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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Interreligious attentiveness: A revised approach to religious literacy

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Abstract

This paper argues for a revised approach to religious literacy that I call the interreligious attentiveness (IA) approach. I argue that this approach is better than those endorsed by other scholars in the academic study of religion – namely, knowledge, analysis, and skills approaches. I draw attention to the limitations of these approaches by virtue of three challenges: conversion (exclusivist groups), multiple religious belonging, and motivation. I then argue that the IA approach offers a more effective response to these challenges and should be regarded as the preferred approach.

Keywords: religious literacy; covenantal pluralism; religious pluralism; interreligious engagement; interreligious attentiveness

Introduction

This paper argues for a revised approach to religious literacy that I call the interreligious attentiveness (IA) approach. I begin by motivating the claim that religious literacy is important for the twenty-first century given the religiously charged conflicts we observe today and discuss the term 'covenantal pluralism' as the kind of pluralism we ought to aim for. I then examine prominent approaches to religious literacy – namely, knowledge-based, analysis-based, and skills-based – revealing their limitations. By way of arguing that these approaches to religious literacy are inadequate for creating the conditions for covenantal pluralism, I introduce three challenges that a religiously diverse society faces and that any adequate approach to religious literacy ought to help resolve. I label these challenges as follows: conversion (exclusivist groups), multiple religious belonging, and motivation. As Walker et al. (2021) note, the aims and goals of religious literacy programmes vary depending on factors such as location, setting, and professional context. While the examples and my thinking about religious literacy in this paper draw primarily from educational settings in American public schools, the IA approach extends beyond this context. It can be applied to most settings in which individuals are developing religious literacy, helping them engage more thoughtfully and effectively with religious others across a wide range of situations.[1] I will present my own definition of religious literacy in the section titled 'The interreligious attentiveness approach to religious literacy', characterising it in terms of IA, which can more effectively address the challenges introduced in the section titled 'Challenges in

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defining and implementing religious literacy'. I will argue that IA (qua religious literacy) is a valuable character trait that is associated with intellectual virtue – that is, a disposition reflecting excellence of character – and that an IA approach, while incorporating many strengths of other approaches (especially the skills approach), ultimately offers the best approach for understanding religious literacy and creating the conditions for covenantal pluralism.

Covenantal pluralism

Religious diversity is an undeniable reality of twenty-first century life, shaped by various factors. Globalisation, immigration, and the rise of social and traditional media have made interactions among diverse religious groups commonplace. Scholars such as Seiple and Hoover (2021), Stewart et al. (2020), and Cheetham et al. (2013) highlight that globalisation has intensified the demand for cross-cultural literacy and interreligious dialogue. Phan and Tan (2013) emphasise migration as a major contributing factor of religious diversity and explore the effects of migration on majority–minority power dynamics and the challenges immigrants face in preserving their religious identities and traditions. Certain global events have underscored the importance of cross-cultural literacy. Seiple and Hoover (2021) and Halafoff (2013) identify the American public's response to the September 11th terrorist attacks as a pivotal moment that heightened the urgency for a deeper understanding of religion. Halafoff (2013) also highlights the London bombings on 7 July 2005 as one of these events. These tragedies illustrate the complex role religion plays in both fuelling and resolving conflicts. Current events show that much work is required for the kind of pluralism we want that respects religious diversity. For example, the genocide of the Rohingya in Myanmar, violence among Hindus and Muslims in India, and the oppression of Coptic Christians in Egypt are present-day cases in point. In the United States, discrimination against Jews, Muslims, and other non-Christian religions is not a unique occurrence, and global events like the Gaza war have fuelled a rise in discrimination and sparked widespread protests on college campuses.

Given the above, we need a more robust concept of religious pluralism. Our concept of religious pluralism should be a representation of the kind of pluralism we want today, and this concept can be used as a target to aim for. Informed by the works of Seiple and Hoover (2021), Seiple and Hoover (2022), and Stewart et al. (2020), I use 'covenantal pluralism' for this more robust concept of religious pluralism. This can be defined as follows: *a pattern of interaction across religious boundaries that overall is increasingly peaceful, productive, characterised by engagement, and respectful of difference and the integrity of each party.*[2] In the sense that covenantal pluralism is 'a pattern of interaction', it is associated with religious diversity as a fact about society. Yet, covenantal pluralism identifies a particular kind of pattern of interaction that has normative underpinnings. Thus, the aim of covenantal pluralism is to move society towards this kind of pattern of interaction.

Creating the conditions for covenantal pluralism will require improving the intellectual characters of all parties involved in interreligious engagement.[3] Covenantal pluralism sets a demanding standard for interreligious engagement, one that requires the intentional development of intellectual virtues such as intellectual humility and open-mindedness (see Garcia and King 2013; King 2022). Moreover, it requires a re-examination of key terms – especially religious literacy, the central focus of this paper. In the section titled 'The interreligious attentiveness approach to religious literacy', I argue that religious literacy is best understood as a character trait, namely, *IA*. This way of understanding religious literacy can facilitate meaningful collaboration between scholars in moral philosophy and psychology and those in religious studies.

Research on covenantal pluralism is in the early stages. The concept 'covenantal pluralism' requires further refinement and development. For example, the term 'covenant' has

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special significance in the Abrahamic monotheistic traditions, and the concept is vague.[4] Regarding the latter, 'covenantal pluralism' is defined in legal, normative, relational, and philosophical terms, all of which have their particular nuances. Since the concept's wide scope potentially undermines its analytic appeal, I have modified the definition of the concept from previous scholars' usage, limiting its scope, but I recognise that some may not be willing to accept the term.

I remain neutral about whether using the term 'covenantal pluralism' itself is advantageous over other labels of pluralism. I am concerned not with the term itself but rather with the description that I have outlined, to which the term refers. I do think the term (with the modified definition I have provided) goes some way in representing the kind of pluralism we want in our democratic societies, providing a more robust understanding of twenty-first-century religious diversity that we can use to attend to unique intergroup challenges and bring about a more peaceful world with less religious conflict. However, the argument of this paper does not hinge on this term.[5]

Three approaches to religious literacy

There is a growing literature on religious literacy (see Cheetham et al. 2013; Dinham and Francis 2016; Gustafson 2023; Ellis 2023; MisirHiralall and Soules 2025). A significant portion of this work focuses on promoting religious literacy in K–12 education (see Marcus et al. 2020; Soules and Del Nido 2025), with some attention also given to higher education (see Gilliat-Ray 2000; Jacobsen and Jacobsen 2008; Jones and Meyer 2022). There is also recent work addressing religious diversity (see Schilbrack 2020) and religious disagreement (see Dormandy 2020), which are also relevant to conceptualising religious literacy due to their connection with interreligious engagement.[6] All of this points to a growing academic awareness of the role religion plays in society. This includes religion's role in constructing or altering social norms and values and being a contributor to social issues (both positively and negatively).[7] Many organisations are now working to bring about a more religiously literate world.[8]

Despite a growing academic literature and advocacy for religious literacy, there are critics. Wolfart (2022) introduces the idea of the *religious literacy myth*.[9] Wolfart expresses scepticism towards religious literacy programmes and the term 'religious literacy', arguing that they rest on unexamined and empirically unsupported assumptions about what religious literacy is and what it achieves.[10] Relatedly, empirical studies showing the benefits of religious literacy programmes could only be achieved if there were agreed upon definitions of 'religious literacy' and 'religious illiteracy'. In essence, Wolfart contends that advocates of religious literacy presume that religious literacy is a good worth pursuing because of its promise to cause social benefits or cure societal ills, but these benefits have not been demonstrated empirically.

Sceptics of religious literacy are right to demand more from its proponents. Although empirical data demonstrating a direct connection between religious literacy and covenantal pluralism is not yet available, interdisciplinary research teams funded by the Templeton Religion Trust are currently working to establish such causal or correlative links. These projects aim to test hypotheses suggesting that religious literacy may serve as a crucial pathway for enabling covenantal pluralism. As a result, research on covenantal pluralism attempts to respond to the criticism that its benefits are empirically unsupported by being an interdisciplinary enterprise with social scientists conducting empirical studies. Furthermore, this paper will offer a revised definition of religious literacy, thereby responding to the definitional challenge of 'religious literacy'.

To identify the kind of religious literacy most applicable for creating the conditions for covenantal pluralism, we can introduce three prominent approaches to religious

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literacy found in the current literature. These approaches are not rigidly defined, as each one overlaps to some extent with the others. I am not suggesting that any of the existing approaches can or should dispense with the others – that a skills approach can dispense with the acquisition of knowledge about religion, for instance. Rather, the typology developed here intends to highlight the distinctive emphases of each approach and to situate particular scholars' work within them.[11] This mapping serves to demonstrate the need for revising our approach to religious literacy – one that increases the likelihood of creating the conditions for covenantal pluralism. My argument that existing approaches do not, on their own, enable covenantal pluralism should not be read as a direct critique of the scholars associated with them, since most were pursuing aims other than covenantal pluralism. Each approach has valuable features and insights relevant to my project, but none, taken individually, is sufficient to bring about the conditions necessary for covenantal pluralism.

The knowledge approach to religious literacy

Prothero (2007) and Moore (2007) advance a knowledge approach to religious literacy when they address the alarming lack of knowledge about the fundamental tenets of the world's religions. Prothero and Moore demonstrate that, despite the United States being a religiously diverse nation, its citizens often lack basic knowledge about religions other than their own. Even more striking, many Americans are unfamiliar with fundamental aspects of their own religion and are unable to identify core tenets that scholars of religion would expect adherents to know.

The core features of the knowledge approach are intuitive. By knowing more information about our neighbour's religion, we are less likely to offend them and more likely to have respectful engagement with them. Given the current reality of religious diversity, people ought to have a basic understanding and knowledge about *world religions*, and if you are in the United States, you must know the basics of Christianity, given its influence on American culture and government. This makes religious literacy a civic duty. If we want competent citizens capable of meaningful engagement in the public sphere, then it is essential for them to have an understanding and knowledge of religion, particularly the dominant religion within their society, given the close relationship between religion and the public sector or government. We want competent citizens because such competencies contribute to the advancement of society. Therefore, religious understanding and knowledge are essential for an engaged citizenry. Although the knowledge approach to religious literacy was and remains highly influential, it is not without its critics (see Lewis 2015). For example, knowing the basic facts about somebody's religion does not prepare me to comprehend the myriad ways in which their religion shapes their identity and worldview. Therefore, this knowledge is not enough for the kind of interreligious interaction proposed by covenantal pluralism. As Prothero's work shows, deeply religious individuals often lack knowledge of facts about their own religious traditions that scholars might expect them to know. This suggests that such facts are not the primary driving force behind their religiosity, so knowing them does not necessarily enable better interactions with them.

In the concluding chapter of Dinham and Francis's (2016) volume, the authors maintain that the volume's contributors collectively argue that it is important to have some degree of knowledge of religious traditions. This point is intuitive, but it raises important questions. Which religions are included in this discussion? And given that religions are complex (or even *complex adaptive systems*; see Purzycki and Sosis 2022; Sosis 2020, 2019; Sosis and Kiper 2014), what specific facts are essential to understand? Moreover, there may be a disconnect between how scholars of religion understand, for example, Christianity and how modern-day Christians perceive it. In other words, what facts adequately represent someone who identifies as a Christian today, and how do these differ from the facts that defined Christians

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in the past? I argue that these unanswered questions matter to resolving present-day conflicts and ought to lead to the position that the knowledge approach to religious literacy needs further refinement to be considered a viable approach to religious literacy.

The analysis approach to religious literacy

Some scholars in the academic study of religion use an analysis approach to religious literacy by focusing on important terms in religious studies and emphasising how theoretical concepts can be applied to understand the lived experiences of religious individuals. On this approach, religious literacy involves knowing what is meant by 'religion'.[12] Scholars of religion are well acquainted with the challenges of defining terms like 'religion', often referred to in the academic study of religion as *the definition problem* (see Wilson 1998; Schilbrack 2010; Taves 2015; Pals 2021; Schilbrack 2022). An individual is religiously literate if they have the analytic tools and concepts to analyse religions in a critical way.

In 2016, Moore formulated the definition of religious literacy for the American Academy of Religion (AAR). Given its influence on the entire discipline of the academic study of religion, it is worth quoting in full here:

> Religious literacy entails the ability to discern and analyse 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 (where applicable), beliefs, practices and contemporary manifestations of several of the world's religious traditions as they arose out of and continue to be shaped by particular social, historical and cultural contexts; and 2) the ability to discern and explore the religious dimensions of political, social and cultural expressions across time and place (AAR 2010, 4).

The essential part of the above definition is acknowledging the 'importance of understanding religions and religious influences *in context* and as *inextricably woven into all dimensions of human experience*' (Moore 2016, 31; emphasis original). Moore's analysis approach prioritises a contextual understanding of religions that acknowledges them as internally complex, with significant diversity in beliefs and practices within any given group. It also recognises that religions are rarely static and instead constantly evolving, and emphasises that knowledge about religion is socially constructed or represents *situated knowledge*. At the same time, this approach deemphasises the necessity of specific knowledge about rituals and doctrines as a core component of religious literacy.

The analysis approach to religious literacy has an intuitive appeal. That is, if we are studying religion, we ought to have some idea as to what 'religion' refers to, and how to use the term appropriately. However, the analysis approach is inherently academic in the sense that this kind of religious literacy might be the most appealing to those already working in the academic study of religion. Since we want an account of religious literacy that is accessible to those outside of the academy, overly academic approaches to religious literacy ought to be resisted. More importantly, it is not clear that the ability to 'discern and analyse' will necessarily lead to respecting the integrity of neighbours who follow different religions.

The skills approach to religious literacy

Some have argued for a skills approach to religious literacy. In fact, during a recent American Academy of Religion conference (San Diego, CA, 2024), the overwhelming

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sentiment expressed at the panel on 'Mapping the Field of Religious Literacy: A Work-in-Progress' was that religious literacy as skill acquisition is becoming the standard approach for those who are doing religious literacy work in the public schools.[13] A skills approach to religious literacy emphasises practical abilities over mere knowledge. One major reason for educators to move towards this model is its inherent versatility. For example, rather than being limited to teaching specific religious content that may not suit the local cultural context, educators can focus on developing skills they believe will better equip students for the interreligious encounters relevant to their geopolitical context.

A further reason lies in the realm of politics. Religious literacy is often framed as knowledge and promoted as part of diversity and inclusion initiatives. For instance, teaching students factual information about unfamiliar religions is seen as valuable cross-cultural training. This knowledge helps students broaden their understanding of people outside their social context, fostering a more diverse perspective and encouraging inclusivity when interacting with individuals of different religions. However, in the context of American public education, this strategy is becoming less viable in certain states where diversity and inclusion initiatives are being dismantled or actively opposed. Proposing a skills approach to school administrators now seems to be a more pragmatic and acceptable alternative that many advocates of religious literacy are adopting.[14] Specifically, a skills approach to religious literacy focuses on self-development rather than solely understanding others. It is pragmatic, emphasising skills like respectful communication and active listening that benefit students' personal and educational growth, and these skills are easily identifiable as transferable to other areas of one's education, not just religious competency. Many K–12 public educators feel unprepared to teach about religion and often misunderstand whether it can be taught in public schools (see Soules 2025). This makes a skills approach for teachers more accessible and practical than focusing on religious knowledge alone because teachers are often appropriately equipped to teach transferable skills. Thus, the skills approach is politically appealing given that an instructor can teach skills and avoid directly engaging with religious content.

What are the specific skills associated with religious literacy and what skills must we develop to become religiously literate? One infers from the literature that negotiation, effective communication, active listening, respectful dialogue, and the skills needed to create interreligious infrastructure are important. While these skills might be necessary, determining which ones are most relevant and understanding how to cultivate them within specific religious contexts is an ongoing process. Moreover, it is not obvious why we should spend time developing skills that may not be important to us. As I will argue later in advancing the IA approach, it is by attending to the consequences of lacking a particular skill that we become motivated to develop it, and I am sceptical that a purely skills approach can adequately explain this. Gustafson's (2023) work, which examines interreligious engagement in a practical wisdom (*phronesis*) framework, goes some way in addressing some problems of the skills approach, but further development is needed to make it truly viable.

Challenges in defining and implementing religious literacy

The approaches mentioned above have advanced the conversation and opened new pathways for exploring interreligious engagement. While borrowing certain elements from these approaches may be helpful in supporting covenantal pluralism, none of them – individually or collectively – offers a sufficient basis for ensuring its realisation. As a result, covenantal pluralism is neither a guaranteed nor a particularly likely outcome of religious literacy as understood in any of these models.

The 'Conversion' section discusses the challenges posed by exclusivist groups, especially conversion. An account of religious literacy must be sensitive to those religions that

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have no interest in engaging with others. Even if these groups represent a small demographic, they cannot be ignored. By their very nature, exclusivist groups are prone to being misunderstood because accurate information about their religion may be inaccessible to outsiders. Furthermore, addressing certain major religious conflicts will often require direct engagement with these groups. Possessing religious literacy should equip individuals to navigate the challenges posed by exclusivist groups, ensuring they can engage effectively and thoughtfully in such complex contexts.

The 'Multiple religious belonging' section discusses the complex issue of multiple religious belonging and how previous approaches to religious literacy may cause problematic conclusions to be drawn about what role people who belong to multiple religions can have in ameliorating religious divisions. It may seem intuitive that these individuals could build bridges between different religious groups. However, I would like to challenge this assumption: effective interreligious engagement should not require the kind of perennialism or ethical relativism often espoused by those who identify with multiple religious traditions. Our approach to religious literacy must respect the integrity of differences that exist between religions, as covenantal pluralism demands.

Finally, the 'Motivation' section poses the question: what motivates individuals to develop religious literacy? A robust account of religious literacy should not only define its purpose but also inspire individuals to cultivate it actively.

A viable approach to religious literacy should address these challenges. In what follows, I argue that the IA approach meets these challenges better than the three prior approaches. Therefore, the IA approach to religious literacy (to be discussed below) ought to be preferred to the previous approaches.

Conversion

A person could be religiously literate, as previously defined in the above approaches, yet use that literacy solely as a tool to convert others to their own religion. I argue that this person is not religiously literate but would be categorised as such on previous approaches. Effective interreligious engagement requires both parties to enter the interaction with genuine intentions to promote understanding, not merely as an opportunity for conversion. This kind of engagement respects the differences of each party. However, and importantly, we should not exclude individuals or specific religions from interfaith dialogue because they are not open to having their religious commitments challenged. Pratt's (2013) analysis of religious 'fundamentalism', 'exclusivism', and 'extremism' offers valuable insights. For example, Pratt provides a framework for identifying religious groups that may not be open to genuine interfaith dialogue. An increased understanding of these groups is crucial because, as recent violent events demonstrate, exclusivist groups like ISIS, Hamas, the Army of God, and so on must be comprehended in order to develop effective strategies for engaging with them, resolving conflicts, and preventing further violence. While covenantal pluralism may be less likely when engaging with religious groups that embody certain forms of exclusivism, excluding these groups from dialogue represents a missed opportunity. At the very least, we fail to understand these groups, their beliefs, and, crucially, the motivations behind their actions. Engaging with exclusivist groups is essential for achieving covenantal pluralism, even if their initial intent may be to use the interaction as an opportunity for conversion.

I use the term 'exclusivist group' broadly, casting a wide net to encompass a range of groups under this label. For example, within the Muslim community, groups like ISIS are often not even recognised by most Muslims as a Muslim group. They are essentially seen as a political group clothed in religious rhetoric that engages in horrific acts.[15] While a full analysis of the term and the distinctions among such groups lies beyond the scope

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of this paper, it remains an important and worthwhile task. For now, however, this intentional vagueness supports the IA approach advocated in this paper. Crucially, it highlights a limitation of previous models of religious literacy: they often fail to equip individuals to engage meaningfully with exclusivist groups or to recognise important nuances among them.

Ford and Higton (2016) emphasise the value of a theological approach to religious literacy, as it enables individuals to adopt the perspective of a religious other, understand their unique religious language – including its concepts and theoretical frameworks – and ultimately engage in a deeper way with that religion. In other words, engaging in dialogue with other religions is one thing, but attempting to adopt the perspective of another religion is something deeper. The latter form of engagement goes beyond the former. This approach, they argue, 'involves learning how religious communities argue, and how to join in with those arguments in order to explore agreements and disagreements, and the dynamics by which they can change' (Ford and Higton 2016, 52). Ford and Higton's approach to scriptural reasoning and promoting religious bilingualism offers a practical method for building bridges to engage with exclusivist groups. These are precisely the groups we need to involve in meaningful interreligious engagement, and our approach to religious literacy ought to aid in such an engagement in pursuit of enabling covenantal pluralism. I argue later that the IA approach can capture the essence of these methods.

Multiple religious belonging

It might be tempting to assume that individuals who are knowledgeable about multiple religions and self-identify with more than one religion can serve as valuable assets in representing these religions. It appears that these individuals could assist in bridging divides. However, those who belong to multiple religions are likely to adopt some form of perennialism, thereby endorsing the belief that no one religion captures ultimate truth or ultimate reality (see Cornille 2013). Multiple religious belonging presents interesting issues that the religious literacy literature ought to address. Can someone be, for example, both a Christian and a Buddhist simultaneously?[16] The puzzle that emerges from asking this question is grounded in the notion of *authenticity*. Specifically, is it accurate to say that being an authentic Christian means one cannot also be an authentic Buddhist? If this is accurate, the idea of multiple religious belonging appears incoherent because belonging to one religion necessarily means you do not belong to another religion.

If one can be both a Chistian and Buddhist simultaneously, then this potentially undermines interreligious dialogue because we are forced into some form of perennialism where truth is dispersed across multiple, or perhaps all, religions. This endorsement is potentially contradictory to respecting the inherent differences between religions, thereby going against a core feature of covenantal pluralism. To reiterate, masking religious differences undermines the goals of covenantal pluralism, as these differences are often tied to moral commitments and lie at the core of many conflicts. If someone identifies as both a Christian and a Buddhist, they simultaneously embody monotheistic and non-theistic beliefs. This can create challenges in interreligious engagement, as many Christians and Buddhists might feel uneasy with someone holding such dual religious identities representing their religion, given the inherent contradiction. Thus, if multiple religious belonging is considered coherent, it requires downplaying the differences between religions, which could compromise respect for the integrity of these inherent differences. Previous accounts of religious literacy have overlooked this issue. Since people in the twenty-first century often identify with beliefs and practices that span across a multitude of religious boundaries (i.e., religions), it is important that our approach to religious literacy helps address this complexity.

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Motivation

Another challenge to the above approaches to religious literacy concerns motivation. Why should people be motivated to acquire knowledge about their neighbours' religions? Why should people care about the concept of 'religion' or other analytic categories that scholars of religion utilise to make meaningful distinctions and do conceptual analysis? Why should people spend the resources and time developing skills to be able to negotiate better with their neighbour who has a different religion? Dinham and Francis (2016) point out that the initial push for religious literacy in higher education was largely driven by concerns about religious extremism. They challenge this approach, arguing that framing religion as a problem from the outset makes the concept of religious literacy itself problematic. I agree with this insight and would add that the fight against extremism alone is unlikely to motivate people to cultivate religious literacy.

Moyaert's (2013) statement is representative of the wider interreligious engagement literature by pointing to the dialogical reward of engaging with the religious other:

> Not infrequently it is said by participants in interreligious dialogue that they have grown through the encounter with the religious other: not only do they understand the particularity of their own faith commitment better, but they also have the idea that they are more strongly anchored or rooted in their own religion (214).

This statement makes it seem that the reason for interreligious engagement is not in fact about the religious other. Rather, the point of crossing religious boundaries is to understand one's own religion, religious tradition, or religious identity better or to become more grounded in it. This is an important claim that has not been tested empirically, but if Moyaert's statement is true, this might go some way in answering the motivational question of religious literacy. In other words, if we can establish empirically that religious literacy has a positive impact on our own self, it will be more motivating than if the positive impact is related outward towards our neighbour.[17]

The interreligious attentiveness approach to religious literacy

Religious literacy framed as mere tolerance is inadequate for achieving covenantal pluralism. Similarly, focusing solely on understanding is also insufficient. Tolerance falls short because it does not require active engagement that crosses a religious boundary, whereas covenantal pluralism demands such an interaction.[18] Likewise, understanding alone is not enough, as one could gain knowledge of another's religion and misuse it to harm or undermine them. Covenantal pluralism demands productive engagement in times of conflict or uncomfortable spaces. Ultimately, we need to move beyond the notion that we have succeeded simply because different religious groups have engaged in peaceful dialogue, collaborated on a social issue, or interacted without causing offence to one another. Producing tangible resolutions to our present-day conflicts requires something more demanding than previous approaches to religious literacy advocated for.

I propose that religious literacy be understood as a character trait, specifically the character trait of *interreligious attentiveness* (IA). I define IA as follows: *religious literacy is a disposition to attentiveness to one's religiosity and others' religiosity that enables meaningful conversations and practical interactions that cross religious boundaries. This disposition to attentiveness is characterised by (a) hermeneutical understanding of both oneself and others, (b) respect for the integrity of all parties involved, and (c) an ongoing process of overcoming misunderstanding.*

I argue that IA is a valuable character trait that is closely associated with a cluster of intellectual virtues such as intellectual humility and open-mindedness. Yet, IA is

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distinct from these intellectual virtues given that IA is about one's character involving matters of religion, whereas intellectual virtues are not restricted to the domain of religion. Put differently, one could not possess IA without being intellectually humble and open-minded, whereas one could be intellectually humble or open-minded without having IA. For Aristotle (1999), virtue is knowing the good, desiring the good, and doing the good. Generally, virtue is 'held to be a character trait, a state of one's character' (Hursthouse 1999, 11). According to Hursthouse and Pettigrove (2023), 'A virtue is an excellent trait of character. It is a disposition, well entrenched in its possessor.' I am arguing that if an individual has IA, as defined above and elaborated further below, then this amounts to (some degree of) religious literacy.

In this account, religious literacy can be understood as a form of attentiveness akin to fluency in learning a second language. Like foreign language fluency (see Marcus 2018), it demands ongoing effort, practice or habituation, and engagement with those proficient in the subject. Having fluency in a second language also involves understanding your native language to draw meaningful connections (e.g., cognate words). Fluency is gradual and requires sustained attentiveness, yet some aspects may always remain challenging or inaccessible, as is common in navigating a second language as a non-native speaker. Religious literacy, like fluency, requires sustained effort, an understanding of one's own religion (or analogous non-religious commitments), and a thoughtful engagement with other religions.

Hermeneutical understanding

This account emphasises hermeneutical understanding, which is the ability to interpret and respond to religious content in the form of words and actions. This requires knowledge of specific facts and general theories of religion only secondarily, for the role they have in interpretation. This account reflects the complexities of many twenty-first-century individuals who identify with a religion but lack the depth of knowledge about its historical and doctrinal aspects that a scholar of religion would typically expect its adherents to possess.

Respect

The requirement of respect for integrity specifies that the interactions enabled by religious literacy must not avoid differences or require either party to modify or mask essential aspects of their religious identity. According to Eck, we should not aim for obliterating differences, 'but rather to discover ways of living, connecting, relating, arguing, and disagreeing in a society of differences' (2007, 745). Interreligious engagement often emphasises similarities while downplaying differences between religions. While recognising the value of such efforts, my approach to religious literacy encourages embracing and understanding these differences, as they are often the root of conflicts. Respecting both one's own religion and those of others does not require agreement with the religious other but does require a willingness to confront and feel unsettled by differences. This process brings moral commitments – both ours and theirs – to the surface, where they may conflict and create discomfort. Such an approach demands open-mindedness, self-reflection, and self-critique.

Overcoming misunderstanding

The requirement of a process of overcoming misunderstanding specifies that although a snapshot of a person's understanding at any given moment may constitute a degree of religious literacy (even if it is not highly developed), the IA approach aims for the kind of religious literacy that is always in the process of evolving, coming into closer contact

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with the reality of the other person through ongoing interaction. I state the requirement negatively as 'overcoming misunderstanding', rather than positively as 'coming to understand', because I hypothesise that it is easier to identify when one is misunderstanding someone than to be sure that one is understanding them accurately. Listening is an act of charity, a powerful form of reciprocity, of hospitality, and when we do listen, the parties consciously cross a religious boundary.

The IA approach to religious literacy is hermeneutical. Our understanding of who we are is shaped by self-serving categories, which need to be critically examined in order for us to understand how they were constructed. Engaging with others broadens our perspective and acts as a mirror, helping us reflect on ourselves, including our inherent biases and limitations. This self-reflection focuses on the concepts we use to divide the world and shape our identities. Interreligious engagement brings these self-constructions to light by exposing us to the often radically different ways others construct their own identities. This hermeneutical approach to religious literacy has a moral dimension. Suppressing one's moral commitments for the sake of interreligious engagement ought to be avoided because doing so does not enable covenantal pluralism. Respecting the integrity of differences requires drawing out these moral commitments and bringing them to the surface and engaging with them directly. This is the kind of engagement that has the potential to enable a *pattern of interaction that crosses religious boundaries that overall is increasingly peaceful, productive, characterised by engagement, and respectful of difference and the integrity of each party.* This process is highly demanding and requires more than just religious literacy, but I suggest that IA (qua religious literacy) is necessary for creating the conditions for covenantal pluralism, and that the IA approach to religious literacy is the most promising approach to religious literacy.[19]

I argue that the IA approach advances existing approaches to religious literacy in important ways. First, by framing IA as a character trait that is associated with some intellectual virtues, this approach directly answers a persistent critique: why should religious literacy be pursued at all? If IA is understood as a valuable character trait that is tied to intellectual virtues (intellectual humility, open-mindedness, etc.), then cultivating religious literacy is not merely instrumentally useful but also intrinsically worthwhile. Virtues improve a person's character, and thus we have good reason to aspire to them. Accordingly, when individuals demonstrate IA in their engagement with religious others, their conduct is not only effective but also morally praiseworthy.

Second, the IA approach designates what is fundamental in our approach, and getting the direction of fundamentality right has benefits. For example, a skills-based approach implies a plurality, recognising many skills as relevant to religious literacy. While IA does not exclude necessary skills for creating the conditions for covenantal pluralism, it uniquely cues a person into the right skills, at the right time, for the right reasons.

Third, Gustafson (2023) proposes *interreligious phronesis* as a model for interreligious engagement and argues that religious literacy is required. Interreligious engagement ought to aim for '*interreligious phronesis* (IP), which is the confluences of *know what, know who, know how*, and *know why*' in everyday encounters with the religious other (4). According to Gustafson (2023),

> The religiously literate person has basic knowledge about the ways religion shapes human behavior; the interreligiously literate person has the practical everyday wisdom to recognize and navigate potentially interreligiously complex situations, with an eye to producing effective and constructive outcomes (157).

By endorsing IA, he could strengthen his model of *interreligious phronesis* by offering a richer and more sophisticated account of religious literacy. IA influences all four dimensions of his

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interreligious phronesis model by equipping a person with the relevant epistemic knowledge (*know what*), by engaging empathetically with the religious other (*know who*), while being grounded in an understanding of oneself and the world (*know why*), and having the practical competence required to apply these insights skilfully (*know how*). Put simply, IA helps us determine which forms of knowledge and skill truly matter in each encounter with a specific religious other and anchors the cultivation of religious literacy within the broader framework of character (and virtue) development. As a result, it is advantageous for the skills approach to utilise IA or endorse the IA approach to religious literacy.

Applications of the interreligious attentiveness approach to religious literacy

In this section, I revisit the challenges to the aforementioned approaches to religious literacy and argue that the IA approach avoids these challenges.

Conversion

When engaging with others, IA cues us into the right kinds of things, at the right time, and for the right reasons. When participating in interreligious engagement with exclusivist groups, one may be aware that the group is only involved as an opportunity to convert them. Of course, to interact effectively with exclusivist groups will involve knowing pertinent information related to the group, but IA directs our attention to the most important feature of the interaction, which provides the foundation for interreligious engagement. As a result, when engaging with an exclusivist group that is only engaging as a means to convert us, IA allows us to see the engagement for what it is and then find the most effective way of getting the most out of the engagement. Furthermore, possessing IA allows us to know when to oppose religious beliefs, practices, or institutions because 'Someone who tolerates religious beliefs and practices that are morally impermissible is not being virtuous' (Schilbrack 2020, 71). According to Schilbrack (2020), this is why engaging with people of different religions is an engagement of *conditional hospitality* – and the possessor of IA gives us the wherewithal to know how to treat individuals in exclusivist groups.

Previous approaches do not capture this picture. Knowledge about the exclusivist groups does not equip you to engage effectively with them. IA is more situational and therefore equips you with the tools necessary to navigate the particularities of that group and situation. This is particularly important because every exclusivist group and situation where one is engaging with such groups is going to be unique – engagement is located in a particular setting, during a particular time with a certain social/political structure, certain social events having occurred, and each member representing their religion will be unique and have a certain hermeneutic understanding of their religious identity and tradition.

This description of the interaction shows how multifaceted it is. This may appear a bit overwhelming. However, I think this further supports the IA approach. For example, imagine the time and effort to learn about all the beliefs and practices that constitute Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, and so on. The knowledge required to have sufficient understanding would be an unrealistic endeavour. The IA approach grounds the interaction in the present moment, meaning that attention is given to the most relevant factors for effective engagement with the other.

Multiple religious belonging

The three factors (globalisation, immigration, media) of religious pluralism discussed earlier have made it more likely for an individual to hold affiliation with multiple religions. Religious literacy should involve understanding how our identities and/or traditions

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influence our interactions with the religious other, and the ways that values are similar and distinct from one's religion. An account of religious literacy that captures the nuances of such distinctions will be essential for building bridges between religious communities. The IA approach is sensitive to this distinction. In fact, understanding social identity, including the social structures that people are embedded in, the social positions and roles people occupy, and the associated norms attached to these positions, represents a significant opportunity for exploration in religious studies.[20] The IA approach helps us understand why many twenty-first-century individuals self-identify with a religion they have very little factual knowledge of. For example, 'I'm a Christian' is often stated by my undergraduate students enrolled in religious studies courses. Once you ask them to relay basic tenets of Christianity or, more specifically, similarities and differences with other religions, including other denominations of Christianity, they fail miserably. The IA approach strikes at the core of this puzzle. Namely, religious literacy requires being attentive to what it means for that person when they say, 'I'm a Christian'. Though syntactically identical, this statement will very rarely have semantic equivalence when stated by different people.

The IA approach tunes us into the importance of those who identify with multiple religions and recognises the vulnerabilities of this population in interreligious engagement. These people may be able to aid in interreligious engagement, but the context, with the particular goals and barriers of the specific engagement, will require attending to. The benefit of the IA approach is that it brings this challenge to our attention. It might be correct that in certain situations these people may be a bridge to communicate between religions, but at other times IA will allow us to see how religious boundaries are formed and how religious boundaries today are flexible. Beyond the modern concept of 'religion' and the implications of scholars applying it, religious boundaries can also be formed through elements like food, clothing, rituals, and doctrines. Notably, Vishanoff (2013) demonstrates that these boundaries don't always reflect real differences between religions; they can be built on perceived differences, even when no actual distinction exists. This is all to say that understanding religious boundaries, including the ways in which they are created and sustained, requires more than knowledge, skill, or analytical tools – it requires a sustained attention that the IA approach promotes. Ultimately, attentiveness to individuals with multiple religious belonging helps identify religious boundaries. It can help show how religious boundaries are never static, and it can reveal how certain interreligious engagement may be aided by such individuals while other engagements will not.

Motivation

What is the motivation to develop religious literacy? The IA approach has an answer. IA results in concern, and this combination often gives us motivation to act. By being attentive to situations in the world where religion is a contributing factor, we become concerned because we notice the consequences of failing to attend to religion in those situations, and attending in the right way enables the person to recognise the nuances and intricacies of that situation.[21] Developing one's attentiveness to matters of religion produces a deep understanding because sustained focused attention brings the role of religion in public life to our awareness. Ultimately, the application of this approach is what provides the motivation. IA cues us into the right kinds of things, at the right time, and for the right reasons. This attentiveness increases the likelihood of caring about the object of our attention, and once we care about things, we are more likely to involve ourselves in those affairs.

From the perspective of effective pedagogy, an IA approach requires starting with current events to highlight the contextual nature of individuals' religiosity. Simply teaching facts about world religions is insufficient for fostering genuine religious literacy and risks

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oversimplifying the complex religious identities of people today. Instead, by training students to pay attention to the right aspects of religion – at the right time and for the right reasons – this approach cultivates deeper, more nuanced understanding. Attention is more fundamental than learning facts about religions; only after attending to the right kinds of things can we understand or appreciate religious facts. This point is significant given the current structure of religious education in K–12 and higher education, which prioritises religious facts.

Conclusion

This paper discusses the relevance of religious pluralism to twenty-first-century conflicts and argues for the need for a different kind of pluralism (i.e., covenantal pluralism) to bring about a more peaceful world. In order to bring to fruition this goal of a more peaceful world through covenantal pluralism, individuals will need to cultivate IA and intellectual virtues. Interdisciplinary research teams are currently working to identify which virtues are most relevant to fostering the conditions for covenantal pluralism. The focus of this paper is religious literacy, which I argued is best understood as the character trait of IA. Furthermore, I argued that previous approaches to religious literacy are insufficient for overcoming several challenges and fostering the conditions for covenantal pluralism and have offered an alternative, the IA approach, which is a theoretical advancement of the existing approaches to religious literacy and avoids major challenges to which past approaches are susceptible, making it a more effective approach.

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Notes

1. Admittedly, this paper is largely theoretical, and only gestures towards its practical implications for integrating religious literacy into educational and social contexts.
2. I have defined 'covenantal pluralism' in such a way as to avoid some of the potential issues with the term, which I discuss later in this section. In doing so, I have deviated from the standard usage of the term. This modified definition comes out of a research group and conference on covenantal pluralism. Therefore, I am greatly indebted to Adam Green, Elizabeth Mancuso, Nancy Snow, and David Vishanoff.
3. For a discussion of character, its significance, and strategies for its improvement, see Miller (2018, 2021).
4. Despite these problems, this is not to claim that the term 'covenantal pluralism' has not been practically useful outside of monotheism. For example, see Hoover (2023a, 2023b) for the ways in which the term has been usefully applied to Asia.
5. More focused theoretical and empirical research on covenantal pluralism is required to discover its true potential for enabling deep interreligious engagement and ameliorating interreligious conflict. This research will inevitably be an interdisciplinary enterprise. This research is currently being funded by the Templeton Religion Trust.
6. For example, Schilbrack's discussion of toleration provides a moral ideal of religious diversity. In particular, Schilbrack argues for *conditional hospitality* which 'involves a willingness to welcome the religious other, but only under certain conditions' (74). Schilbrack's work aids my discussion on exclusivist groups later in the paper. Furthermore, Dormandy (2020) argues for the epistemic-potential claim, which is defined as follows: 'Religious disagreement has the strong potential to promote epistemic goals in the religious domain, to a greater extent than suppressing does' (390). Ultimately, according to Dormandy, engaging with the religious other has epistemic benefits, and this provides reasons for seeking out interreligious engagement.
7. See Dinham (2016) for a discussion of the ways religious literacy is, and has been, relevant to social welfare.

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8. These include, but are not limited to, Harvard Divinity School's Religion and Public Life – especially its Religious Literacy Project; the Tanenbaum Center for Interreligious Understanding (New York); the Institute for Islamic, Christian, and Jewish Studies (Baltimore, MD); and the Dialogue Institute (Philadelphia, PA). Religious literacy and interreligious engagement are beginning to receive the attention they deserve. Acknowledging the fact that we occupy a religiously diverse world means that engagement, both physical and dialogical, will also increase (see Swamy 2019 for a nuanced discussion of the history of religious dialogue). Traditionally, the aim of religious literacy has been to aid in this engagement. Yet challenges remain. For example, one challenge in promoting religious literacy is that educators have limited time and resources. Educators have identified that a centralised database with relevant literature and materials accessible to both educators and the public would be helpful. In the field of education, limited access to psycho-socio-scientific research is one of the key factors contributing to the fragmentation of advocacy efforts for religious literacy.

9. Wolfart (2022) draws extensively on the work of Harvey J. Graff, particularly his formulation of the 'literacy myth' (see Graff 1979; Graff 2010).

10. Giorda (2019) also emphasises this idea that religious literacy (and religious illiteracy) lacks empirical investigation and an agreed upon definition. I should note that Giorda's focus is primarily on religious illiteracy in the European context.

11. The typology I develop is intended as a flexible framework, not one with rigid or sharply defined boundaries between the approaches.

12. This approach will also be concerned with related terms like 'Judaism', 'Christianity', 'literacy', and so on.

13. The panel featured the following scholars: Heather Miller Rubens, the Institute for Islamic, Christian, and Jewish Studies; Daniel del Nido, Tanenbaum Center for Interreligious Understanding; Justine Ellis, Institute for Religion, Culture, and Public Life at Columbia University; Kate Soules, Religion and Education Collaborative; Michael Graziano, University of Northern Iowa.

14. Although I have not introduced the interreligious attentiveness account yet, it is worth mentioning here that it also has the advantage of avoiding what some think of as problems with the knowledge account and its association with DEI initiatives.

15. In this sense, the analysis approach does help to a degree because appreciating this problem may mean going back to the question of what constitutes religion, with which that approach is concerned.

16. Some may be quick to dismiss the idea as impossible, but modern Japan provides a straightforward example: many Japanese people identify as Shinto, Buddhist, and Christian at the same time, illustrating that a person can belong to multiple religions simultaneously.

17. The plausibility of this may depend on if we are referring to WEIRD individuals (see Henrich 2020). These individuals have a psychological package that Henrich calls *individualism.*

18. Eck (1993) also points out that tolerance is not enough for pluralism. According to Eck, pluralism involves a commitment to engaging with the religious other. This emphasis on commitment is a distinguishing feature between pluralism and mere tolerance. In my definition of covenantal pluralism, I use the phrase 'characterised by engagement', which takes inspiration from Eck's work.

19. Although the focus of this paper is on one essential feature of covenantal pluralism, there are other important features that will need to be present to enable covenantal pluralism, such as the virtues of intellectual humility and courage.

20. Although the topic is underexplored systematically in religious studies, some relevant literature exists (see Schilbrack 2023). In contrast, philosophy – particularly social ontology – has produced strong work in this area (see Asta 2018; Witt 2023).

21. We can notice the consequences of failing to attend to religious situations from both a first-person and third-person perspective. For example, if I am engaging in interfaith dialogue with a person, failing to attend to their religious commitments would be associated with a first-person perspective. Watching the news and seeing that a governor of a particular state is hoping to mandate that the ten commandments be present in public school classrooms and seeing the consequences this might have on the well-being of non-Christian students is associated with a third-person perspective.

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