talk to thank me for my work. Their sincerity and appreciation were clear.

The warm reception was similar to the one I had received a few months earlier, when I had addressed the NRB leadership (and received Janet's invitation to take my message to the Convention). The leadership came expecting a talk about Muslims' rights but found that everything I said applied to them, too. Nothing I said alienated them as people or demonized their motivations.

Indeed, time and again, as I sit with conservative Christian audiences and share my three-part message, I see shoulders loosening up. Suddenly, the gentleman in the front row who had been staring me down looks puzzled instead. Some in the audience are even smiling. Everyone is listening.

I have even witnessed these dynamics when I am interviewed on conservative talk radio. I cannot see my audience, obviously, but I can hear the tension in my host's voice drop. Sometimes it's like a slow-deflating balloon; other times it's like an emphatic "POP!" One host exclaimed on air, "I'm getting texts! Folks are saying, YES, this is what we need!"

In one Facebook conversation, my three-point message took my opponent from "It's gonna be hard to get people on board with religious freedoms for a religion that enforces an agenda of pushing for a political system that puts in place strict religious laws" to "I am with you 100%. Thanks for a great discussion!"

And then, "I want to read your book."

## Note

- 1 A note about terminology: Conservative white evangelicals are the focus of most of the empirical evidence presented; however, because conservative white evangelicals share many of their religious liberty interests with other conservative Christians, at various points I refer to the relevant group as "Christian conservatives" broadly.

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# SEEKING A VIRTUOUS FEEDBACK LOOP

## Robust pluralism and civic engagement in the United States

*Zeenat Rahman*

Although the United States is the world's oldest constitutional democracy, it is still an experiment which continues to strive towards the goal of a truly just and inclusive democracy. A robust and principled pluralism is the sine qua non of democracy. Pluralism is where each person living in that democracy pledges to engage, respect, and protect the other, without necessarily lending moral equivalency to the other's beliefs. This kind of pluralism (what the editors of this *Handbook* call "covenantal pluralism") honors the equal dignity of every citizen and affirms the mutuality of rights and responsibilities. Importantly, it also acknowledges deep differences. Without difference, there can be no pluralism, which is why it is an essential condition for a thriving democracy.

Religion has frequently been viewed as something that perpetuates division. But when viewed through the lens of citizenship, rights, and responsibilities, it can be a powerful driver for strengthening civil society, and thus democracy.

Maintaining a level playing field is the only way to ensure that everyone's rights are consistently protected—and, hopefully, respected. The framework of cross-cultural religious literacy (CCRL) is important because it recognizes the importance of religion in people's lives. By offering a concrete framework for engagement, CCRL offers an important tool that can bridge societal divides.

Today, democracies are in decline globally and the United States is not immune from this trend (Repucci 2020). Yet despite this, communities across the country have shown signs of connection as they stepped up to care for another in the face of a global pandemic. When the French historian Alexis De Tocqueville visited America almost 200 years ago, he marveled at the strength of American civil society and its centrality to a healthy democracy. It was where citizens put into practice their mutual obligations to one another, the habits of effective citizenship. Yet, then, as now, American civil society has had deep fragmentation, high levels of polarization, and a trust deficit in society (Putnam 2000). Applying the framework of cross-cultural literacy can enable citizens to put into practice their mutual obligations to one another by establishing the skills and competencies needed to build civic solidarity.

I view both our main challenge and opportunity as this: In these multi-religious, multi-racial, and multi-ethnic United States of America, how do we envision a common life? And how do we do so while maintaining our differences and building a truly equitable society? In the opening chapter, Seiple and Hoover define covenantal pluralism as the “humility, patience, empathy, and responsibility to engage, respect, and protect the other ... a balanced emphasis on both the rules and relationships necessary to live peacefully and productively in a world of deep differences.”

In this chapter, I explore the practical application of cross-cultural religious literacy and covenantal pluralism through the lens of my personal experiences as a Muslim growing up in a Christian-majority country, and my professional experiences working with Interfaith Youth Core, the United States Agency of International Development, US State Department, and the Aspen Institute. It is meant to be practically useful and demonstrate the adaptiveness of the framework of cross-cultural religious literacy. It is also intended to offer practical methods for readers to add to their own toolkits in considering how to approach and engage religious diversity and equity in their own work.

### **Self-evaluation—A minority faith in a majority context**

In elementary school, English was my favorite class. I could generally overcome my reserved and shy nature to participate in class because I loved it so much. I remember raising my hand one day in fourth grade English class. Instead of calling on me to answer the question, my teacher berated me and asked why I had painted my hand with orange marker. I tried to explain to her that it wasn't marker, but henna that we used to decorate our hands for the celebration of Eid. Instead of believing me, she reprimanded me in front of the whole class. As an eight-year-old, I didn't have the knowledge or skillset to explain my faith, but I do remember feeling that I was different and that difference was not something positive, but rather something that should be hidden away in my private life.

Now I am a mother of a five-year-old, and during Ramadan this year, I will visit her classroom and explain to her peers (and ostensibly to her) the meaning and importance of Ramadan to Muslims. My goal will not be to impart the facts of the holiday (though that will of course be a part of it), but rather to inculcate an appreciation of difference that contributes to the whole. I want my daughter and her peers to understand that the model of the United States—out of many, one—means that our differences make us richer as a country and that gaining knowledge and appreciation of those differences will deepen our understanding of one another and strengthen our bonds.

In the opening chapter of this *Handbook*, Seiple and Hoover write, “At every step of this process, negotiation takes place, internally, and externally. Internally, one cannot help but (re)-consider one's own identity through the encounter of different beliefs, cultures, and people.” In my experience, the dual processes of evaluation and negotiation are inextricably linked and always happening simultaneously and dynamically. As a first-born child of immigrants from India, the encounter of different beliefs, cultures, and people are part of my earliest memories. With frequent trips to India as a child, I was very aware of a world much different and bigger than my own life in the suburbs of Chicago. On those visits, I was seen as distinctly “American” by my extended family and felt that way too. Although we shared the same belief system, the social-cultural-religious context was very different. Even though Islam is a minority religion in India, my family lived in an area where the majority of the population practiced Islam and so the practice of faith was a more explicit part of the common culture.

America and India are both large, religiously diverse democracies. In America, Christianity as the majority faith is interwoven into the common culture. Upon my return from those trips

to India, I would often feel a sense of dislocation, neither fitting in here nor there. This is a common experience to first generation Americans, a constant process of evaluating self, trying to make sense of where you fit between the heritage you have adopted from your family and the legacy you hope to leave in the world. As I learned about the faith beliefs of my friends, Jewish, Hindu, Christian, and Sikh, it made me want to engage more deeply in my own faith. I knew the facts that I was taught in Sunday school and learned from my parents about Islam, but I couldn't always see the relevance of those facts to my own life. As immigrants who were raised in a completely different political and cultural context, my parents certainly had their own personal competency, but did not have a deep enough understanding of my lived experience to effectively translate the faith to my context.

It was this process of searching (or negotiation) that led me to pursue a graduate degree in Middle East studies at the University of Chicago. My master's thesis was on how young Muslims lived out their faith identity in the context of living in America. I did an ethnographic survey and found that young Muslims perceived a sense of commonality between how they thought about their faith in relation to their peers. That is to say, the context of living in America deeply shaped how these young people perceived and lived out their faith (negotiation and evaluation). Although they knew there were distinct differences in belief and practice, they also recognized the common context in which their faith was playing out. They weren't adopting exported traditions from their parents' culture as the way they thought about their faith practice had a distinctly American context to it.

This experience led me to realize that I wanted to explore this work further, particularly to determine which tools/skillsets were most effective in enabling young people to best understand, negotiate, and communicate their faith identity. Through my previous research, I saw how powerful faith was in shaping a young person's identity and deepening an understanding of themselves and the world. I also saw a lack of easily accessible models or tools for engagement for young people. These conclusions led me to work at the Interfaith Youth Core, a young Chicago based non-profit which put youth-focused, experiential learning at the center of its methodology. Unlike typical interfaith encounters based on the religion's official doctrines (and often represented by male clergy), the Interfaith Youth Core focuses on the lived experience of the young person, communicated in their own words. Over the last 20 years of operation, Interfaith Youth Core has trained thousands of young people in interfaith leadership skills (Interfaith Youth Core 2020).

I think this model has been so successful because it encourages evaluation, communication, and negotiation at the same time. You must be able to tell your "faith story" and in doing so, you are evaluating what your faith says about engaging the other. Put another way, owning your own narrative helps deepen your "personal competency," an understanding one's own moral, epistemological, and spiritual framework, to include one's own (holy) texts and what they say about engaging the other. Communication of this story in small group settings with people of other faith traditions encourages vulnerability and trust, what Seiple and Hoover call a "comparative competency." The focus on the "lived religion" of the young person acknowledges and recognizes differences, sometimes within the same faith tradition—all of which is essential for cross-cultural religious literacy to be successful. Lastly, the model focuses on what common good or social action participants can do together (what Seiple and Hoover refer to as "collaborative competency"). Having gone through the process of "personal" and "comparative" competency, participants are ready to work together to accomplish a specific task. This model echoes what Seiple and Hoover write in the opening chapter, "The key has always been the same: seeking first to understand the essence of one's own, as well as the other's, identity before engaging to create a relationship capable of discovering common values, and common interests, pursuant a common project."

My time at the Interfaith Youth Core gave me a way to think about the skillsets of evaluation, negotiation, and communication that I had informally used throughout my life. It provided a structure to think through what was needed in order to positively navigate religious differences. The framework of cross-cultural religious literacy is an important tool for youth identity development. The model gives a young person agency and ownership over the lived experience of their faith, connects it to a shared civic identity (individual rights through citizenship), and ties it to issues of shared concern (common ground).

### **Applying cross-cultural religious literacy to multi-stakeholder partnerships**

The concept of covenantal pluralism as laid out by Stewart, Hoover, and Seiple in the second chapter of this *Handbook* assumes a top-down and bottom-up approach: It seeks a constitutional framework of equal rights and responsibilities for all citizens under the transparent rule of law (the top-down), as well as a supportive cultural context (the bottom-up), of which religion is often a significant factor. This section will focus on the application of cross-cultural religious literacy as a policy tool that can be utilized for more effective public/private partnerships.

In the opening chapter Seiple and Hoover write,

We believe that in a world where no global challenge can be solved by a single state or non-state actor, it is not a question of if but when you partner with an individual or institution that does not think, act, or believe as you do.

As I began my work in the Office of Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships (OFBNP) at the United States Agency of International Development, I was tasked with navigating the complexities of multi-stakeholder partnerships. OFBNP was created to strengthen USAID's collaboration with faith-based and community organizations by eliminating barriers these groups may face while seeking partnership. It also focuses on the networks, insights, and resources that faith-based and community organizations bring to addressing global development challenges (USAID 2020).

According to Devex,<sup>1</sup> international faith-based development organizations are some of the biggest implementing partners of USAID (Villarino, 2011). America's international development goals cannot be met without them. They have been on the ground for decades in the most disadvantaged places in the world, and therefore have access and relationships and trust that are critical to successfully reaching those in dire need. In addition to these attributes, in many countries around the world where USAID works, the primary civil society actors are faith-based groups, so it is essential to understand them as they understand themselves, in order to successfully achieve development goals.

It was apparent from the outset that none of the global development challenges we faced could be solved by government alone. It would take an "all hands-on deck" or multi-stakeholder partnership effort in order to have an impact on any of USAID's priorities. In practice, within the Agency, there was limited knowledge on how to collaborate across sectors, and particular skepticism about working with faith-based groups. The origin of this skepticism was often derived from a general lack of literacy about the first amendment and the establishment clause, which prohibits the government from making any law "respecting an establishment of religion." This clause not only forbids the government from establishing an official religion, but also prohibits government actions that unduly favor one religion over another. To many of my colleagues in government, the establishment clause translated to a deep wariness of working with faith-based groups at all.

I began my work at USAID with a series of listening sessions, one on one meetings where I would meet with faith-based groups to learn about their work. It was during this process that I met a gentleman named Shepherd Smith. Shepherd was an evangelical Christian who had worked with his wife on HIV prevention for decades throughout sub-Saharan Africa. Our initial meeting was cursory: He told me about their work, and I filled him in on the topline priorities of the administration. Over time, however, our relationship evolved into one with depth and breadth which allowed me to understand his perspective in a way that allowed for successful partnership on a number of global challenges. What guided our interactions was a desire to deepen one another's understanding of how faith informed our respective work. Shepherd was avowedly pro-life and determined to work with the administration I was a part of, even though it was known for being pro-choice, because we shared a common goal: Improving the lives of the disadvantaged young people in sub-Saharan Africa. Through the process of getting to know one another, we were able to identify the lines that each party would not cross. We could have jumped head on into partnership because of the common goal of improving young lives, but without understanding the motivations that each party was bringing to the table, the relationship would have been too transactional in nature, and I believe, ultimately would have failed.

Because we used literacy and cross-cultural communication as a starting point for our conversation, focused not only on what we were bringing to the table, but *why* we were invested in the work, we were able to partner on many initiatives such as a campaign on child survival, and a global hunger and food security initiative named "Feed the Future." Additionally, because Shepherd and I built trust in one another over time, others in his network such as Kay Warren of Saddleback Church and Senator Boozman (R-AK) also saw me as a trusted partner and ally with whom they could partner on a number of global challenges. In building our relationships, Shepherd and I developed what Seiple and Hoover call "collaborative competency"—a process that takes place when different individuals/institutions move from side-by-side tolerance (diversity), to self- and other- awareness, to mutual engagement (the heart of covenantal pluralism).

While my office was the hub for cross-cultural religious literacy, this work was also strongly supported by the USAID Administrator, Rajiv Shah. Over the course of our time working together, cross-cultural religious literacy became an embedded part of his interactions with religious and political leaders. In a recent podcast where he reflected on his time as leading the Agency, he said:

Building bi-partisan cooperation on these types of issues, it's not just about the math, it's also about the relationships. One of the most surprising things for me was I found getting to know on a really personal level faith-based Republican senators ... and even though we don't agree on most issues politically ... I admire the fact that they have an inner core of values that drives their desire to serve. And we can disagree on lots of things, but also find the opportunity to agree ... [Because of this,] America was able to mount the largest investment in addressing food and hunger around the world that we did since WWII. We were able to create an effort to electrify much of Africa, and we were able to pass both of those bills through a very divided Congress and get it signed by the President.

(Armchair Expert with Dax Shepherd 2020)

I learned many lessons about multi-stakeholder partnerships during my time at USAID. International development provides a great platform to deepen understanding of cross-cultural religious literacy, through exploring the faith-based motivations to engage in the work. Many faith traditions speak directly to addressing the needs of humanity. If policymakers can create



the space to discuss what motivates people to engage in development work, it can be a powerful driver for deepening the understanding of motivations of the other party, leading to more effective partnerships. The work of international development, whether the topic is disaster response, disease eradication, addressing food and hunger, refugee response, and so many others, can be a powerful source of civic solidarity.

An important corrective that would help to eliminate the barriers that faith-based groups often face when trying to work with USAID would be to train USAID staff in cross-cultural religious literacy—not just among American stakeholders, as I experienced with Shepherd, but as the pre-cursor to working with local partners worldwide. These trainings must include literacy of the constitutional framework of the United States, especially the First Amendment and a nuanced understanding of issues of separation of church and state. Often those tasked with partnership within government have limited knowledge of how to collaborate across sectors and therefore the application of cross-cultural religious literacy would not only deepen understanding of faith communities in local contexts, it would also provide a tool for more effective multi-stakeholder partnerships.

### **The necessity of the cross-cultural religious literacy in covenantal pluralism**

Religious literacy by itself doesn't automatically translate into support or adoption of pluralism. As Seiple and Hoover write in Chapter One, "It is quite possible to combine technical knowledge of religion with illiberal, anti-pluralist sentiment." I would add that *selective, non-contextual* literacy of a faith tradition has allowed for the weaponization of faith, which is dangerous and only serves to further polarize communities and weaken civil society. Nowhere has this been more evident than with the example of the Muslim American community. In the past almost two decades since September 11, 2001, levels of negative sentiment towards Muslims have steadily risen in the United States. These negative attitudes towards Muslims did not just happen, but are a result of this anti-Muslim bigotry movement, which is well documented. (For example, please see Asma Uddin's chapter in this *Handbook*.)

So even as there was an uptick in efforts around religious literacy spurred by September 11, there was also a concurrent anti-pluralist, well-funded, and well-organized effort towards driving Islamophobia. Religious literacy by itself cannot solve this anti-pluralist sentiment. In light of such a pervasive climate of anti-pluralism, we must ask how can we support efforts at cross-cultural religious literacy with the acknowledgment that we are not operating on a level playing field? I believe that we must outline the conditions which create and allow religious pluralism to thrive while also considering the relationship between those conditions, ensuring religious literacy is embedded throughout.

Currently, I run a program at the Aspen Institute called the Inclusive America Project (IAP). The focus of our work is on how to achieve a robust religious pluralism. IAP defines religious pluralism as a world in which diverse religious communities and non-believers engage each other in beneficial ways, maintain their distinct identities, and thrive and defend each others' right to thrive. We view pluralism not as merely side-by-side tolerance of the other, but rather robust engagement based on an understanding and respect for our differences, coupled with a mutual commitment towards the common good. IAP's work is about understanding, strengthening, and connecting the foundational components that need to be in place in order for religious diversity to arrive at religious pluralism. We believe that religious pluralism is the bedrock of a strong, healthy, democratic society.

IAP views religious pluralism as a complex system of multiple interdisciplinary and specialized networks of individuals and organizations working toward similar outcomes. Accordingly,

we developed a systems-thinking approach which hypothesizes that religious pluralism requires seven components, each functioning dynamically in society, in order to thrive. Systems thinking requires that we understand a system's many stakeholders, how they interact, and what influences them (Misra and Maxwell 2016). Each of the seven component parts of religious pluralism is itself a complex, multisectoral area of work focused on one outcome in society. Some have their own budding or established academic fields of study, while others are only fields of practice. The seven component parts include:

- **Thriving religious communities:** Religious pluralism relies on the presence of many diverse faith communities with good leadership, sustainable institutions, and leaders and congregants knowledgeable about their own doctrines and traditions;
- **Religious literacy:** Religious pluralism relies on individuals having a basic understanding of religions, which allows citizens to engage each other more effectively and find common values, through an understanding of self and others, with people of all faiths and no faith;
- **Diversity in media and representation:** Religious Pluralism relies on minority communities telling their own stories in media like journalism, literature, and television, so their diverse and multi-faceted stories become part of the American narrative;
- **Hate speech and hate crime prevention:** Hate speech and hate crimes bring a cycle of fear to whole communities, prompting them to withdraw into closed spaces, further sequestering them from society, and preventing their inclusion. The prevention of these activities allows religious pluralism to thrive;
- **Religious freedom:** Religious pluralism relies on every person feeling the guarantee of equal rights and freedoms to worship, or not, according to their conscience, as well as the guarantee that not one individual or community can force their faith orientation on anyone else. This includes a freedom to convert and to bring one's faith into public life;
- **Religion in diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI):** Including faith orientation in DEI thinking brings to bear all the benefits of true diversity, equity, and inclusion acknowledged for other poles of identity. Religious DEI means respecting and understanding individual religious observance and allowing individuals to be their whole selves;
- **Multi-faith and intra-faith engagement:** Religious pluralism relies on meaningful connection around lines of faith difference to build shared bridges, deepen understanding, and develop critical skill sets for democratic engagement in a religiously, ideologically, and demographically diverse society.

In November 2019, IAP convened a group of faith-based civic engagement organizations based in Chicago. During this convening, we asked participants to map themselves onto our multi-component framework of religious pluralism described above. The resulting network analysis revealed that the participant organizations rely on each other's successes in the field of religious pluralism in a virtuous feedback loop and that their interests are deeply intertwined. We learned that faith-based nonprofits' prosocial work is dependent on the system of religious pluralism. For example, the Syrian Community Network works to serve, connect, and empower Syrian refugees and Muslims, and it also depends heavily on the field of hate crime prevention and diversity in media in order to do their work (Ralph 2020).

Through our work, we have discovered that too few individuals and organizations see how these fields are connected, but that interdependency and cross-connection is essential to the work having impact. Instead of collaborating, there is often an unhealthy competition among communities and nonprofits for scarce resources, and the result is inefficiency in the field that is limiting its impact.

We hypothesized that each of the aforementioned components is necessary for religious pluralism, because if any one of them is not functioning dynamically in society, true religious pluralism, deep engagement across difference while all maintain their distinct identities and defend each other's right to thrive, cannot exist. We believe that each of these components mutually reinforces the others and the umbrella of religious pluralism. Through our work, we will be testing our assumptions on these component parts, and their connection to religious pluralism and hope to publish the results in 2022.

## Conclusion

Having spent the last 15 years engaging in this work, I have arrived at two principal conclusions. First, while there has been a greater awareness for the need for cross-cultural religious literacy over the last decade, not enough stakeholders see its relevance to their concerns. For those of us who are practitioners, we must be more effective in conveying the importance of this work to a diverse range of stakeholders. The concepts outlined in this book and this chapter specifically offer a humble attempt at defining the terms, a necessary first step in engaging new stakeholders. Put another way, outlining the competencies and skillsets needed for cross-cultural religious literacy is an excellent pathway for engagement for non-specialists because of its practical application in real-world scenarios.

Second, many good models exist which incorporate the three skillsets needed to engage in cross-cultural religious literacy, yet they are scattered and ad-hoc. This is why it is imperative to better understand the system of religious pluralism in which cross-cultural religious literacy is embedded. Further, the work of religious pluralism itself must be grounded in a broader normative understanding of how/why pluralism is essential to a healthy democracy. My hope is that the real examples and lived experience in this chapter help the reader to understand how cross-cultural religious literacy can be practically integrated in both governmental and civil society contexts of America's richly diverse polity.

## Note

- 1 Devex is a media platform used to connect members of the global development community through news, business intelligence, and funding and career opportunities. Further information can be found at: <https://www.devex.com/>.

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*Seeking a virtuous feedback loop*

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# FAIRNESS AS A PATH FORWARD ON LGBTQ RIGHTS AND RELIGIOUS LIBERTY

*Shirley Hoogstra and Robin Fretwell Wilson*

This is a story about real people with deep differences deciding to sit down together to chart a peace, knowing that it might prove impossible. It is a story about what can result when we overcome suspicion of each other, think more clearly about our own needs, and shift from protecting our own interests to seeking to protect the right of all people to live with integrity, even those who hold different beliefs. It is a story in which the framework for covenantal pluralism presented by Stewart, Seiple, and Hoover (see Chapter 2 of this *Handbook*) becomes tangible by being put into practice.

Cultural shifts are often exercises in transmitting the possible. As one example: Many women populate the ranks of city councils, federal and state legislatures, and serve as mayors, heads of executive branches and governors. Vice President Kamala Harris' election has captured the imagination of countless school children. VP Harris has helped them believe that they, too, can be public servants at every level. Even in higher education, it was not too long ago that women could not teach at universities, let alone head a system-wide faculty institute or an association of universities and colleges.

For covenantal pluralism to take hold as a means for bridging deep divides, those willing to repair deep rifts between communities also need inspiration. They need to believe it is possible to heal old wounds, even if against long odds.

In America's seemingly intractable culture war over LGBTQ rights, a little noticed *détente* is emerging. A coterie of lawyers and long-time advocates for both the LGBTQ and faith communities met routinely for four years to outline legislation with a single purpose: Respecting and protecting all persons in the same law. This group believed working together to communicate their concerns to each other, evaluate their needs, and negotiate the possible gave them greater capacity for nuance in this approach, instead of waiting for the hammer of a US Supreme Court decision.

Still, there was enormous risk, not necessarily from the outside, but from within. Those who engaged worried about animosity from the other, which naturally implicates an assessment of whether the opposing side was worthy of engagement. Some wondered whether any productive gains would be drowned by reputational losses and push-back by those outside the group. Both LGBTQ and religious liberty advocates questioned themselves: Would sitting down with the other side compromise their integrity?

As with so much in the effort to meld civil rights for all people, these intra-group dynamics were symmetrical. The concerns of one side mirrored the other. Furthermore, if healing can take hold here, it can serve as a model for tackling other “intractable” problems.

What follows is a distillation<sup>1</sup> of in-depth interviews with people who came together out of a common desire to be fully themselves in private and public. All feared being marginalized, all wanted security. It chronicles the deep trust and unexpected affection that grew up between the parties as they hammered out the details of proposed legislation known as Fairness for All, which was introduced into the 116th Congress on December 6, 2019 (see Wilson 2019; Adams 2018; Hoogstra, LoMaglio, and Crofford 2018; LoMaglio 2019; Leavitt 2018).

Part I sketches the motivations for pursuing a peace many believed impossible. The group that assembled saw America’s persistent clashes between gay rights and many faith communities as an opportunity for healing.

Part II chronicles their gatherings in an abbreviated timeline. What would have been a transactional arrangement—what do I need to give you in order for you to make concessions to me?—transformed through acts of caring and selflessness into an act of covenantal pluralism.

Part III maps the preconditions for success. Understanding that they shared core values helped to close the gaping chasm that initially separated the parties. The values identified by Stewart, Seiple, and Hoover—humility, empathy, patience, courage, fairness, reciprocity, cooperativeness, self-critique and self-correction—came alive around the bargaining table.

## **The why**

Across much of the country, LGBTQ individuals still feel unsupported, or worse, under attack (Wilson 2017). LGBTQ people worry about the fragility of the gains made during their lifetimes—things many take for granted, like being able to marry or not being fired just for who one is.<sup>2</sup> Working to enact a federal civil rights law would stabilize those gains, even as the executive branch or the judiciary changed over time (Bean and Wilson 2020a). Quite simply, fear for the future motivated LGBTQ advocates to extend an olive branch to those with whom they have bitterly divided, namely religious communities maintaining a traditional view of sexuality.

Fear for the future also motivated members of these faith communities. Some have long been minorities and could instinctively identify with their LGBTQ counterparts. But those who in the not-so-distant past were comfortably ensconced in the majority also now feared being a minority—both numerically,<sup>3</sup> and because many of their core beliefs are no longer widely shared.<sup>4</sup> Shifting cultural sands, and the knowledge that a shrinking slice of Americans shared their perspectives,<sup>5</sup> sparked an existential fear.

A mutual understanding of freedom united the two groups. As one of our interviewees surmised:

[U]ltimately, the cause of autonomy and liberty for LGBT people is the cause of liberty for people of faith. [B]oth sides want recognition ... and protection for their ability to live their own authentic lives themselves, largely free of undue, unwarranted interference from the government. They want the freedom to be themselves in their homes, and in their families, in their workplaces. And in the public square.<sup>6</sup>

Parity of needs played a decisive role. As one participant said,

[F]or the most part, they're seeking the same thing ... a place of respect, a place of peace, a place where you can live in dignity and in security and a type of friendship in community, even with people with whom you disagree fundamentally.<sup>7</sup>

Shortly after *Obergefell v. Hodges*,<sup>8</sup> two groups of long-time advocates for the LGBTQ community and faith communities holding a traditional view of sexuality arrived almost simultaneously at the judgment they should reach out to each other. Both believed resolving culture war clashes required laws, not simply litigation. As one explained, "Legislation could do something courts couldn't. ... Congress can [act] with a scalpel. [The] Supreme Court might not have the same surgical tool kit [because they decide only on] facts presented to them."<sup>9</sup>

Ultimately, the group that would join forces spanned the cultural and theological spectrum, including a religious liberty lawyer; a national religious liberty policy expert working for religious organizations; two preeminent legal scholars in LGBTQ rights and religious liberty, respectively; a national advocate for trans people; long-time advocates for bridging differences from the LGBTQ and religious liberty perspectives; a national advocate for LGBTQ people; and a revolving cast of invited guests. Together, this group had decades of experience navigating complex cultural-legal issues in America.

All believed that much was at stake for those they represented, and for themselves. Some LGBTQ advocates worried that the LGBTQ movement's litigation strategy had run its course. "[F]undamental problems" in the Equality Act are likely to "lose at the Supreme Court, possibly by unanimous decisions."<sup>10</sup> Too, the newly recomposed US Supreme Court "woke up the left."<sup>11</sup>

Religious liberty advocates also sought the security that only an act of Congress can give. At that moment in 2015,

[We had] had a Republican Congress for eight years ... a Republican Congress with a Republican president for two years, zero things have been advanced. Meanwhile, here's the trajectory of the LGBTQ rights legislation, which is only gaining more and more support every time it goes around. ... You can either do nothing and get nothing. Or you can do something and get a lot of what you want.<sup>12</sup>

For LGBTQ advocates, any rapprochement would have to begin with the acknowledgment that "[t]here was discrimination against LGBT people. And it was wrong."<sup>13</sup> For those advocating from the perspective of the faith communities at the table, efforts to bridge differences had to be undertaken for principled reasons, not just pragmatic ones. Dialogue should be opened "because of their faith, not in spite of their faith."<sup>14</sup> And Biblical principles should guide. "Being for" one's fellow citizen is Biblically commanded, as is love of God.<sup>15</sup> By loving our neighbor as ourselves, we love God. This central principle of Christianity is best relayed by the story of Good Samaritan.<sup>16</sup> Loving our neighbor is not limited to those we know or with whom we agree. Our neighbor is each and everyone, especially the person in need.

Critics of Fairness for All have suggested that LGBTQ advocates would not respect the needs of religious communities or the sincerity of religious belief. This was plainly wrong.

[I]f we had thought that religious freedom is just a cover for bigotry, and it serves no useful purpose in the constitutional order, and if you thought that gay people are legitimately discriminated against in housing, and in business services and in employment and so forth, [then] there's just not much to talk about.<sup>17</sup>

This group had a genuine desire to allow people with radically different values and perspectives to live together, cooperatively. Laws can address the “genuine concerns that [all] people have about ... their role in this society and their freedom to live their lives.”<sup>18</sup> These concerns run to the most important choices we make: Who we love, how we worship (if at all), where we work, how we move through society and access public spaces, where we live. They are not superficial. It would be a mistake to think that this massive lift to ensure fairness for all was all *kumbaya* campfire moments.

### **The “gatherings” to work out details of Fairness for All**

When persons know each other as friends and colleagues, it is then that they can leave narrow self-interest aside and ask: What can I do to protect and defend your ability to live your best life, even at a cost of myself?

Across four years, a shifting cast of stakeholders in the LGBTQ and faith communities worked together to hammer out the outlines of a stable, sustainable accord—a trek fraught with risk for the parties themselves. Some organizations lost members because of this effort. Others lost credibility. As one LGBTQ advocate said, “Some of the movement folks wonder if I didn’t go native.”<sup>19</sup>

This effort began on the heels of a watershed moment, the Utah Compromise, a stunning accomplishment that ignited hope (Adams 2018, 44). In March 2015, three months before *Obergefell* opened marriage to all couples, Utah gave more rights to the full LGBTQ community than that community had expressly in New York law (Wilson 2019). At the time, Utah was politically the most conservative state in America. More germane to the group that was forming, Utah is home to a large percentage of devoutly religious people holding traditional views on sexual morality and marriage.<sup>20</sup> Almost immediately, phones started blowing up. If Utah could enact laws protecting both communities, perhaps its model of engagement could be scaled up in a federal accord.<sup>21</sup> The pluralism happening in that spark was catalytic.

A second spark came in July 2015 when the US House of Representatives and the US Senate both introduced the Equality Act.<sup>22</sup> The Council for Christian Colleges & Universities (CCCU)—whose work is to preserve, protect and advance Christian higher education in the public square—together with religious liberty experts reached out to the American Unity Fund.<sup>23</sup>

Unbeknownst to each other, each group had visited the office of a senior Republican US Representative who suggested that they explore working together. By December 2015, the two groups had drafted a “Statement of Shared Principles.” Both groups invited each other to organizational gatherings.

Throughout 2016, meetings continued between experienced LGBTQ advocates and religious liberty experts drawn from multiple faith communities. The desire to draft a bill melding rights continued in earnest as each side added legal expertise, becoming a multi-faith, multi-denominational effort. The concept of “Fairness for All” began to be publicly discussed—and reactions ranged from skepticism to keen interest.

Thirteen drafters met for four days at a Maryland retreat, hoping to complete a draft bill respecting all persons. That proved overly optimistic.

Over the next three years, a core group met for multi-day drafting sessions that were tedious, exhausting, and fraught. Beginning in 2017, day-long and sometimes two-day summits happened quarterly, interspersed with three-day summits at which the parties made a concerted push to reach agreement. A three-day meeting in Salt Lake City, Utah, in February 2019, capped the collective drafting effort. By April, final language was in hand. Utah Congressional



Representative Chris Stewart would ultimately introduce the bill with eight co-sponsors on December 6, 2019 (Stewart and Schaerr 2019; Bean and Wilson 2020b).

Over hard work, good meals, shared stories, and sometimes bitter exchanges, both tried-and-true and cutting-edge solutions emerged. The group succeeded in capturing what each needed to live well in America.

In addition to mind-numbing drafting meetings, the small coterie met tirelessly with key stakeholders in their own communities to introduce an audacious idea: Each group had to fundamentally reorient its relationship to the other. Put simply, these collaborators are not our enemy.

Good faith ambassadors from each camp met with their counterparts in meetings that were polite on the surface, but rippled with an undercurrent of skepticism. “I was prepared to hate you,” one gentleman said to one of us. These meetings humanized the other side.

As one testament to the small group’s effort to make the “impossible” achievable, in November 2018, more than 100 groups advocating for LGBTQ rights or religious liberty met to discuss the why of the proposed Fairness for All legislation.

### **Preconditions for success and skills needed for engagement**

In order for a chasm to be crossable, parties have to share some common identity. The core group of drafters shared a belief in and love of the creator. As happens so often, many at the table were people of faith, some of whom happened to be gay or trans.<sup>24</sup> They shared a common vocabulary, a respect for marriage even if they were divided about whether marriage is reserved for persons of different sexes, and a desire to expand everyone’s liberty to live authentic lives.

Genuine friendships sprung up, relationships that kept them at the table when friction erupted over a substantive provision. One religious stakeholder with conservative views on sexuality described “a friendship and a sort of camaraderie and a brotherhood . . . that transcends our differences.”<sup>25</sup> One participant said she “fell in love with everybody on that side of that table. I love them, understand them, give them miles worth of grace.”<sup>26</sup>

Before one pivotal meeting, a participant’s grandmother died. She literally made “funeral arrangements during the breaks in these discussions.”<sup>27</sup> Her mother had

died years back and I hadn’t had a motherly hug in God knows how long. A person [most easily] describe[d] [as] having been my enemy . . . gave me a hug. On that day she acted like my mom . . . I remember that act of actual love and Christian welcome. . . . We’ve literally crossed swords before, and since.<sup>28</sup>

Drafting proposed legislation to reach an accord on a broad range of issues is a tremendous lift even for the most mature and experienced professionals. Evaluation, negotiation, and communication—three specific skills enumerated by Seiple and Hoover (Chapter 1 of this *Handbook*)—placed an impossible task within reach. The skill of evaluation requires self and situational awareness. The small group that assembled probed their own beliefs, perceptions of the other, and biases. The skill of negotiation, fueled by mutual listening and understanding, began the moment the group gathered. Understanding each other and avoiding assumptions about the other was as crucial as any substantive point. Understanding and respect meant that less central things upon which the group could not agree could be left to the side. The third skill, communication, knit the group together. Good listening requires empathy and experience reading verbal and non-verbal cues. The profound example of kindness and grace shown to a grieving colleague built trust. With trust comes tangible results.

All nine values of covenantal pluralism identified by Stewart, Seiple, and Hoover (Chapter 2 of this *Handbook*) found expression in the process. They were preconditions to success. We highlight those that exerted the most significant impact.

The ability to recognize the shortcomings of one's own tribe is a humility that few have. One religious liberty advocate expressed surprise at how many people who claim religious freedom "if you really drill down, for many of them, that principle does not extend past their own interests."<sup>29</sup> Members of faith traditions acknowledged an unacknowledged legacy of homophobia and bigotry towards LGBTQ people in certain religious circles. Religious actors had not engaged the LGBTQ community perfectly in the past.

An LGBTQ advocate noted that "many of us went in assuming that ... hostility"<sup>30</sup> to LGBTQ persons explained past resistance to laws that mattered deeply to the LGBTQ community. "If it turns out [that this is] not the case, you have to sit down and talk with people."<sup>31</sup> Working with religious stakeholders felt to another "a little embarrassing,"<sup>32</sup> a bias against religious freedom advocates that was a source of "shame"<sup>33</sup> and ultimately was re-examined.

Courage is a precondition. Making an overture to groups across such a gaping divide is not for the faint of heart. Being at the table made one participant want to "jump out of my own skin. ... I just started out with so much fear and skepticism."<sup>34</sup> Some feared being accused of being a liberal, not truly a conservative Christian, a sellout and enemy. But for their courage, there would have been no attempt to bridge differences.

Thick skin is required. Many described

long and hard conversations about this and moments of tension [where] there were raised voices and there were sometimes tears ... [and] yet [the people sitting at the table] hung together [with] a kind of a camaraderie and even ... love that grew up and developed.<sup>35</sup>

Empathy shaped the negotiations. All made "real efforts to grapple with the question, what do you need to feel like a part of this community? And what do I need? And what can we live with? Even as [they] disagree, fundamentally?"<sup>36</sup> Everyone we spoke to hit a similar note:

It is necessary to understand the perspectives of those who disagree with you, both in an effort to compromise and in an effort maybe to see the perspective of others so that you can ... give yourself permission to compromise. And so that you can show others your own perspective.<sup>37</sup>

It takes patience to work across four years when tensions are high and people are exasperated and sometimes hurt. As an LGBTQ activist said, "we have to have confidence and trust that when there's a bit of a sacrifice on the part of one group, that it will not be ... continually one sided ... there won't end up being groups ... continually pushed to the margins."

The hallmark of Fairness for All is right in its name—fairness. It is why this group came together. As a way to preserve fairness, they sought to "keep space to have ... arguments about truth..., not to coerce people ... that [they] can't live the way [they are] convinced at the moment."<sup>38</sup> The *raison d'être* was to "find a legal framework in which we can live with our differences."<sup>39</sup>

Fairness was understood in terms of reciprocity: "wanting peace for you and wanting peace for me." Provision by provision, you have "two human actors, two human beings who have rights and the law is trying to figure out how the both of them can exist in community without being marginalized and made minorities."<sup>40</sup>

Self-critique and self-correction, which in its core means honesty, created conditions of trust. Hammering out sterile legal provisions together forced everyone involved to confront an unspoken question: Could each work across from others that they secretly suspected scorned them? Surfacing and receding, that question hung over the negotiations between participants, an unseen force shaping the willingness to make concessions.

The magnitude of condemnation felt by LGBTQ people during their lives could not be understated. “I was just so suspicious because ... I guess from my life lived ... You know the other side was not going to operate in good faith. You know, like spy versus spy type of thing.”<sup>41</sup>

Religious participants had their own hurdles to overcome. Many religious people feel like pariahs in America, labeled as bigots for their beliefs. Many had to navigate how to live out the “truth they receive from God” as they understand it while pursuing a *détente*.

A theological humility gave permission to proceed. One explained: “we can set aside questions of God’s ultimate judgment, that’s not my business, that’s God’s business.”<sup>42</sup> Moreover, protection for LGBTQ rights does not “constitute some kind of sort of theological endorsement of various propositions related to marriage, family, gender, and sexuality.”<sup>43</sup>

LGBTQ advocates faced similar quandaries. Are they compelled to seek to stamp out the very belief that had been so hurtful to them across their lives? Or was their mandate the public sphere, leaving legally untouched pockets of differing belief? As one said, “[w]e were not trying to destroy people or their freedom to live as they choose under their own values. That was not our effort.”<sup>44</sup>

And the nature of rights mattered. “In the United States of America ... we engage what we believe to be error in a different way, ... not through legal punishment, we instead create spaces for people to live together, we create spaces for pluralism.”<sup>45</sup>

Over time, questions of being judged by others yielded to trust and reason. Working through substance helped to narrate each side’s needs. What might present as judgment or hostility often reflected an honest struggle to find a place for their own worldview in a fractured America.

Parties began to map more precisely their own needs, asking what is most core to them. And then things shifted. “[O]ften the question that we ask[ed] each other was, what do you need? What do you truly need in this situation?”<sup>46</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Whether or not Fairness for All is ultimately enacted, or some other law melds protections for LGBTQ and religious Americans who hold traditional views on sexuality and marriage, this effort is an example for others.

The United States is composed of people with profoundly different points of moral and religious departure. No group commands a majority, as they have in the past. Covenantal pluralism instantiates a shared desire for freedom and the liberty to lead one’s life as one chooses, when it does not harm others. But it takes commitment, shared respect, perseverance, and grit.

The fledgling group that sought over a span of years to reach an accord around such differences did not try to erase them. Instead, they worked to protect the other’s choice about how to live. All persons should have the freedom to believe or not believe, as well as the freedom to love the people in their lives, even if others believe their choices are misguided or, worse, will damn them to hell. The simple recognition of others’ equal standing and inherent dignity led them to seek a space for mutual respect and peace.

A common human desire—the need for certainty and stability—led them to try. But something transformative also happened. The group shifted its frame from asking what each of them needs individually to asking if what the other needs most can be accomplished at reasonable costs to themselves.

Working examples of covenantal pluralism can normalize the hard work of living together in peace.

## Notes

- 1 We conducted a set of eight interviews with four religious liberty experts and four LGBTQ rights advocates. These interviews form the backbone of this chapter. The interviewees' identities remain anonymous in order to have a more frank discussion in the chapter. Interviewees are numbered so that the reader can see individual voices.
- 2 *Obergefell v. Hodges*, 576 U.S. 644 (2015); *Bostock v. Clayton County, Georgia*, 140 S. Ct. 1731(2020) (interpreting Title VII, which applies to businesses with 15 or more employees, to ban discrimination on the basis of gender identity and sexual orientation).
- 3 In 2019, Evangelical Protestants represented 25% of the US population; Catholics were 20%. Together, they are not a majority. With the rise of the “nones”—religiously unaffiliated adults—the ranks of theologically conservative believers are thinning. See Pew Research Center 2019a.
- 4 Although not all participants held theologically conservative views, these views include non-affirming stances on same-sex intimacy, same-sex marriage, sex outside marriage, abortion, and other matters.
- 5 As one barometer of an out-view, a majority of Americans stopped opposing same-sex marriage in 2011. In 2019, 61% of Americans supported the opening of marriage to all couples. See Pew Research Center 2019b.
- 6 Interviewee #5.
- 7 Interviewee #4.
- 8 576 U.S. 644 (2015).
- 9 Interviewee #1.
- 10 Interviewee #1.
- 11 Interviewee #1.
- 12 Interviewee #7.
- 13 Interviewee #5.
- 14 Interviewee #5.
- 15 Mark 12:30–31.
- 16 Luke 10:25–37 (New Revised Standard Version). In the book of Luke, a very religious person asks Jesus, the son of God, “Who is my neighbor?” He asks because he wants to be the best religious person he can be. Jesus answers by telling a story of a man traveling along a road who is stripped, beaten, and left for dead. Independently, two of the most respected religious men of the day see the man in need and pass him by, thinking he was dead and therefore untouchable based on their religious laws. Religious purity superseded care for a stranger in desperate need. A third man, an outsider to the religious purists of Jesus’ day who also traveled along the road, sees the badly beaten man, checks on him, sees he is alive, and immediately takes him to an inn. He pays for the stranger’s care and promises the inn keeper that all expenses will be covered to help this badly wounded person. Jesus asks the religious person, “Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” The man answers, “The one who showed him mercy.” Jesus concludes the story by saying, “Go and do likewise.”
- 17 Interviewee #5.
- 18 Interviewee #5.
- 19 Interviewee #2.
- 20 A 2016 Pew study ranking states by overall religiosity ranked Utah 11th. See Pew Research Center 2016.
- 21 That Utah innovated in bridging divides around LGBTQ rights and religious liberty may not be as surprising as it seems. Of the 75 Representative in the Utah House of Representatives and the 29 Senators in the Utah Senate, 91 legislators are Mormon. See Davidson 2019. Many people of the Mormon faith remember the persecution experienced by that faith as a minority. For many members of the Utah Legislature, their experiences as members of this faith underpinned the value of protecting minorities. Bill Sponsor Senator Stuart Adams has explained that “[p]eople view their religious identity and their sexual identity as core fundamental values and as such, those values deserve respect and fair treatment.” See Adams 2015. Many states are even more diverse than Utah and the value of protecting all people will resonate with them. While Utah’s “religious community” was more singular and hierar-

- chical, the lesson of the federal Fairness for All effort is that people of many faith traditions have banded together to protect people against unfair and unnecessary discrimination. The most telling measure of Utah's legislation melding the interests of communities is that Utah's citizens have enjoyed legal protection without the bitter fights being fought in other states. Indeed, people of faith and LGBTQ communities both enjoy more protections in Utah than these communities have across much of the United States. See Fairness For All Initiative 2015.
- 22 For more information about the introduced bill, see Equality Act, H.R.3185, 114th Congress (2015–2016).
  - 23 “American Unity Fund, a 501(c)(4) non-profit organization, advances the cause of freedom for LGBTQ Americans and religious freedom by making the conservative case that freedom truly means freedom for everyone” (American Unity Fund. n.d.).
  - 24 In the 2014 Pew Research Center Religious Landscape Study's pool of 35,000-plus respondents, 5% identify as sexual minorities. “Of that group, 59% said they are religiously affiliated.” See Pew Research Center 2015.
  - 25 Interviewee #4.
  - 26 Interviewee #2.
  - 27 Interviewee #2.
  - 28 Interviewee #2.
  - 29 Interviewee #8.
  - 30 Interviewee #5.
  - 31 Interviewee #5.
  - 32 Interviewee #3.
  - 33 Interviewee #3.
  - 34 Interviewee #3.
  - 35 Interviewee #4.
  - 36 Interviewee #4.
  - 37 Interviewee #5.
  - 38 Interviewee #6.
  - 39 Interviewee #6.
  - 40 Interviewee #4.
  - 41 Interviewee #3.
  - 42 Interviewee #4.
  - 43 Interviewee #4.
  - 44 Interviewee #5.
  - 45 Interviewee #4.
  - 46 Interviewee #4.

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# FROM THE PULPIT TO PLURALISM

## A personal reflection

*Bob Roberts, Jr.*

Cross-cultural religious literacy isn't merely a field for academics, but a necessity for everyday people. It is critical and will determine our ability to relate in an ever-changing world. The world is migrating like never before. Everyone is everywhere. In the past, countries were generally defined by a majority religion (usually in combination with ethnic/racial identities). For example, most Christians were in the West, Muslims in the Middle East, Buddhists in the Far East, and Hindus in South Asia. That is no longer our world: All religions are now all places. For example, Christianity is currently growing faster in Iran than in any other place in the world. While some millennials in the West turn away from Christianity, millennials by the thousands turn to it in Iran and other Middle Eastern locations; even Iran's intelligence minister, Mahmoud Mahmoud Alavi, is reportedly concerned with the spread (Smith 2019). The same is true for Islam in the West, where it is now the fastest-growing world religion, according to the Pew Research Center (2017).

Ignoring religion globally has become very costly. The reasons, including blaming religion for many of the world's problems if not outright arrogance and disdain, play a role but are not nearly as important as the results with which we are left. As Miroslav Volf notes, "The world religions are part of the dynamics of globalization. They are, in a sense, the original globalizers and remain among the drivers of globalization processes" (Volf 2015, 1). This isn't a bad thing; it's a good thing because each religion will have to stand on its own theological, moral, and philosophical underpinning, and the people of the world, especially the youth of the next generation, will decide for themselves what it is, good and bad. The problem is that we no longer know how to relate in a world where all religions are present and free. Things "they are a-changin'," as Bob Dylan sang.

In my experience, the natural tendency is for the majority religion to hold things tight in order to maintain power, influence, or privilege, be it evangelical Protestants in America or Muslims in Pakistan or Hindus in India. There is a fear, often by the majority religion, that when other religions are present, adherents of the majority religion may convert to the alternative religion. Also, leaders worry about the growth of sects and offshoots of their faith tradition. Thus, competition and conflict arise. When this happens, the differences between the religions are magnified in unhealthy ways. Leaders of the majority religion often become self-described experts in the competing (minority) religion(s) and begin asserting things that are abhorrently

false, further building division and suspicion between the faiths. Nowhere is this felt stronger than at the grassroots level. If issues and allegations are left unchallenged here, the consequences can be deadly.

A practical example is how evangelicals respond to Islam. The largest religious group in America, amidst its own challenges within, evangelicals are also the quickest to blame Islam as wanting to take over America. It has led to a whole industry called Islamophobia. They don't say that about Jews, Hindus, Buddhists, or any other group, neither are those religions perceived as a threat. I've seen this regularly when I recruit pastors for the pastor/imam retreats that we do at Multi-Faith Neighbors Network. I'll have pastors ask me, "Have you vetted these imams? How can you know they're not terrorist? Did you know in Islam they can lie to you?" The very first retreat we did, it was like pulling teeth to get the pastors to come. Most wouldn't allow us to share publicly that they were coming to the event for fear of repercussions from their church members. But at the end of the event, every single one of them had changed their minds. It wasn't primarily the information that changed them but the *relationships*.

What does the public square look like in a multi-religious context? You can have educated leaders with lofty denominational titles engaged in dialogue at the highest levels, but the absence of grassroots clerics who have relationships with clerics and leaders of other faiths in the community will result in a failure to see any change. The difficult question that arises in living next door to as many people with different faiths as we have today is, "what does it look like to love your neighbor?" Also, in a world that is globalizing at a rapid pace, with rootlessness very real, religion becomes one of the things that anchor people. Put all that together with each faith holding to a different worldview and to various degrees of exclusivity, and challenges are sure to arise as people interact.

This isn't necessarily bad; if anything, it could actually be better for people and even better for a faith. That is exactly what covenantal pluralism is, a framework that facilitates fairness and flourishing for all people. Covenantal pluralism moves past tolerance and leads people into relationship through mutual engagement, resulting in more respectful and resilient communities. This doesn't just happen on its own; it requires cross-cultural religious literacy applied in multi-faith engagement. It will force people to know what they believe and why they believe it, not just because they were raised in a particular faith, and also know what their neighbor believes. If we can get along, it opens massive doors and opportunities for faiths to come together to address some of the challenges that society faces. Clerics possess a significant amount of moral authority and, as such, have a unique opportunity to model cross-cultural religious literacy and can be the driving force for communities to operate under covenantal pluralism.

For example, it's hard to imagine how much I've changed since my youth, particularly because my spiritual and geographic roots have not. I can understand fundamentalism and extremism because I was raised in it. You would not necessarily consider Baptists from deep East Texas to be "extreme," but we were. We were conservative in our theology and rife with racism—not endorsing the KKK, but not outright condemning it either. We believed we were better than others, though we would never say that aloud. The other more-or-less accepted religion was the Methodist Church. Catholics were all heretics, and Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, and Jews were some of those people we didn't know but sent missionaries to on the other side of the world.

Over the years my faith didn't change, but my world did. When my world changed for the first time, I began to interpret the Bible with a bigger lens than I ever had before. It pushed me more to the core and center of my faith, where I chose to make my stand, instead of the fringes of eschatology and election. The church I started, through some unique circumstances, began working in Vietnam with the government serving their people. We mobilized our doctors, teachers, business leaders, agriculturalists, landscapers, you name it, to serve, and we did it



alongside the Vietnamese government. My Western capitalistic Christian philosophical worldview was challenged with an eastern communist Buddhist/Atheist worldview. I found that addressing human need was the place we could agree, and we worked at that point in society. In short, though disagreeing, I became friends with Vietnamese Communists—the very people we Americans had been at war with and that I had signed up for the draft to fight. We started an NGO there that is thriving today, Glocal Ventures, which serves Vietnamese at their point of need through the jobs of the people in our church. In December 2017, we were given the highest award a foreigner can receive from the Vietnamese government, the Friendship Medal. Who would have ever thought an evangelical church and a communist government could do anything together?

Having overcome my fear of Vietnamese Communists, I was asked to do the same thing and serve the hurting people in Afghanistan. Using the same principles we learned in Vietnam, we had great success. I brought young American pastors with me to connect with imams, and together we began to build schools, clinics, and do many other projects together. The Muslims forced me to think theologically about what I believed and why. Instead of wavering, my faith went much deeper. A few years later, I was challenged by a Saudi Prince I had become friends with to build bridges, not just around the world between Christians and Muslims but back home in Texas. So, I did.

While it was fruitful, it was also very painful. Many in our church could not handle us becoming friends with Muslims, so they left. In their minds, we were at war with the enemy that we were fighting in Afghanistan and Iraq. None of these critics ever quoted Jesus on, “love your enemies.” Many younger pastors saw the problem, and I would take them with me to mentor them; but, I couldn’t take all of them with me all over the world, so instead I brought many of my friends from around the world, of different religions, to my church. We began to hold a conference called Global Faith Forum. Evangelicals and others could come, watch, hear stories, and listen as I interacted with friends of other faiths.

As good as this was, I realized a conference would always be limited in who could come and how people could build their own bridges. I came to know Imam Mohammed Magid from the Washington, D.C. area, and while on a trip together to Nepal with Islamist Muslims and persecuted Christians, we came up with an idea. What if we began to do retreats with pastors and imams to build bridges? Soon after starting these retreats, we added Jews to the mix. Rabbi Ambassador David Saperstein was a good friend of Magid and mine, so he began to help us connect with rabbis. Together we formed the Multi-Faith Neighbors Network in order to facilitate this process for others. It took me a lifetime to learn these lessons, and I didn’t want young pastors, rabbis, and imams to spend as long as I did to learn them. This is why Imam Magid, Rabbi Saperstein, and I try to bring people together in the retreats. In a retreat setting, you can move forward extremely fast. Much of our retreat is simply watching Imam Magid, Rabbi David, and myself interact as friends, which sadly, is a foreign observation to many.

In the three-day retreat that Multi-Faith Neighbors Network conducts, pastors, imams, and rabbis begin the experience with a great deal of uncertainty and anxiety, sitting together only as a group of diverse faith representatives. By the third day, when the retreat is over, they leave as friends, arm-in-arm. How does such a radical transformation take place so quickly? There is no new information shared or discovered. No one has to water down their beliefs. Nothing new is explained about each of the three religions that make them more palatable to the other. But relationships are built. The clerics don’t change because they learned anything new. They are changed because they met someone new for the first time, someone that they thought they knew but found out they didn’t know them at all. It’s a self-conversion of love towards the neighbor that takes place. Jesus said, love God, love your neighbor, even love your enemy. That

means no one is left out or beyond love. You can't love someone and remain their enemy. Most of those attending our retreats were "religious enemies" without having ever met one another. Our most important task is to create the context for the encounter; we find that they speed up the relationship because they are so hungry for it.

The most important question that must be asked is whether or not we can see the image of God in the other. Jonathan Sacks (2002, 17) writes,

Can we find, in the human other, a trace of the Divine Other? Can we recognize God's image in one who is not in my image? There are times when God meets us in the face of a stranger. The global age has turned our world into a society of strangers. That is not a threat to faith but a call to a faith larger and more demanding than we had sometimes supposed it to be. Can I, a Jew, hear the echoes of God's voice in that of a Hindu or Sikh or Christian or Muslim?

Most of us are in dire need of a shift in how we relate and communicate with other faith traditions. No entity has as much potential ability to help transition the way in which we relate to and engage each other quite like the church, mosque, synagogue, and/or temple. No group of people has the ability to speak hope and peace in this era like grassroots religious leaders. Sadly, these resources go largely untapped. It's true that religious leaders have been the chief architects of hate and promoters of violence—these kinds of preachers will always be present. But now is the time for clerics of all faiths to stand united against hate and lead their houses of worship towards a profoundly different future. It won't be easy. Radical shifts will be necessary.

### **Shift #1: From preachers to practitioners**

The biggest challenge in grassroots engagement begins with the cleric. The skill of evaluation, necessary in cross-cultural religious literacy, is where it all starts. The key is not to get a cleric to critique another religion, but to get them to critique themselves about how they feel about the other. In the US, we have challenges with racism. Most evangelical pastors would preach sermons against it. But sermons are not enough. Most of those same white evangelical pastors have few to no real African American friends beyond mere acquaintances. It's even worse in terms of how evangelical pastors relate to people of other faiths. Nothing will change until pastors become friends with rabbis, imams, priests, etc. Research from LifeWay (Green 2015) says that evangelicals have the worst view of Muslims of any group, and the only group worse are evangelical pastors! Thus, you have in the US what you see overseas. Just as sometimes imams drive the view of Christians from their pulpits, so too do pastors drive the view of Muslims from theirs.

When our church began to work in Vietnam with the government doing humanitarian work, I had to learn a completely different way of relating to a Vietnamese Communist. The same became true when I began to work in Afghanistan, doing humanitarian work. I had to work with imams to build schools and clinics. I came to know people in ways I would never have experienced.

The key lesson is that relating as what I call a "religious industrialist" always puts us at odds with one another, whereas relating as co-builders of our communities radically changes the dynamic. Once again, it isn't because of formal education or new information, but because of relationships built with each other, and the grid is not the religion but the society. As those change, we learn we can work together for the common good in our cities. The key bridge-builders across the community are the clerics. They cannot do it alone, by themselves; they are not enough. But

without them, everything else will be undermined because the religious leader is seen as the religious, social, and moral leader of the community.

Peace preaching is not enough. We must have *peacemaking*. Most preachers have a saying, “You have to move people out of the pews into the community.” The same can be said of preachers, “You have to get out of the pulpit into the community!” There is a certain amount of moral authority that is vested in a cleric in a congregation in a community. When they speak, and when they challenge, it gives others permission and freedom to move forward. If you can make the cleric the protagonist, they are more likely to promote multi-faith engagement among the congregants. Congregants are the ultimate grassroots where real change happens.

That said, it is also true that clerics can get out of the pulpit for the wrong reasons. Politicizing other religions and trashing them publicly gets a really quick following by the fearful. Jonathan Sacks writes, “Undeniably, though, the greatest threat to freedom in the post-modern world is radical, politicized religion” (Sacks 2015, 14). These have always been tricky issues, and one person’s prophetic voice can be another’s polarizing scream.

To engage with the other is not to just connect others but to first connect yourself. There will be a price. Roger Williams, founder of Rhode Island, came to the new Americas wanting freedom for him and others to be left alone to practice their respective faiths. Puritans came to America to have a place to be free to practice their own religion, not to give religious freedom to all. It was his belief in “Soul Liberty” or freedom of religion or conscience that led to his banishment from the Massachusetts Bay Colony in January of 1636, and it would be the Native Americans who would save him. “In the wilderness he had carved out a society and translated his experiences there into a view of how the world worked, and how he thought the world should work” (Barry 2012, 310). In his book, *The Bloody Tennent*, Williams wrote, “It is the will and command of God, that since the coming of his Sonne the Lord Jesus, a permission of the most Paganish, Jewish, Turkish, or Antichristian consciences and worships, bee granted in all Nations and Countries” (quoted in Barry 2012, 321). Williams didn’t get in trouble over his theology—none of the Puritans, including John Winthrop, accused him of heresy. He got in trouble over how he applied his faith. Winthrop said freedom for me but not for thee. Williams said freedom for thee, and for me. This fundamental difference impacts how society and faith mix and what results. We desperately need new Roger Williamses today.

## **Shift #2: From interfaith to multi-faith**

How do we get evangelical Christians and fundamentalist Muslims to the same table? If we don’t, all of our interfaith dialogue frankly is a waste, as it’s merely singing to the choir. It all has to do with the cross-cultural religious literacy skill of communication. It demands the creation of a new vocabulary, often as you’re in the middle of the journey. Unless you can get the people who cause the challenges to the table, bigotry and fear of other religions will persist. Language is everything. How you say it really matters, especially to clerics, and will determine how they respond. The ability to listen well, while still expressing oneself in a way that deepens trust, is critical to making this shift. We need a new way to communicate religious engagement with the other. It’s time to move beyond interfaith dialogue to multi-faith engagement. One of the keys to starting a movement is recognizing the power of language and words.

The other key is articulating a story that people want to be a part of. If you invite an evangelical pastor to an interfaith event, most will not come. First, they will not come because they are viewed by their own tribe as compromising their faith. Many of the interfaith events have been characterized by a prevailing thought that “all roads lead to heaven” and it really doesn’t matter what you believe. This does not represent evangelicals, nor does it represent most Muslims. For

evangelicals to be seen with people at an interfaith event or with an interfaith leader can prompt some to say you no longer hold to the core tenets of your faith about Jesus. Similarly, evangelicals are hesitant to go somewhere where they are viewed as bigots or backward, only to be ostracized by more liberal clerics. Everyone loses with this approach.

By contrast, “multi-faith” is a word that gives them permission to meet. They can tell their congregants and other cleric friends they are not into a mushy interfaith conversation but holding on transparently to the core of their faith. Multi-faith says, “I hold on to what my faith teaches and will not water it down or compromise it.” Multi-faith acknowledges that we all live in the same public space. Most evangelical pastors will tell you that Islamophobia and anti-semitism are very real problems, and they know it’s wrong, but are unsure how to deal with it. Multi-faith says it will find in my faith that part which allows me to be in a relationship with you for the sake of peace and for the sake of community building.

People often think that religious exclusivists should have no role in the public square. But this is a horrible mistake. Those same exclusivists actually wind up shaping local laws and foreign policy, and create or destroy a culture of civility in a deeply diverse world. They must be engaged. As Volf argues, “Religious exclusivists—those who believe that their religion alone is true—need not advocate authoritarian or totalitarian forms of government but can be, and historically have been in some cases, active political pluralists” (Volf 2015, 25). It was Roger Williams, a religious exclusivist, who became the model for religious freedom and separation of church and state in America. The heart of a covenanted pluralism, after all, is simply this: It is inclusive of the exclusive, while also demanding that theological exclusivists respect political pluralism.

### **Shift #3: From multiple conversations to one conversation**

An absence of relational capital between the faiths leads to a significant lack of transparency. Many clerics will say one thing in public and another in private, or one thing in the pulpit just to their congregation but another when they are out in public at a civic event. This isn’t good. There is no longer privacy anymore. The whole world is listening. When a pastor preaches, the whole world is listening, or at least can listen. Religious leaders and institutions have websites and social media for their followers. They write and post things just for their own tribe. The problem is everyone sees and hears it. Every sermon posted online for your followers is available to everyone else as well. When you realize the whole world is listening, it will change how you say it. Once again we are back to the cross-cultural religious literacy skill of communication. You will not stop saying what you believe, but you will ask, what is the kindest and most positive way to say it? You will ask how will this be received outside my tribe? This isn’t to say that you need only to be careful of what and how you say things, but you must be attentive to what else can you say to build bridges with others. The opportunities expand massively when you see things in this light.

We must learn to say the same thing in private with our tribe that we say in the public square. A lack of consistency in our message will inhibit honest communication with others. It also reinforces negative views and behaviors that are held when the tribe gets together. I have a saying I teach young pastors, “Never, never, never vilify another religion.” If you have to trash another religion to maintain yours, it’s a very weak faith. If it’s a hard saying or position, say it honestly but say it in the kindest, gentlest, and simplest way possible.

We can respect a religion without converting to it or compromising our own faith. Once we learn to have honest conversations, we find not only where we disagree, but where we agree, and often the moral values are very similar.

Respect for freedom of religion is a form of respect for persons and for their sovereignty in determining their way of life, regardless of whether or not we respect that way of life itself ... we respect persons by virtue of their humanity, but we respect their work, their actions, convictions, character, and basic orientation—by virtue of its excellence ... we can claim respect for ourselves as persons, but we must earn respect for our work.

(Volf 2015, 118–120)

#### **Shift #4: From relating based on a common faith to a common good**

What value, as communities of faith, do we bring to the community? Just having worship services is not enough. These are good for the adherents, but the value and even health of any religion should not be simply what it does for its own adherents. It must ask what it does for the community at large. When faith leaders work together in community building, they grow deeper in their relationship together. One of the essentials of covenantal pluralism is engagement; this is our biggest opportunity to make a shift culturally in communities.

Most people start with the head to dialogue, and then if they can find a common view to agree on, the heart to care about, and if they come to like them enough, the hand to serve. That's fine for interfaith dialogue at a conference, but not multi-faith engagement at the grassroots in the community. We've learned to start with the hands and sweat together. We've even discouraged religious dialogue at times because of tension or suspicion. We encourage faith leaders to focus on what common good they both share and serve together, whether it's feeding people, improving healthcare, or improving schools. It's important to come to know one another first and foremost as human beings sharing in a global humanity. There is something about sweating together, working on a challenge in your community.

When you sweat together, you naturally begin to talk with no coerced agenda, and you begin to ask questions about family, life, and other issues, and you begin to care about the other person. You come to know someone in a heart way, which gives credibility to the relationship, and you can then have the head discussions. We wrongly want to ask questions and challenge others often without the benefit of relationships! The most mature relationship isn't about how much we agree on so we can get along, but how much we can disagree and still get along. A mature faith is able to have difficult dialogue with other religions while maintaining healthy relationships and a strong belief. When you know someone legitimately cares about you, you can ask them, or they can ask you, the most sensitive questions of faith, and you aren't offended because you know they care about you. We move here from confrontation to collaboration.

Some people would say if you can't convert someone to your faith, what is the value of the relationship? Is it worth peace to be in a relationship with someone? If I can't save you—do you still matter? People have value outside of “converting” to bring peace and community building. The world has yet to see how the faiths of the world could bless the world by working together. Rabbi Sacks writes, “the world's great faiths have a significant potential role in conflict resolution and not merely, as many continue to believe, in conflict creation” (Sacks 2002, viii–ix).

The grid from which all humanity and religions operate is the society, more specifically in a local context, the community. This is the public space all must be present in. I used to think all I needed to change the world was me, but I discovered it took more than me to change the world. Then I thought all it took was more Christians with me, and I found out I was wrong again. I am now convinced that to change the world, we will all have to work together. I love what David Brooks writes in his book *The Second Mountain*, “community builders are primarily driven ... by emotional, spiritual, and moral motivations: A desire to live in intimate relation

with others, to make a difference in the world, and to feel right with one's self" (Brooks 2019, 67). Jonathan Sacks drives home this point of engagement by writing, "Sometimes side by side working together is more effective than face to face talking together" (Sacks 2007, 174).

### **Shift #5: From tribal faith to global citizens**

A "tribal" faith that holds the story, the values, and the culture of a community can be, within limits, a healthy thing. The problem begins when that tribal faith begins to see itself as a victim or remains isolated with no need or value of others outside its tribe. When this happens, everyone outside your tribe is a potential problem or group to blame for something that's going wrong in your tribe. I once watched a significant evangelical speaker at an event I was hosting between Muslims and Christians give a talk, but it was directed primarily at evangelicals' concerns towards Muslims and their right to proselytize. These concerns can be legitimate, but you don't start a conversation by telling others what the other has done wrong. It would have been much better to have started the talk as an evangelical openly admitting where evangelicals had fallen short of the mark. The speaker didn't possess the cross-cultural religious literacy skill of evaluation not just of self but of their tribe. Knowing who you are and who they are prevents you from giving ultimatums or dictums to the other group.

Truthfully, the only tribe that you can change is your own. Telling another tribe that they are doing wrong, and all you are doing that's right, isn't going to work. Imagine someone doing that with their spouse! Always start with what you can change. As you change, that earns you the right to speak into their behaviors. The power of a pastor, a rabbi, and an imam showing up in a nation together and the imam challenging a country that is majority-Muslim that they must do better is so different than a group of Christian pastors showing up saying the same thing. In America, it's primarily up to evangelical Christians to challenge Islamophobia; sadly, it is our tribe that drives the majority of that. The good news is we all have the power to change things. The bad news is the greatest change we can make is within ourselves and our own tribe.

We have to see ourselves as part of a broader group of global citizens. Miroslav Volf (2015, 38) writes of world religions,

all of them in their own way teach the fundamental unity of all humanity. Each person is to understand himself or herself primarily as a human being rather than as a member of this or that tribe, ethnic group, or kingdom; there is one right path, one truth and, for some religions, one God to be embraced by everyone, outsiders should be treated the same way as insiders.

We need not fear other religions. "Some have argued that by increasing religious pluralism, migration leads to the weakening of religious allegiance and the decline of religions. It is the other way around" (Volf 2015, 63). The entire thesis of the influential book, *The Churching of America*, by Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, was that "religious deregulation ... supported a religious market where competition was encouraged" (Finke and Stark 1992), which resulted in greater religious diversity and higher rates of religious participation.

One of the greatest trips of my life was visiting the Rohingya camp in Cox's Bazaar with Imam Mohamed Magid and Rabbi David Saperstein. When we think and act in global ways collaboratively, we can relate what we experienced, and it impacts what happens at the grass-roots at home. When we see things through tribal eyes, we can become polarized and operate with an "us versus them" mentality. I believe evangelical "missions" of the future are going to

be us not showing up just with our “own” but with the whole public square and community of faiths. There are no limits on personal conversations and questions of faith for those who work with non-Christians. People are shocked that I get to share my faith so much with so many non-Christians, and they are even more shocked when I explain that generally, the conversation comes from questions they keep asking non-stop because I am in friendship with them. There is nothing Imam Magid, Rabbi Saperstein, and I have not talked about! When you are close, it isn't even like “witnessing”—it's simply conversation between friends. This closeness comes not from mere dialogue, but through time spent serving together.

If you want to develop cross-cultural religious literacy, you have to seek projects that serve society. Then, roll up your sleeves and faithfully engage the project and the people you are working with. Only then will a partnership arise, and you begin to develop cross-cultural religious literacy. Sacks says it this way, “We see community service as an essential part of citizenship. ‘Together,’ means integration, not segregation. Inter religious harmony is promoted less by dialogue than by working on community-based projects” (Sacks 2007, 109–110). The projects you will do will be a benefit to society, but the heart of the work is the relationships that will be developed.

There are responsibilities that go with citizenship, and covenant relationships demand even more because of those responsibilities from our ethics, not our law. As Rabbi Sacks (2007, 110) has eloquently argued,

[C]ovenantal society is formed in a conscious act of new beginnings. The parties come together to achieve what neither can achieve alone. . . . Social contract creates a state; social covenant creates a society. Social contract is about power and how it is to be handled within a political framework. Social covenant is about how people live together despite their differences. . . . Social covenant is about moral commitments, the values we share, and the ideals that inspire us to work together for the sake of the common good.

### **Shift #6: From majority focus to minority focus**

The cross-cultural skill of negotiation in religious literacy comes into play at its strongest at this level. The majority and the minority will have to cooperate to make things work and it will be done only after the covenantal pluralist values of empathy, respect, and protection are activated. How do we move beyond tolerance, to standing up for the other when it may cost us? Every majority has a minority somewhere, and every minority has a majority somewhere. The health of a nation is not that the majority gets its way but is how the minority is able to also have their rights. There has been a relationship between Pakistani Muslims and American Christians, where we have come together as imams and pastors from America and Pakistan to stand up for one another's minorities. It has led to significant changes and transformations by those clerics that are involved. The Christian pastors in America have challenged the hate speech of notable evangelical leaders in public ways with the press. The Muslim imams in Pakistan have stood in front of churches to protect them—churches that would have otherwise been destroyed. People are putting their lives and reputations on the line for the sake of the other. This is how civility is birthed, sanctified, and protected. Civility is first and foremost not what I do for myself but what I do for the other in providing them a space and a voice with respect.

The most critical person that enables and ensures religious freedom is the one from the faith of the majority. There is no movement that has ever happened to grant minority rights that the majority did not endorse, whether they identified the issue on their own or were shamed into seeing it. The majority has the power to enable or destroy it. The minority can fight for their

rights like Martin Luther King Jr. did for civil rights, but it takes a Lyndon Johnson to sign the Civil Rights Act of 1964 for it to become law.

There is the possibility of a global movement of religious freedom that has not ever been seen in the history of humanity. In the 1600s, it was Roger Williams and in the 1700s Thomas Jefferson that were the heroes of religious freedom. Today, in the 2000s, it's Sheik Abdullah Bin Bayyah and his writing of the Marrakesh Declaration promoting religious freedom for religious minorities in Muslim-majority nations. Religious freedom is not just for your religion, but for all religions. My religious freedom is only as good as yours. What has the potential of moving this to the next level is when all the faiths work together. Os Guinness (2008, 45) writes, "Because freedom is a duty as well as a right and obligation and not only an entitlement, all citizens in a free society are responsible for the rights of others just as others are responsible for theirs."

The Williamsburg Charter, drafted in 1986 and signed in 1988 by prominent faith and philosophy leaders on the 200th anniversary of the Virginia Bill of rights, states, "A society is only as just and free as it is respectful of this right, especially toward the beliefs of its smallest minorities and least popular communities" (Williamsburg Charter Foundation 1988, 46). For me, the religion I feared the most, the one that got me in the most trouble with my tribe, was Islam. However, the relationships that have developed have allowed Muslims to challenge other Muslims internationally to release Christians from jail and stop persecution. It is far more powerful, a Muslim challenging a Muslim on an issue of religious freedom than a Christian challenging a Muslim, and visa-versa. Protecting their faith wound up not only deepening my faith but also opening the world up to me.

## Conclusion

There is a prophetic and priestly role for faith leaders to play. As Rabbi Sacks (2002, 2) has written,

There have been many books written about the emerging global landscape, but all too few about the moral and spiritual issues involved. Yet these are among the most important we must face if we are to enhance human dignity, improve the chances of peace, and avoid Samuel Huntington's prediction of a clash of civilizations. Bad things happen when the pace of change exceeds our ability to change, and events faster than our understanding. It is then that we feel the loss of control over our lives. Anxiety creates fear, fear leads to anger, anger breeds violence, and violence—when combined with weapons of mass destruction—becomes a deadly reality.

Globalization is bringing people who look and think differently closer than ever before. Christians, Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, Atheists, and all other faiths/worldviews now live in the same neighborhood. Merely "tolerating" one another will never lead to the flourishing societies we desire to live in. The mutual respect and reliance that covenantal pluralism is built upon will lead our communities to be places everyone feels at home and encouraged to be their full selves. The aim of covenantal pluralism isn't a vague syncretism. It's to offer a holistic paradigm of civic fairness and human solidarity.

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