



CROSS-CULTURAL RELIGIOUS LITERACY

YOU, THE OTHER, AND WHAT YOU DO TOGETHER



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CROSS-CULTURAL RELIGIOUS LITERACY

You, The Other, and What You Do Together

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(Editor)

PERKUMPULAN


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Leimena

Cross-Cultural Religious Literacy: You, The Other, and What You Do Together

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INTRODUCTION

Praise be to Allah, God Almighty for His mercy and grace, so that we can publish a book series entitled “Cross-Cultural Religious Literacy: You, The Other, and What You Do Together.” The publication of a series of books in both Indonesian and English aims to increase literature references related to the concept and implementation of Cross-Cultural Religious Literacy (CCRL) in Indonesian society as well as the world.

Cross-Cultural Religious Literacy (CCRL) is an approach to thinking, acting, and acting to be able to work together with different religions and beliefs (collaborative competence), based on an understanding of the moral, spiritual framework, and personal self-knowledge (personal competence) and people. other religions and beliefs (comparative competence).

CCRL is based on the belief that awareness and belief that the common good for humanity will be achieved not when the diversity of religions and beliefs is rejected or merged into uniformity, but precisely when the diversity is affirmed and managed together by different adherents through a process of evaluation, communication, and negotiation. together to respond to various opportunities and challenges faced, both in local and global contexts.

We would like to thank the authors of this Cross-Cultural Religious Literacy book series such as Dr Chris Seiple, Dr Alwi Shihab, Prof Dr Amin Abdullah, Dr Ari Gordon, Rabbi David

Saperstein, Rabbi David Rosen, and Rev. Dr Henriette T. Hutabarat Lebang, and other writers.

We realize that there are still many shortcomings in the writing of this book, for that we expect suggestions and constructive criticism for improvement.

Finally, I hope that this book will be of use to both CCRL training participants, educators in schools, madrasas, universities, policy makers, and the wider community.

Jakarta, June 3, 2022

CROSS-CULTURAL RELIGIOUS LITERACY

By Chris Seiple

Executive Summary: There is you, the other, and what you do together. Cross-cultural religious literacy wrestles with a basic question: if solving our common, global, challenges require us to engage with people who do not believe like we do, then what is the framework of engagement? How do we think about engagement? What are the skills of engagement?

This framework of engagement suggests 3 competencies (how to think) and 3 skills (what to do) that can be used in any context, such that mutual respect and trust are built, across the dignity of deep difference, while taking on our global challenges.

It's a framework in which you decide what works best for you. And if you think the framework can be better, then please let us know.

Cross-Cultural Religious Literacy (CCRL) necessarily begins with an understanding of the world as it is—not the world that we would like it to be, or the world that we believe it to be, but the world as it is, in order to engage it effectively, and efficiently...and empathetically.

Our global challenges have two core characteristics. First, there is no single state or non-state actor, no government or non-governmental organization, that can solve our challenges by themselves. Second, as a result, it is not a question of if, but when you partner with somebody different than your organization, different than your country, different than your culture, different than your beliefs.

If such individual and institutional actors will always be present amidst our global challenges—e.g., climate change, terrorism, economic development, etc.—then how will you engage them?

Put differently, what is your practice or philosophy of partnering with the other?

CCRL provides a framework for working with the other—conceptually and literally—in order to address and even solve our common global challenges. CCRL, however, is also a framework that expects and encourages the inclusion of “religion”—as an analytic factor, at the least, and as a force for good, through faith communities that collectively and individually live and work in every sector of society, and the state. Such people of faith will never agree on theology, but they do agree that their faith values should inform their engagement (as do people of other faiths and non-religious philosophies).

So, what does this process of partnership “look like”? How can we each “cross” over to—i.e., move toward—the other without sacrificing the substance of our own beliefs, or theirs? CCRL provides a framework for this discussion—pursuant practical impact. There is you, the other, and what you do together.

Before continuing, however, it is important to say what cross-cultural religious literacy is not. It is not syncretism. In fact, it is the exact opposite. CCRL asks that its participants seek to discern their differences in order to dignify, not demean, the other. Participants in CCRL believe that each human has dignity, even as each human

has the capacity and right to disagree with their neighbor's beliefs and behavior.

CCRL is not secularism. For many of my Muslim friends worldwide, "secularism" means "godless." And most Muslims that I know find it impossible to conceive of a public sphere without God. As a Christian, I feel the same way.

It is also important to say that CCRL is not fluency; nor is it illiteracy. Rather, CCRL is humility. It is knowing just enough to get the questions right about the other. CCRL asks just enough, in order to demonstrate respect toward the "other," who is also one's neighbor.

Put another way: I will never have complete and total fluency to understand another's beliefs, or their culture at the national or village level. I will never understand Asia as someone from Asia does; just as someone from Asia will never understand America as I do. But can we know enough to show respect toward and for each other, so that we can work together and get something done that serves everyone?

In other words, CCRL is about possessing the humility to Listen, Observe, Verify, and then Engage, that is, to L.O.V.E., practically, for the sake of everyone. To say it yet one more way: you listen and observe with your heart, you verify with your head, and you engage with your hands.

CCRL has three competencies: personal, comparative, and collaborative. These competencies help you to think about the process of engagement—i.e., the process of understanding yourself, the other as s/he understands her/himself, and the context in which you might practically partner.

It is not easy. Because we are all humans, we all have stereotypes. Stereotypes are more likely when rely only on what we've been told about the religious other, instead of seeking to listen to understand, to understand them as they understand themselves.

Personal competency is understanding and accounting for yourself: internally, and in the words and actions you speak and do, externally, as a result. One can read one's own holy scriptures and be taught in class about the other, but often true internal understanding does not take place until you travel outside your family and country.

I remember going to the Registan in Samarkand, Uzbekistan. It is an iconic setting, where many intellectual giants of Islam's Golden Age lived. I remember standing among some statues of them—e.g., Ulugh Begh, al-Biruni, etc.—and thinking to myself: why have I never heard of them?

Such questions begged more questions about how I was educated, and what I believed. What were my moral beliefs, and what did my beliefs as a Christian, say about engaging somebody who had a very different worldview, but a worldview so intellectually and theologically rich that I would be stupid if I did not learn from it?

I remember watching some women weave a silk rug at the Registan, a rug that would take nine months to complete. They had a very different concept of time and space. In America we want everything now. We want McDonald's food now. If I don't get the food in five minutes, I'm mad.

(Besides the fact that the food is bad for me.)

So, you begin to learn things about the other, but what it's really teaching you is about yourself.

What do I believe? What do I think? What do my beliefs say about engaging the other?

After some internal reflection, in such situations, one cannot help but genuinely consider the local people, and how do they think, and why. So, then you have to start thinking, well what does the other person think?

I remember traveling to Indonesia in January 2017, and meeting with Dr. Ahmad Syafii Maarif. It was very clear that he had to be my teacher. He had to teach me. He gave me his book, which I quote:

“...being religious in a civilized way is the same as being religious in an honest, sincere, and generous way. By “generous” I mean that the principle of pluralism is important; it shows in our willingness to recognize the rights of others to hold that the greatest truth resides in their respective religions, even if we do not agree with them. At the same time, other people must respect the position of Muslims who say that Islam is the truest religion.

The expression “truest” must be understood in the light of the distinct beliefs of each adherent. It is uncivilized and it disturbs the peace to say, “Our religion is the truest and your religion is packed with myths and confused beliefs.”¹

Dr. Maarif is saying that we must respect the right of others to hold that the greatest truth resides in their religion, even if we do not agree with them. At the same time, other people must respect the position of Muslims, who say that Islam is the truest religion.

Seems fair.

Maarif also says it’s uncivilized to express disagreement with the religious doctrines or practices of others in a way that is rude and disrespectful, and that undermines the basic civility that we all need in society. In other words, disrespecting the other not only goes against your faith, but it is bad for your country. More importantly, when you say things that are needlessly insulting about the other person’s faith, you actually are speaking against your own faith. Because you’re putting somebody else down, someone else that God made.

And this is what Dr. Maarif has taught me. To think about pluralism in this fashion, not as syncretic, not as secular, but as a public square like in Samarkand’s Registan, where everybody comes together as common citizens of a country.

I also learned this fundamental thinking from K.H. Abdul Muhaimin, a member of Nahdlatul Ulema. He told me: “The Quran

1 Ahmad Syaffii Maarif, *Islam Humanity and the Indonesian Identity* (Leiden University Press, 2018), 33.

teaches us to honor all of humanity, that we are all descendants of Adam.”

I had a teacher from Muhammadiyah, and a teacher from Nahdlatul Ulama, saying the same thing, even as they taught me about how to understand them, as they understood themselves. This is the comparative competency.

When we exercise our personal and comparative competencies, we position ourselves to move past the stereotypes of each other, even as we discover common values through which we can work together on very practical things.

For example, several years ago I was blessed with the opportunity to work with the Chinese government and the Tibetan Diaspora.

It took five years of relationship building before we convened a gathering of government officials to meet with some Tibetan NGOs in Chengdu. They met because they both had a common interest: how to practically address the desertification of Tibet. Among the Tibetans were literal “grassroots” NGOs who wanted to bring the grasslands back to Tibet. The representatives from China’s capital, Beijing, were two women, both ethnically Han Chinese, and both officially atheist.

Put differently, the top-down representatives of the Chinese government (and of the majority ethnic group) were meeting the bottom-up leaders of the (literal) grassroots communities who cared deeply for their land—in part, as a function of their Buddhist faith.

And so, this meeting took place after years of trust building, to see about how they could, literally, create new grassroots in the soil, so that things could grow again.

But they had a common interest to make the sand dunes produce food again for all citizens in the public square, irrespective of their faith.

Why did this meeting work? Because it had been built on many previous meetings. We knew about each other; we did not let stereotypes guide us, but our own understanding of ourselves and our neighbors, as they understood themselves. Despite the deep differences present, there was a mutual respect among all parties.

Another example comes from my friend Akram Khan Durrani. In 2002, he was freely elected as the Chief Minister of the Northwest Frontier Province (NWFP) of Pakistan, now known as Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

Through some common friends, he visited me in the United States in July of 2005. He invited me to visit him in Peshawar in October 2005, and again in 2006, when we decided to co-host a conference about Islam and Christianity in May of 2007.

He is truly my friend. We truly do not agree on many things. But we love each other and because of that respect and love that grew over time, over those two years, he decided that he wanted to have a conference, and he asked for my help.

The night before the conference he hosted a dinner for us. But my friend, instead of just inviting Muslims and Christians, decided that he would invite leaders from all the faith communities of his province. He invited Shia and Ishmaeli, very small minorities in his part of the world. But he also invited the Hindu and Sikh leaders, who represented even smaller minorities.

After the conference, the Hindu and Sikh leaders came up to me and said: “We want to apologize for taking twice the speaking time allotted to us...and we want to thank you.”

I asked why. “This is the first time that we have been able to speak as fellow Pakistanis from our tradition, into the public square, to share how our faith wants to build and support all Pakistanis, no matter their faith or politics.”

At that moment I understood the purpose of good governance. The purpose of democratic government is to provide the table, and

to ensure that everybody gets a seat. The purpose of government is to make sure that the non-majorities always get a seat.

As a Pashtun and Muslim, my friend could have invited people who looked and believed like he did. But it is the responsibility of the majority to make sure that the non-majorities have a seat at the table. That is the only way that we can truly understand and respect each other as a function of our own belief.

Of course, I have a responsibility to live out these values in my own culture, where I am a member of the ethno-religious majority. I am a Christian, Protestant, in America. It is my responsibility to make sure that the non-majority has a seat at the table.

I have always worked closely with my Muslim friends, Sunni and Shia and Sufi. Through these relationships I have a friend from Texas by the name of Rashad Hussein. President Biden nominated him to be the sixth (and first Muslim) U.S. Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom. He is qualified. He's the former special envoy to the OIC. He's worked in counterterrorism and serves on the national security council. But there are still some stereotypes about Muslims in America.

So a Texas pastor and I wrote an op-ed published in Dallas, affirming and asking the U.S Senate to approve unanimously, our friend Rashad Hussain as ambassador. In January 2022, Rashad was confirmed by the U.S. Senate as America's Ambassador for International Religious Freedom.

The majority has a responsibility to support the minority and to make sure they have a seat at the table, always. You have to live out your beliefs. Otherwise, you are hollow; and you will not have opportunity to address the practical challenges we all face, in a sustainable way.

These three competencies—personal, comparative, and collaborative—provide a framework for how to think through how *you* live out *your* faith, in the context of your neighbors' many faiths.

There are also three skills to help implement that framework: evaluation, negotiation, and communication.

I cannot hope to get anything done in this world without evaluating the context where I am. Such an evaluation, however, begins with oneself. I have found that the simultaneous evaluation of the internal and external contexts is good for both.

I once met the head of the largest madrassah in Peshawar, Pakistan. He did not like America. But he met with me because we had a common friend in the Chief Minister. We had a conversation that was as candid as it was courteous.

He said something to me that I will never forget: “You Americans want respect, we want tenderness.” I still think about that. But it was the kind of comment that forced me to evaluate how he had come to that conclusion; which, in turn, made me evaluate myself and my country.

Evaluation never stops.

Next there is the skill of negotiation. It too takes place internally and externally. One time there was an “incident” in Northwest Vietnam, where a local villager had converted to Christianity. It was receiving much attention in Washington, D.C., and, because of the trust that I had with the Vietnamese government, I suggested to them that I should go to the village.

They said: “We can’t do that. That’s a very sensitive area regarding ethno-religious minorities, and it’s right on the Chinese border.” So, we began to negotiate. I told them that I did not pick the place because the place had picked me. I asked: “Do you want to look bad over this incident? You need somebody that Americans in the American Congress trust to visit and see for themselves to

verify. The Congress is not going to trust you.” The government allowed me to visit, and I was able to evaluate the situation in an honest manner.

But one negotiation always leads to another. Once I got there, I had to negotiate with the village elders, looking and listening (evaluating) as I did. Here’s what I found: of course, the person who converted had a right to convert; but he had done so in a manner disrespectful to the village culture and the ancestors they worshipped.

I told this story, honestly, such that all parties felt that “their” side of the story was told appropriately. It was only possible because we were able to negotiate with each other, deciding that everyone could “win” if an independent observer told the story.

Experiences like this one, however, can’t help but make you look inside yourself, asking: “What do I believe? What would I have done? Should I change anything about myself as a result?” In other words, as you engage, you learn more about, even negotiate, your own identity.

The third skill is communication. One time I was asked to speak in a madrassah in Bannu, right on the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan.

I had no idea what to do...so I prayed.

I asked God for guidance and I felt Him whisper “Psalm 11:7”... from the Zabur, the psalms of King Daoud, King David. It says: “For the Lord is righteous. He loves justice. The upright will seek His face.” So I spoke about what that verse meant to me.

Did I water down the differences between our faiths? No. But I spoke about a common value that we both had, justice.

Justice.

What does that look like in the town of Bannu? What does

that look like in my town in Virginia? What does that look like in Indonesia? These are the must-have conversations of our global village.

We have to find ways to work together, in order to serve the common good.

To summarize: There is you, the other and what you do together. You must have a framework of engagement—of competencies (how to think) and skills (what to do)—if you want to get stuff done that helps everyone.

Engaging the world as it is—especially its challenges—demands partnerships. Those partnerships will include people of faith. Many of those people will agree with you; and many will not.

You will need a framework of engagement, that is, the competencies and skills of cross-cultural religious literacy. This literacy is not fluency nor illiteracy, but a humility to listen, observe, verify, and engage. Listen and observe with your heart. Verify with your mind. Engage with your hands.

Of course, Indonesia already knows these points. A dear friend of mine, Lamin Sanneh, now deceased, once said: “Islam in Indonesia is like the colorfully designed shirts that Indonesia is famous for—the Batik. Batik Islam is an Islam whose structure and fabric is the same but whose application varies with local color. It looks good on us and is good for us.”

And I thought, I hope that somebody says that about my faith someday.

There are common tenets, common beliefs, core beliefs that never change in Islam—this is the shirt itself. But they vary locally as they’re applied—this is the color and design of the shirt.

But because I wear a Batik doesn’t make me an expert on Indonesia. It just means that I’m trying to be literate enough—that is,

I'm trying to be respectful, and sensitive, hopefully communicating that I love your country and I love your Batiks.

But the Batik is an interesting analogy for how we think about religion and how it is lived locally.

Because we have to understand the other as they understand themselves.

So, Batik Islam is about expressing one's faith because you're humbly confident in it. That is, you are not threatened by the different faiths of others.

The result is the common capacity to interact locally out of mutual respect. This Batik capacity is rooted in the tremendous tradition that you have, dating back to the youth pledge of 1928.

Your ancestors consciously chose to be Indonesian, even though the majority of you are Muslims. You chose to make room at the table for non-Muslims, for non-majorities.

This is exactly the model that we need all around the world. If we can live this model, then the world will be a safer, happier, and more resilient. It will have more peace. It will be a world in which everyone enjoys full freedom of religion and belief, while also living out civic virtues and voluntarily exercising moral responsibility in how they use their liberty.

And to say it one more time, this Batik Islam, as with Cross-Cultural Religious Literacy, is not to water down the differences between faith traditions. It is to be strong theologically, to be authentic in your own faith; so strong that you are not threatened by another's faith. Which is also to say, simply, there are things in life on which you will never agree with others of different beliefs.

Such an approach to life is the "gado-gado way."

In America we have a saying that we are a melting pot. I have never liked this phrase because if you're melting, in a pot, that means you all become the same. In government policy language, you might call this assimilation. Everybody has to look like the majority.

I think that is wrong, theologically and politically. We don't want to be melted together, we do not want to be the same. The Gado-gado salad is integration.

Gado-gado says: "Don't blend and become the same; instead bring the essence of your identity, the essence of your ingredient. Do not to lose your flavor, do not to lose your identity. When we're together we are better because we are bigger than the sum of our parts."

This is the gift of Indonesia. This is what the world needs now, more than ever. Thank you for listening patiently to an American who loves your country.

*This document has been prepared for the Cross-Cultural Religious Literacy (LKLK, for its acronym in Indonesian) program, October 2021 – June 2022

A CASE FOR CROSS- CULTURAL RELIGIOUS LITERACY

By Chris Seiple and Dennis R. Hoover

Abstract: Cross-cultural religious literacy is a comprehensive approach to understanding and conducting the kind of engagement that distinguishes robust, covenantal pluralism from merely indifferent “tolerance” of diversity. Such an approach teaches, respectively, the personal and comparative competencies of knowledge about self, and about the other, as well as the collaborative context in which this knowledge is applied. This approach also teaches the skills—evaluation, negotiation, and communication—of moving toward the other such that shared goals can be identified and implemented.

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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?”¹ 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*.

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 & 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 the phrase “cross-cultural religious literacy” to describe what it was doing, but, in reflection, it is a phrase that captures the core of IGE’s ethos and methodology of engagement. As our writings and conferences suggest across IGE’s first 20 years, we were and continue to constantly assess and analyze ourselves, as well as our potential partners and their context, before applying ideas developed together. 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—at least as an analytic factor, understanding that religion can potentially be, depending on the context, a tremendous force for good, or ill.²

Global Context

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 subconsciously—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 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 challenges 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 strengthens 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 (the most recent year for which full data are available),

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 C. 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 disruption 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 *ill*iteracy, 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).³

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 U.S. unless one is functionally literate about its history, a history which Biblical diction and theological doctrine played a vital part in shaping (and still does). 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 add 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 its 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 services, and humanitarian action. For example, a 2017 study with Oxfam looked at the religious literacy of faith-based relief & 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 U.S. 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 think through how religious literacy begins with the self, and how it is applied globally with the other, in different contexts (See C. Seiple 2018a, 2018b). In March 2019, the University of Washington Board of Regents unanimously approved “Cross-Cultural Religious Literacy” as a graduate certificate.⁴

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.”⁵

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 precolonial 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 & 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's religion's official doctrines.

Collaborative Competency

By “collaborative competency” we mean knowledge of the particular place where two (or more) different moral frameworks, usually informed by different religions, meet as two individuals and/or institutions that also have to accomplish a specific task. Collaborative competency is understanding the spiritual, ethnic, and/or organizational cultures relevant to 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 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).

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 prosocial 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

There are two kinds of communication, verbal and non-verbal. 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 talk that results in trust, trust that leads to tangible results, together.

Conclusion: Cross-Cultural Religious Literacy as a Means to Covenantal Pluralism

Cross-cultural religious literacy is developed through 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. *But cross-cultural religious literacy is not an end unto itself.* Rather it is part of a broader theory of positive change.⁶ 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 vision for robust pluralism. A merely technical 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 normative 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 C. Seiple 2012.)

The phrase “covenantal pluralism” is designed to catalyze and convene 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 (Stewart, Seiple, and Hoover 2020a, 2020b; Joustra 2020, 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.

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(Endnotes)

- 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 R. Seiple 2004; R. Seiple and Hoover 2004; White 2008; Thames, C. Seiple, and Rowe

2009; Daugherty 2011; Hoover and Johnston 2012; C. Seiple, Hoover, and Otis 2013; Hoover 2014; and many other policy briefings. For more, please see: <https://globalengage.org/publications>.

- 3 This article is a slightly edited and abridged version of the introductory chapter in a book we are co-editing. Forthcoming later this year, the book is entitled *The Routledge Handbook of Religious Literacy, Pluralism, and Global Engagement*.
- 4 See <https://jsis.washington.edu/religion/cross-cultural-religious-literacy-graduate-certificate/>.
- 5 See <https://hds.harvard.edu/news/2020/10/15/understanding-religion-and-public-life#:~:text=Harvard%20Divinity%20School%20launched%20this%20week%20Religion%20and,since%20it%20introduced%20the%20master%20of%20theological%20studies>.
- 6 This broader theory of change identifies several key categories of enabling conditions (or “conditions of possibility”) for making progress toward robust, relational, nonrelativistic pluralism. Along with cross-cultural religious literacy, these conditions include freedom of religion and belief, as well the embodiment and expression of essential virtues such as humility and patience. For more, see Stewart, Seiple, and Hoover 2020a.

TOWARD A GLOBAL COVENANT OF PEACEABLE NEIGHBORHOOD:

INTRODUCING THE PHILOSOPHY OF
COVENANTAL PLURALISM

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

Abstract: The global challenge of living together peacefully and constructively in the context of deep religious/worldview differences will not be met through bumper-sticker slogans about “tolerance.” The essay provides an introductory overview of a richer approach called covenantal pluralism, which has been developed over the last few years at the Templeton Religion Trust. The philosophy of covenantal pluralism is a robust, relational, and non-relativistic paradigm of citizenship that emphasizes both legal equality and neighborly solidarity. It calls not only for a constitutional order characterized by equal rights and responsibilities but also a culture of engagement characterized by relationships of mutual respect and protection.

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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, 1636¹

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 lives 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.²

In this essay 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.³ 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. It calls for *both* 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 (c.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.⁴

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.”⁵ 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 of citizens to exercise their right to believe, and live out that belief, responsibly. He held that forced worship “stinks in the nostrils of God” (22 June 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).⁶

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 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. 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 constitution⁷—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.”⁸

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 nonengagement 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.⁹ 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 (2010) 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.¹⁰ 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 Rights; 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 “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 its 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.¹¹ 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 are 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). 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 maths 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 nonrelativistic 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.

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(Endnotes)

- 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.

RESOURCE PERSON PROFILE

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Dr. Chris Seiple is Senior Research Fellow for Comparative Religion at the University of Washington's Jackson School of International Studies, where he first developed Cross-Cultural Religious Literacy. He is also the Principal Advisor to the Templeton Religion Trust and President Emeritus of the Institute for Global Engagement. He is widely known and sought after for his decades of experience and expertise regarding issues at the intersection of geopolitics, US foreign policy, Asia, conflict resolution,

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Cross-Cultural Religious Literacy (CCRL) is an approach to thinking, acting, and acting to be able to work together with different religions and beliefs (collaborative competence), based on an understanding of the moral, spiritual framework, and personal self-knowledge (personal competence) and people, other religions and beliefs (comparative competence).

CCRL is based on the belief that awareness and belief that the common good for humanity will be achieved not when the diversity of religions and beliefs is rejected or merged into uniformity, but precisely when the diversity is affirmed and managed together by different adherents through a process of evaluation, communication, and negotiation, together to respond to various opportunities and challenges faced, both in local and global contexts.