

Religious Literacy for a Secular Age:  
Approaches from Secularism Studies and Affect Theory



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## Abstract

Religious literacy has become a widely invoked concept in scholarship, policy, popular discourse, and beyond. Since the 1990s, but more actively since 9/11, arguments in favor of training citizens to “get” religion and to understand why it matters “on the ground” have proliferated. A trans-Atlantic, Anglophone conversation has emerged as United States and United Kingdom educators and policymakers have called for increased engagement with, and public understanding of, religion. Often advancing one or more of the agendas of social cohesion, active citizenship, and democratic self-awareness, religious literacy emerges as a framework for addressing timely issues within pluralist settings. Frequently, advocates for religious literacy also call upon notions of secularity, explicitly citing the idea that the need for religious literacy results from our so-called secular society’s lost ability to interact with religious populations and identify religious tropes. Religious literacy, in this way, participates in the debate around religion’s place within the liberal-democratic public sphere and points to tensions underlying the category of the “secular.”

Despite the growing body of literature on such themes, there is a dearth of scholarly analysis connecting theories of secularism to current policy proposals. My thesis intervenes by linking critical secularism studies—an emerging field that rethinks the classic secularization narrative—to the dialogue on religious literacy. I argue that religious literacy, with its inherent emphasis on “literacy” has the capacity to set us on an all-too-narrow path from the start by advancing intellectualized and “linguisticized” conceptions of religions, which privilege the cognitive, textual, rational, and apparently democratically compatible aspects of religions. Challenging such presumptions, this project examines the discourse on religious literacy, using the tools of critical secularism studies and affect theory to expose some of the liberal assumptions underlying the conversation. The thesis, in response, proposes a fresh perspective on religious literacy that takes into account the affective and embodied dimensions of religions and the “secular.”

## Long Abstract

Within the past two decades, religious literacy has become an increasingly popular and pervasive organizing framework for understanding religions in settings such as state-funded schools, workplaces, foreign service, and the media. For the most part, public discourse on religious literacy has focused on how to generate more of it, such that the conversation and the resulting research have centered primarily on how to cultivate increased levels of knowledge or skills about religions. Following from this, commentators argue frequently that religious literacy constitutes an evident social good, needed for enhanced social cohesion and civic engagement. Others, in contrast, approach the topic with suspicion, arguing that religious literacy advances an insidious religiously motivated agenda within nominally secular quarters.

Rather than falling into either of these camps, this thesis instead considers the theoretical underpinnings of the project of religious literacy and its enactment within a variety of contexts. Focusing on what the current conversation assumes and what such assumptions suggest about implementing religious literacy programs in the years ahead, this project asks how religious literacy functions in public policy production. In other words, what types of understanding of the categories of religion and the secular does the current conversation configure? What, perhaps more importantly, does the current instantiation of the discourse overlook? Aiming to be reparative, rather than adversarial, in its emphases and recommendations, this project presents a note of caution about the ways in which religious literacy gets deployed in policy and practice.

A central claim of religious literacy is that it advances a nonsectarian, and, by extension, potentially nonpartisan, set of tools for understanding religions within pluralist democratic contexts such as the United States and the United Kingdom. As a result of such a positioning, proponents tend, this thesis argues, to overemphasize the role of “literacy” within religious literacy, privileging the cognitive, textual, rational, and apparently democratically compatible aspects of religions, religious perspectives, and religious communities. In this way, religious literacy, with its inherent emphasis on “literacy” and all that such a term implies, has the capacity to set us on an all-too-narrow path from the start by advancing intellectualized and “linguisticized” conceptions of religions, thereby potentially marginalizing affective and embodied possibilities. Through an analysis of the discussion contained in English-language policy proposals, this thesis critiques the terms of engagement of the debate and proposes a possible path forward for religious literacy—and the wider discourse surrounding it—that takes into account the affective and embodied dimensions of religions and the “secular.”

To date, there have been no full-length studies connecting religious literacy to current understandings of secularity and the “secular” as epistemic categories. In response, this thesis examines the discourse on religious literacy, using the tools of critical secularism studies and affect theory to expose some of the liberal assumptions underlying the conversation. As a fundamental premise, this thesis takes the perspective that religious literacy’s connection to liberal norms and precepts needs to be reconsidered and revised.

Showing the blind spots that arise from such emphases—the policy conversation’s elevation of rationality, autonomy, choice, and textuality—this project calls attention to certain inbuilt challenges. Religious literacy, despite its advantages in aiming to inform and engage wider publics, has the potential to situate understandings of religions within the context of civility, civics, and enhanced democratic discourse. Calling attention to the intellectual consequences of such starting points, I suggest that such agendas have the potential to shape depictions of religions in accordance with liberal precepts of reason and language, precluding other, equally relevant, possibilities and limiting the scope from the outset.

In terms of the broader implications of this study, in addition to providing an original evaluation of current proposals and a critique of the concept of religious literacy through the lens of critical secularism studies, my thesis, in line with recent attempts from theorists such as Cécile Laborde to “disaggregate” and “de-parochialize” liberalism, contributes to an understanding of the ways in which conceptions of religion continue to be transformed in liberal-democratic contexts. This project, therefore, not only offers a critique of religious literacy proposals, but also provides a space to examine the implications for treatments of religions in settings where liberal-democratic subjectivity is the dominant discourse. This thesis aims to contribute in two related ways: first, it proposes to “materialize” religious literacy by paying attention to embodiment and affect, and, second, it also situates itself within the wider, and emergent, critical scholarship on cultures of liberal democracies. Religious literacy as a case study, this thesis suggests,

provides an illustrative look into the ways in which we engage with the “secular” as part of embodied, lived practice.

*Chapter Descriptions:*

The argument unfolds in the following ways: Chapter 1 sets the stage for the later theoretical analysis by tracing the development of a trans-Atlantic, Anglophone conversation around the concept and application of religious literacy. It introduces and analyzes varying theories of practice from the U.S. and the U.K., delineates the schools of thought within the growing debate, and examines what scholars and practitioners mean when they call for religious literacy. The chapter also assesses the advantages, disadvantages, and strategies behind each approach. Specifically, this chapter focuses on the works of U.S. proponents of religious literacy, including Warren Nord and Charles Haynes, Stephen Prothero, and Diane Moore, as well as research outputs from institutes such as Harvard Divinity School’s Religious Literacy Project. This chapter also introduces and analyzes U.K. perspectives on religious literacy, with a particular emphasis on the works of Adam Dinham, the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Religious Education’s report on religious literacy, and the Commission on Religion and Belief in British Public Life. Through an analysis of current theories of practice, along with some critical responses to such proposals, this chapter examines religious literacy’s entanglements with the concept of the “secular,” and what such tensions suggest about current secular formations.

Chapter 2 focuses on religious literacy as public scholarship, examining in particular its engagement with current understandings of the so-called public sphere. Given its rapid ascent and prevalence within scholarly and popular discourse, religious literacy has become a powerful conceptual tool for organizing public understanding of religions. As a result, it remains critical to consider what such a policy conversation assumes and, perhaps more significantly, what dynamics it configures and reinforces. Drawing on theoretical insights from Charles Taylor’s formulation of “Secularity 3,” elaborated in *A Secular Age*—the idea that the present is a time during which religious belief and identity constitutes one option among many—this chapter sets out to explain recent arguments in favor of religious literacy. Through a close reading of religious literacy proposals, and Taylor’s conception of the “imminent frame,” this chapter develops the contention that certain proponents of religious literacy advance a strategy of presenting religion, and religious perspectives, as well-suited to nominally secular contexts such as U.S. public schools by emphasizing the notion of student choice. Further, in critiquing religion’s purported marginalization from public life, religious literacy advocates aim to reclaim such a narrative from theocrats, and, in so doing, risk tacking too far in the opposite direction: framing religion in terms of voluntarism, individual discernment, and choice. Such emphases, this chapter argues, result from religious literacy’s positioning as a tool of active citizenship and democratic self-awareness in ways that have the capacity to shape religious possibilities.

Following the previous chapter's discussion of religious literacy's democracy-building aims and its interconnections with the public sphere, Chapter 3 examines what gets left behind if the conversation fails to take into account the affective, non-cognitive dimensions of embodied life. Specifically, Chapter 3 problematizes religious literacy's entanglements with the aims of liberal education, exposes its emphasis on textuality, and points to possible stumbling blocks within the pedagogical practices of religious literacy that result from such starting positions. The argument takes up three interrelated themes. First, it suggests that religious literacy's frequent usage as a tool of active citizenship and democratic self-awareness places a disproportionate emphasis on democratic deliberation and rationality. Second, the chapter proposes that such democracy-building goals have the capacity to lead to a sidelining of the affective and embodied aspects of studying religions and to a privileging of the textual and cognitive. Third, it connects such critiques to the implementation of religious literacy. The chapter draws on recent scholarship connecting embodiment and education to argue that an emphasis on cognitive learning masks a suspicion of, and entanglements with, the body in contemporary education policy. Classroom practices, I propose, need to begin making room for a critical reexamination that results from taking into account the idea that human bodies factor into the calculus in ways for which policymakers have not yet accounted. This chapter concludes that religious literacy must begin attending to the affective dimensions of understandings both of religions and of pedagogic practices or risk reproducing existing challenges.

Chapter 4 advances Chapter 3's critiques by connecting religious literacy to discussions of liberal tolerance and toleration. Increasingly, religious literacy has become tied to the theme of managing religious offense and promoting democratic sociability. Examining the ways in which calls for religious literacy have the capacity to advance a prosocial agenda, this chapter suggests that, in many instances, advocates of religious literacy aim to cultivate a habituated civility towards religions on the basis of fostering respectful communication about difference. Although religious literacy, as this thesis argues, tends to emphasize the cognitive features both of religions and of learning about religions, the illustrative examples under discussion show a project of cultivating particular attitudes and dispositions operative in religious literacy programs. As a result, proponents of religious literacy, who tend to frame their project in terms of the cognitive, rational, and by extension, seemingly democratically compatible aspects and expressions of religion, are also engaging in affective work in ways that frequently go unexamined. By attending to the way in which certain proponents of religious literacy cite the need for civility and peaceful coexistence, this chapter argues that, in certain manifestations, religious literacy entails cultivating a particular attitude or disposition towards religion: one that would render recourse to legal mechanisms unnecessary. This chapter rounds out its discussion with an analysis of critical reconsiderations of tolerance in the form of William Connolly's "agonistic respect" and Lori Beaman's "deep equality," pointing to the ways in which recent critiques of tolerance policies have the capacity to reproduce old challenges within new vocabularies.

Building on the discussion of the previous chapter, Chapter 5 focuses on workplace religious literacy case studies to examine the implications of using religious literacy to habituate and inculcate particular attitudes towards religion and religions. Focusing in particular on the tension between “education” and “literacy” within the religious literacy debate, this chapter shows the ways in which religious literacy, in certain manifestations, aims to cultivate orientations and practices around engaging with religions in workplace contexts. Through a focus on contemporary case studies—Ernst & Young’s “Religious Literacy for Organisations” initiative and the Tanenbaum Center for Interreligious Understanding’s “Religion at Work” program—this chapter studies the use of religious literacy as part of corporate diversity and inclusion human resources (HR) strategies. Rather than focusing on the well-studied area of caselaw surrounding workplace religious accommodation, this chapter instead examines the implications of mobilizing religious literacy as social practice aimed at promoting good relations among employees, maximizing productivity through worker satisfaction, and thereby minimizing the need for recourse to legal mechanisms to settle potential work-related disputes before they arise.

Finally, the definitional question looms large within discussions of religious literacy and its varied and varying applications in policy and practice. Chapter 6, in response, anchors the thesis in the study of religions by turning to the instability of the category of religion, especially within the context of an apparent rise in increasingly religiously unaffiliated populations on both sides of the Atlantic. In other words, for someone to become

religiously literate—often the stated objective of religious literacy programs—there must be particular understandings of the category of religion undergirding such calls to action. To address this consideration, this chapter weaves together approaches from critical religion with current discussions of nonreligion, critiquing essentializing and universalizing understandings of religions that sometimes appear in religious literacy proposals. Taking up, moreover, the recent resurgence of “worldviews” as an alternative organizing mechanism for religious studies teaching and religious education, this chapter identifies the inbuilt challenges that accompany moves to operationalize critical religion critiques in policy and the resulting efforts to innovate inclusionary vocabularies for educational purposes.

The conclusion offers a brief summary, a series of reflections about the implications of the analysis, and a set of questions for further study related to the wider context of recent calls to revisit the World Religions Paradigm in light of scholarship from critical secularism studies.

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## 0 Introduction

Back in 2015, in the wake of a series of suicide bombing attacks in the Saint-Denis neighborhood of Paris, students across North American undergraduate university campuses held vigils and gathered in solidarity. At the University of Wisconsin at Madison, in particular, an outpouring of support brought students of various backgrounds together to reflect on the events. Encouraged by this show of community cohesion in response to a geographically distant occurrence, a professor at the university remarked that such a time called for increased religious literacy. In light of the situation, he recommended that “educators should not just teach about religious diversity and difference; they should also train their students in how to negotiate it.”<sup>1</sup> In his view, these students, as burgeoning “global citizens,” had demonstrated the ability to “transcend the real and perceived religious boundaries in times of crisis” and displayed an attempt “to nurture a democratic space of freedom and difference.”<sup>2</sup> Students, according to this assessment, exhibited a desire to bridge boundaries of religious difference in the service of promoting democratic aims.

More recently, and across the Atlantic, the Home Office of the United Kingdom has begun enlisting the help of specialists to assist with asylum claims. Responding to

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<sup>1</sup> Ulrich Rosenhagen, “The Value of Teaching Religious Literacy,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 2 December 2015, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/The-Value-of-Teaching/234393>.

<sup>2</sup> Rosenhagen, “The Value of Teaching Religious Literacy.”

complaints that caseworkers had rejected an Iranian asylum-seeker's claim on the basis of a "misunderstanding" of scripture, the Home Office began to reevaluate its approach. Reportedly, the asylum-seeker had sought religious persecution protection on the basis of a conversion from Islam to Christianity. However, caseworkers apparently dismissed the claimant's petition on the grounds that, despite the asylum-seeker's assertion that Christianity was a "peaceful" religion, passages taken from the Book of Revelation painted a decidedly more martial picture.<sup>3</sup> The decision, once public, came under fire for relying on "a superficial understanding of biblical text."<sup>4</sup> Attributed to a lack of "basic" knowledge about religions, the incident prompted a reconsideration of current policies and assessments. In response, and in order to avoid future missteps, government officials have called for Church of England clergy to prepare religious literacy courses for asylum caseworkers. As of mid-2019, such a program was being developed to counter a "culture of low religious literacy" within the Home Office and the wider public.<sup>5</sup>

Despite their clear differences, both examples share a crucial similarity: each scenario prompted an immediate call to action in the form of religious literacy. Although, in the first example, religious literacy was viewed as a key ingredient in promoting democratic sociability and in the second religious literacy was called upon as a corrective to textual

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<sup>3</sup> Adam Becket, "Home Office Uses Bad Bible Study to Reject Asylum Claims," *Church Times*, 22 March 2019, <https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2019/22-march/news/uk/home-office-uses-bad-bible-study-to-reject-asylum-claim>.

<sup>4</sup> Rebecca Paveley, "Home Office Asks Clergy for Asylum Help," *Church Times*, 17 May 2019, <https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2019/17-may/news/uk/home-office-asks-clergy-for-asylum-help#.XN-L5GmCrBU.twitter>.

<sup>5</sup> Paveley, "Home Office Asks Clergy for Asylum Help."

misinformation, commentators on both incidents depicted religious literacy as a potential remedy. Religious literacy, as these examples suggest, has become a widely invoked concept in contemporary scholarship, policy, popular discourse, and beyond. Within the past two decades, especially, the concept has gained currency in discussions about religions. A trans-Atlantic, Anglophone conversation has emerged as U.S. and U.K. educators, academics, and policymakers have called for increased engagement with, and public understanding of, religion and religions. Since the 1990s, but much more actively since 9/11, arguments in favor of training citizens to “get” religion and to understand why it matters “on the ground” have proliferated. Although the term itself remains multifaceted and contested, often self-consciously by those who invoke the concept, a debate around religious literacy has demonstrated an overarching concern with understanding and engaging with religions in areas of civil society such as state-funded schools, workplaces, government, and media. In response to this identified need, proponents of religious literacy and their affiliated research centers have generated scholarship and proposals for teaching about religions within liberal democracies. Often advancing one or more of the agendas of equity, social cohesion, active citizenship, and democratic self-awareness, religious literacy, as a growing discourse, often emerges as a toolkit and template for addressing timely issues within religiously pluralist settings.

At the heart of many of these calls to action is the notion that there is a growing need for training in understanding religions to help navigate an increasingly interconnected global world. Speaking “religiously,” understanding religious motivations and justifications, and

knowing how to comport ourselves around religious “others,” has become, in this framing, a lost art in our ostensibly secular age. In this way, advocates for religious literacy call upon theories of secularism and notions of secularity, often explicitly citing the idea that the need for religious literacy results from our so-called secular society’s lost ability to interact with religious populations and to identify religious tropes. Religious literacy invokes the debate around religion’s place within the liberal-democratic public sphere and points to tensions underlying the category of the “secular.” It also, as a result, provides an access point into these debates and a timely “problem space”<sup>6</sup> for examining theorizations of the “secular” in policy and practice.

Often, leading academic advocates for religious literacy frame the discourse in terms of navigating a religiously plural public sphere: one that has failed to make room for religions, against the assumed backdrop of secularism. Pushing back against the notion that religious reasons should necessarily be subordinated to secular reasons and advocating that religious perspectives be taught alongside secular ones, certain proponents of religious literacy have advanced a civic argument in favor of teaching about religion. Aiming to construct a response to the disappearance of religion from the U.S. public school curricula, for example, Warren Nord and Charles Haynes confront what they term the “secularization” of state-funded education.<sup>7</sup> Following Nord and

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<sup>6</sup> See: Hussein Ali Agrama, *Questioning Secularism: Islam, Sovereignty, and the Rule of Law in Modern Egypt* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 28. Agrama uses the formulation of “problem space” to refer to secularism, noting that a “problem space” denotes seeing the object of study “in terms of the ensemble of questions, stakes, and range of answers that have historically characterized it.”

<sup>7</sup> Warren A. Nord, and Charles Haynes, *Taking Religion Seriously Across the Curriculum* (Alexandria, Virginia: Association for Supervision & Curriculum Development (ASCD), 1998), 7.

Haynes, Stephen Prothero, more recently, has characterized religious literacy's aim as forming "citizens who know enough about Christianity and the world's religions to participate meaningfully...in religiously inflected public debates."<sup>8</sup> Further, in advocating for a cultural studies approach, Diane Moore also advances a civic agenda, asserting that religious literacy's goal is, explicitly, to "enhance democratic discourse."<sup>9</sup> Within the U.K. context, Adam Dinham and Matthew Francis have recently suggested that religious literacy plays a role in challenging the very normativity of "secular assumptions" within civil society.<sup>10</sup> Taken together, despite their varying approaches to the problem of religious literacy, these proposals demonstrate a preference for cultivating the tools of reasoned, democratic discourse.

These responses, frequently advanced as public reasons and justifications for increasing knowledge and skills about religions, suggest a wider story about the ways in which religious literacy gets deployed in policy, practice, and public discourse. This project examines the strategies of calling upon applied religious studies—in the form of the emergent discourse around religious literacy—to help solve social ills. Specifically, I ask how religious literacy, as an organizing framework for understanding religions, functions in public policy production. In other words, what types of understanding of religions and

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<sup>8</sup> Stephen Prothero, *Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know—And Doesn't* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2007), 22.

<sup>9</sup> Diane L. Moore, *Overcoming Religious Illiteracy: A Cultural Studies Approach to the Study of Religion in Secondary Education*, (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007), 28.

<sup>10</sup> Adam Dinham and Matthew Francis, *Religious Literacy in Policy and Practice* (Bristol: Policy Press, 2015), 258.

the secular does the current conversation configure? What, perhaps more importantly, does the current instantiation of the discourse overlook?

Religious literacy often comes across in popular discourse as either an unqualified social good—needed for enhanced social cohesion or civic engagement—or, in contrast, as advancing an insidious religiously motivated agenda within nominally secular quarters.<sup>11</sup> Rather than falling into either of these camps, this thesis, instead, focuses on what the current policy conversation assumes and on what such assumptions suggest about implementing religious literacy programs in the years ahead. Through such an analysis, this thesis critiques the terms of engagement of the current debate and proposes a possible path forward.

Tellingly, “literacy” within the formulation of religious literacy already suggests the discourse’s emphases. Although proponents and detractors alike have at times called attention to the potential deficiencies of the term “religious literacy,”<sup>12</sup> the phrase has gained, rather than lost, momentum in popular discourse and beyond. It therefore merits closer consideration, since it appears to be here to stay, at least for the time being. Literacy itself implies an emphasis on textuality, a focus on the cognitive, intellectualized, and content-based aspects of the object(s) of study. Just as a literate person possesses the

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<sup>11</sup> See Chapter 1 for a discussion of the views of both proponents and critics of religious literacy.

<sup>12</sup> See, for example: Adam Dinham and Matthew Francis, “Religious Literacies: The Future,” in *Religious Literacy in Policy and Practice*, eds. Adam Dinham and Matthew Francis (Bristol: Policy Press, 2015), 257. In the conclusion to their edited volume, Dinham and Francis suggest that religious literacy should “be understood as a stretchy, fluid concept which is variously configured and applied in terms of the context in which it happens.”

ability to read and write, a religiously literate person, by implication, has the facility needed to engage with religions. Often linked with numeracy—a command of basic numerical concepts—literacy implies proficiency in a set of fundamental skills. As such, the literacy piece of religious literacy also suggests a learning competency, a skill to be mastered. Without such skills and basic knowledge, learners would be ill-equipped to make sense of the world.

Relatedly, a central claim of religious literacy is that it advances a nonsectarian, and, by extension, potentially nonpartisan, set of tools for understanding religions within pluralist democratic contexts such as the U.S. and the U.K. As a result of such a positioning, proponents tend, this thesis argues, to overemphasize the role of “literacy” within religious literacy, privileging the cognitive, textual, rational, and apparently democratically compatible aspects of religions, religious perspectives, and religious communities. Religious literacy, with its inherent emphasis on “literacy” and all that such a term implies, has the capacity to set us on an all-too-narrow path from the start by advancing intellectualized and “linguisticized” conceptions of religions, thereby potentially marginalizing affective and embodied possibilities.

To challenge such presumptions, the thesis examines the discourse on religious literacy, using the tools of critical secularism studies to expose some of the liberal assumptions underlying the conversation, such as an overemphasis on textuality, rationality, and autonomy. In so doing, it aims to demonstrate, through a close examination of current

proposals, that religious literacy faces inbuilt obstacles by setting out a template of acceptable dispositions, attitudes, and orientations about, and towards, religions in ways that often go unacknowledged. The thesis does not aim to question the value of setting up religious literacy as a democracy-building project.<sup>13</sup> Rather, it calls attention to the intellectual consequences of such a maneuver. Following this line of argument, this thesis suggests that such emphases risk shaping religious possibilities, in accordance with liberal precepts of reason and language. My thesis, in response, proposes a new perspective on religious literacy—and the wider discourse surrounding it—that takes into account the affective and embodied dimensions of religions and the “secular.”

Today, rather than receding from view, religious literacy has gained momentum and traction within a variety of contexts. The notion of religious literacy appears frequently in academic articles and has even made significant inroads into the American Academy of Religion (AAR), a leading membership organization for the academic study of religions.<sup>14</sup> It also appears regularly in policy circles, ranging from the U.K. All-Party Parliamentary Group on Religious Education<sup>15</sup> to U.S. Department of State working

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<sup>13</sup> There exists an extensive body of scholarship assessing both the advantages and disadvantages of turning religions into hosts for democratic values. However, this discussion is beyond the scope of this thesis. Rather than assess the merits or demerits of advancing a democracy-building project, this thesis instead examines the ramifications and assumptions built into such aims. See, for example: Robert A. Orsi, “Is the Study of Lived Religion Irrelevant to the World We Live in?,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, Vol. 42, No. 2 (June 2003): 169-174.

<sup>14</sup> Chapter 1 and Chapter 2 both include discussions of this trend within the American Academy of Religion (AAR).

<sup>15</sup> “Improving Religious Literacy: A Contribution to the Debate,” *All-Party Parliamentary Group on Religious Education*, July 2016, <https://www.fionabruce.org.uk/sites/www.fionabruce.org.uk/files/2018-02/All-Party%20Parliamentary%20Group%20on%20Religious%20Education%20-%20Improving%20Religious%20Literacy%20-%20A%20Contribution%20to%20the%20Debate.pdf>.

groups.<sup>16</sup> Above all, it has surged as a form of public scholarship, with advocates for religious literacy calling for increased public discussion of religion. As such, if the project of religious literacy is here to stay, then we need to acknowledge blind spots and take them into account. Otherwise, we risk reproducing existent challenges.

## 0.1 Original Contribution

To date, there have been no full-length studies connecting religious literacy to current understanding of secularity and the “secular” as epistemic categories.<sup>17</sup> Much of the discussion around religious literacy has focused on how to generate more of it. In other words, the conversation and the resulting research have centered on how to cultivate increased levels of religious literacy. This thesis, instead, proposes that attending to the interconnections between religious literacy and secularity, points to new ways into the debate that account for affective, embodied possibilities.

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<sup>16</sup> For examples of religious literacy’s inroads into foreign policy and diplomacy, see: Shaun Casey, “Government Innovation in an Era of White Nationalism,” *Harvard Divinity Bulletin*, Spring/Summer 2018, <https://bulletin.hds.harvard.edu/government-innovation-in-an-era-of-white-nationalism/>; and Claire Sneed, “Elevating the Value of Religious Literacy in U.S. Diplomacy,” *DIPNOTE U.S. Department of State Official Blog*, 2 November 2016, <http://2007-2017-blogs.state.gov/stories/2016/11/02/elevating-value-religious-literacy-us-diplomacy.html>.

<sup>17</sup> For an article-length example, see: Jonathan S. Kahn, “Secularism and Religion in American Education,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and American Education*, ed. Michael Waggoner (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018). In his essay examining secular education within U.S. contexts, Kahn connects religious studies education to the conception of the “secular” as a critical category. Although Kahn ultimately situates his own project, and resulting recommendations, within a wider project of democracy-building, he draws on commentary from critical theorists such as Asad and Mahmood to caution against upholding “secular myths.”

In terms of the broader implications of this study, in addition to providing an original evaluation of current proposals and a critique of religious literacy as a concept through the lens of critical secularism studies, my thesis, in line with recent attempts to “disaggregate” and “de-parochialize” liberalism,<sup>18</sup> contributes to an understanding of the ways in which conceptions of religions continue to be transformed in liberal-democratic contexts. The project, therefore, not only offers a critique of current religious literacy proposals, but also provides a space to examine the implications for treatments of religions in settings where liberal-democratic subjectivity is the dominant discourse. In this way, this thesis aims to contribute in two related ways: first, it proposes to “materialize” religious literacy by paying attention to embodiment and affect, and, second, it also situates itself within the wider, and emergent, critical scholarship on “cultures of liberal democracy and ‘modernity.’”<sup>19</sup> Religious literacy as a case study, this thesis suggests, provides an illustrative look into the ways “we inhabit the secular,” and, perhaps more significantly, the ways “secularity inhabits us.”<sup>20</sup>

## 0.2 Theoretical Frameworks

The concept of religious literacy offers a timely case study for examining present possibilities. Religious literacy, this thesis contends, tells us as much about current

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<sup>18</sup> Cécile Laborde, *Liberalism's Religion* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2017), 3.

<sup>19</sup> Monique Scheer, Nadia Fadil, and Birgitte Schlepelern Johansen, “Secular Embodiments: Mapping an Emerging Field,” in *Secular Bodies, Affects and Emotions: European Configurations*, eds. Monique Scheer, Nadia Fadil, and Birgitte Schlepelern Johansen (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019), 14.

<sup>20</sup> Scheer, Fadil, and Johansen, “Secular Embodiments: Mapping an Emerging Field,” in *Secular Bodies, Affects and Emotions*, 14.

understandings of religions as it does about the varying ways in which we inhabit the secular. To address such considerations, the analysis of this thesis relies, in large part, on the theoretical framings of the emerging field of critical secularism studies.

As a starting point, the classic secularization narrative of the twentieth century predicted religion's inevitable decline. In this model, modernization would, inevitably and proportionally, bring about secularization. Assuming that in the coming years secularization would unfold as a process—bringing with it decline of religious affiliation and authority, differentiation in the form of separation of religion from government, and privatization of religious expression<sup>21</sup>—this influential theory, or perhaps better yet, interrelated theories, informed scholarship and policy within the academy and beyond.

Within the past decades, however, a narrative of religion's resurgence and the “desecularization of the world” have called into question religion's presumed decline.<sup>22</sup> Addressing such challenges to the classic secularization thesis, scholars such as Charles Taylor,<sup>23</sup> Talal Asad,<sup>24</sup> and William Connolly,<sup>25</sup> to name only a few, have formulated

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<sup>21</sup> Noteworthy interventions include, but are in no way limited to: Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (Garden City: Anchor Books, 1969); Bryan Wilson, *Religion in Secular Society: A Sociological Comment* (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1966); Steve Bruce, *Secularization: in Defence of an Unfashionable Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

<sup>22</sup> *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics*, ed. Peter L. Berger (Washington, D.C.: Ethics and Public Policy Center, 1999).

<sup>23</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007).

<sup>24</sup> Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003).

<sup>25</sup> William E. Connolly, *Why I Am Not a Secularist* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).

arguments and frameworks with which to evaluate our present historical moment.<sup>26</sup> This varied, and often multidisciplinary, literature calls into question many of the previously-held assumptions about state and status of religions, against a backdrop of presumed decline.

Theoretical interventions into critical secularism studies have taken several trajectories. First, such theories often focus on secularism, understood as “normative-ideological state projects” or as “an epistemic knowledge regime that may be held unreflexively or phenomenologically as the taken-for-granted normal structure of modern reality.”<sup>27</sup> Scholarship into the concept of secularism has, increasingly, acknowledged the multiplicity of perspectives and practices encompassed in a single, and singular, term. In response, theorists such as Janet Jakobsen and Ann Pellegrini have offered a corrective in the form of pluralizing the term. They suggest that thinking of the present in terms of “secularisms,”<sup>28</sup> each with geographically and historically contingent trajectories, offers

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<sup>26</sup> Academic conversations have also considered the use of the term “post-secular” to describe the present situation. Gorski et al., for example, note that the term itself implies “that we have left the secular behind,” and cautions that “[a]mid the proliferation of ‘post-’ terms in recent academic discourse, it is important to consider whether the concept of the post-secular refers to an actual shift in the social world, or whether its growing deployments result, instead, from a zealous need to detect epochal turning points in every minor twist of the historical road.” See: Gorski et al., *The Post-secular in Question: Religion and Contemporary Society* (New York: New York University Press, 2012), 1. Further, Beckford, enumerates at least six different and “partly incompatible” uses of the term “post-secular” in contemporary academic discourse, which points to the challenges of disambiguating the term’s varying applications. See: James A. Beckford, “Public Religions and the Postsecular: Critical Reflections,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, Vol. 51, No. 1 (2012): 16. As a result of such considerations, in line with much of the scholarship of critical secularism studies, I have opted in this thesis to use the term “secular,” rather than the “post-secular.”

<sup>27</sup> José Casanova, “The Secular, Secularizations, Secularisms,” in *Rethinking Secularism*, eds. Craig Calhoun, Mark Juergensmeyer, and Jonathan VanAntwerpen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, USA, 2011), 55.

<sup>28</sup> Janet R. Jakobsen and Ann Pellegrini, “Introduction,” in *Secularisms*, eds. Janet R. Jakobsen and Ann Pellegrini (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 13.

a more accurate depiction of the present. This reframing, in turn, “challenges the dominant narrative of secular universalism,” predicated on entwined Western and Christian genealogies.<sup>29</sup> If context-dependent secularisms arise in response to particular places, politics, and periods, then it follows that such secularisms themselves reflect equally specific constructs, configurations, and orientations. Such a perspective pushes back productively against what Taylor refers to as “subtraction stories,” the misapprehension that removing religion yields a blank slate, with the secular constituting an assumed neutral absence.<sup>30</sup> This understanding “reflects a wider tendency to see religion as a presence and secularism as an absence.”<sup>31</sup> However, what if secularism itself constitutes a presence? This reconceptualization of the secular has opened the door to new scholarship.

What, then, might the “secular” look and feel like? How, in other words, is it lived, embodied, and enacted? In response, as scholars such as Lois Lee have argued, the secular comes with its own set of problematics and possibilities. In Lee’s understanding, following Taylor, the “insubstantial secular” misleads by suggesting that “the secular is the ‘everything but’ that surrounds and interacts with religion.”<sup>32</sup> Rather, Lee advocates for analysis, in her case, empirical study, of the “substantial secular,” an underexplored concept that comes with its own positive life stances, norms, values, and social

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<sup>29</sup> Jakobsen and Pellegrini, “Introduction,” in *Secularisms*, 13.

<sup>30</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 22.

<sup>31</sup> Craig Calhoun, “Secularism, Citizenship, and the Public Sphere,” *Hedgehog Review*, Vol. 10, No. 3. (2008): 7-21.

<sup>32</sup> Lois Lee, *Recognizing the Non-Religious: Reimagining the Secular* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 51.

configurations.<sup>33</sup> These recent attempts to map the contours of the secular have yielded a new body of empirical research into ways of being “secular,” understood often in terms of the developing vocabulary of “nonreligion.”<sup>34</sup> Attending to the ways in which the religion and the secular are “co-constituted,” such scholarship, moreover, urges for critical reflection on the “secular-religious binary,” which carries with it the capacity to overlook the myriad ways people “decide what matters, what goals to pursue, and what things are of value” in a manner that defies a simple binary categorization.<sup>35</sup>

To address such considerations, the more recent path critical secularism studies has taken moves from a study of secularization as a process or of secularism as political practice to a study of the “secular.”<sup>36</sup> This condition of secularity, of being “secular,” constitutes an emergent area of study. Following Talal Asad, who called for theorists to disentangle “‘secularism’ as political doctrine” from “‘the secular’ as an epistemic category,”<sup>37</sup> recent scholarship, rather than focusing on political configurations, instead, pays attention to “concepts, norms, sensibilities, and dispositions that characterize secular societies and subjectivities.”<sup>38</sup> Such a move responds to Asad’s call to create an “anthropology of the

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<sup>33</sup> Lee, *Recognizing the Non-Religious*, 50-51.

<sup>34</sup> For examples of primarily social science approaches to “nonreligious” and “secular” formations, see: Joseph Blankholm, “The Political Advantages of the Polysemous Secular,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, Vol. 53, No. 4 (2014): 775-790; Stephen Bullivant, “Introducing Irreligious Experiences,” *Implicit Religion*, Vol. 11, No. 1 (2008): 7-24; and “Home,” *The Nonreligion and Secularity Research Network (NSRN)*, <https://nonreligionandsecularity.wordpress.com>.

<sup>35</sup> Courtney Bender and Ann Taves, “Introduction,” in *What Matters?: Ethnographies of Value in a Not so Secular Age*, ed. Courtney Bender and Ann Taves (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 1-3.

<sup>36</sup> Scheer, Fadil, and Johansen, “Secular Embodiments: Mapping an Emerging Field,” in *Secular bodies, Affects and Emotions*, 10.

<sup>37</sup> Asad, *Formations of the Secular*, 1.

<sup>38</sup> Saba Mahmood, *Religious Difference in a Secular Age: A Minority Report* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 3.

secular,"<sup>39</sup> which attends to the possibility of a "secular body" "related to liberalism and modernity."<sup>40</sup> This linking of the secular to particular embodied attitudes, orientations, and feelings opens up rich avenues for further study.

Taking up this challenge, in his essay of the same title, Charles Hirschkind poses the following, framing question: "Is there a secular body?"<sup>41</sup> More specifically, he asks, "is there a particular configuration of the human sensorium—of sensibilities, affects, embodied dispositions—specific to secular subjects, and thus constitutive of what we mean by 'secular society'?"<sup>42</sup> Even though Hirschkind himself does not go on to propose any systematic answer to his own question, his connection of the "secular" with the notion of a body calls for scholarship to "rethink our models of embodiment, habitus, [and] sensibility"<sup>43</sup> in accordance with present conditions and realities. Hirschkind questions, fundamentally, whether there are specifically, characteristically identifiable ways of being secular in the world. How do you know whether someone is secular? Is it about attitudes, habits, experiences, or something else entirely? A reframing of this kind invites new modes of scholarship with which to consider emerging configurations of secular subjectivities and sensibilities.

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<sup>39</sup> Asad, *Formations of the Secular*, 21-66.

<sup>40</sup> Talal Asad, "Thinking about the Secular Body, Pain, and Liberal Politics," *Cultural Anthropology*, Vol. 26, No. 4 (October 2011): 658.

<sup>41</sup> Charles Hirschkind, "Is There a Secular Body?," *Cultural Anthropology*, Vol. 26, No. 4 (October 2011): 633.

<sup>42</sup> Hirschkind, "Is There a Secular Body?," 633.

<sup>43</sup> Hirschkind, "Is There a Secular Body?," 634.

This “embodiment turn” in studies of the “secular” propels the theoretical conversation and shifts the lens of analysis from the procedural and programmatic to the lived and embodied. Paving the way for this development, some years ago, religious studies underwent an “affective turn,” which “asks *what bodies do*—what they want, where they go, what they think, how they decide—and especially how bodies are impelled by forces other than language and reason.”<sup>44</sup> Critical theorists, in particular, have called to “re-materialize” religious studies, in such a way as to call into question the legacy of the Enlightenment purported binary between cognitive understanding and embodied approaches.<sup>45</sup> However, only recently have studies of the “secular” begun taking into account “embodied, affective components, or lived attachments,” considering, in particular, the notion of secularity “as something that is practiced, felt and experienced.”<sup>46</sup>

This emergent area of scholarship calls for new perspectives, approaches, and case studies. In particular, such theorizations of the secular seek to demonstrate “how the secular structures not only institutions but subjectivities, how it is made not only plausible but indeed appears to be the natural state of affairs in modern societies, something that can only happen through materialization.”<sup>47</sup> In response, this thesis uses the example of

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<sup>44</sup> Donovan O. Schaefer, *The Evolution of Affect: Humanities, the Sciences, and the Study of Power* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 1. Emphasis original.

<sup>45</sup> For discussions of the “materialist shift” in religious studies, see: Manuel A. Vázquez, *More Than Belief: A Materialist Theory of Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); and Donovan O. Schaefer, *Religious Affects: Animality, Evolution, and Power* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015).

<sup>46</sup> Scheer, Fadil, and Johansen, “Secular Embodiments: Mapping an Emerging Field,” in *Secular Bodies, Affects and Emotions*, 1.

<sup>47</sup> Scheer, Fadil, and Johansen, “Secular Embodiments: Mapping an Emerging Field,” in *Secular Bodies, Affects and Emotions*, 14.

religious literacy as a test case with which to examine the interdependent, bidirectional flow between institutions and subjectivities in our questionably secular age. In so doing, this thesis reformulates Hirschkind's motivating question by asking, is there a secular student body? In other words, in what ways are the subjectivities, secular or otherwise, of the intended learners of religious literacy—whether they be primary or secondary school pupils, private-sector workers, diplomats, media professionals, etc.—configuring religious literacy as a discourse, and what religious possibilities do such configurations afford and enable?

Most studies of the secular have focused on secularism as a political, institutional form, and only recently has critical scholarship broadened its focus to include embodied subjectivities and sensibilities. Although policy work has concentrated primarily on the former understanding of secular configurations, this thesis locates itself intentionally within the latter category, thinking about secular ways of being, embodied practices, and attachments. Although the thesis, by necessity, engages with secularism as enacted in policies, this project situates itself within the very recent turn in scholarship of the “secular” that focuses on affects, emotions, and embodiment in order to provide a new way to see an ongoing policy discourse, expose some of its blind spots, and, ideally, begin pointing to new ways of reconfiguring the discussion around religious literacy that attend to the “secular” and the affective.

By necessity, this project engages with secularism as an organizing principle and policy towards religions, dealing specifically, although in a circumscribed way with U.S. First Amendment concerns and U.K. equality legislation, for example. Such considerations are inescapable and help frame our situated, geographically and historically contingent understandings of the “secular.” This thesis, however, draws upon those conversations, but also looks beyond such considerations to think through secular formations and what those configurations might suggest for the ongoing religious literacy debate.

Moreover, such theorizations point to the ways in which the “secular” gets enacted in policy, practice, and beyond. In this way, this thesis situates itself within a wider theoretical conversation that aims to call into question some of liberalism’s guiding assumptions.<sup>48</sup> In line with such critical scholarship, this thesis does not intend to critique liberal democracy’s aims, but rather to point to areas in need of further consideration. As such, this thesis invites theoretical reflections into “materializing” liberalism, or better yet, acknowledging its embodied and affective possibilities, to push past some of the impasses of the present. Religious literacy, as a case study, facilitates such explorations.

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<sup>48</sup> When considering liberalism’s Enlightenment legacy, it remains challenging to avoid constructing a strawman conception of the Enlightenment, predicated on a strict elevation of cognition (or *cogito*) and rationality to the exclusion of embodied, affective currents. Recent scholarly interventions, in particular, have urged for caution on this front, especially with regard to *ratio*-centric depictions of Enlightenment thought. See, for example Marek Sullivan, *Secular Assemblages: Affect, Orientalism and Power in the French Enlightenment* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020). Sullivan, through a critical reading of Taylor’s *A Secular Age* and French Enlightenment texts, urges for a reconsideration of the Enlightenment’s legacy and values, pointing to materialist, affective, and embodied possibilities within that body of literature.

### 0.3 Scope

In conducting this research, I focused on English-language conversations, examining examples primarily from the U.S. and, to a lesser extent, from the U.K. Although religious literacy as a discourse has begun to reach many contexts and geographies, this project concentrates on English-language contributions, for a variety of practical reasons. These considerations include, but are not limited to, the reality that much of the literature around religious literacy exists in North American and U.K. contexts (i.e., English-language contexts) and the example that differing juridical frameworks provide for examining the wider discussion around religious literacy. Where relevant, this thesis draws from supranational, often continental European, documents because such policy interventions have informed the educational conversation on religious literacy in the U.S. and U.K. contexts and beyond.<sup>49</sup>

The bulk of the scholarship and case studies of this thesis come from the U.S. The simple explanation for this choice of weighting of materials is that, at present, much of the conversation around religious literacy, although increasingly international in scope, takes place in the U.S. Concerns surrounding teaching about religion in the U.S. have produced vast amounts of scholarship. In particular, public (i.e., state-funded) education has a long, and contentious history, as a site of disestablishment concerns,

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<sup>49</sup> See, for example, "Toledo Guiding Principles on Teaching About Religions and Beliefs in Public Schools," *Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe* (27 November 2007); and Robert Jackson, "Signposts—Policy and Practice for Teaching about Religions and Non-religious World Views in Intercultural Education" (Strasbourg: Council of Europe Publishing, 2014).

considerations, and controversies. First Amendment considerations prevent Constitutionally impermissible confessional or devotional religious studies in public schools. However, the debate surrounding religions' inclusion, or exclusion, from the curricula remains ongoing and, on occasion, hotly contested.

Looking to the past, from colonial times onward, common schools, proto-public schools, included Christian confessional education as part of school lessons, primarily in the form of Bible lessons. Christianity remained, for many—well into the twentieth century and beyond—a guarantor of moral good and, therefore, a necessary component of public education. Although the “religious content of public school teaching decreased dramatically” over the course of the nineteenth century, “[d]evotional practices continued in many schools” in ways that remained unremarked.<sup>50</sup> As such, until the mid-twentieth century, the Supreme Court of the United States had little involvement in matters of religion and public education.<sup>51</sup> The states were free to do as their legislatures saw fit, inhibiting or promoting religion on an *ad hoc* basis.

This inconsistent treatment of religion among the states came to a halt with the decisive Supreme Court rulings of the mid-twentieth century. Beginning in the 1920s and culminating in the Court decisions of the 1960s, the issue of religion's proper place in public schools came to the national stage. As the federal government expanded public

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<sup>50</sup> Kent Greenawalt, *Does God Belong in Public Schools?* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 16.

<sup>51</sup> Greenawalt, *Does God Belong in Public Schools?*, 17.

school funding, the national government began to exert greater influence over local decisions.<sup>52</sup> As a result, uniform treatment of religion in public schools became a priority.

The Supreme Court's ruling in the 1963 case *Abington Township v. Schempp* marked a significant change in the role that the Bible would play in American public education. The opinion set down in *Schempp* declared devotional Bible readings, often performed perfunctorily as part of mandatory morning assemblies, to be unconstitutional.<sup>53</sup> In the Court's ruling, state-supported devotional Bible reading constituted the impermissible government endorsement of religion, a violation of the Establishment Clause.<sup>54</sup> By ruling against the Constitutional permissibility of school-sponsored devotional Bible reading, the Court disallowed "a characteristic feature of public school education from its inception."<sup>55</sup> The Court's ruling in *Schempp* put an end, at least ostensibly, to the devotional use of the Bible in the nation's public education settings.

The *Schempp* ruling, however, did not seek to eliminate the Bible from America's classrooms. Although the Court banned devotional Bible readings as part of a program of public education, it left room for religion's inclusion in the curricula. In response, within the past few decades, religious literacy has entered the conversation as a means by which to present ideas about religion into the public-school curricula in

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<sup>52</sup> James W. Fraser, *Between Church and State: Religion and Public Education in a Multicultural America* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999), 128.

<sup>53</sup> Greenawalt, *Does God Belong in Public Schools?*, 19.

<sup>54</sup> Greenawalt, *Does God Belong in Public Schools?*, 38-39.

<sup>55</sup> Greenawalt, *Does God Belong in Public Schools?*, 19.

Constitutionally permissible ways. This positioning has attempted to reframe the discussion around the often-contested issue of including teaching about religion in public schools.

Crossing the Atlantic, the U.K.'s religious education landscape offers a decidedly different picture—demographically, socially, and juridically. In contrast to the U.S.'s model of disestablishment, the U.K.'s established Anglican Church of England factors into the calculus in discernible ways. Religious education classes, known as RE, have been a fixture of state-funded education settings across the U.K. Unlike the U.S., the U.K., in contrast, calls explicitly for religious education in schools and RE is a compulsory component of syllabi. Determined at the local level by Standing Advisory Councils for RE (SACREs), RE syllabi are the products of local stakeholders, who must work together to create what is known as a Locally Agreed Syllabus.<sup>56</sup> Since syllabi are determined at the local level, their contents vary considerably, depending on the context, demography, and composition of the local SACRE.

In the past, RE classes for primary and secondary school students were largely confessional and devotional, helping with Anglican faith formation. Faith schools, which more recently began offering varying religious affiliations—ranging from Muslim to Jewish, for example—have aimed to instill the teachings of their nominal associations.

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<sup>56</sup> Mark Plater, "What is Religious Education For? Exploring SACRE Member Views," *Religion & Education*, Vol. 47, No. 1 (September 2019): 3.

Now, however, although faith schools still exist and confessional RE remains in place in certain contexts, schools have increasingly sought alternatives. From the post-war period onward, particularly within the late 1960s, RE took a phenomenologically-inspired turn towards a more expansive world religions model advanced by Ninian Smart.<sup>57</sup> Especially since the Education Reform Act of 1988, RE curricula have increasingly moved towards non-denominationalist programs so as “not to teach the subject from any particular religious emphasis.”<sup>58</sup> In very recent years, religious literacy has stepped onto the scene as a possible re-branding strategy for RE. Increasingly entangled with concerns surrounding citizenship education in the form of so-called British values<sup>59</sup> and the growing, and widely contested, securitization and surveillance agenda,<sup>60</sup> RE appears to have reached a pivotal moment in deciding and advancing a particular set of learning objectives. Although such considerations remain largely outside the scope of this project (arguably, the question of the securitization agenda would take up a full-length work of its own and several U.K. academics have already made key interventions into this topic), themes of social cohesion loom large.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Clive A. Lawton, “Time to Abandon Religious Education: Ditching an Out-of-Date Solution to an Out-of-Date Problem,” in *We Need to Talk about RE: Manifestos for the Future of Religious Education*, ed. Mike Castelli (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2018), 23-24.

<sup>58</sup> Plater, “What is Religious Education For?,” 4.

<sup>59</sup> The promotion of “British Values” as a policy objective has faced widespread criticism, including from those who view its agenda as inciting fears about a racialized, Muslim “other.” See: Claire E. Crawford, “Promoting ‘Fundamental British Values’ in Schools: A Critical Race Perspective,” *Curriculum Perspectives*, Vol. 37, No. 2 (2017): 197-204.

<sup>60</sup> See: Farid Panjwani et al., *Education and Extremisms: Rethinking Liberal Pedagogies in the Contemporary World* (London: Routledge, 2017).

<sup>61</sup> See: Panjwani et al., *Education and Extremisms*.

From the U.S. to the U.K., this project dedicates ample space to examining religious literacy's application in state-funded school settings. However, this thesis has a broader aim: to analyze the discourse around religious literacy. For that reason, even though the bulk of the case study materials relies on religious literacy recommendations for schools, this project also considers examples from workplaces, higher education, the media, and diplomacy, among others.

#### **0.4** Methodology

In recent years, scholars and practitioners have advanced multiple visions of religious literacy and empirical studies within classroom settings. Rather than offering another intervention to add to this mix, this thesis zooms out to consider the theoretical underpinning of the project of religious literacy and its enactment in education, policy, workplaces, and a variety of other contexts. In so doing, it considers the wider implications of various approaches to religious literacy.

Although this project engages with themes of education and policy, it does so explicitly through the lens of religious studies. Arguably, this project might have taken as a starting point a social scientific, legal, or comparative education studies approach to the questions at hand. Some theorists are beginning to make relevant interventions into religious literacy following empirical methodologies, assessing, for example, which

classroom practices are most effective for cultivating religious literacy.<sup>62</sup> However, at its core, this project aims to provide an analysis of the current educational and policy debate from the perspective of the study of religions. Much academic debate surrounds the study of religions, including the extent to which it should be viewed as a discipline, or rather as multiple fields of study that share similar concepts and objects of analysis. Although religious studies itself remains multi-modal in its methodologies and frequently in flux, this project situates itself within this area because it focuses, fundamentally, on current understandings of “religions,” through the example of the religious literacy debate. Such a humanities positioning allows the thesis to follow a discourse analysis approach and to focus on the wider policy conversation. Moreover, situating the project within the study of religions permits the thesis to engage with religious literacy as a form of public scholarship, and, perhaps, more importantly, with its explicit positioning as an applied religious studies project.<sup>63</sup>

My method employs text-based discourse analysis to put proponents of religious literacy in conversation with theorists of critical secularism studies in order to critique existing assumptions within the ongoing educational and policy conversation. In particular, I examine religious literacy proposals, civil society organizations and government reports,

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<sup>62</sup> See, for example: W.Y. Alice Chan et al., “Recognition of Context and Experience: A Civic-Based Canadian Conception of Religious Literacy,” *Journal of Beliefs & Values* (March 2019); and Kate Soules, *Beyond Religious Literacy for Educators: Advancing a Model of Pedagogical Content Knowledge about Religion*, 2019 (Manuscript in preparation).

<sup>63</sup> As an example, the American Academy of Religion (AAR) has advanced religious literacy across its professional network, connecting religious literacy to an applied religious studies agenda. See Chapter 2 for a fuller discussion of religious literacy’s positioning as public scholarship.

religious literacy materials found on research institute websites, and academic articles and blog posts on the subject. Taken together, such materials show the ways in which religious literacy, as an admittedly multifaceted discourse, advances particular construals of religions, predicated on rationality, textuality, and autonomy.

On the whole, however, despite the critique this thesis advances, this project aims to be reparative, rather than adversarial, in its emphases and recommendations. The project, instead, presents a note of caution about the ways in which religious literacy gets deployed in educational and policy contexts. Viewing religious literacy within the context of the theoretical interventions of the affect turn within critical secularism studies opens up new ways of bringing in the often-overlooked areas of embodied experience and emotional attachments currently missing from the discussion. In so doing, this project aims to present a new way of looking at religious literacy that takes the conversation, now blinkered by a focus on democracy-building and rationality, into the often-avoided territory of bodies, emotions, feelings, and senses. Such a reorientation will, I hope, open up new avenues and possibilities for religious literacy in the present moment.

## **0.5 Chapter Summaries**

The argument unfolds in the following ways: After this introduction, Chapter 1 sets the stage for the later theoretical analysis by tracing the development of a trans-Atlantic, Anglophone conversation around the concept and application of religious literacy. It

introduces and analyzes varying theories of practice from the U.S. and the U.K, delineates the schools of thought within the growing debate, and examines what scholars and practitioners mean when they call for religious literacy. The chapter also assesses the advantages, disadvantages, and strategies behind each approach. Specifically, this chapter focuses on the works of U.S. proponents of religious literacy, including Warren Nord and Charles Haynes,<sup>64</sup> Stephen Prothero,<sup>65</sup> and Diane Moore,<sup>66</sup> as well as research outputs from institutes such as Harvard Divinity School's Religious Literacy Project<sup>67</sup> and the New York University (NYU) Office of Global Spiritual Life.<sup>68</sup> This chapter also introduces and analyzes U.K. perspectives on religious literacy, with a particular emphasis on the works of Adam Dinham and Matthew Francis,<sup>69</sup> the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Religious Education's report on religious literacy,<sup>70</sup> and the Commission on Religion and Belief in British Public Life.<sup>71</sup> Through an analysis of current theories of practice, along with some critical responses to such proposals, this chapter examines religious literacy's entanglements with the concept of the "secular" and what such tensions suggest about current secular formations.

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<sup>64</sup> See: Nord, and Haynes, *Taking Religion Seriously Across the Curriculum*.

<sup>65</sup> See: Prothero, *Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know—And Doesn't*.

<sup>66</sup> See: Moore, *Overcoming Religious Illiteracy*.

<sup>67</sup> "Religious Literacy Project," *Harvard Divinity School*, Accessed 2 February 2020, <https://rlp.hds.harvard.edu>.

<sup>68</sup> "Global Spiritual Life," *New York University*, Accessed 2 February 2020, <http://www.nyu.edu/students/communities-and-groups/student-diversity/spiritual-life.html>.

<sup>69</sup> Adam Dinham and Matthew Francis, *Religious Literacy in Policy and Practice* (Bristol: Policy Press, 2015).

<sup>70</sup> "Improving Religious Literacy: A Contribution to the Debate," *All-Party Parliamentary Group on Religious Education*, July 2016.

<sup>71</sup> Report of the Commission on Religion and Belief in British Public Life (CORAB): *Living with Difference: Community, Diversity and the Common Good*, The Woolf Institute, Cambridge, 7 December 2017, <https://www.woolf.cam.ac.uk/research/publications/reports/report-of-the-commission-on-religion-and-belief-in-british-public-life>.

Chapter 2 focuses on religious literacy as public scholarship, examining in particular thinking about religious literacy's engagement with current understandings of the so-called public sphere. Given its rapid ascent and prevalence within scholarly and popular discourse, religious literacy has become a powerful conceptual tool for organizing public understandings of religions. As a result, it remains critical to consider what such a policy conversation assumes and, more perhaps more significantly, what dynamics it configures and reinforces. Drawing on theoretical insights from Taylor's formulation of "Secularity 3" elaborated in *A Secular Age*<sup>72</sup>—the idea that the present is a time during which religious belief and identity constitutes one option among many—this chapter aims to explain recent arguments in favor of religious literacy. Through a close reading of religious literacy proposals and Taylor's conception of the "imminent frame," this chapter develops the contention that certain proponents of religious literacy advance a strategy of presenting religion, and religious perspectives, as well-suited to nominally secular contexts such as U.S. public schools by emphasizing the notion of student choice. Further, in critiquing religion's purported marginalization from public life, advocates of religious literacy aim to reclaim such a narrative from theocrats, and, in so doing, risk tacking too far in the opposite direction: framing religion in terms of voluntarism, individual discernment, and choice. Such emphases, this chapter argues, results from religious literacy's positioning as a tool of active citizenship and democratic self-awareness in ways that have the capacity to shape presentations of religions.

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<sup>72</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 2-4.

Following the previous chapter's discussion of religious literacy's democracy-building aims and its interconnections with the public sphere, Chapter 3 examines what gets left behind if the conversation fails to take into account the affective, emotional, and embodied dimensions of interactions. Specifically, Chapter 3 problematizes religious literacy's entanglements with the aims of liberal education, exposes its emphasis on textuality, and points to possible stumbling blocks within the pedagogical practices of religious literacy that result from such starting positions. The argument takes up three interrelated themes. First, it suggests that religious literacy's frequent usage as a tool of active citizenship and democratic self-awareness places a disproportionate emphasis on democratic deliberation and rationality. Second, the chapter proposes that such democracy-building goals have the capacity to lead to a sidelining of the affective and embodied aspects of studying religion and leads to a privileging of the textual and cognitive. Third, it connects such critiques to the implementation of religious literacy. Specifically, it draws on recent scholarship connecting embodiment and education to argue that an emphasis on cognitive learning masks a suspicion of, and entanglements with, the body in contemporary education policy. Classroom practices, I propose, need to begin making room for a critical reexamination that results from taking into account the idea that human bodies often "batter against the pedagogical body,"<sup>73</sup> in ways for which policymakers have not yet accounted. This chapter aims to use such critiques to

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<sup>73</sup> Elspeth Probyn, "Teaching Bodies: Affects in the Classroom," *Body & Society*, Vol. 10, No. 4 (2004): 32.

reconsider assumptions about the agential frame within the modern scene of education. It concludes that religious literacy must begin attending to the affective dimensions of understandings both of religions and of pedagogic practices or risk reproducing existing challenges.

Chapter 4 advances Chapter 3's critiques by connecting religious literacy to discussions of liberal tolerance and toleration. Increasingly, religious literacy has become tied to the theme of managing religious offense and promoting sociability. Arguing that calls for religious literacy have the capacity to advance a prosocial agenda, this chapter suggests that, in many instances, advocates of religious literacy aim to cultivate a habituated civility towards religions on the basis of fostering respectful communication about difference. Although religious literacy, as this thesis demonstrates, tends to emphasize the cognitive features of both religions and learning about religions, the illustrative examples under discussion show a project of cultivating particular attitudes and dispositions operative in religious literacy programs. As a result, proponents of religious literacy, who tend to frame their project in terms of the cognitive, rational, and, by extension, seemingly democratically compatible aspects and expressions of religion, are also engaging in affective work in ways that frequently go unexamined. By attending to the way in which certain proponents of religious literacy cite the need for civility and peaceful coexistence, this chapter argues that, in certain manifestations, religious literacy entails cultivating a particular attitude or disposition towards religion: one that would render recourse to legal mechanisms unnecessary. This chapter rounds out its analysis

through a critique of critical reconsiderations of tolerance in the form of “agonistic respect”<sup>74</sup> and “deep equality,”<sup>75</sup> pointing to the ways in which recent critiques of tolerance policies have the capacity to reproduce old challenges within new vocabularies.

Building on the discussion of the previous chapter, Chapter 5 focuses on workplace religious literacy case studies to examine the implications of using religious literacy to habituate and inculcate particular attitudes towards religion and religions. Focusing in particular on the tension between “education” and “literacy” within the religious literacy debate, this chapter shows the ways in which religious literacy, in certain manifestations, aims to cultivate embodied orientations and practices around engaging with religions in workplace contexts. Through a focus on contemporary case studies—Ernst & Young’s “Religious Literacy for Organisations” initiative and the Tanenbaum Center for Interreligious Understanding’s “Religion at Work” program—this chapter studies the use of religious literacy as part of corporate diversity and inclusion human resources strategies. Rather than focusing on the well-studied area of caselaw surrounding workplace religious accommodation, this chapter instead examines the implications of mobilizing religious literacy as social practice aimed at promoting good relations among employees, maximizing productivity through worker satisfaction, and thereby

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<sup>74</sup> William E. Connolly, *Identity, Difference: Democratic Negotiation of Political Paradox*, expanded edition (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), xxvi.

<sup>75</sup> Lori Beaman, *Deep Equality in an Era of Religious Diversity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 13.

minimizing the need for recourse to legal mechanisms to settle potential work-related disputes before they arise.

The definitional question looms large within discussions of religious literacy and its varied and varying applications in policy and practice. Chapter 6, in response, anchors the thesis in the study of religions by turning to the instability of the category of religion, especially within the context of an apparent rise in increasingly religiously unaffiliated populations on both sides of the Atlantic. In other words, for someone to become religiously literate—often the stated objective of religious literacy programs—there must be particular understandings of religion undergirding such calls to action. This chapter weaves together critical religion approaches with current discussions of nonreligion, critiquing essentializing and universalizing understandings of religions that sometimes appear in religious literacy proposals. Taking up, moreover, the recent resurgence of “worldviews” as an alternative organizing mechanism for religious studies teaching and religious education, this chapter identifies the inbuilt challenges that accompany moves to operationalize critical religion critiques in policy and the resulting efforts to innovate inclusionary vocabularies for educational purposes.

Finally, the thesis’s conclusion offers a brief summary, a series of reflections about the implications of the analysis, and a set of questions for further study related to the wider context of recent calls to revisit the World Religions Paradigm in light of scholarship from critical secularism studies.

## 0.6 Notes on Terminology

This thesis, as a result of the subject matter, ventures into the territory of capacious and contestable terms, such as “tolerance” and “liberalism,” not to mention the notoriously hazardous terrain of the category of “religion.” Wherever possible, this thesis attempts to unpack and historicize terminologies, without becoming weighed down by protracted definitional discussions. Chapter 4 discusses the related terms “tolerance” and “toleration,” within the context of an analysis of critical responses to tolerance policy and practice. Chapter 6 attends to the instability of the category of religion, thereby addressing some of the attendant issues accompanying the term’s applicability in policy, education, and practice.

Throughout the thesis, the term “liberalism” appears frequently. A full exploration of the term, and of its myriad applications in political theory and beyond, lies outside the scope of this project. However, for the purposes of this analysis, I employ “liberal” adjectivally to describe geographically Western democracies predicated on the ideals of liberty and equality of citizens, rather than to denote “liberal” in the sense of politically progressive or left-wing. Finally, I employ the term “public school” throughout the thesis in its American, rather than British, usage to denote state-funded schools.

# 1 Chapter One – Religious Literacy and Secular Entanglements

The themes of secularization, secularism, and the secular weave through much of the discussion around religious literacy. Religious literacy has, from its inception, demonstrated a concern with understanding and engaging with religion in nominally secular contexts—from state-funded schools to workplaces, and from foreign service to the media. As a result, proponents of religious literacy are in conversation with theories of secularism and notions of secularity, often explicitly invoking the idea that we live in a seemingly secular world as a justification for increased religious literacy. As such, the discussion around religious literacy has pointed to tensions underlying ostensibly secular ways of living. Religious literacy, in many of its manifestations, questions the putative cultural neutrality of secularism by calling for a reevaluation of secularism in public and institutional life.

In response, this chapter traces the development of a trans-Atlantic, Anglophone conversation on the concept and application of religious literacy to shine a light on the themes of secularity running through the current policy discussion. The following evaluates U.S. and U.K. theories of practice through the use of several case studies. As a way into these varying schools of thought, the discussion subdivides the approaches into the typologies of “values,” “content knowledge” and “skills.”<sup>1</sup> It also assesses the strengths,

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<sup>1</sup> Often, the recent policy/educational conversation around religious literacy focuses on the seeming incompatibilities between approaches focused on content knowledge and approaches focused on skills-building. For a short discussion of the U.S. public education curricular confusion that results from a lack of clarity about learning objectives in religious literacy guidelines and calls to action, see, for example: Justine Ellis and Benjamin Marcus, “Beyond Content or Skills: The Why, What, and How of Religious Studies Education,” *Social Education*, Vol. 83, No. 4 (September 2019): 225-229.

weaknesses, strategies, and criticisms of the various proposals. In particular, it analyzes the ways in which differing conceptions of religious literacy point to tensions underlying a seemingly simple narrative of factual teaching about religion—and what these tensions suggest about the conditions of secularity in the here and now.

## 1.1 Values

The Constitution and corresponding Supreme Court jurisprudence provide the context for religious literacy within the U.S. This framing implicates the notion of the secular in unmistakable ways. Historically, until the mid-twentieth century, the U.S. Supreme Court had little involvement in matters of religion and public education.<sup>2</sup> Although the First Amendment to the Constitution states that “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof,”<sup>3</sup> this provision applied, before the intervention of the Fourteenth Amendment, exclusively to the Federal Government.<sup>4</sup> Without federal oversight, the states did as their legislatures saw fit.

Beginning in the 1920s and culminating in the Court decisions of the 1960s, the issue of religion’s proper place in public schools came to the national stage. As the federal government expanded public school funding, the national government began to exert

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<sup>2</sup> Fritz Detwiler, *Standing on the Premises of God: The Christian Right’s Fight to Redefine America’s Public Schools* (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 17.

<sup>3</sup> U.S. Constitution, Amendment 1.

<sup>4</sup> Detwiler, *Standing on the Premises of God*, 17.

greater influence over local decisions.<sup>5</sup> As a result, uniform treatment of religion in public schools became a priority.

Although the Court banned devotional Bible readings specifically as part of a program of public education, it left room for religion's inclusion in the curricula. Supreme Court Justice Thomas Clark's opinion determined that the Bible could remain in the classroom, provided that it was used for educational, rather than devotional, purposes. In his majority opinion in the 1963 *Abington v. Schempp* case, Justice Clark wrote these oft-cited words:

Nothing we have said here indicates that such study of the Bible or of religion, when presented objectively as part of a secular program of education, may not be effected consistently with the First Amendment.<sup>6</sup>

Schools were permitted to "teach religious understandings" and "religious texts in the course of a secular education."<sup>7</sup> This decision shifted the emphasis from, in the words of legal scholar Kent Greenawalt, "the teaching *of* religion, to teaching *about* religion."<sup>8</sup> Despite these provisions, the crucial question remained largely unanswered: what constitutes a "secular" program of education?

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<sup>5</sup> James W. Fraser, *Between Church and State: Religion and Public Education in a Multicultural America* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999), 128.

<sup>6</sup> Justice Thomas Clark, *Abington v. Schempp*, 374 U.S. at 225, quoted in Greenawalt, *Does God Belong in Public Schools?*, 19.

<sup>7</sup> Kent Greenawalt, *Does God Belong in Public Schools?* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 41.

<sup>8</sup> Greenawalt, *Does God Belong in Public Schools?*, 77. Emphasis original.

Calls for religious literacy within the U.S. often take as their starting point the Supreme Court's language of teaching about religion as part of a "secular program of education." Beginning in the 1990s, American educators and academics initiated a conversation on religious literacy as a new response to this dilemma. Starting with public schools and spanning various sectors, religious literacy has made inroads into popular discourse. These proposals aim to connect theory with practice by using scholarship and academic arguments to build the case for increased religious literacy across multiple spheres, sectors, and contexts. As the argument goes, from primary school students to workers in the private sector, citizens must learn about religion if they are to be equipped to navigate a world in which religious ideas and people play a role.

American scholars Warren Nord and Charles Haynes were among the first and most influential advocates of religious literacy to propose an answer. Their thinking and writings set the stage for later proponents of religious literacy to build on their ideas and in many ways set the terms of the ensuing public policy debate. A professor of philosophy at University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, until his death in 2010, Nord was concerned chiefly with the role of religion within American education. His collaboration with Charles Haynes, now the vice president of the Freedom Forum Institute of the Religious Freedom Center and a senior scholar at the First Amendment Center, yielded several key contributions to the U.S. religious literacy discourse. Aiming to initiate a conversation around teaching about religion within state-funded, public school settings, Nord and Haynes set out to

reframe the conversation around religion's fraught history within U.S. state-funded education.

In their view, including religion in the curriculum need not result in controversy, injured sensibilities, or legal action. Citing the so-called culture wars between the religious right and secular left, Nord and Haynes position their call to action as occupying a middle way, a "New Consensus," between unconstitutional confessional religious teaching and the deliberate absence of religion in primary and secondary public-school curricula. In their writings, Nord and Haynes advance a civic, and values focused, argument in favor of cultivating religious literacy. Aiming to catalyze a conversation about the perceived absence of religion within public education textbooks, Nord and Haynes distilled their ideas into a concise 1998 text titled *Taking Religion Seriously Across the Curriculum*. In it, they put forward civic and Constitutional frameworks for teaching about religion within U.S. public education settings. Framing their argument in terms of fairness, they contend that excluding religious perspectives from public school curricula actively disfavors religion by giving the impression to students that religion lacks significance within contemporary contexts.

Aiming to explain, and construct a response to, the disappearance of religion from the curricula of state-funded U.S. education, Nord and Haynes push back against what they term the "secularization" of state-funded education. By this, they mean that religion no longer features prominently, or in many instances at all, in U.S. public education. According to Nord and Haynes "the almost complete secularization of education does not reflect our

culture.”<sup>9</sup> They assert that, despite what textbooks convey, “religion retains a good deal of vitality.”<sup>10</sup> Citing metrics of prayer, belief in God and importance of prayer in Americans’ lives, Nord and Haynes argue that religion remains dynamic within America. In their interpretation, then, “[w]hat we must conclude, therefore, is that education mirrors only what have come to be the *dominant* ideas and ideals of modern culture and especially of intellectuals.”<sup>11</sup> The idea that secular intellectuals have won the day pervades Nord and Haynes’ writings. To them, this intellectual hegemony “means that we don’t take religious people seriously.”<sup>12</sup> Failing to include religious ideas, for them, constitutes an exclusionary practice that relegates religious ideas, and, by extension, people, to the intellectual and cultural margins. Specifically, Nord and Haynes’ writings show concern for the impression students receive. How young people encounter religion and religious ideas matters a great deal to these early advocates of religious literacy. In their words: “An elementary school education curriculum that ignores religion gives students the false message that religion doesn’t matter to people—that we live in a religion-free world.”<sup>13</sup> Pushing back against this framing, Nord and Haynes argue that students must encounter religion as a vital force in the present.

To this end, Nord and Haynes point to the potential hazards of presenting religion in historical terms. Although they advocate teaching about religion’s place in history and

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<sup>9</sup> Warren A. Nord, and Charles Haynes, *Taking Religion Seriously Across the Curriculum* (Alexandria, Virginia: Association for Supervision & Curriculum Development (ASCD), 1998), 7.

<sup>10</sup> Nord and Haynes, *Taking Religion Seriously Across the Curriculum*, 7.

<sup>11</sup> Nord and Haynes, *Taking Religion Seriously Across the Curriculum*, 7.

<sup>12</sup> Nord and Haynes, *Taking Religion Seriously Across the Curriculum*, 8.

<sup>13</sup> Nord and Haynes, *Taking Religion Seriously Across the Curriculum*, 75.

influence on historical events and ideas, they caution against relegating religion to the ranks of history:

[I]f educators focus all of the attention on sacred texts and classical, historical forms of religions, they will not address one major educational problem that concerns us: the relationship of *live* religions to various “subjects” of the curriculum. The importance of religion lies not just in its historical influence but in the implications of living religion for how we think about the world and live our lives.<sup>14</sup>

This framing points to their unease with the present. They go on to argue that “[m]ost textbooks leave the reader with the false impression that religion is something that used to matter a long time ago but no longer makes much difference in the lives of modern people.”<sup>15</sup> One of the main reasons for Nord and Haynes’ concern about the ways in which religion is, or is not, presented becomes clear later in their text. They contend that “to ignore religious voices is not neutral; rather it marginalizes those voices, conveying implicitly their irrelevance to the search for truth.”<sup>16</sup> Here, their concern comes into sharper focus. It is not simply that students may not encounter religious ideas. Rather, if students do not come across religious ideas, they may conclude that religion has no place in making sense of the contemporary world, from the mundane to the metaphysical. In this way, Nord and Haynes situate their intervention squarely within the realm of values.

Arguing in favor of including religion and religious perspectives within the public-school curricula, Nord and Haynes cite the value and purpose of liberal education. For them, “[a]

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<sup>14</sup> Nord and Haynes, *Taking Religion Seriously Across the Curriculum*, 178. Emphasis original.

<sup>15</sup> Nord and Haynes, *Taking Religion Seriously Across the Curriculum*, 90.

<sup>16</sup> Nord and Haynes, *Taking Religion Seriously Across the Curriculum*, 47.

good liberal education will map the relationships of alternative ways of thinking about the subjects of the curriculum—and the world more generally.”<sup>17</sup> In this passage, their argument about religion comes to the fore. Religion presents an alternative to the dominant secular paradigm. As Nord and Haynes contend: “The point of a liberal education is not simply to expose students to an array of positions, but to initiate them into a continuing discussion about where the truth is to be found.”<sup>18</sup> By implication, students must be exposed to religious views as a potential source of truth. Otherwise, given the absence of religion in the curricula and possibly even in people’s homes, where else would students encounter religious ideas as yielding possible answers?

Secularism, here construed as the conspicuous and possibly deliberate absence of religion, holds the default position. Nord and Haynes, however, push back against secular history as the *de facto* position from which to approach the public-school curriculum. They argue:

[N]owhere in the curriculum is an effort made to justify the use of secular rather than religious categories or conceptual nets. Their adequacy is assumed and they are used uncritically—in spite of the fact that their adequacy is deeply controversial.<sup>19</sup>

Here, readers come to the crux of the matter. In this text, Nord and Haynes challenge the hegemony and sufficiency of secular categories. In a telling passage, they question a facet of the classic secularization narrative, that with progress and modernization comes religious decline: “The claim that progress inevitably marches to the beat of secular modernity is

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<sup>17</sup> Nord and Haynes, *Taking Religion Seriously Across the Curriculum*, 52.

<sup>18</sup> Nord and Haynes, *Taking Religion Seriously Across the Curriculum*, 55.

<sup>19</sup> Nord and Haynes, *Taking Religion Seriously Across the Curriculum*, 41.

dubious. From almost any religious perspective a significant problem has been that modern civilization has marginalized religion."<sup>20</sup> Although they make it clear that they are not endorsing any religious point of view, they draw attention to their obvious quarrel with the idea that a condition of secularity provides sufficient answers and resources.

Building on their earlier critique of the uncritical normativity of secular categories, Nord and Haynes go on to challenge the purging of religion from moral education. Their review of U.S. public school textbooks led them to conclude that:

[m]ost proposals for moral education are alike in employing vocabularies sterilized of religious language. The net effect, again, is the marginalization of religion. The implicit message is that religion is irrelevant to the development of virtue, moral judgement, and the search for moral truth.<sup>21</sup>

Their argument indicates that they see religion as inseparable from morality. In calling for fairness, Nord and Haynes make clear their own view that religion presents a source of moral teaching. To exclude it, therefore, may prevent students from accessing a possible source of truth.

In summarizing their views, Nord and Haynes distill the argument of their book into the following passage:

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<sup>20</sup> Nord and Haynes, *Taking Religion Seriously Across the Curriculum*, 114.

<sup>21</sup> Nord and Haynes, *Taking Religion Seriously Across the Curriculum*, 188.

The curriculum all but completely ignores religion as a *live* way of making sense of the world in the here and now...in course after course we teach students to think about matters that are religiously controversial in exclusively and uncritically secular ways. The implicit message is that students can learn everything they need to know about whatever they study (other than history and historical literature) without learning anything about religion: religion is irrelevant in the search for truth.<sup>22</sup>

Warren Nord's solo-authored works articulate a trenchant challenge to the neutrality of secularism within educational spaces. In his 1995 book, *Religion & American Education: Rethinking a National Dilemma*, Nord states his aims plainly: "to restore the tension between religious and secular ways of making sense of the world."<sup>23</sup> By this, Nord means ensuring that religious perspectives are included in public school curricula. In Nord's assessment, the "intellectual orthodoxy of our time—of the past hundred years or so—has been fully secular."<sup>24</sup> In his assessment, academics, and by extension, those in charge of crafting public school curricula, do not see a place for religion because religion does not play an active role in their lives. In his own words:

Religion is no longer a live alternative. The reason God and religion are absent from most scholarly work—and textbooks—is that they are no longer live alternatives for most scholars, at least within the context of their disciplines. If God was a live option, religion could not be ignored with such casual impunity. Religion is close to being academically dead.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Nord and Haynes, *Taking Religion Seriously Across the Curriculum*, 201. Emphasis original.

<sup>23</sup> Warren A. Nord, *Religion and American Education: Rethinking a National Dilemma* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1995), 7.

<sup>24</sup> Nord, *Religion and American Education*, 4.

<sup>25</sup> Nord, *Religion and American Education*, 230.

Nord's telling emphasis on the word "live"<sup>26</sup> demonstrates his focus on religion in the present. Further, according to Nord, "there is a widespread assumption that the intellectual and cultural wars of religion have been won," thereby rendering religion "an anachronism, a museum piece, for most intellectuals."<sup>27</sup> Pushing back against the assumption that self-identified religious people and religious ideas no longer matter, Nord aims to show the continued relevance of religious views as guiding viable ways of living in the here and now.

Although Nord and Haynes emphasize the civic rationale of advancing the public good as underpinning their calls for religious literacy, their Tillichian construal of religion—the concern with the ultimate<sup>28</sup>—suggests their stance. Religion, for Nord and Haynes, represents a concern with transcendent matters. In their line of reasoning, students who are not exposed to religious ways of making sense of the world, miss out on potential answers. This is not to say that Nord and Haynes are launching a veiled campaign to smuggle devotional teaching into the curriculum, as critics of teaching religion in school settings often allege. Something far subtler is at play in Nord and Haynes' writing. Their concern, it appears, is that, given the presumed backdrop of increasing secularity, young people may not encounter religious ideas or concepts as existing options. Exposing students to religious

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<sup>26</sup> This formulation has a long history within the philosophy and psychology of religion approaches to the academic study of religions. William James, for example, uses the language of "live" options in his discussion of "live" versus "dead" hypotheses, the former of which must manifest as "a real possibility." Crucially, the property of being "live" does not inhere to any option; rather, liveness comes as a result of an individual's "willingness to act." See: William James, *The Will to Believe: And Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* (New York: Dover, 1956).

<sup>27</sup> Nord, *Religion and American Education*, 4.

<sup>28</sup> Theologian and philosopher Paul Tillich's influence appears to inform both Nord and Haynes' understanding of religion. According to Tillich, faith itself reflects an "ultimate concern." See, for example, Paul Tillich, *The Dynamics of Faith* (New York: Harper & Row, 1957).

ideas within school settings might convince young people, not necessarily to become adherents or practitioners of a particular religion, but to see religious people and ideas as important and potentially as a valid countervailing force against secular norms. Nord and Haynes' brand of religious literacy, in this way, challenges the cultural neutrality of secularism, suggesting that it is hostile to religious claims. This religious literacy equips students to cultivate an openness to religious ideas and people. The exclusion of religion from the curriculum for Nord and Haynes potentially stunts students' moral, social, and civic development.

Nord and Haynes, above all, appear to view religion as philosophically rich and therefore want more avenues for religious reflection taught in schools. Their emphasis on values, especially the values religious traditions might instill, highlights their approach. In particular, their argument in favor of the civic mission of public schools and religion's role within liberal education points to their view that a loss of religious understanding might threaten the moral foundations, and thereby the civic mission, of public-school teaching. To deprive students of the moral reasoning religion in this understanding provides would be to deprive students of a key source of virtue—civic or otherwise.

Although this approach has the benefit of advocating for a clear learning objective—in this case, specifically, fostering civic values—it also encounters challenges. Understanding religion primarily as value-instilling risks advancing an essentialized, and at the same time, possibly universalizing, understanding of religion that does not take into account sufficient

specificity and context. Viewing religion as a source of morality and virtue—civic, social, or otherwise—gives an incomplete, possibly decontextualized, picture.<sup>29</sup> Such a focus on religions, and religious ideas, as possible foundations of civic virtues risks reducing religions to moral systems and frameworks, at the expense of other, equally salient, understandings of the concept.

## 1.2 Content Knowledge

By the year 2007, Nord and Haynes' ideas about re-introducing teaching about religions into U.S. schools gained additional momentum.<sup>30</sup> Writing nearly a decade after Nord and Haynes, Stephen Prothero, professor of religion at Boston University also advances a civic rationale for teaching about religion within U.S. public education. Although Prothero takes up Nord and Haynes' project, he explicitly differentiates his approach by de-emphasizing religion's role in instilling morality and virtue. In Prothero's own words, his approach entails "spreading knowledge rather than inculcating virtues."<sup>31</sup> Rather, Prothero frames religious literacy in purely civic terms. His project, specifically, takes a presentist view of religious

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<sup>29</sup> This thesis will return to Nord and Haynes' views of religious literacy, and understandings of the category of religion, in greater detail in upcoming chapters. Chapter 2 contains an analysis of their perspectives on religious literacy as a democracy-building initiative. Chapter 6 considers their views about religion within the context of critical religion's critiques of category and arguments against ahistorical and decontextualized essentialist/universalist depictions of religion within the academic study of religions.

<sup>30</sup> It should be noted that the events of 9/11 offer one possible explanation for an increasing interest in the concept of religious literacy at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

<sup>31</sup> Stephen Prothero, *Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know—And Doesn't* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2007), 21.

literacy, emphasizing its relevance and timeliness for public discourse and citizenship within a religiously plural setting.

In his bestselling book, *Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know—and Doesn't*, Prothero argues that “teaching about religion is first and foremost a civic exercise.”<sup>32</sup> Careful to note that his agenda is “civic rather than theological,”<sup>33</sup> Prothero goes on to state that his “brief for religious literacy proceeds on secular grounds, on the theory that Americans are not equipped for citizenship (or, for that matter, cocktail party conversation) without a basic understanding of Christianity and the world’s religions.”<sup>34</sup> Such an emphasis, and insistence on a secular justification for his brand of religious literacy appears to lead Prothero to emphasize content knowledge. Learning specifics about religion, according to Prothero, will equip citizens for civic action and ensure that the endeavor remains “secular” at its core. Venturing into the territory of morality and virtues, for him, invites its own set of risks. Intended to be pithy and accessible to a wide readership, Prothero’s book points to what he characterizes as the gap between Americans’ religiosity and their lack of religious knowledge. The book aims to call attention to the lack of understanding and to help “citizens participate fully in social, political, and economic life in a nation and world in which religion counts.”<sup>35</sup> Knowledge of religious concepts and ideas, in this view, will help enhance civic participation.

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<sup>32</sup> Prothero, *Religious Literacy*, 21.

<sup>33</sup> Prothero, *Religious Literacy*, 178.

<sup>34</sup> Prothero, *Religious Literacy*, 179.

<sup>35</sup> Prothero, *Religious Literacy*, 19.

To counter this perceived knowledge deficit, Prothero includes a “Dictionary of Religious Literacy”<sup>36</sup> in his book. Framing the attainment of knowledge about religions as “both a personal challenge and a civic duty of the highest order,”<sup>37</sup> Prothero appears to view content knowledge as the antidote to widespread ignorance about religions. Although Prothero acknowledges that his glossary of key terms is not intended to be exhaustive, he does suggest that religiously literate Americans should have familiarity with at least a hundred terms. This dictionary highlights, in Prothero’s assessment, the “information US citizens need to make sense of their country and the world—the key stories, doctrines, practices, symbols, scriptures, people, places, phrases, groups, and holidays of the world’s major religions.”<sup>38</sup> With an eye towards the practical—consisting of topics that permeate public discourse and have contemporary usage—the dictionary provides simple descriptions of terms, ranging from “Abraham” to “Mecca” and from “Quakers” to “Yoga.”<sup>39</sup>

Garnering a good deal of media attention following its publication, Prothero’s *Religious Literacy* has informed much of the popular coverage and depiction of religious literacy within the U.S. over the past decade or more. The appeal and related influence of Prothero’s method, in all likelihood, lies in its simplicity. These short summaries provide accessible entry into a world of complexity. However, would familiarity with these terms, as Prothero’s work suggests, lead to greater understanding? Does Prothero’s approach, which lays out a

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<sup>36</sup> See: Prothero, *Religious Literacy*, 185-292.

<sup>37</sup> Prothero, *Religious Literacy*, 184.

<sup>38</sup> Prothero, *Religious Literacy*, 185.

<sup>39</sup> See: Prothero, *Religious Literacy*, 185-292.

catalogue of religious concepts, enhance or detract from its own enterprise?<sup>40</sup> As critics of his method have pointed out, Prothero's categories may inscribe, rather than elucidate, the terms of debate by focusing on too narrow an understanding of religion.<sup>41</sup> In this way, by setting out neat, simple, accessible bits of information, Prothero's dictionary may give the impression that learning facts about religions and religious concepts will, to use Prothero's own words, constitute sufficient preparation for engaging with "a religiously inflected public sphere."

Prothero's content-focused recommendation raises the question of what it means to be religiously literate. Does memorization of facts prepare citizens to interact with one another and with religious concepts in productive and full ways? This is not to say that facts play no role in fostering understanding. To the contrary, it would be challenging to argue that facts do not enhance understanding. Rather, the question at hand lies in their application: Does a facility with certain key concepts foster civility, sociability, and enhanced civic engagement? Prothero does not say.

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<sup>40</sup> This thesis provides additional analysis of Prothero's method elsewhere, offering an explanation for, and suggesting possible implications of, his emphasis on content knowledge and textuality within his approach to religious literacy. Please see Chapter 3 for this discussion.

<sup>41</sup> See, for example: Ariel Ennis, *Teaching Religious Literacy: A Guide to Religious and Spiritual Diversity in Higher Education*, (New York: Routledge, 2017), 6. Ennis writes that Prothero's emphasis on facts about religion detracts from understanding "the complexity of [a] person's identity." Further, Donovan O. Schaefer, writes that Prothero, at times, misses the bigger picture by lapsing into "dictionaryism," defined as "the belief that the essence of a thing is contained in its dictionary entry." See: Donovan O. Schaefer, "On Dictionaryism: The Good News and Maledictions of Religious Literacy," *Bulletin for the Study of Religion*, Vol. 40, No. 2 (April 2011): 4.

### 1.3 Skills

Publishing her views in the same years as Prothero—in 2007—Diane L. Moore has formulated an influential skills-focused definition that has informed religious literacy within a U.S. context and beyond. Her ideas about, and approach to, religious literacy have proliferated in academic and policy circles, especially given her strong ties to the American Academy of Religion (AAR), the main U.S. professional association for the academic study of religion. From her position as the founder and director of the Religious Literacy Project at Harvard Divinity School, Moore has advocated for what she characterizes as a “cultural studies” approach to religious literacy, highlighting the diversity and socio-political contexts of religious traditions and experiences. Put simply, by cultural studies, Moore means an acceptance of the premise that “religious influences have always been and continue to be intimately woven into the fabric of human cultures.”<sup>42</sup> Religions are, in her description “internally diverse,” prone to “evolve and change,” and “embedded in cultures.”<sup>43</sup> Whereas Nord and Haynes focus more explicitly on values and Prothero more on content knowledge, Moore focuses on cultivating skills, emphasizing the historical, contextual, political, and cultural valences of religions and religious communities.

By arguing in favor of increasing religious literacy, Moore claims, in a move similar to that of Prothero, that “without a basic understanding of the beliefs, symbols, literature, and

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<sup>42</sup> Diane L. Moore, *Overcoming Religious Illiteracy: A Cultural Studies Approach to the Study of Religion in Secondary Education* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007), 29.

<sup>43</sup> Diane L. Moore, “Methodological Assumptions and Analytical Frameworks Regarding Religion,” *Religious Literacy Project*, Harvard Divinity School (2017): 3.

practices related to the world's religious traditions, much of history and culture is rendered incomprehensible."<sup>44</sup> However, in contrast to Prothero's information-heavy religious literacy, Moore's approach, in her own words, "emphasizes a method of inquiry more than specific content knowledge."<sup>45</sup> In her definition of religious literacy, Moore calls for educators and policymakers to help students and adults cultivate the following skills and abilities:

Religious literacy entails 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 (where applicable), beliefs, practices and contemporary manifestations of several of the world's religious traditions and expressions 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.<sup>46</sup>

This approach, which was adopted by the AAR,<sup>47</sup> calls attention to the context, experiences, and relations of power around religion. Understanding religion and religious people, for Moore, entails a recognition that all knowledge is "situated," in Donna Haraway's formulation,<sup>48</sup> meaning that our "knowledge claims" arise from particular historical

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<sup>44</sup> Moore, *Overcoming Religious Illiteracy*, 5.

<sup>45</sup> Moore, *Overcoming Religious Illiteracy*, 57.

<sup>46</sup> Moore, "Methodological Assumptions and Analytical Frameworks Regarding Religion," 4-5.

<sup>47</sup> See, for example, the following report, of which Diane L. Moore was the task force chair: "Guidelines for Teaching about Religion in K-12 Public Schools in the United States," *The American Academy of Religion* (April 2010).

<sup>48</sup> Donna Haraway uses this formulation in a 1988 essay, which pushes back against claims of "scientific objectivity," arguing instead that knowledge and the resultant epistemic categories depend on particular locations, embodied positions, and contexts. See: Donna Haraway, "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective," *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 14, No. 3 (Autumn 1988): 575-599.

conditions and are not simply “universal.”<sup>49</sup> Anticipating the criticism that such a stance would be interpreted as a move towards “relativism”—the notion that all claims are equally valid—Moore argues that situated knowledge pushes back against ahistorical tendencies and helps show claims’ “specificity.”<sup>50</sup>

This definition has the advantage of pointing to geopolitical, historical, political dimensions of religious communities and traditions. In acknowledging existing power relations, cultural contexts, and political manifestations, Moore’s religious literacy highlights the multivalent nature of religious expressions. Her definition, too, acknowledges the importance of textual sources, without allowing them to take precedence over other, potentially equally or more potent, sources.

Similar to Nord and Haynes and unlike Prothero, Moore references the moral valence of religions, linking morality with a better quality of civic participation. Rather than following Nord and Haynes directly, however, and pushing back against secularist tendencies within liberal education, Moore diverges subtly by unreservedly embracing secular education’s aims. As Moore notes, public schools should be secular “because a secular approach is the strongest philosophical foundation to promote nonrepression and nondiscrimination.”<sup>51</sup> In Moore’s words, religious literacy should enable students “1) to function as active citizens who promote the ideals of democracy; 2) to act as thoughtful and informed moral agents;

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<sup>49</sup> Moore, “Methodological Assumptions and Analytical Frameworks Regarding Religion,” 5.

<sup>50</sup> Moore, “Methodological Assumptions and Analytical Frameworks Regarding Religion,” 5.

<sup>51</sup> Moore, *Overcoming Religious Illiteracy*, 56.

and 3) lead fulfilling lives."<sup>52</sup> For Moore, then, religion is inseparable from morality and religious literacy underpins good democratic participation. Further, according to Moore, religious literacy also "invites students to identify and question underlying foundations of assumption in the ways that inspire engaged reflection and critical thinking. This dimension of understanding includes both the 'why' of human agency as well as the 'why' of existence itself."<sup>53</sup> Employing the educational terms of "engaged reflection" and "critical thinking," this passage highlights Moore's ideas about religion's role.

In her assessment, religion may challenge prevailing cultural assumptions, and, moreover, prompt those exposed to its ideas to reflect on bigger ontological questions, such as the "why" of existence. Pushing back against the notion that religious reasons should necessarily be subordinated to secular reasons and advocating that religious worldviews be taught alongside secular ones, Moore asserts in language similar again to that of Nord and Haynes that "religious worldviews provide alternative frameworks from which to critique normative cultural assumptions."<sup>54</sup> Increased religious literacy, here, challenges young people and adults alike within liberal democracies to consider fundamental questions from different vantage points. This passage suggests that she conceives of religion as having a specific function within the democratic public sphere, hence the emphasis on the potential of religions and religious views to engage in the space of rational debate. Religion, in Moore's assessment, has the necessary capacity to countervail against cultural norms,

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<sup>52</sup> Moore, *Overcoming Religious Illiteracy*, 9.

<sup>53</sup> Moore, *Overcoming Religious Illiteracy*, 30.

<sup>54</sup> Moore, *Overcoming Religious Illiteracy*, 5.

thereby providing a crucial role in aiding agonistic democracy. Liberalism just might need dissent for robustness. In this way, although Moore's cultural studies approach at first appears to diverge from the values- and civic-centric approach of Nord and Haynes, her brand of religious literacy shares a concern about the loss of meaning that might result from a loss of religious perspectives in school curricula.

One of the chief benefits of Moore's project is that, in outlining specific, religious studies-based approaches to religious literacy, it translates theory into practice. Moreover, by specifically invoking the secular, Moore's model becomes widely accessible and compatible with current models of liberal education. Recently, for example, the first set of AAR guidelines her work inspired, set the stage for a newly-released Religious Studies Companion Document to *The College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards* for U.S. public schools.<sup>55</sup> Significantly, even though the C3 frameworks are not part of the Common Core,<sup>56</sup> they have the capacity to influence textbook creation and adoption at the state level. Buy-in from such a notable educational association signals the reach of Moore's project.

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<sup>55</sup> "Religious Studies Companion Document," *College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards* (Silver Springs, MD: National Council for the Social Studies, 2017): Appendices.

<sup>56</sup> The Common Core constitutes a U.S. multi-state consensus about what students should know/learn, developed by local education chiefs and governors, aimed at promoting standards for K-12 (both primary and secondary) public education. For additional information, see: Common Core State Standards Initiative, "Frequently Asked Questions, Accessed 10 December 2019, <http://www.corestandards.org/about-the-standards/frequently-asked-questions/>.

Additionally, Moore's influence has not only informed approaches to religious literacy within primary and secondary education, but also has made inroads into higher education. For example, following Moore, Ariel Ennis of the New York University (NYU) Office of Global Spiritual Life also advocates for a skills-based multiculturalist approach to religious literacy. Since 2012, NYU has designed and delivered skills-based workshops called "Faith Zone" trainings aimed at "facilitating conversations about religious and spiritual diversity on campus."<sup>57</sup> In much the same vein, the AAR has begun to consider the role of religious literacy and its potential application for educators and policy practitioners within higher education. At its annual gathering in 2017, the AAR convened a task force working group on the role of religious literacy in higher education. Notably, a 2019 report that resulted from the group's work, titled "AAR Religious Literacy Guidelines: What U.S. College Graduates Need to Understand about Religion,"<sup>58</sup> frames religious literacy in terms of developing competencies, emphasizing skills needed for graduates from both two-year and four-year institutions.

As such recent examples attest, Moore's model has proven scalable. By outlining an approach to teaching and learning about religion within explicitly secular frameworks, the cultural studies model avoids the challenge of coming up against current education models. However, despite the benefits of Moore's approach—namely a focus on power, diversity, and an acknowledgement of a multiplicity of factors contributing to understandings of

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<sup>57</sup> Ariel Ennis, *Teaching Religious Literacy: A Guide to Religious and Spiritual Diversity in Higher Education* (New York: Routledge, 2017), xiv.

<sup>58</sup> See: "AAR Religious Literacy Guidelines: What U.S. College Graduates Need to Understand about Religion," *The American Academy of Religion (AAR)*, October 2019.

religion—it, too, encounters challenges. In particular, although Moore positions her project as conforming to a “cultural studies” model, her approach might be better described as a democracy-building endeavor. Such goals, although not inherently unworthy, risk positioning religious literacy as a tool of civics education in ways that have the capacity to form and inform depictions of religions.

In using religion in the service of democracy, Moore constructs a religious literacy which might privilege specific understandings of religions. Although, anticipating objections, Moore is quick to note that “[n]o religious tradition can be accurately represented as a singular worldview nor can any religion be characterized as either promoting or hindering democratic ideals,”<sup>59</sup> she still prioritizes democratic ideals in ways that have the capacity to lead to an evaluative approach: one that uses democratic compatibility as the evaluation metric. For example, of her model of religious literacy, Moore asserts that “a cultural studies method will help identify cultural assumptions while also providing tools to interrogate all value claims and assess them in light of whether they will serve to promote or hinder human agency and well-being in the context of our multi-cultural democracy.”<sup>60</sup> Thus, in conforming with the principles of liberal-democratic education, Moore’s multicultural model privileges and prioritizes democracy-building in ways that have the capacity to circumscribe the terms of debate, all in the name of inclusivity.

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<sup>59</sup> Moore, *Overcoming Religious Illiteracy*, 77.

<sup>60</sup> Moore, *Overcoming Religious Illiteracy*, 77-78.

Although she is careful to avoid, in her words, a vision of religion literacy that focuses explicitly religions' abilities to enhance or inhibit "democratic ideals," Moore still advocates for a religious literacy that assesses religions on the basis of whether or not they "serve to promote or hinder agency and well-being" within the context of pluralist democratic societies. Accordingly, her view that religious perspectives "provide alternative frameworks" perhaps assumes too much and places the emphasis squarely on learning about religions as a way of fostering community cohesion.<sup>61</sup> This is where Moore's skills-building agenda, which flows directly from this conception of religious literacy, encounters difficulties.

Advocating for a similarly skills-building approach, Adam Dinham, professor of Faith and Public Policy at Goldsmiths University, is one of the chief proponents of religious literacy within a U.K. context. Representing a prominent academic voice within a debate awash with policymakers and practitioners, Dinham and his writings carry authoritative weight. In addition to directing the Faiths and Civil Society Unit at Goldsmiths, Dinham has written prolifically on the theme of religious literacy and is active in policy circles. Almost invariably, searches and inquiries on religious literacy within the U.K. will lead to Dinham directly or a project to which he has contributed research. As such searches show, Dinham and his colleagues have aimed to advance a U.K. conversation around religious literacy. Although Dinham works from a decidedly different geographic and cultural context, his project's aims bears striking resemblance to Moore's vision of religious literacy.

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<sup>61</sup> This thesis includes an expanded discussion of Moore's ideas, within the context of liberal education and democratic discourse. Please see Chapter 3 for an analysis of Moore's position in relation to such themes.

Although Dinham has critiqued instrumentalized approaches to religious education, which, in his view advance a misguided and impractical vision of social cohesion,<sup>62</sup> Dinham appears to view religious literacy similarly to Moore in that he sees it as a skills-building endeavor. The author of several oft-cited individual publications and edited volumes on religious literacy, Dinham also serves as the founding partner of the Religious Literacy Partnership, an organization aimed at promoting a “better quality of engagement” with religion across multiple sectors of British society.<sup>63</sup> As Dinham’s involvement in multiple academic, policy, and civil society projects demonstrates, he espouses a religious literacy rooted in social action, rather than solely in theory.

However, whereas Moore is chiefly concerned with promoting the skills needed to engage with multiple “religious” perspectives in pluralist societies, Dinham appears more concerned with addressing indifferent attitudes towards religions within his home country. Dinham’s Religious Literacy Leadership in Higher Education program, which he ran in collaboration with Stephen H. Jones, provides insight into the current landscape of religious literacy across the U.K. The stated aim of the project was to help higher education institutions (HEIs) around the U.K. “lead high quality public conversation about religious faith in a context which is often ambivalent, confused and anxious about religion.”<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> See, for example, Adam Dinham and Martha Shaw, “RE for Real: The Future of Teaching and Learning about Religion and Belief,” *Goldsmiths, University of London* (November 2015).

<sup>63</sup> “Values,” *Religious Literacy Partnership*, Accessed 1 February 2018, <https://religiousliteracy.org/values/>.

<sup>64</sup> Adam Dinham and Stephen H. Jones, “Religious Literacy Leadership in Higher Education: An Analysis of the Challenges of Religious Faith, and Resources for Meeting them, for University Leaders,” *Religious Literacy Leadership in Higher Education* (September 2010): Forward.

Universities, increasingly, require practical guides for mediating potential conflicts and for addressing instances of religious bias. This program steps in to meet this need.

The report, which also includes an accompanying handbook of case studies, advances a working definition of religious literacy. Religious literacy has several possible valences and purposes:

1. Religions deserve to be articulated publicly, not only so their positive aspects are acknowledged and engaged with, but also so they can be criticised constructively and risks identified and addressed.
2. Religious literacy has the potential to mediate cultural, moral, and cognitive differences and to broaden intellectual, social and cultural horizons. It can also challenge any attempt to close down debates with conversation-stopping certainties and absolutes.
3. Religious literacy can help the development of a level of background understanding, so a person may be able to grasp the inner meaning of literary works, political events or public actions, or the history which has shaped particular public institutions or national norms.
4. Today building religious literacy is a challenge: partly because of disinterestedness, partly just because the world is increasingly diverse, people often find that religious traditions are poorly understood. This can lead to resistance—even violence—against them (and by them) and to missed opportunities to enrich experience.<sup>65</sup>

Taken together, these attributes contribute to a summary of religious literacy's aims. The language Dinham and Jones use highlights their outlook. In the first part of the definition, they reference the idea that religions "deserve to be articulated publicly." Pushing back against the idea of privatized religion, Dinham and Jones, here, follows the model of democratic discourse; religions must be public so that they can become the object of public

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<sup>65</sup> Dinham and Jones, "Religious Literacy Leadership in Higher Education," 6.

scrutiny and be judged, either favorably or unfavorably. According to Dinham and Jones, “religious literacy lies, then, in having the knowledge and skills to recognize religious faith as a legitimate and important area for public attention, a degree of general knowledge about at least some religious traditions, and an awareness of and ability to find out about others.”<sup>66</sup> By implication, this brand of religious literacy calls for an increased public profile of religion. Dinham and Jones’ use of terms such as “legitimate” and “deserv[ing]” belie a fear that British people might, without the necessary training, simply dismiss religious concepts and people. Religious literacy, in this model, seeks “to inform intelligent, thoughtful and rooted approaches to religious faith that countervail unhelpful knee-jerk reactions based on fear and stereotype.”<sup>67</sup> This appeal to counter discrimination resulting from stereotyping suggests that Dinham and Jones view religious literacy as fulfilling a civic function and pushing back against the “disinterestedness” they themselves reference.

Elsewhere, Dinham discusses religious literacy’s practical dimensions and its implications for civil society. In his 2015 co-edited volume with Matthew Francis, *Religious Literacy in Policy and Practice*, he challenges some of what he characterizes as the secularist assumptions underlying contemporary understandings of religion. Writing with greater trenchancy than in past publications, Dinham argues that religious literacy has the capacity to push back against prevailing ideas within public discourse:

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<sup>66</sup> Dinham and Jones, “Religious Literacy Leadership in Higher Education,” 6.

<sup>67</sup> Dinham and Jones, “Religious Literacy Leadership in Higher Education,” 6.

that the West is largely secular; that religions tend to cause wars, oppress women, and gay people; that they want to hold people in orthodoxies that constrict their freedoms and creativities...that the public sphere is a secular sphere, by which is usually meant a somehow neutral sphere when it comes to religion and belief.<sup>68</sup>

Here, Dinham and Francis challenge the assumed cultural neutrality of the so-called secular public sphere. Religious literacy, in this model, plays a role in countering the idea that secularism is synonymous with neutrality. Implicit in this religious literacy is a call to reexamine assumptions about the public sphere. As Dinham and Francis contend:

Secular assumptions, whereby religion is either assumed to have no relevance to a modern, enlightened age, or is seen as increasingly irrelevant due to diminishing membership of its formal institutions, have led to people paying less attention to religious debates and to people taking less interest in religious knowledge.<sup>69</sup>

The idea that the institutional decline of religion signals an attendant diminution of religion's importance in social life represents a hallmark of the classic secularization thesis. Dinham and Francis' statements may suggest that they wish to reawaken people's interest in religious knowledge, not for confessional purposes, but rather to ensure that religion retains a prominent, in their words, "legitimate," place in the public imaginary.

As a first step, religious literacy entails a willingness to engage with religious people and ideas. Moreover, in Dinham and Francis' words, religious literacy starts with a readiness to accept religion as a "relevant" force in shaping contemporary public life and debate.<sup>70</sup> This

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<sup>68</sup> Adam Dinham and Matthew Francis, *Religious Literacy in Policy and Practice* (Bristol: Policy Press, 2015), 1.

<sup>69</sup> Dinham and Francis, *Religious Literacy in Policy and Practice*, 258.

<sup>70</sup> Dinham and Francis, *Religious Literacy in Policy and Practice*, 11.

emphasis on the immediacy and pertinence of religion runs through Dinham's writing. Ideally, religious literacy, in this model, will do more than equip people to understand the basics of religious propositions and ideas; it should also instill in people the "ability to ask appropriate questions with confidence about others."<sup>71</sup> This phrasing, essentially suggesting that people must go about asking appropriate questions appropriately, should give readers pause. Although it emphasizes the propriety, and the resultant civility, that knowledge of religions purportedly produces, this statement may gesture towards something deeper: the desire to cultivate the proper attitude towards religion. As the authors note, their mission "is not didactic."<sup>72</sup> Learning about religions in any depth should be left to the classroom and university halls. In contrast, religious literacy, in this view, "asks that faith in the public realm be taken seriously by everyone, regardless of one's own religion, belief or none, and that the engagement be informed, intelligent and open."<sup>73</sup> According to Dinham and Francis, people act from a place of ignorance that results from indifference, which "is problematic, not just because people often lack an understanding, but also because they assume that this deficiency is not an issue."<sup>74</sup> For Dinham and Francis, hostility towards religion may not be the main issue. Rather, ignorance and indifference, byproducts in this narrative of institutional decline, must be countered through religious literacy.

Similar to Moore, Dinham and his colleagues place a premium on religious literacy as a potentially evaluative process through the means of rational discourse. For example, the

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<sup>71</sup> Dinham and Francis, *Religious Literacy in Policy and Practice*, 14.

<sup>72</sup> Dinham and Francis, *Religious Literacy in Policy and Practice*, 23.

<sup>73</sup> Dinham and Francis, *Religious Literacy in Policy and Practice*, 23.

<sup>74</sup> Dinham and Francis, *Religious Literacy in Policy and Practice*, 258.

previously referenced statement that a religious literacy approach would put religions into public conversation “not only so their positive aspects are acknowledged and engaged with, but also so they can be criticised constructively and risks identified”<sup>75</sup> signals the intent of this skills-building perspective. Here, religions must become public in order to be defended or critiqued, as part of a wider project of religious literacy. In claiming that their mission is not “didactic,” Dinham and his co-authors try to position religious literacy as a framework and toolkit for engaging with religions within wider civil society.

#### 1.4 Critical Responses

This history of religious literacy within the U.K. helps explain some of its sticking points. In some ways newer than its American counterpart, the notion of religious literacy within the U.K. remains inextricably linked with equality legislation, a notion that Dinham and his academic collaborators frequently invoke. Many of the proponents of religious literacy view the Equality Act of 2010 as a watershed moment in recognizing religion’s place within modern British public life. The Act, a piece of national legislation passed through Parliament, aimed to codify a range of anti-discrimination laws across the U.K., thereby “making the law easier to understand and strengthening protections.”<sup>76</sup> With the intention of increasing protections within workplaces and the wider society, the Act has provided the

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<sup>75</sup> Dinham and Jones, “Religious Literacy Leadership in Higher Education,” 6.

<sup>76</sup> “Equality Act 2010: Guidance,” *GOV.UK*, Accessed 1 February 2018, <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/equality-act-2010-guidance>.

touchstone for assessing instances of diversity and equality infringements in a variety of settings.

Notably, the Act upholds “religion and belief” as a protected characteristic alongside those of age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, race, sex, and sexual orientation.<sup>77</sup> The piece of legislation defines religion and belief in the following ways. According to the Act, “[r]eligion means any religion and a reference to religion includes a reference to a lack of religion.”<sup>78</sup> The Equality Act also states that “[b]elief means any religious or philosophical belief and a reference to belief includes a reference or a lack of belief.”<sup>79</sup> The language of the law, here, protects not only religious beliefs, but also the lack thereof.

With the Equality Act providing the legal frameworks for protecting individual rights, the Commission on Religion or Belief in British Public Life (CORAB) has taken up the task of commenting on the state and status of religion in British public life. Commissioned in 2013 and completed in 2015, CORAB released a policy briefing entitled “Living With Difference: Community, Diversity and the Common Good.” This high-profile commission, chaired by Baroness Elizabeth Butler-Schloss, was composed of academics, faith leaders, and practitioners across the U.K. Coordinated in partnership with Cambridge’s Woolf Institute,

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<sup>77</sup> “Equality Act 2010: Table of Contents,” *GOV.UK*, Accessed 1 February 2018, <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2010/15/contents>.

<sup>78</sup> “Equality Act 2010,” Chapter 1, *GOV.UK*, Accessed 1 February 2018, <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2010/15/part/2/chapter/1>.

<sup>79</sup> “Equality Act 2010,” Chapter 1, *GOV.UK*, Accessed 1 February 2018, <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2010/15/part/2/chapter/1>.

the Commission aimed “to consider the place and role of religion and belief in contemporary Britain, consider the significance of emerging trends and identities, and make recommendations for public life and policy.”<sup>80</sup> These objectives—organized around the themes of education, media, dialogue, action, and law—provide the framework for the report.

At its core, CORAB represents a response to the changing demography of religion within British public life and the theme of secularity weaves through the report. Towards the beginning of the report, the Commission cites the “increase in the number of people with non-religious beliefs and identities,” “the decline of Christian affiliation,” and “the increased diversity amongst people who have a religious faith,” as factors motivating the report.<sup>81</sup> The Commission’s aim, “to create an environment in which [religious] differences enrich society rather than cause anxiety, and in which they contribute to its common good,” signals its intention to contribute to debates around diversity and national cohesion.<sup>82</sup> Further, the Commission’s stated objectives foreground a narrative of religious decline, both in terms of demography and, relatedly, of significance.

In advancing its goals, the Commission emphasizes the role of “religion and belief literacy.”

Out of a list of twelve key policy recommendations, religious literacy comes in close second

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<sup>80</sup> “Report of the Commission on Religion and Belief in British Public Life (CORAB): Living with Difference: Community, Diversity and the Common good,” *The Woolf Institute, Cambridge*, 7 December 2017, 6, <https://www.woolf.cam.ac.uk/research/publications/reports/report-of-the-commission-on-religion-and-belief-in-british-public-life>.

<sup>81</sup> CORAB, 6.

<sup>82</sup> CORAB, 7.

behind a general call for increasing the national conversation on religion and belief.<sup>83</sup> The Commission states:

Much greater religion and belief literacy is needed in every section of society, and at all levels. The potential for misunderstanding, stereotyping and oversimplification based on ignorance is huge. The commission therefore calls on education and professional bodies to draw up religion and belief literacy programmes and projects.<sup>84</sup>

The call to action within the report underscores the Commission's aim to contribute to the conversation on creating a cohesive British national character despite differences. With the exception of strategies for increased religious literacy within the media, the Commission offers few recommendations for how, specifically, policymakers and educators should go about inculcating religious literacy. It does, however, cite the principle of enhancing democratic debate through religious participation. The Commission states that "most religious and philosophical traditions contain concepts, wisdom and teachings that can valuably challenge the strategies, policies and priorities of secular governments."<sup>85</sup> This framing of religions as natural counterpoints and potential challenger of secular governmental policies has several implications. First, it evidences the Commission's belief in a kind of instrumentalized religion, one that brings with it necessarily challenging perspectives. This comment also underscores the Commission's aim to present religion as not only compatible with democratic discourse, but also somehow integral to it. Religion, in this framing, speaks truth to secular power.

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<sup>83</sup> CORAB, 7-8.

<sup>84</sup> CORAB, 8.

<sup>85</sup> CORAB, 26.

The CORAB report spawned a number of critical responses. Tellingly, following the report's publication, The University of Warwick convened a group of scholars and practitioners, who found fault with the premise and methodology of the report. The resulting report, "A Secularist Response to the Commission on Religion and Belief in British Public Life," which was released in November 2016, draws from panel deliberations among academics and practitioners. The Commission's stated aim was to "provide a critical counterweight to the CORAB recommendations."<sup>86</sup> According to the report, CORAB placed a disproportionate emphasis on the views of religious people and thereby disfavored non-religious members of the British public. The report argued that, by according undue space to religious viewpoints, the Commission painted an uneven and unequitable picture of modern British religious composition. The report outlines its criticism of CORAB as follows:

We believe that the Commission's attempt to put religion at the very centre of British public life offers a one-dimensional, diminished, and limited view of modern British society. Instead we emphasise an alternative, inclusive and positive secularist framework based on shared values to put an end to unjustified religious privilege and to ensure that the rights and freedoms of all citizens are afforded equal weight and protection.<sup>87</sup>

In this interpretation, the CORAB privileged religious perspectives and advocates for policies that may infringe on the rights and freedoms of other Britons. Significantly, the term

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<sup>86</sup> "A Secularist Response to the Commission on Religion and Belief in British Public Life," *The University of Warwick*, (November 2016): 3, <https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/pais/people/kettell/a-secularist-response/a-secularist-response.pdf>.

<sup>87</sup> "A Secularist Response to CORAB," 3.

“religion and belief literacy” draws particular ire from the report’s writers. According to the response, the emphasis on religious literacy:

reflects the inherent bias of the Commission and the underlying interests of the commissioners, rather than those of British society as a whole. It is notable that CORAB provides no evidence to support its assertions on this issue and precisely why religion and belief literacy deserve to be given such priority (especially given the continuing decline of religion in British society) is a question that remains unanswered.<sup>88</sup>

The concerns here, evidently, are twofold. First the panelists take the emphasis on religion and belief literacy as evidence of partisanship on the part the CORAB commission. Second, these writers take seriously the demographic side of the secularization thesis and view demographic decline as a sign that a diminishing minority aims to impose its will on a majority. Implicit in these contentions is the idea that there is an unadvertised advocacy campaign at work. According to this interpretation, CORAB’s compilers are smuggling in a religiously motivated agenda into a seemingly neutral policy proposal.

This critical response highlights a tension at the heart of religious literacy: the suspicion that an evangelizing mission underlies an ostensibly nonpartisan initiative. This charge, whether true or false, is difficult to challenge and one which recurs with great frequency throughout the debate around religious literacy. The pervasiveness of this claim underscores the potential difficulties with implementing religious literacy training programs. Unsurprisingly, proponents of religious literacy frequently take pains to emphasize the neutrality and

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<sup>88</sup> “A Secularist Response to CORAB,” 5.

democratic compatibility of their claims. The charge that religious literacy elevates the place of religion within public imaginations remains a point of contestation.

The concept of religious literacy has made inroads into the highest levels of civil society and the U.K. government has played a key role in advancing the agenda. Within recent years, the term religious literacy itself has become prevalent within the Houses of Parliament. In 2016, the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Religious Education (APPG on RE) released a report entitled “Improving Religious Literacy: A Contribution to the Debate.” Rather than framing the report as an attempt to measure or quantify religious literacy, the report instead aimed to promote dialogue on religion amongst policymakers and within civil society. According to the document, “it intends to stimulate a conversation among policymakers about how greater religious literacy can be promoted.”<sup>89</sup> The report goes on to state its objectives as calling on “the government to take the need for religious literacy in society seriously, and make its promotion a long-term priority.”<sup>90</sup> As this statement suggests, the APPG on RE intends to foster public debate and, in so doing, introduce the term “religious literacy” into the public idiom. With government backing, religious literacy becomes normalized as a means of talking about religion within the public sphere.

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<sup>89</sup> “Improving Religious Literacy: A Contribution to the Debate,” *All-Party Parliamentary Group on Religious Education* (July 2016): 5, <https://www.fionabruce.org.uk/sites/www.fionabruce.org.uk/files/2018-02/All-Party%20Parliamentary%20Group%20on%20Religious%20Education%20-%20Improving%20Religious%20Literacy%20-%20A%20Contribution%20to%20the%20Debate.pdf>.

<sup>90</sup> “Improving Religious Literacy,” *APPG on RE*, 5.

Since the report emphasizes the importance of cultivating higher levels of religious literacy, it rightly takes pains to define the term. The report's authors outline a four-part definition, which underscores the changing nature of the British religious landscape and strategies for engaging with it. According to the report, religious literacy entails:

1. A basic level of knowledge about both the particular beliefs, practices and traditions of the main traditions in Britain, and the shape of our changing religious landscape today. This must be complemented by a conceptual understanding of what religious belief systems are, and how they may function in the lives of individuals.
2. An awareness of how beliefs, inherited traditions and textual interpretations might manifest into actions, practices and daily lives of individuals. Crucial to this is an understanding of the diversity within religious traditions, and an awareness of the ways in which the same text, or religious principle, can be interpreted in different ways by different individuals.
3. A critical awareness, meaning that an individual has the ability to recognise, analyse and critique religious stereotypes, and engage effectively with, and take nuanced approaches towards, the questions raised by religion.
4. A sophisticated ability to engage with religious groups in a way which promotes respect and plurality, and which enables effective communication about religion.<sup>91</sup>

Taken together, these statements advance an understanding of religious literacy that brings dispositional qualities to the fore. In other words, religious literacy does not only entail an understanding of religious concepts, but also cultivating the right attitude towards religious ideas and communities. The emphasis on the term "awareness," moreover, highlights the authors' belief in cultivating individual responsibility in the service of promoting respectful coexistence. Take definition number 3, for instance. The report urges people to cultivate "a critical awareness" in order to, among other things, "engage effectively with...the questions

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<sup>91</sup> "Improving Religious Literacy," *APPG on RE*, 6.

raised by religion.” The demographic decline of religion, here, appears to undergird this section. Despite the authors’ insistence that people must have the “ability to recognise, analyse and critique religious stereotypes,” all of which imply the active presence of overtly religious individuals who may become targets of prejudice, there may be something more underlying these comments. In some ways, this part of the religious literacy definition reads like a primer for those who are unfamiliar with religious ways of being and unaccustomed to interacting with people of various religious backgrounds. Religious literacy, framed in this way, aims to cultivate a particular orientation towards religion, and, by extension, possibly an amenability to “the questions raised by religion.”

Critical responses to the APPG on RE report tell a story of tension underlying religious literacy. Similar to the previously cited critical response to CORAB, the APPG on RE drew criticism from members of the British public concerned with the prioritization of religion reflected in the call for increased religious literacy. In a response to a requested call for evidence from the APPG on RE, the U.K.’s National Secular Society (NSS) challenged what it viewed as the report’s elevation of “religious privilege,”<sup>92</sup> claiming the existence of an outsize emphasis on religion and self-identified religious people throughout the report. Taking issues with the term “religious literacy” itself, the NSS worried that religious literacy, in its ambiguity, has the capacity to function “as a Trojan horse to advance an agenda of increasing religion’s public profile.”<sup>93</sup> As a result, the NSS members were, in their own

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<sup>92</sup> “A Response to the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Religious Education call for evidence on the importance and development of religious Literacy,” *National Secular Society* (April 2016): 1, <https://www.secularism.org.uk/uploads/nss-response-to-appg-on-re-on-religious-literacy-april-2016.pdf>.

<sup>93</sup> “A Response to the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Religious Education,” 2.

words, “concerned that the ‘urgent need’ for improved ‘religious literacy’ is often overstated by those wishing to elevate the status and role of their religion or belief in wider society.”<sup>94</sup> In this view, religious literacy, by its very name, exaggerates the public importance of religion in misleading ways. The NSS members were especially “concerned by the implication that the promotion of religious literacy should be advanced in all areas of public life,” which, to them, appeared “both disproportionate and counter-productive.”<sup>95</sup> This worry stemmed from concerns about influencing future generations:

Young people’s attitudes towards religion will shape future changes in the UK’s religious landscape for better or worse. Those concerned about future generations developing attitudes to religion, in particular the increase in personal religiosity that relegates the role of traditional religious authorities and hierarchies, coupled with an overall decline in religiosity may be prone to moral panic.<sup>96</sup>

The NSS’s alarm highlights the themes of influence and weighting. Presenting religious literacy as a matter of urgency, for the NSS, shows an advocacy agenda at work. The NSS elaborates:

While good religious literacy may counter ill-informed negative views of religion or religious people, attempting to use religious education to foster positive views deprives young people of critical religious literacy skills which they may need to understand and respond to the negative view of religion or religious groups which they will encounter in the real world.<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> “A Response to the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Religious Education,” 7.

<sup>95</sup> “A Response to the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Religious Education,” 9.

<sup>96</sup> “A Response to the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Religious Education,” 7.

<sup>97</sup> “A Response to the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Religious Education,” 4.

Although, in the NSS's assessment, the term remains suspect, religious literacy itself need not cause problems. In this understanding, elevating an uncritically positive view of religion does students a disservice. Moreover, perhaps an unsurprising complaint given the nature of the group, the notion that religious literacy carries with it an unseen advocacy message comes consistently to the fore. Such groups allege that religious literacy aims to cultivate a positive regard towards religion.

Returning to the criticisms of both CORAB and the APPG on RE report, which alleged that the commissions placed undue emphasis on religious views, might play a key role helping discern the motives behind the rhetoric. The argument, here, is one of fairness. CORAB and the APPG on RE, critics insist, privileged religious perspectives by overemphasizing their weight and social significance within public discourse and civil society. In this model, a vocal minority imposes its will and agenda on the majority. This assumption of demographic secularity and institutional religious decline undergirds much of the writing on religious literacy.

Critiques of religious literacy, notably, do not come exclusively from avowedly secularist corners. Educators who come from an explicit position of faith, tellingly, have expressed concern over religious literacy's depictions of religion. For example, the concept, recently, has come under fire from Christian educators who view religious literacy as hostile to young people of faith, particularly those who identify as Christian. Educationalist Daniel Moulin writes, for example, that religious literacy as an approach to Religious Education in U.K.

schools might have a “pathologizing” effect on “student religion.”<sup>98</sup> Concerned especially with faith formation, Moulin writes that curricula should not support an “overarching set of values that either distort religions or marginalize students’ religious identity formation.”<sup>99</sup> Current approaches, in Moulin’s view, have failed “to address how the subject may conceptually and practically accommodate students who actually adhere to, identify with, or practise, religions.”<sup>100</sup> The emphasis on religious literacy, for Moulin, might restrict religiously identifying students from expressing themselves and, as a result, “could potentially act as a positive feedback mechanism for the secularization of mentalities and practice.”<sup>101</sup> Religious literacy, in other words, might, through its didactic stance, distance the object of study—religion and religions—in such a way that would alienate religiously identifying students. Concerned, in particular, that religious literacy programs, under the guise of academic objectivity, would encourage students to “critique religion”<sup>102</sup> and thereby undermine their religious identity formation.

Despite the divergent starting positions of Moulin and the secularist critiques, the overall concerns remain similar: namely, that secularism, as an organizing principle, dictates religious literacy programs. On the one hand, critiques from the secularist responses allege that religious literacy gets it wrong by allocating demographically disproportionate coverage to religion, a strategy intended deliberately to inflate religion’s social importance. On the

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<sup>98</sup> Daniel Moulin, “Doubts about Religious Education in Public Schooling,” *International Journal of Christianity & Education*, Vol. 19, No. 2 (2015): 140.

<sup>99</sup> Moulin, “Doubts about Religious Education in Public Schooling,” 144.

<sup>100</sup> Moulin, “Doubts about Religious Education in Public Schooling,” 144.

<sup>101</sup> Moulin, “Doubts about Religious Education in Public Schooling,” 143.

<sup>102</sup> Moulin, “Doubts about Religious Education in Public Schooling,” 135.

other hand, critics such as Moulin assert that, despite the attention to religion, religious literacy still pushes religious people and perspectives to the margins by virtue of its content and possible emphasis on evaluative critique. In this view, religious literacy, by objectifying religion, distances it from students. In spite of their differences, both sides hold in common the worry that the presentation of religion in such programs might inform young people's views about religion in problematic ways. These shared concerns point to the anxieties underlying the project of religious literacy and the perceived vulnerability of future religious perspectives.

## 1.5 Conclusion

Several of the current religious literacy proposals—and, tellingly, their critics, too—appear to view religion as holding less social prominence than it did in the past, or at least as more prone to vulnerability. This narrative of decline and change, at least in terms of demography and stature, perhaps necessarily underpins religious literacy initiatives. If society were awash with active religious perspectives, would such trainings be necessary? Perhaps not. If demographic diversity and religious pluralism were of primary importance, then mediating between religious perspectives would likely be a chief concern of religious literacy. This, however, is not the case.

Criticism of religious literacy, in particular, highlights the tensions underlying the discussion: namely, what is the place of religious literacy within the context of assumed secularity?

More specifically, such proposals, and their critical responses, signal a wider concern about religion's potentially changing role. Does religious literacy's recent surge in scholarly and popular discourse suggest religions' continued robustness or a symptom of their decline in the public imagination and understanding?

The debate surrounding religious literacy offers some clues about scholarly and popular perceptions. Tellingly, the notion that society has "lost the ability" to talk about religion features prominently in the discourse around religious literacy.<sup>103</sup> The picture that emerges in calls for religious literacy is one in which secularity has become the dominant way of being in the world. As Dinham asserts on the Religious Literacy Partnership website, "Billions of people around the world remain religious, despite the assumptions of secularity."<sup>104</sup> This is meant, in writing for a British popular audience, to be perhaps a surprising assertion, the presumption being that British people are so unaccustomed to live religious ideas and concepts that they are ill-equipped to either engage with, or even recognize, them.

Taken together, many of the approaches that emphasize "values," "content knowledge" and "skills" discussed in this chapter, despite their differences, paint a picture of enhanced democratic participation resulting from increased widespread understanding of religion and religions. Advocacy for understanding religion, framed in terms of religious literacy,

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<sup>103</sup> See, for example: "Home," *Religious Literacy Partnership*, Accessed 1 February 2018, <https://religiousliteracy.org>.

<sup>104</sup> "Home," *Religious Literacy Partnership*, Accessed 1 February 2018, <https://religiousliteracy.org>.

challenges the cultural neutrality of a secularism that, for historical or ideological reasons, keeps the public ignorant about religion. In so doing, it provides a template for engaging with, understanding, and negotiating, religious difference. Narratives of, on the one hand, resurgent religion, and religious decline, on the other, undergird depictions of religious literacy. Religion's place—at the center or at the periphery of public life—remains integral to the debate around religious literacy. Such concerns signal a tension at the heart of the endeavor: a negotiation for space in the policy conversation, and, perhaps, in wider public life.

This is not, however, to say that religious literacy is, as so many critics of teaching religion within school settings have alleged, necessarily a proselytizing move in disguise. Rather, when viewed in this light, the ostensibly secular advocacy position for religious literacy becomes not only a call for increased religious knowledge, but also potentially a call for the choice to participate in religious life. Framed within secularist terms—those of informed civic engagement, neutrality, and increased sociability—religious literacy may be, paradoxically, using secularist frameworks to promote an openness to religious options, or at the very least an amenability to religious concepts and their claims. The proponents of religious literacy deploy the language of modernization and of secularism to challenge the normativity of secular frameworks and orientations. Such language indicates the desire to create a counter-narrative with which to challenge dominant secularist assumptions. In so doing, religious literacy might offer an invitation, rather than a prescription.

For these reasons, religious literacy, especially within the U.K., highlights the tensions that accompany the practical application of religious literacy in policy, education, and civil society. Tangling with notions of the secular, secularity, and secularization, these proposals, often explicitly, question, probe, and challenge present conditions of secularity. In other words, both proponents and detractors of religious literacy ask members of the public to question the prevailing ideas and assumptions about secularity and religion within contemporary liberal democracies.

After all, as both advocates and critics acknowledge, secularism, as an organizing principle, provides the frameworks for religious literacy's formation and ascendancy within policy and educational circles. Against this background, with the notable exception of Prothero, many other proponents of religious literacy make the case that identifiably religious perspectives provide a needed counterpoint, and possibly a corrective, to prevailing secularist discourses. Thus, the actual content of religious literacy proposals may be secondary to their existence. The call to action may be more important than the content of the specific propositions. In positioning themselves as public intellectuals, advocates for religious literacy aim to open up a conversation about religion's role in a seemingly secular, or at the very least, secularist, world. The remainder of this project, in response, takes up the task of examining what their claims about the current state of affairs indicates about the conditions for secularity in the here and now.

## 2 Chapter Two – Public Sphere, Private Choice: Religious Literacy and Public Reason

The perception that religion functions as a “conversation-stopper,”<sup>1</sup> in philosopher Richard Rorty’s dictum, often guides policy and practice. Against this, religious literacy comes onto the scene to help equip budding citizens to enter into the conversation in informed and respectful ways. Pushing back against the notion “one shouldn’t speak about either religion or politics in polite company,”<sup>2</sup> advocates for religious literacy such as Adam Dinham and Matthew Francis urge for increased dialogue and discussion about religion in public life. Stephen Prothero, moreover, states his objectives as aiming to “help citizens participate fully in social, political, and economic life in a nation and a world in which religion counts.”<sup>3</sup> These frequent refrains about religion’s role in public life set the stage for religious literacy advocacy. Conversation about religions is not just the domain of would-be theocrats, such calls suggest. To the contrary, topics pertaining to religion should be accessible, publicly, to people from the full spectrum of religious identification, or lack thereof.

These calls should perhaps come as little surprise. Without an assumed need for public conversation and attention, after all, would religious literacy as a program of education and training be as relevant, urgent, and timely as its proponents suggest? Such a framing

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<sup>1</sup> See: Richard Rorty, “Religion as Conversation-stopper,” in *Philosophy and Social Hope* (London: Penguin Books, 1999), 168.

<sup>2</sup> Adam Dinham and Matthew Francis, *Religious Literacy in Policy and Practice* (Bristol: Policy Press, 2015), 3.

<sup>3</sup> Stephen Prothero, *Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know—And Doesn’t* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2007), 19.

positions religious literacy as a tool for negotiating, or better yet, renegotiating and reconfiguring, public engagement with religions. As Dinham and Francis frame it, the will to talk about religion publicly exists, but what is missing is the toolkit for such engagement religious literacy provides. “[T]he problem is not people’s willingness to have the conversation,” Dinham and Francis assert, but rather “their ability to do so,” which is lacking.<sup>4</sup>

Religious literacy itself signals a shift in priorities within the academy and beyond. It in many ways aligns with recent scholarship that has urged for a reconsideration of the place of religious perspectives in public places.<sup>5</sup> The influential and sizeable religious studies membership organization, the American Academy of Religion (AAR), for example, has played a decisive role in advancing religious literacy as a form of public scholarship. In addition to commissioning guidelines for teaching about religion in U.S. public schools over a decade ago, the AAR has recently released recommendations for enhancing religious literacy in higher education.<sup>6</sup> Although in the past the AAR’s mission was to “foster academic excellence in the study of religion,” it has added “enhan[cing] the public understanding of religion” to its organizational vision.<sup>7</sup> Such a priority fits well with religious literacy’s often-stated goals of fostering understanding and engagement. Religious literacy,

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<sup>4</sup> Adam Dinham and Matthew Francis, *Religious Literacy in Policy and Practice* (Bristol: Policy Press, 2015), 5.

<sup>5</sup> See, for example: Nigel Biggar and Linda Hogan eds., *Religious Voices in Public Places* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

<sup>6</sup> See: “Guidelines for Teaching about Religion in K-12 Public Schools in the United States,” *The American Academy of Religion (AAR)*, April 2010; and “AAR Religious Literacy Guidelines: What U.S. College Graduates Need to Understand about Religion,” *The American Academy of Religion (AAR)*, October 2019.

<sup>7</sup> “About,” *The American Academy of Religion*, Accessed 16 January 2020, <https://www.aarweb.org/about>.

by its very (often, admittedly, varied) definition(s), constitutes the ultimate applied religious studies project in its aim to bring a practical approach to religion to the public. Given its rapid ascent and prevalence within scholarly and popular discourse, religious literacy has become a powerful conceptual tool for organizing public understanding of religions. As a result, it remains critical to consider what such a policy conversation assumes and, more perhaps more significantly, what dynamics it configures and reinforces.

Proponents of religious literacy, relatedly, use the language of preparing students for engagement with a religiously active public sphere. In this way, religious literacy as a case study in engaging with religion within democratic contexts participates in the conversation around religion's role in the public sphere in illustrative ways. At the heart of the debate that surrounds religious literacy lies the issue of whose views warrant inclusion in a liberal-democratic society. As the recent writings in favor of religious literacy suggest, the question of who has the right to be heard features prominently in discussions about religion's proper place in civil society, especially within U.S. public school curricula. Religious literacy, certain proponents argue, will help create an informed citizenry and, as a result, a more equitable society. Within a religious literacy model, students must gain knowledge about religion and acquire certain skills to become equipped to engage in religiously plural democratic contexts.

This chapter argues that religious literacy proposals of recent years exemplify the strategy of presenting religion, and religious perspectives, as well-suited to nominally secular contexts

such as U.S. public schools. Drawing on theoretical insights from Taylor's formulation of "Secularity 3" elaborated in *A Secular Age*<sup>8</sup>—the idea that the present is a time during which religious belief and identity constitutes one option among many—this chapter aims to explain, and contextualize, recent arguments in favor of religious literacy. In what follows, this chapter shows the ways in which religious literacy as a project consolidates Taylor's "Secularity 3." Through a close reading of religious literacy proposals and Taylor's conception of the "imminent frame," this chapter analyzes the ways in which proponents of religious literacy mobilize the language of religious voluntarism through student choice and the goal of self-cultivation in calling for increased religious literacy. This discussion illustrates the ways in which religious literacy, through its emphasis on civic formation and public engagement with religions, advances an understanding of religion predicated on the conventions of the liberal-democratic public sphere. Further, in critiquing religion's purported marginalization from public life, religious literacy advocates aim to reclaim such a narrative from theocrats, and, in so doing, risk tacking too far in the opposite direction: framing religion in terms of voluntarism, discernment, and individual choice.

## 2.1 Secularity 3 and Religious Voluntarism

Charles Taylor's formulation of "Secularity 3" helps explain recent arguments in favor of religious literacy and develops the contention that proponents of religious literacy are in critical conversation with theories of secularism at a time during which religion presents

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<sup>8</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 2-4.

one option among many. Taylor's monumental 2007 work on religion and modernity in the West, *A Secular Age*, offers insight into the changing modes of religiosity within a contemporary context. Taylor opens his work with the following question: "What does it mean to say that we live in a secular age?"<sup>9</sup> He asserts that, despite a widespread agreement that the present time is a secular age, there is little consensus about what that might signify. This problem, that of identifying and analyzing the "secular," occupies the pages of Taylor's tome.

When examining Western societies, Taylor points out the potential insufficiency of contemporary theories of secularization in describing the present situation. As a starting point, Taylor enumerates several of the ways in which contemporary theorists have characterized secularization. He lists religion's retreat from public spaces and the "decline of belief and practice" as possible explanatory factors.<sup>10</sup> However, Taylor remains unconvinced that such explanations account completely for the changing modes of religiosity. According to Taylor, there exists a third, more potent, factor: a set of new conditions of belief that "put an end to the naïve acknowledgement of the transcendent, or of goals or claims which go beyond human flourishing."<sup>11</sup> This third possibility, which Taylor terms "Secularity 3," characterizes modernity. The onset of modernity does not herald religion's complete withdrawal from public spaces or a straightforward decline of

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<sup>9</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 1.

<sup>10</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 20.

<sup>11</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 21.

beliefs and practice; rather, the present, Taylor's assessment suggests, represents a time of change for religion and its expression.

Here Taylor's formulation of "Secularity 3" contributes to the debate. Belief in God, or a lack thereof, remains integral to Taylor's analysis. A central question guides Taylor's inquiry. How, he asks, "was it virtually impossible not to believe in God, in say, 1500 in our Western society, while in 2000 many of us find this not only easy, but even inescapable?"<sup>12</sup> Although Taylor presumes that belief in God was practically an invariant among people of the past, his observation about the present rings true. According to Taylor, over five hundred years ago, belief in God would have been widely accepted as a natural state, whereas today belief in God represents only one possibility among many. This multiplicity of possible perspectives characterizes the present age.

This crucial change, in Taylor's account, resulted, in large part, from "the coming of exclusive humanism as a widely available option."<sup>13</sup> The rise of humanism did not do away with the possibility of belief in God's existence; rather, it precipitated a "shift" from a condition in "which our highest moral and spiritual aspirations point us inescapably to God" to one in which many options exist.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Prothero, *Religious Literacy*, 25.

<sup>13</sup> Prothero, *Religious Literacy*, 21.

<sup>14</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 26.

Taylor's well-known formulation of the "immanent frame," which he discusses at length in *A Secular Age* and elsewhere, plays a decisive role in his conception of modernity. In an essay entitled "Western Secularity," Taylor writes how it is now possible to describe the world in purely immanent terms, that is, without reference to a transcendent power. In Taylor's estimation, modern, Western societies need not rely on the belief in a divine cosmos to dictate the social order. As Taylor explains, "the possibility of really conceiving of, or imagining, ourselves within such an order, one that could be accounted for on its own terms" renders "belief in the transcendent as a kind of 'optional extra.'"<sup>15</sup> According to Taylor's hypothesis, this immanent order became self-sustaining and autonomous. Although the new immanent order did not preclude the existence of a transcendent reality, belief in the transcendent was no longer a requisite condition for society's maintenance and self-conception.

In Taylor's assessment, humans were once embedded in an enchanted natural and social world. Taylor asserts that, in pre-modern times, "people couldn't conceive of themselves as potentially disconnected from this social matrix."<sup>16</sup> People were, as Taylor describes, socially connected to one another and to the natural world. Today, however, with the rise of the modern conception of self came a process of dis-embedding, wherein people no longer feel a close affinity for the world that exists outside their narrowly bounded selves.

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<sup>15</sup> Charles Taylor, "Western Secularity," in *Rethinking Secularism*, eds. Craig Calhoun, Mark Juergensmeyer, and Jonathan VanAntwerpen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, USA, 2011), 50.

<sup>16</sup> Taylor, "Western Secularity," in *Rethinking Secularism*, 44.

Implicit in Taylor's assessment of religion and modernity is the question of whether the process of dis-embedding can be undone. Taylor points to a fundamental dissatisfaction with the modern conception of self and its attendant "existential condition."<sup>17</sup> As Taylor notes, "[p]erhaps the clearest sign of the transformation in our world is that today many people look back on the porous self with nostalgia."<sup>18</sup> He takes this nostalgia for the past as evidence of disaffection with the present. In Taylor's belief, "the creation of a thin emotional boundary between us and the cosmos" precipitated the present state of dissatisfaction.<sup>19</sup> People in present times endeavor "to recover some measure of this lost feeling."<sup>20</sup> This assumed yearning for fulfillment or a desire for human flourishing, which Taylor describes as "fullness,"<sup>21</sup> represents an inherent human characteristic.

The related theme of dissatisfaction with aspects of modernity pervades *A Secular Age*. In a chapter tellingly entitled "The Unquiet Frontiers of Modernity," Taylor argues that "modern culture is restless at the barriers of the human sphere."<sup>22</sup> According to Taylor, people experience this sense of disquiet "when searching for meaning," "in moments of bereavement," and even "in moments of relaxation in nature."<sup>23</sup> Taylor interprets these observations to indicate the presence of a basic human impulse to break through the current immanent order.

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<sup>17</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 38.

<sup>18</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 38.

<sup>19</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 38.

<sup>20</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 38.

<sup>21</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 5.

<sup>22</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 726.

<sup>23</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 727.

In his writings on secularism, Taylor offers a cautiously optimistic vision for religion's future. In his assessment of the present, people seek, perhaps unwittingly, to break with the immanent order of society. They search for a transcendent reality, which, from their position within the immanent frame, they are unable to identify.<sup>24</sup> This pursuit instills a sense of hopefulness in Taylor about the role of the transcendent.

Modernity, rather than closing the door on a transcendent reality, offers a "gamut of possibilities."<sup>25</sup> One possible avenue for reconnecting to the transcendent reality, paradoxically, is through the "expressive individualism"<sup>26</sup> that characterizes the present. Citing the New York Times columnist David Brooks, Taylor describes how "self-cultivation is the imperative."<sup>27</sup> At present, "personal development and self expression"<sup>28</sup> express our highest values. Life within the present "Age of Authenticity,"<sup>29</sup> as Taylor terms it, need not obviate the need to grasp for the transcendent.

Taylor's theories of the present, "secular" age, therefore, offer a useful perspective on religious literacy. In particular, his formulation of "Secularity 3," the new conditions of possibility for faith in the present, provides a way to examine such proposals. In a world in which belief in God represents one possible belief among many, religion, at least from the

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<sup>24</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 768.

<sup>25</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 757.

<sup>26</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 473.

<sup>27</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 477.

<sup>28</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 477.

<sup>29</sup> See: Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 475-505.

perspective of those who privilege belief as a measure of religiosity, requires exposure to its basic propositions for its continued existence. Put differently, for religion to constitute a viable option, it must be made readily accessible to potential adherents.

In particular, Taylor focuses on the young, whom he sees as cause for optimism about religion's future. During an age in which religion presents one choice among many, it still represents a viable, and possibly potent, option. Taylor argues that "[m]any young people are following their own spiritual instincts."<sup>30</sup> This spiritual seeking, for Taylor, demonstrates a desire on the part of young people to transcend the immanent frame. Thus, within the current "Age of Authenticity," belief represents an attainable, and potentially desirable, choice on the part of an individual. Young people, as Taylor emphasizes, represent the best hope for religion's future. As a result, the ways in which students learn about religion may be of the utmost importance for their later attitude towards it.

Religious literacy discourse strengthens the conditions of Taylor's "Secularity 3." First and foremost, the idea that religion presents simply one option among many pervades the growing discourse around religious literacy. In their previously-discussed book,<sup>31</sup> *Taking Religion Seriously Across the Curriculum*, Nord and Haynes assert that the notion of a culture war within American society distorts the reality on the ground and complicates contemporary education policy.<sup>32</sup> They contend that, despite the potential divisiveness of

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<sup>30</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 506.

<sup>31</sup> See Chapter 1 for a discussion of Nord and Haynes' main arguments and contributions to religious literacy.

<sup>32</sup> Warren A. Nord, and Charles Haynes, *Taking Religion Seriously Across the Curriculum*, (Alexandria,

religious issues, public schools should accord space to teaching about religion in the classroom. In so doing, they call for educators, and, by extension, public education as a whole, to take religious truth claims seriously. By disregarding such views, proponents argue, the public-school curricula suggest religious perspectives are irrelevant at best, or, at worst, suspect. As a first order of business, Nord and Haynes argue that religious liberty, enshrined in the First Amendment, provides the necessary foundation of religion courses. Taking religion seriously, for Nord and Haynes, is predicated on taking religious liberty seriously.<sup>33</sup> Eliminating the confusion that surrounds the religious liberty clause of the First Amendment constitutes a priority for Nord and Haynes. In their assessment, by displacing religion from public school curricula, schools have demonstrated their incomprehension of “the religious liberty rights of students.”<sup>34</sup> In this view, public school students have both a right and a civic duty to learn about religion. Schools that fail to address the topic of religion fail, in Nord and Haynes’ opinion, in their civic purpose: to train informed citizens. Taking religion seriously, for Nord and Haynes, entails according it sufficient airtime across the curriculum.

Nord and Haynes, in this way, aim to provide both an educational and a civic rationale for increasing what they term religious literacy. According to the authors, a “shared vision of religious liberty” underpins this new educational initiative.<sup>35</sup> They call for the advent of a “civil public school,” to mediate between the extremes of either a “sacred public school”

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Virginia: Association for Supervision & Curriculum Development (ASCD), 1998), 6.

<sup>33</sup> Nord and Haynes, *Taking Religion Seriously Across the Curriculum*, 15.

<sup>34</sup> Nord and Haynes, *Taking Religion Seriously Across the Curriculum*, 15.

<sup>35</sup> Nord and Haynes, *Taking Religion Seriously Across the Curriculum*, 15.

that privileges one vision of religion or a “naked public school” that bars religion from its premises.<sup>36</sup> This civil public school would set a new standard for religious inclusion. In Nord and Haynes’ words, it would provide a space wherein “people of all faiths and no faith are treated with fairness and respect.”<sup>37</sup> Such fairness, for Nord and Haynes, begins with the inclusion of religious perspectives. They argue that sidestepping religion within the curriculum is tantamount to denigrating religion. For Nord and Haynes, “it is anything but neutral to ignore religion.”<sup>38</sup> State neutrality in matters of religion necessitates inclusion. They add that an education, within a liberal democracy, should “include religious as well as secular ways of understanding the world.”<sup>39</sup> In this line of thinking, by excluding mentions of religion from the curricula, the government disfavors religious perspectives.

Nord and Haynes cite the U.S. Supreme Court’s opinion that public school should neither advance nor inhibit religion as justification for religion’s inclusion in the curriculum. They write: “We are convinced that the curriculum does inhibit religion by marginalizing religion in our intellectual and cultural life, (implicitly) conveying the sense that religion is irrelevant.”<sup>40</sup> As the forceful wording of this passage suggests, Nord and Haynes view religion’s virtual exclusion from the curriculum as unstated discrimination against religious viewpoints.

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<sup>36</sup> Nord and Haynes, *Taking Religion Seriously Across the Curriculum*, 15.

<sup>37</sup> Nord and Haynes, *Taking Religion Seriously Across the Curriculum*, 15.

<sup>38</sup> Nord and Haynes, *Taking Religion Seriously Across the Curriculum*, 18.

<sup>39</sup> Nord and Haynes, *Taking Religion Seriously Across the Curriculum*, 23.

<sup>40</sup> Nord and Haynes, *Taking Religion Seriously Across the Curriculum*, 25.

In response, Nord and Haynes propose incorporating religious perspectives into the public-school curriculum in Constitutionally permissible and academically rigorous ways. Advancing their contention that “[o]ne can’t be an educated human being without understanding a good deal about religion,”<sup>41</sup> Nord and Haynes outline an argument for teaching about religion from an academic standpoint. They enumerate the following four points of their argument:

*First*, because of the powerful influence of religion on our history and culture it is essential—not optional—to include religion in the curriculum. *Second*, the influence of religion is not limited to history: students must understand the relevance of religion on contemporary life. *Third*, religion is relevant to virtually all subjects of the curriculum. *Finally*, it is important for students to understand a variety of religions, not just their own.<sup>42</sup>

Although the arguments may at first glance appear disparate, they advance a consistent message. These four arguments, which comprise the core of Nord and Haynes’ thesis, point to a central theme of their work: religion’s continued relevance. Although the first of the arguments cites a historical reason for religion’s inclusion in the curriculum, it remains clear that the authors are interested in the contemporary impact of religion. Their emphasis on the word “culture” indicates that they view relegating religion to the area of history as an incomplete depiction of the state of current affairs. Rather, Nord and Haynes argue for religion’s enduring importance. In Nord and Haynes’ estimation, religion pertains not only to the domain of religious studies, but also to all areas of the curriculum. In their assessment,

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<sup>41</sup> Nord and Haynes, *Taking Religion Seriously Across the Curriculum*, 35.

<sup>42</sup> Nord and Haynes, *Taking Religion Seriously Across the Curriculum*, 37.

religious views play a decisive role in shaping human perspectives on fundamental matters such as “suffering and death, reason and faith, happiness and justice.”<sup>43</sup> The task of curriculum writers, therefore, should be to reintroduce religion into the public school textbooks and to end the tacit silence on religious matters.

For them, teaching about religion, and specifically the Bible, forms a necessary component of liberal education. In their estimation, teaching about religion means teaching a variety of understandings. In failing to teach citizens about a multiplicity of religious perspectives, schools are unsuccessful in their basic mission: to expose students to diverse opinions and to teach citizens to engage with a variety of viewpoints. Teaching about religion, within the strictures of the Constitution, constitutes a foundational component of a national civic project. In Nord and Haynes’ view, an informed citizenry is one that can identify differing points of view and is equipped to engage with those differences in a productive manner.

Nord and Haynes do not merely assert that an understanding of religion provides an indispensable part of the training required for responding to multiple perspectives and arguments. They go further. As pupils progress through the public school curriculum, “most of the answers students encounter will be secular...[b]ut there are both secular and religious ways of asking, reflecting on, and answering these unavoidable ‘existential’ questions.”<sup>44</sup> Students, as Nord and Haynes hasten to add, ultimately may not arrive at religious answers

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<sup>43</sup> Nord and Haynes, *Taking Religion Seriously Across the Curriculum*, 27.

<sup>44</sup> Nord and Haynes, *Taking Religion Seriously Across the Curriculum*, 38.

to fundamental questions, but they may be ill-equipped to begin answering such questions if they do not receive adequate exposure in the first instance. Religious literacy, in this view, necessitates the inclusion of multiple perspectives.

In much the same vein, Stephen Prothero asserts that America has become a nation of “religious illiterates.”<sup>45</sup> Continuing Nord and Haynes’ program of teaching about religion in public schools, Prothero constructs a civic and educational argument in favor of religious literacy. Tellingly, Prothero insists that students learn about Christianity, by virtue of its status as the majority religion of the United States. Prothero asserts forcefully that “the most important of these particular literacies is Christian literacy.”<sup>46</sup> Positioning himself in opposition to multicultural pedagogical approaches, Prothero insists that educators must pay serious attention to America’s status as “the world’s most Christian country.”<sup>47</sup> Rather than relying on an approach that highlights America’s religious diversity, educators should instead forge ahead with the unfashionable project of emphasizing “Christianity over other religions.”<sup>48</sup> To bolster his claim that Christianity should take priority, Prothero cites the preponderance of Christians within the “corridors of power.”<sup>49</sup> For Prothero, understanding American politics is predicated on understanding Christianity. In a political system awash in references to the “Golden Rule” or the “Good Samaritan,” students, as the future participants in said system, must become conversant in its dominant symbols and narratives.

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<sup>45</sup> Prothero, *Religious Literacy*, 27.

<sup>46</sup> Prothero, *Religious Literacy*, 15.

<sup>47</sup> Prothero, *Religious Literacy*, 15.

<sup>48</sup> Prothero, *Religious Literacy*, 15-16.

<sup>49</sup> Prothero, *Religious Literacy*, 16.

Like Nord and Haynes' *Taking Religion Seriously Across the Curriculum*, Prothero's *Religious Literacy* frames teaching about religion in public schools as a civic matter. From the outset, Prothero states his aim as helping "citizens [to] participate fully in social, political, and economic life in a nation and world in which religion counts."<sup>50</sup> For Prothero, having a well-informed civic body necessitates content knowledge about religion. Prothero elaborates that the goal of religious literacy educational programs is "to produce citizens who know enough about Christianity and the world's religions to participate meaningfully—both on the left and the right—in religiously inflected public debates."<sup>51</sup> In Prothero's view, then, teaching about religion in schools would perform the necessary function of preparing citizens to engage with a religiously active nation and world. In this way, Nord, Haynes, and Prothero are united in understanding religious literacy as part of training for robust engagement in the public sphere.

However, despite the apparent confidence with which religious literacy initiative proponents argue, the proposals evince a concern that religious perspectives may no longer hold the same currency as they did in the recent past. Of religion's role in the public school curriculum Warren Nord writes, "part of taking religion seriously is taking its claim to have truth seriously, and we cannot do this unless we allow it to enter the rough-and-tumble of intellectual competition."<sup>52</sup> For Nord, then, religious perspectives should be afforded the

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<sup>50</sup> Prothero, *Religious Literacy*, 19.

<sup>51</sup> Prothero, *Religious Literacy*, 22.

<sup>52</sup> Warren A. Nord, *Religion and American Education: Rethinking a National Dilemma* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1995), 241.

opportunity to contend fairly with other views. As Nord's comments imply, religion remains at an unfair disadvantage if textbooks do not give religious truth claims credence. Crucially, Nord and Haynes do not make an explicitly majoritarian argument, claiming that so-called religious perspectives, given their prevalence, must receive a seat at the table. Rather, as one option among many competing others, such perspectives must fight to be heard.

## 2.2 Taking Religion Seriously

Taylor's analysis has implications for religious literacy and the advocates for religious literacy under discussion appear to view the present religious landscape in ways that accord with Taylor's vision of today as an "age of authenticity" predicated on individual choice and discernment. Connecting Taylor's assessment of the present so-called secular age to the arguments of religious literacy proponents points to a key theme: religious voluntarism, enabled specifically through deliberative democracy's mechanisms. Here, the "rough-and-tumble of intellectual competition" provides the means of accessing and engaging with "religious" ideas. As such statements suggest, this case for religion's inclusion rests on secular liberal assumptions and assemblages. The very act of "taking religion seriously" itself reflects the assumption of choice, specifically, informed choice. In other words, in Nord and Haynes' view, students must be free to reflect critically on their own tradition and those of others. Calls to take religion seriously themselves invoke a secular paradigm that privileges, and presumes, choice.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Elizabeth A. Pritchard, "Seriously, What Does 'Taking Religion Seriously' Mean?," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Vol. 78, No. 4 (December 2010): 1087.

Supporting the point that religious literacy proponents such as Nord and Haynes rely on conventions of democratic discourse, Elizabeth A. Pritchard, for example, has suggested that calls to “take religion seriously,” rather than decentering secular assumptions as is often their stated aim, instead offers “an insidious reinscription of a secular liberal assumption, i.e., that a nonconflictual, liminal space free of power can be created.”<sup>54</sup> Put differently, the move to take religion seriously itself entails taking a critical distance from the subject at hand. Students, in this model, acquire knowledge of religion in order to make informed choices. The move to “take religion seriously” itself presupposes the supremacy of the aims of deliberative democracy as a regulatory mechanism and thereby has the capacity to set the terms of engagement.

In her own critique of Nord and Haynes, through the lens of “taking religion seriously,” Pritchard gets at the heart of the matter when she asserts that Nord and Haynes “seem oblivious to the secular bidding done by the ideology of exposure to (and religion’s submission to) the marketplace of ideas or the purported ‘critical distance’ (supposedly antithetical to indoctrination) claimed of liberal education.”<sup>55</sup> As Pritchard’s critique correctly suggests, invoking the language of the marketplace of ideas highlights the reliance of the norms and conventions of deliberative democracy and rational persuasion.

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<sup>54</sup> Pritchard, “Seriously, What Does ‘Taking Religion Seriously’ Mean?,” 1089.

<sup>55</sup> Pritchard, “Seriously, What Does ‘Taking Religion Seriously’ Mean?,” 1093.

The strategy of appealing to individual conscience, freedom, democracy, and self-cultivation has implications for the varieties of perspectives accorded space within religious literacy proposals. An additional caution to this approach comes from certain theological quarters. Vocal critics of liberalism, including theologian Stanley Hauerwas, fault liberal democracy for essentially censoring what religious people are permitted to say in public. Taking this critique a step further, Hauerwas notes that an approach that privileges the aims of deliberation evidences “the presumption that students ought to be educated to ‘make up their own minds’ since indoctrination is antithetical to ‘education.’”<sup>56</sup> He continues, “teaching students to ‘make up their own minds’ is a form of indoctrination but since it underwrites the hegemonic character of liberalism, few notice it as such.”<sup>57</sup> Although Hauerwas’ project, in framing the liberal order as somehow inherently antitheological, advances a particular agenda and calls for justifying positions on the basis of explicitly Christian arguments, it also points to some significant underlying tensions. Hauerwas, here, offers a useful critique and perspective on Nord and Haynes’ vision of religious literacy. Becoming religiously literate entails taking a critical distance, which promotes the idea of free choice.

Although certain religious literacy proponents take pains to note that public school curricula should steer clear of indoctrinating students, scholars like Nord prioritize the role of each student’s individual conscience. As Taylor contends, the current “Age of Authenticity” paves

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<sup>56</sup> Stanley Hauerwas, *Dispatches from the Front: Theological Engagements with the Secular* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994), 13.

<sup>57</sup> Hauerwas, *Dispatches from the Front*, 13.

the way for the acceptance of an expressive individualism that privileges self-cultivation. In this model, each individual must draw his or her own conclusions. In this way, religious literacy, grounds itself in appeals to individual choice and deliberation. As an example, in a single-authored work, Nord writes:

Religious perspectives must be allowed to contend with other perspectives in the critical conversation that a liberal education should nurture; religion can't be compartmentalized, rendered irrelevant to the rest of education, if education is to serve the purposes of critical thinking. It would seem, then, that barring any special reasons for excluding religion from the conversation...a liberal education must take religion seriously, nurturing an inside understanding of religions, as live options, as part of a critical conversation.<sup>58</sup>

Appealing to religions as “live options”<sup>59</sup> that form “part of a critical conversation” offers a prescriptive take on Taylor’s descriptive theories of secularism. Religious perspectives, when presented as part of a program of education, must offer a viable choice for students. If, as Taylor’s assessment suggests, contending perspectives characterize the present age, then the crucial task for advocates of a particular position must be to engage in public discourse. As this chapter argues, religious literacy proposals of recent years exemplify the strategy of presenting religion, and religious perspectives, as fundamentally well-suited to nominally secular contexts such as U.S. public schools.

Although it is unclear whether Taylor himself would look favorably on current instantiations of religious literacy—especially given that there is little, if any, evidence that gaining content

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<sup>58</sup> Warren A. Nord, *Does God Make a Difference: Taking Religion Seriously in our Schools and Universities* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 113.

<sup>59</sup> For a fuller discussion of the formulation “live options,” see Chapter 1.

knowledge about religions or skills for engaging with religions would necessarily help individuals in their spiritual seeking—his perspectives offer commentary on the current situation vis-à-vis religious literacy. In Taylor’s view, the present is an age wherein belief in God is but one possible view among many other perspectives. As a consequence, then, believers must compete within the realm of public debate in order to make their views known. As Talal Asad argues, “the enjoyment of free speech presupposes not merely the physical ability to speak but *to be heard*.”<sup>60</sup> Therefore, following in Asad’s logic, people who hope for a belief-centric vision of religion’s continued vitality and relevance must argue their case to willing listeners. They must, moreover, as scholars such as Cornel West assert, use language that is widely accessible.<sup>61</sup> Willing listeners, particularly those who are exposed to messages that resonate with them, constitute an ideal audience.

For that reason, the drive to include religious perspectives in primary and secondary education follows naturally from this strategy. If schools present religious perspectives as intelligible and viable positions, then students face a choice among live options. The authors of religious literacy proposals appear to be well-attuned to such logic. For example, in his writing, Nord states his aim clearly: to ensure that students recognize that religion presents a plausible choice in the present age. Textbooks, he argues, depict religion, if at all, as a relic of history, a “museum piece.”<sup>62</sup> As a result, students are unlikely to encounter religion

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<sup>60</sup> Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 184. Emphasis original.

<sup>61</sup> Cornel West, “Prophetic Religion and the Future of Capitalist Civilization,” in *The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere*, eds. Judith Butler, Eduardo Mendieta, and Jonathan VanAntwerpen (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 93.

<sup>62</sup> Nord, *Religion and American Education*, 1.

as “a live option for understanding the here and now.”<sup>63</sup> As such comments suggest, Nord endeavors to depict religion as a living, breathing, vital reality. Including religious viewpoints and sacred texts in the public-school curricula suggests to students that, as Nord wishes to convey, religion represents a real option for young people. It is, in other words, a viable option among the “gamut of possibilities” emergent in Taylor’s conception of modernity.

Tellingly, the ideals of freedom and individual conscience feature prominently in the literacy proposals under discussion. Religion, as theories of secularism contend, no longer occupies the *de facto* position; it is merely one possibility among many. Citing Rational Choice Theories of religion, Nord, for example, asserts that “religion continues to possess a good deal of vitality in our cultural marketplace.”<sup>64</sup> Therefore, according to this logic, to omit religion from the curricula would be to deprive students of their right to choose. Neglecting to teach religious perspectives is tantamount to disenfranchisement. If students remain ignorant of their options, they are not free to choose. Freedom, for the proposals’ authors, equates to religious voluntarism. In this way, the religious literacy proposals exemplify the modernist project of favoring persuasion over coercion.

### **2.3 Inclusion in the Public Sphere**

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<sup>63</sup> Nord, *Religion and American Education*, 1.

<sup>64</sup> Nord, *Religion and American Education*, 377.

At the heart of the debate that surrounds religious literacy courses lies the issue of whose views warrant inclusion in a liberal-democratic society. As the recent writings in favor of religious literacy programs suggest, the question of who has the right to be heard features prominently in discussions about religion's proper place in public discussion. In this way, the inclusion of religious perspectives in state-funded educational settings connects inextricably with debates about the public sphere.

Recent calls to rethink religion's engagement with the so-called public sphere have advocated for caution and clarity regarding the commonly-invoked term "public religion."<sup>65</sup> In an essay about the place of contemporary theorizations of public religion, Matthew Engelke warns "that the parameters of what constitutes publicity need careful consideration."<sup>66</sup> In other words, what are the conditions under which religion becomes public? What are the "modes of publication, presence, and circulation?"<sup>67</sup> Religious literacy, and its attendant assumptions about public reason and individual choice, point to a particular configuration of public religion that prioritizes the aims of deliberative democracy. In considering public religion through the lens of religious literacy, there emerges a framing of religion within educational and policy spaces that carries with it the legacies of liberal modernity. Such examples suggest that, despite the cautions of scholarship on this front and calls for nuancing of conceptions of public religion, educational policy, and practice in the case of religious literacy show the enduring power

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<sup>65</sup> Matthew Engelke, "Rethinking Public Religion: Word, Image, Sound," *The Immanent Frame*, 30 April 2019, <http://tif.ssrc.org/2019/04/30/rethinking-public-religion-introduction/>.

<sup>66</sup> Engelke, "Rethinking Public Religion."

<sup>67</sup> Engelke, "Rethinking Public Religion."

of liberal understandings of the autonomous self, individual choice, and the public sphere in ways that have the capacity to remake and inscribe understandings of religions.

Jürgen Habermas' theories, which he set down in his work, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*,<sup>68</sup> paved the way for future discussions about the public sphere. The public sphere, as Habermas conceived of it, was a space wherein people could interact with one another "as private citizens" to discuss the "public good."<sup>69</sup> Above all, this space, which, in Habermas' account, began to take shape in the eighteenth century, privileged reason as an evaluation metric.<sup>70</sup> Within this model, citizens either accepted or rejected propositions regarding the public good on the basis of an argument's reasonableness.<sup>71</sup> In this space of "rational deliberation," an argument's strength determined its success or failure.<sup>72</sup>

After *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere's* publication, critics faulted the analysis for what they deemed a significant omission: the role of religion in public debate.<sup>73</sup> In recent years, however, Habermas has taken up the question of religion's role in the public sphere.<sup>74</sup> His 2011 essay, "'The Political': The Rational Meaning of a Questionable

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<sup>68</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991), translated by Thomas Burger.

<sup>69</sup> Eduardo Mendieta and Jonathan VanAntwerpen, "Introduction" in *The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere*, eds. Judith Butler, Eduardo Mendieta, and Jonathan VanAntwerpen (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 2.

<sup>70</sup> Mendieta and VanAntwerpen, "Introduction" in *The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere*, 2.

<sup>71</sup> Mendieta and VanAntwerpen, "Introduction" in *The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere*, 2.

<sup>72</sup> Mendieta and VanAntwerpen, "Introduction" in *The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere*, 2.

<sup>73</sup> Mendieta and VanAntwerpen, "Introduction" in *The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere*, 2.

<sup>74</sup> Mendieta and VanAntwerpen, "Introduction" in *The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere*, 2.

Inheritance of Political Theology,” for example, considers religion’s place in the public sphere. In the piece, Habermas discusses how the public sphere cannot be divested of religion. Habermas writes, “as long as religious communities play a vital role in civil society and the public sphere, deliberative politics is as much a product of the public use of reason on the part of *religious* citizens as on *nonreligious* citizens.”<sup>75</sup> Provided that religious perspectives persist, the public sphere will remain religiously inflected.

Furthermore, Habermas raises the question of the extent to which religious citizens must frame their arguments in terms that their nonreligious counterparts will understand. Citing John Rawls’ conception of public reason, Habermas discusses how, according to Rawls’ line of thinking, “all citizens should be free to decide whether they want to use religious language in the public sphere.”<sup>76</sup> However, citizens who choose to use religious language, according to Habermas’ assessment of Rawls’ theory, do so at their own peril. In Habermas’ words, citizens who use religious language would “have to accept that the potential truth contents of religious utterances must be translated into generally accessible language.”<sup>77</sup> Although this process of translation places “an additional, and hence asymmetrical, burden” on citizens who choose to use religious language, Habermas argues that such linguistic maneuvering constitutes a necessary price to pay in return for state-sanctioned religious neutrality.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Jürgen Habermas, “The Political: The Rational Meaning of a Questionable Inheritance of Political Theology,” in *The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere*, eds. Judith Butler, Eduardo Mendieta and Jonathan VanAntwerpen, 24. Emphasis original.

<sup>76</sup> Habermas, “The Political” in *The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere*, 25.

<sup>77</sup> Habermas, “The Political” in *The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere*, 25.

<sup>78</sup> Habermas, “The Political” in *The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere*, 25-26.

Other contemporary commentators disagree with the contention that citizens who use religious language must translate their ideas into a so-called secular idiom. Such a stance, detractors counter, unfairly conceives of citizenship in purely secular terms. Craig Calhoun observes that “[t]he tacit understanding of citizenship in the West has been secular,” insofar as participation in the public sphere comes with certain restrictions.<sup>79</sup> As Calhoun argues, “[p]articipation in the political public sphere is a central dimension of citizenship, so restrictions on public debate are significant.”<sup>80</sup> In Calhoun’s thesis, a fundamental inconsistency underlies liberal democratic civic participation. He writes, “secularists propose a limit on religion in the public sphere, which they take as a basis for equal inclusion.”<sup>81</sup> This “ironic exclusion” privileges one form of discourse over another.<sup>82</sup> He contends that, although liberals value inclusivity, they frequently view restrictions on religious arguments as “unproblematic.”<sup>83</sup>

In Calhoun’s assessment, this curtailing of religious viewpoints represents a pressing modern problem. In the past, he argues, religious diversity was seen as having the potential to “undermine political cohesion.”<sup>84</sup> Today, however, against the backdrop of declining religious affiliation and attachment, religion itself is at issue.<sup>85</sup> In a sphere of public debate

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<sup>79</sup> Craig Calhoun, “Secularism, Citizenship, and the Public Sphere,” in *Rethinking Secularism*, eds. Craig Calhoun, Mark Juergensmeyer, and Jonathan VanAntwerpen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, USA, 2011), 75.

<sup>80</sup> Calhoun, “Secularism, Citizenship, and the Public Sphere,” in *Rethinking Secularism*, 75.

<sup>81</sup> Calhoun, “Secularism, Citizenship, and the Public Sphere,” in *Rethinking Secularism*, 75.

<sup>82</sup> Calhoun, “Secularism, Citizenship, and the Public Sphere,” in *Rethinking Secularism*, 75.

<sup>83</sup> Calhoun, “Secularism, Citizenship, and the Public Sphere,” in *Rethinking Secularism*, 75.

<sup>84</sup> Calhoun, “Secularism, Citizenship, and the Public Sphere,” in *Rethinking Secularism*, 75.

<sup>85</sup> Calhoun, “Secularism, Citizenship, and the Public Sphere,” in *Rethinking Secularism*, 75.

in which “[a]rguments based on faith or divine inspiration don’t qualify,”<sup>86</sup> citizens are forced to recode their language in order for others to lend their views credence.

In a similar fashion, Veit Bader raises the question of which viewpoints are considered acceptable in modern liberal democracies. He asks whose rationality and whose conception of reason will prevail.<sup>87</sup> In response to such questions, Calhoun calls for religious and nonreligious citizens to work “through the debates of the public sphere to find a common ground for citizenship, rather than trying to mandate the common ground by limiting the kinds of reason citizens can bring to their public discussions.”<sup>88</sup> This inclusive public sphere would accord equal airtime to differing perspectives.

Cornel West also sees the potential for religious and nonreligious citizens to come together in creating an inclusive public sphere. In his essay “Prophetic Religion and the Future of Capitalist Civilization” West calls for mutual understanding. In vivid language, West argues that “[t]oo many secular thinkers are religiously tone-deaf and flat-footed.”<sup>89</sup> However, in West’s view, this fundamental incomprehension is not one-sided. Speaking from a self-identified position of faith, West remarks, “religious persons like myself must be secularly musical, because through empathy and imagination, we must try to get inside other peoples’

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<sup>86</sup> Calhoun, “Secularism, Citizenship, and the Public Sphere,” in *Rethinking Secularism*, 76.

<sup>87</sup> Veit Bader, “Public Reason or Moderately Agonistic Democracy?” in *Secularism, Religion and Multicultural Citizenship*, eds. Geoffrey Brahm Levey and Tariq Modood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 132.

<sup>88</sup> Calhoun, “Secularism, Citizenship, and the Public Sphere,” in *Rethinking Secularism*, 88.

<sup>89</sup> Cornel West, “Prophetic Religion and the Future of Capitalist Civilization,” in *The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere*, 93.

view of the world” in order “to understand why persons are convinced by this set of arguments.”<sup>90</sup> In West’s view, nonreligious citizens must become acquainted with religious language, and religious citizens, in turn, must endeavor to speak in a secular idiom. From West’s perspective, mutual understanding represents a pragmatic solution. Democracy’s continued existence, for West, might rest on “the ability to be multicontextual in various frameworks and reason-giving activities in public spaces.”<sup>91</sup> Religious and secular perspectives must engage with one another, and religion’s continued vitality is predicated on an active engagement in public discourse.

Writing in the mid-1990s, José Casanova contends that, contrary to prevailing theories of secularization, religion need not remain private for it to be compatible with democracy. In his influential treatise on religion in the public sphere, *Public Religions in the Modern World*, Casanova calls for a nuancing of secularization theory. As Casanova discusses, differentiation, the notion that secular spheres such as “the state, the economy, and science” have gained “emancipation” from religious control, has long been a mainstay of secularization theory.<sup>92</sup> In addition, Casanova adds two sub-theories, the decline-of-religion theory and the privatization theory. Modernity, in a traditional conception, would bring about religion’s inevitable decline as well as its “marginalization.”<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> West, “Prophetic Religion and the Future of Capitalist Civilization,” in *The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere*, 93.

<sup>91</sup> West, “Prophetic Religion and the Future of Capitalist Civilization,” in *The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere*, 93.

<sup>92</sup> José Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World* (London: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), 20.

<sup>93</sup> Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World*, 20.

In particular, Casanova challenges the idea that religions have been relegated successfully to the private sphere. The core of Casanova's thesis rests on the contention that "we are witnessing a 'deprivatization' of religion."<sup>94</sup> He explains that his neologism "deprivatization" refers to "the fact that religious traditions throughout the world are refusing to accept the marginal and privatized role which theories of modernity as well as theories of secularization had reserved for them."<sup>95</sup> Citing the example of the 1980s, Casanova argues that, rather than retreating from public visibility, religions will "continue playing important roles in the ongoing construction of the modern world."<sup>96</sup> In Casanova's view, religion, and its public expression, will not retreat as previously predicted. As Casanova sees it, religion need not remain relegated to the private sphere for church-state separation to remain intact. To the contrary, he argues, religion's active engagement with the public sphere could, through its "ongoing encounter with modernity," be compatible with modernity.<sup>97</sup> When religions fight for inclusion in the public sphere, they further not only their own freedom, "but all modern freedoms and rights."<sup>98</sup> From Casanova's perspective, religion is not, as some proponents of secularization theory have claimed, antithetical to modernity.

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<sup>94</sup> Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World*, 5.

<sup>95</sup> Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World*, 5.

<sup>96</sup> Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World*, 6.

<sup>97</sup> Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World*, 234.

<sup>98</sup> Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World*, 57.

Religion's engagement with the modern world, however, must conform to specific parameters. In his final section, Casanova asks, "[w]hat are the conditions of possibility for modern public religions?"<sup>99</sup> Casanova answers that religions, in order to thrive, must accept modern terms of engagement. In Casanova's view, "religion may enter the public sphere and assume a public form only if it accepts the inviolable right to privacy and the sanctity of the principle of freedom of conscience."<sup>100</sup> According to Casanova's model, only religions that use modern terms and strategies will forestall their own decline. Moreover, Casanova predicts that "the more religions resist the process of modern differentiation...the more they will tend in the long run to suffer religious decline."<sup>101</sup> Religions, in Casanova's view, must accept that they cannot exert control over the domains of the state, the economy and science. Rather, religions should embrace the modernist ideal of persuasion, not coercion. Religions, in Casanova's assessment, should appeal to the principle of "voluntarism" and thereby allow for potential adherents to choose religion freely.<sup>102</sup>

Asad, one of Casanova's main interlocutors, challenges Casanova's analysis of the public role of religions in modernity. In his *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity*, Asad points to a possible oversight in Casanova's argument. According to Asad, once religions have entered the public sphere, differentiation no longer holds.<sup>103</sup> As Asad notes, if religion enters the public debate, then the spheres of politics, economic, science,

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<sup>99</sup> Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World*, 211.

<sup>100</sup> Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World*, 211.

<sup>101</sup> Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World*, 214.

<sup>102</sup> Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World*, 214.

<sup>103</sup> Asad, *Formations of the Secular*, 182.

and education must feel its influence.<sup>104</sup> In other words, if private beliefs impact public conduct, then religious perspectives will permeate public debate.

Asad, moreover, casts doubt on whether it is ever possible to bracket off the public from the private. As he suggests, private belief must invariably inform public conduct. As Asad asks rhetorically, “[i]f the adherents of a religion enter the public sphere, can their entry leave the preexisting discursive structure intact?”<sup>105</sup> He responds: “[t]he public sphere is not an empty space for carrying out debates. It is constituted by the sensibilities—memories and aspirations, fears and hopes—of speakers and listeners.”<sup>106</sup> Religious perspectives permeate the public sphere because religious people are present.

Returning from theory to practice, the religious literacy initiatives of recent years employ, in Casanova’s formulation, modern terms of engagement.<sup>107</sup> Writers like Nord and Haynes mobilize the language of individual conscience and freedom to argue in favor of teaching religion in public schools. As even a cursory reading of their material suggests, these authors are well-versed in current theories of secularization. Rather than focusing on the question of whether the trends of secularization are reversible, however, the authors appear to embrace the notion that new conditions of possibility for religion abound. Such theories, it seems, shape the ways in which the authors understand religion. In this way, religious

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<sup>104</sup> Asad, *Formations of the Secular*, 182.

<sup>105</sup> Asad, *Formations of the Secular*, 185.

<sup>106</sup> Asad, *Formations of the Secular*, 185.

<sup>107</sup> Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World*, 211.

literacy proponents such as Nord and Haynes deploy the language of modernization and of secularism to make a case for religion's future.

The proponents frame religious literacy in unmistakably modern terms. Prothero, for instance, formulates his argument in favor of teaching about religion as a civics and educational project: one in which students engage with a variety of perspectives. Students must, in his words, learn to navigate "religiously inflected public debates."<sup>108</sup> To accomplish this goal, Prothero appeals to the ideal of self-cultivation, which Taylor identifies as a characteristic of the present age. Prothero argues that the study of sacred texts and narratives, by which he means primarily the Bible, constitutes an integral component of training well-informed citizens. Through their religious literacy training, students will come to view "attaining religious knowledge as both a personal challenge and a civic duty of the highest order."<sup>109</sup> This knowledge will motivate action. Students will, in his estimation, become "empowered to talk about religion" and "emboldened to ask questions about their own faiths."<sup>110</sup> In Prothero's view, then, religious literacy represents a true act of formation enabled by a liberal education. Students, by virtue of their religious literacy training, will become informed citizens. By extension, students will also, as Prothero's writing suggests, become equipped to make informed, individual religious choices.

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<sup>108</sup> Prothero, *Religious Literacy*, 22.

<sup>109</sup> Prothero, *Religious Literacy*, 184.

<sup>110</sup> Prothero, *Religious Literacy*, 19.

As political theorist Stephen Macedo writes, “[p]ublic schools are, and have been from their inception, sites of some of the most interesting and intense conflicts in our polity.”<sup>111</sup> Therefore, if, as Macedo suggests, conflicts in schools reflect larger societal tensions, then it is worthwhile to heed disputes within public education. Theories of secularism and of the public sphere offer useful perspectives with which to interpret religious literacy initiatives. In turn, however, religious literacy initiatives also contribute to contemporary understandings of secularism and the public sphere. Nord, Haynes, and Prothero’s writings on the need for religious literacy suggest that contemporary theories of secularism and the public sphere may be correct in their analyses. At a minimum, the religious literacy proponents appear to give credence to the view that modes of religiosity are transforming to reflect the changing conditions of religious belief and expression in the present age.

Ultimately, the religious literacy initiatives of recent years point to the possibility of changing conditions for religion in the present. Although the “American experience defies the predictions of classical (European) secularization theory”<sup>112</sup> in that religious attendance and adherence continue to thrive, the religious literacy initiatives belie an underlying uncertainty about this assessment. Factors such as the “lack of religious regulation”<sup>113</sup> and the resulting religious voluntarism have long been viewed as antidotes against religious

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<sup>111</sup> Stephen Macedo, *Diversity and Distrust: Civic Education in a Multicultural Democracy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 42.

<sup>112</sup> Linda Woodhead, Paul Heelas and Grace Davie, “Introduction,” in *Predicting Religion: Christian, Secular and Alternative Futures*, eds. Grace Davie, Paul Heelas, and Linda Woodhead (Hampshire: Ashgate Publishing, 2003), 7.

<sup>113</sup> Roger Finke, “An Unsecular America,” in *Religion and Modernization: Sociologists and Historians Debate the Secularization Thesis*, ed. Steve Bruce (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 164-165.

decline in the United States. As a result, certain religious literacy proponents appear to believe that, as in the past, religious voluntarism will serve as a guarantor of religion's vitality within an American context. Religiously informed perspectives, and Christian ones in particular, may be thriving at present, but will they persist well into the future? The answer, for religious literacy proponents, lies in the continued dynamism of the American religious "marketplace."

The authors' concern with religion's perdurance suggests that the conversation about secularism, even within an American context, is far from finished. As their writings indicate, the religious literacy proponents remain convinced that teaching about religion must keep pace with changing possibilities in order to appeal to twenty-first century sensibilities. Religious literacy proponents, in this way, deploy the language of modernization and of secularization to make a case for religion's future. Within this model, inculcation remains unconstitutional within a U.S. context, but exposure to religious perspectives constitutes an acceptable approach. Teaching religious literacy in a secular age, therefore, represents the ultimate liberal project: presenting religion as a vital, viable, and, above all, informed choice.

## **2.4** The Standard of Democratic Discourse

The debate over the extent to which religious people are able, or unable, to bracket off their public from their private selves for the purposes of public reason risks missing a broader

challenge: the inscription of liberal norms as the sometimes-unstated standard. As an example, theologian Nigel Biggar argues in the conclusion of *Religious Voices in Public Places* that “[u]nreasonable religion is a grave problem. But not all forms of religion are unreasonable...Some believers are willing and able to give reasons, to examine and refine them, to win points and concede others, [and] to distinguish areas of agreement and disagreement.”<sup>114</sup> In other words, Biggar makes the case that so-called believers, in this instance theists specifically, essentially follow the same principles for engaging in public discourse as anyone else would do, regardless of underlying principles. The inspiration may differ, but the underlying procedure remains the same.

Biggar’s challenge rests on the translation principle. Using the example of assisted dying within a U.K. context, Biggar insists that Christian theological arguments, properly presented, are perfectly accessible to non-theologians, non-Christians, and the wider public.<sup>115</sup> In so doing, Biggar aims to build the case that members of institutional religion’s appeals to specific religious authorities or sources should not disqualify them from public debate: “So the fact that religious arguments are informed by certain authorities does not mean that their proponents are incapable of deliberating, reasonably and critically, with those who differ from them.”<sup>116</sup> In his hurry to defend religious reasons from what he terms “secularist language,”<sup>117</sup> the conviction “that public discourse should be free of theological

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<sup>114</sup> Nigel Biggar, “Conclusion,” in *Religious Voices in Public Places*, eds. Nigel Biggar and Linda Hogan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 321.

<sup>115</sup> Nigel Biggar, “Not Translation, but Conversation: Theology in Public Debate about Euthanasia,” in *Religious Voices in Public Places*, 161.

<sup>116</sup> Biggar, “Conclusion,” *Religious Voices in Public Places*, 321.

<sup>117</sup> Biggar, “Not Translation, but Conversation,” *Religious Voices in Public Places*, 191.

references, because theological beliefs are uniquely irrational and irreducibly confounding to anyone other than those who hold them,"<sup>118</sup> Biggar ends up playing directly into the hands of those who privilege public reason as the metric by which to assess claims and contending visions for public life. Biggar's defense of the reasonableness of religious positions and corresponding call for fairness highlights the issues at hand.

Prominent voices within this debate come from scholars such as Jeffrey Stout who critiques calls to privatize religion in an attempt to safeguard democracy from theocratic impulses. As Stout argues, such concerns, while real, are often disproportionate because "not all religious people are theocrats."<sup>119</sup> Stout's warning against conflating religious perspectives with theocratic ones presents a useful note of caution.

However, reclaiming religious reason from the theocrats who jeopardize democracy's stability risks something else entirely: framing and, potentially evaluating, religions in terms of democratic compatibility. Take, for example, Stout's following criticism of current variants of secularism:

Secularism comes in many forms, but what they all have in common is the aim of minimizing the influence of religion *as such*. Secularism comes into focus only when we notice that it takes *religion*, rather than some particular religion or type of religion, to be the problem. If, however, some forms of religion are in fact committed to democracy and have evidently promoted democracy in the past, why oppose *them*? Why substitute whole for part and then oppose the whole?<sup>120</sup>

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<sup>118</sup> Biggar, "Not Translation, but Conversation," *Religious Voices in Public Places*, 191.

<sup>119</sup> Jeffrey Stout, "The Folly of Secularism," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Vol. 76, No. 3 (September 2008): 534.

<sup>120</sup> Stout, "The Folly of Secularism," 534. Emphasis original.

In pushing back against democratic secularists who envision democracy as under attack from certain religious quarters and therefore advocate for religion's marginalization from public life, Stout calls for a different approach. Citing examples of combating poverty and advancing civil rights, Stout points to the theological motivations that have underpinned and inspired such acts of good citizenship, the process, as he puts it, of "ordinary people achieving democratic ends by democratic means against great odds."<sup>121</sup> Barring religious motivations from entering the public arena for fear of damaging democracy's aims, might prevent, in Stout's assessment, such laudable achievements from being realized in the first place. It is not that religious motivations necessarily inspire "excellence of citizenship," but rather that barring citizens from access to religious language in public might stand in the way of such actions in the future.<sup>122</sup> Although Stout gets it right in critiquing those who paint religion with too broad a brush, he encounters a problem with his framing of religion, and religious perspectives, as something that either accords neatly, or does not, with the civic aims of democratic polities.

Herein lies the challenge. In arguing for religion's inclusion, Stout overemphasizes democratic compatibility as a metric for religion's inclusion in public discussion. Such approaches might privilege the perspectives of those willing and able to engage in democratic discourse. Although scholars such as Stout recognize that people—religiously

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<sup>121</sup> Stout, "The Folly of Secularism," 544.

<sup>122</sup> Stout, "The Folly of Secularism," 544.

identified or otherwise—are not swayed in predictable ways by rational persuasion alone,<sup>123</sup> often advocates for religious literacy do not make such a nuanced distinction. Such qualifications, understandably, lie beyond the scope of their public engagement projects, especially within the parameters of advocating for religion’s inclusion within the space of liberal education and other areas of civil society. However, in invoking the notion of the democratic, and discursive, public sphere, advocates for religious literacy tap into a wider debate around religion’s place in public life in ways that show some of the inbuilt stumbling blocks.

Returning to Stout’s commentary illustrates the stakes of the debate. He argues in *Democracy and Tradition* that, as the title implies, democracy itself “*is a tradition,*”<sup>124</sup> replete with specific and time-honored conventions, norms, expectations, and precedents. As a counter to so-called traditionalists who view democratic institutions as leading to constant churn, subject to the vicissitudes of popular opinion or unmoored from a necessary connection to past virtues, Stout’s work places democracy squarely within the realm of tradition. Stout is not suggesting that tradition, as he invokes the term, implies stasis. Instead of being open, and therefore potentially vulnerable to constant remaking on the part of partisans, democracy “inculcates certain habits of reasoning, certain attitudes towards deference and authority in political discussion, and love for certain goods and virtues, as well as a disposition to respond to certain types of actions, events, or persons with

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<sup>123</sup> Stout, “The Folly of Secularism,” 538.

<sup>124</sup> Jeffrey Stout, *Democracy and Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 19. Emphasis original.

admiration, pity, or horror.”<sup>125</sup> In Stout’s words, “democratic sociality”<sup>126</sup> has the capacity to guide not only political engagement, but also the ability to form a common life. Despite what he characterizes as a traditionalists’ critique that liberal “democracy undermines itself by destroying the traditional vehicles needed for transmitting the virtues from one generation to another,” Stout counters that this position is overly pessimistic.<sup>127</sup> Rather, Stout suggests that “the ethical heritage of modern democracy can be made intelligible to at least some of those who have been shaped by it.”<sup>128</sup> In making the significant point that even those who critique liberalism do so by employing its terms of engagement, namely rational persuasion and argument,<sup>129</sup> Stout identifies an inbuilt trap: a reliance on the conventions of liberalism to either attack or defend it.

As previously mentioned, Stout notes that, if staunch secularists truly believe that theocrats are either incapable of formulating reasonable positions or impervious to reasonable arguments, why then do they place such a high premium on reason in bringing those who disagree to their side? Apologists taking the opposite approach will argue that religious positions are as reasonable as purportedly secular positions, or correctly note that such a framing presumes a misguided distinction between the two. However, in making the case that religious positions (if they can be distinguished at all from other positions) are no less

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<sup>125</sup> Stout, *Democracy and Tradition*, 19.

<sup>126</sup> Stout, *Democracy and Tradition*, 21.

<sup>127</sup> Stout, *Democracy and Tradition*, 28.

<sup>128</sup> Stout, *Democracy and Tradition*, 31.

<sup>129</sup> Stout, “The Folly of Secularism,” 538.

reasonable than other views, the standard of deliberative democracy emerges as the metric by which to evaluate claims.

## 2.5 Conclusion

The notion that religious perspectives must enter the “rough-and-tumble of intellectual competition,” in Nord’s telling phrasing, brings the wider issues of this chapter into view. Sharing and building upon Prichard’s critique of “taking religion seriously,” this chapter has pointed to the liberal inscriptions of religion within the discourse around religious literacy, highlighting in particular the intellectual consequences of religious literacy’s democracy-building aims. In elevating the standard of deliberative democracy and aiming to demonstrate the compatibility of so-called religious perspectives with the standard of public reason, certain political theorists, theologians, cultural critics, and proponents of religious literacy alike play by the same rules of engagement in ways that risk offering an exclusionary vision of religion and religions. This is not to argue that religious perspectives are inherently unreasonable, in the common staunch secularist reframing, or, conversely, that non-religious perspectives are equally unreasonable and therefore fail to meet their own, self-imposed standard. Rather, the religious literacy case study suggests that, without considering other possibilities and other influences on our formation and resultant decision-making processes, we risk becoming locked into a self-perpetuating system wherein reasonableness and accessibility become the exclusive evaluation metrics. This is not to suggest that reason itself is inherently unreasonable, but rather to propose that other factors also have the potential to inform participation, action, and positions.

Contemporary theories of secularization and the public sphere suggest that contending perspectives characterize the present age. The crucial task for advocates of a particular position, therefore, must be to engage in public discourse. As this chapter has argued, religious literacy initiatives of recent years exemplify the strategy of presenting religion, and religious perspectives, as fundamentally well-suited to contemporary society in their ability to conform to the rules of engagement of deliberative democracy. Although someone like Taylor, whose writings suggest his belief in humans' inherent yearning for a transcendent reality, a sense of "fullness"<sup>130</sup> as he terms it, often absent from view as a result of our position within the "immanent frame," might not fall into the same trap of arguing for the equal salience of "religious" arguments in the accessible language of public reason, Taylor's ideas about the multiplicity of contending perspectives characterizing the present might have the unintended consequence of facilitating or consolidating this kind of thinking.

In an age of multiple available perspectives presenting potential options, autonomous choice, above all, emerges as the key decider in mediating among a variety of positions and possible stances. In this way, calls for fairness and inclusivity of views within religious literacy obscure a deeper underlying mechanism from immediate view. Even useful critiques of the problematic legacy of the classic secularization narrative's public-private binary conception of religion have the capacity to reproduce this issue. As the religious literacy example highlights, calls for fairness and inclusivity of religion and so-called

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<sup>130</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 6.

religious perspectives in public discourse carry with them a prioritization of deliberative democracy's aims in ways that have the capacity to reframe understandings and inscribe the terms of engagement.

### 3 Chapter Three – Religious Literacy and its Limits: Liberalism, Affect, and Pedagogy

Summarizing her recent book on religious literacy within the context of U.S. public school controversies, *Faith Ed: Teaching about Religion in an Age of Intolerance*, education journalist Linda Wertheimer, points to the attendant challenges of attempts at experiential learning in liberal education. Describing a 2013 incident, dubbed “burkagate,” a controversy that ensued after photos surfaced of public school students wearing full body coverings as part of a geography lesson on world religions, Wertheimer warns against attempts at experiential, embodied learning.<sup>1</sup> Although it later emerged that no students were required to try on any of the clothes, the damage was already done, and public outcry followed. What went wrong here, in Wertheimer’s assessment, was that experiential learning techniques opened teachers up to the charge of promoting indoctrination.<sup>2</sup>

Such incidents have prompted her to advance a series of recommendations for educators who wish to incorporate topics of religion into their lessons. According to Wertheimer, teachers should prevent potential backlash by “avoid[ing] experiential exercises, whether it’s dress-up with religious garb or simulating how Muslims pray.”<sup>3</sup> This slippery slope of experiential learning opens teachers and schools up to the possibility of crossing unspoken

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<sup>1</sup> Linda Wertheimer, *Faith Ed: Teaching about Religion in an Age of Intolerance* (Boston, Massachusetts: Beacon Press, 2015), 2.

<sup>2</sup> Linda Wertheimer, “Teaching about Religion: Five Ways to Avoid Uproar,” *Education Week*, 8 November 2017, [http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/global\\_learning/2017/11/teaching\\_about\\_religion\\_five\\_ways\\_to\\_avoid\\_uproar.html?platform=hootsuite](http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/global_learning/2017/11/teaching_about_religion_five_ways_to_avoid_uproar.html?platform=hootsuite).

<sup>3</sup> Wertheimer, “Teaching about Religion.”

and unwritten boundaries of faith formation. In Wertheimer's words, experiential learning, especially the act of putting on "religious" clothing, "can come close to simulating a religious act."<sup>4</sup> This porousness and permeability of individuals, here depicted, provides evidence of the complexities of embodiment within classrooms. Although pedagogical practices often elevate the role of content and cognition, bodies, as the above example demonstrates, factor into the calculus in ways for which educators have been unprepared. As Wertheimer warns, teachers must avoid experiential, embodied learning because it risks, in her telling words, coming "close to simulating a religious act,"<sup>5</sup> in its capacity to move bodies, and by extension, minds, into the territory of possible proselytization.

As Wertheimer's caution illustrates, there is a sense of vulnerability and susceptibility surrounding the body within classroom settings. A reason-emotion binary, crucially, also comes into play within religious literacy in ways that highlight the challenges of the endeavor. Underlying warnings against embodied learning with regard to topics of religion is an apparent fear of the non-cognitive. By implication, if information is presented within the circumscribed, textual, and cognitive realm of textbooks, then students are safe from the potential pull of their emotions and other feelings. In reading about a topic, students are assumed to be able to assess and deliberate in rational, measured ways. The moment bodies enter the classroom, as Wertheimer's warnings suggest, students become susceptible to non-cognitive, sub-rational forces.

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<sup>4</sup> Wertheimer, "Teaching about Religion."

<sup>5</sup> Wertheimer, "Teaching about Religion."

In response to this challenge, this chapter examines what gets left behind if policymakers and educators fail to consider fully the role of affects, embodiment, and non-linguistic dimensions of human interaction at play in promoting and implementing religious literacy programs. Using the tools of affect theory which “asks *what bodies do*—what they want, where they go, what they think, how they decide—and especially how bodies are impelled by forces other than language and reason,”<sup>6</sup> this chapter questions what religious literacy’s democracy-building agenda might overlook and highlights the practical implications of such an emphasis.

This line of inquiry builds sequentially. First, this chapter expands on the argument of the previous chapter, examining the implications of positioning religious literacy as a civics and democracy-building project—its reliance on the norms of democratic discourse, in line with the conventions of liberal education. Such an analysis aims to show the ways in which an elevation of rationality within the discourse comes at the expense of other factors. Second, it examines the consequences of sidelining the affective dimensions of religions and what such an omission might mean for the content of religious literacy proposals. In so doing, the discussion draws upon affective critiques of cognitivism and of liberal subject formation. Finally, moving from theory to practice, this chapter identifies and analyzes the possible

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<sup>6</sup> Donovan O. Schaefer, *The Evolution of Affect: Humanities, the Sciences, and the Study of Power* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 1. Emphasis original.

constraints of implementing religious literacy trainings within the frameworks of contemporary pedagogical spaces.

For all the discussion around promoting prosocial behavior and inclusive democratic discourse, there remains an unaddressed component: What actually happens in classrooms, seminar rooms, and other areas of civil society? In taking up such questions, this chapter calls for a more robust understanding of religious literacy made possible by taking into account the tools and resources of contemporary scholarship on affect theory. This chapter aims to use such critiques to reconsider assumptions about the agential frame within the modern scene of education. Finally, this chapter concludes that religious literacy must begin attending to the affective dimensions of both understandings of religions and of pedagogic practices or risk reproducing existing challenges. Paying attention to the role of liberalism and its accompanying assumptions about rationality and autonomy shows some of the intrinsic limitations of the religious literacy discourse and suggests that new theoretical perspectives might open up more promising angles that take us past some of the existing discourse's liberal blind spots.

### **3.1 “In the Service of Democracy”: Secularity, Civics, and Liberal Education**

Promoting “democratic discourse,” enhancing “critical thinking,” and “improving the quality of public debate” are common refrains in calls for religious literacy. Such language, with its emphasis on democracy and public reason, hints at the motivations for increasing

religious literacy in contemporary contexts. Religious literacy, in its varying iterations, provides a contemporary site in which to examine discourses around civic formation, self-sovereignty, and rationality within liberal-democratic contexts. How, proponents of religious literacy ask, will students and other citizens become equipped to navigate a religiously inflected public sphere within liberal democracies? Although not a panacea, religious literacy, advocates suggest, would help provide some answers by encouraging students to become equipped to enhance the “quality of public debate” on religion. In so doing, proponents of religious literacy tend, this chapter argues, to overemphasize the role of “literacy” within religious literacy, attending to the cognitive, rational, and by extension, seemingly democratically compatible aspects and expressions of religion at the expense of other potential contributing factors.

As an illustrative example, Moore has advocated for a brand of religious literacy that is inextricably linked with liberal democracy. It aims, overtly, to foster social cohesion and enhance democratic discourse. Although she positions herself as a multiculturalist, her project might be better situated as civic enterprise. Doing religious literacy, must, in her view unfold in “ways that will enhance rather than undermine the democratic ideals that unite us in multicultural, multireligious America.”<sup>7</sup> In reaffirming her position on the necessity of liberal-democratic frameworks, Moore goes on to claim that, “the purpose of education in our multicultural/multireligious democracy is to foster the skills, values,

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<sup>7</sup> Diane L. Moore, *Overcoming Religious Illiteracy: A Cultural Studies Approach to the Study of Religion in Secondary Education*, (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007), 8.

interest, and confidence in students to be able to participate as active moral agents in the conscious social reproduction of society in its most inclusive form.”<sup>8</sup> Note, here, the emphasis on inclusivity and morality. As Moore puts it, “the promotion of religious literacy will enhance democratic discourse by cultivating discernment, understanding, and respect as they relate to religion in American public life.”<sup>9</sup> Religious literacy advances the aims of civility, inclusivity, and democratic deliberation. By contrast, in Moore’s assessment, “religious illiteracy thwarts understanding and diminishes the ability to engage in rational debate.”<sup>10</sup> This emphasis on rationality as a basis for deliberative democracy, is suggestive of Moore’s views about the role of religion within the realm of public reason.

Using language of civility and liberal-democratic inclusion, Moore asserts that “ignorance about religion itself and the world’s religious traditions promotes misunderstanding that diminishes respect for diversity.”<sup>11</sup> This emphasis on civility, or rather the potential for incivility that results from unawareness, suggests that Moore’s concern with multiculturalism is entangled with her support for liberal education. It is not that secularism is neutral, as Moore is quick to add.<sup>12</sup> Rather, anticipating possible criticism, she points out that this model of liberal education privileges “certain religious perspectives over others (e.g., acceptance of pluralism over exclusivity).”<sup>13</sup> Liberal state sovereignty, however, in Moore’s view, does not undermine the efficacy of her model. In advocating transparently for a

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<sup>8</sup> Moore, *Overcoming Religious Illiteracy*, 24.

<sup>9</sup> Moore, *Overcoming Religious Illiteracy*, 28.

<sup>10</sup> Moore, *Overcoming Religious Illiteracy*, 28.

<sup>11</sup> Moore, *Overcoming Religious Illiteracy*, 31.

<sup>12</sup> Moore, *Overcoming Religious Illiteracy*, 56.

<sup>13</sup> Moore, *Overcoming Religious Illiteracy*, 56.

religious literacy that accords with liberal-democratic precepts, Moore claims that secular foundations for education represent the best model.

It is, following political theorist Amy Gutmann, “imperative to protect the secular framework of public education as the only foundation capable of promoting a shared set of values amidst our religious and cultural diversity.”<sup>14</sup> Conversely, failing to promote the “religious dimensions of multiculturalism” would foster “repression by perpetuating ignorance and limiting the exposure of students to rational considerations of religious worldviews as legitimate and widely held expressions of the good life.”<sup>15</sup> Here, in advocating the “rational consideration of religious worldviews,” Moore calls attention to the idea that rationality underpins this educational model.

As these passages suggest, Moore consistently employs religious literacy in the service of promoting democratic ideals. This is not to suggest that Moore’s fostering of democratic inclusivity is an unworthy goal. Rather, her emphasis on advancing liberal-democratic aims may shape the ways in which students would come to learn about religion. Moore makes her agenda and context clear. As she herself writes, “a cultural studies method will help identify the cultural assumptions while also providing tools to interrogate all value claims and assess them in light of whether they will serve to promote or hinder human agency and well-being in the context of our multi-cultural democracy.”<sup>16</sup> Her brand of religious literacy

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<sup>14</sup> Moore, *Overcoming Religious Illiteracy*, 52.

<sup>15</sup> Moore, *Overcoming Religious Illiteracy*, 52.

<sup>16</sup> Moore, *Overcoming Religious Illiteracy*, 77-78.

aims, overtly, to foster social cohesion and enhance democratic discourse. Inscribed in this way, Moore's religious literacy, and by extension, her understanding of religion's role, remains tied to a well-functioning democracy.

As Moore herself acknowledges, this approach to religious literacy rests on a particular set of assumptions about religion's role and liberal state sovereignty. Her focus on democratic discourse, for one, suggests that certain manifestations of religion would be more, or less, welcome in this purportedly inclusive space. A religion with a universalizing claim or one that would not engage explicitly in rational debate might not fare so favorably in Moore's model. Herein lies the challenge: paradoxically, Moore's inclusive model has, built within it, an exclusionary approach that may dictate the template of who gets to participate in this plural, democratic space. Here, Moore comes up against the constitutive dilemma of liberalism: how to tolerate the intolerant.<sup>17</sup> Although capacity for rationality and the presumed liberty of individual choice represent hallmarks of the liberal education Moore advocates, these ideals may not accord with religious literacy as neatly as Moore's account would lead us to believe.

Religious literacy's entanglements with liberal-democratic civic agendas presents a clear site of contestation within discussion around the stated—and sometimes unstated—objectives of such educational programs. Writing in collaboration with researcher Martha

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<sup>17</sup> Contending with this identified challenge of liberal democracies is far from a recent concern. Popper, for example, identified this "paradox of tolerance" in 1945. For an updated, two-volume edition of his work, see: Carl Popper, *The Open Society and its Enemies* (London: Routledge, 2002).

Shaw, Adam Dinham, another proponent of religious literacy, puts forward a relevant critique of such instrumental approaches. Although Dinham does not reference Moore directly, given that he is concerned largely with U.K. examples of religious literacy (especially within state-sanctioned religious education contexts), his criticism of current religion courses would easily apply to Moore's brand of religious literacy. Within a U.K. context, Dinham asserts that teaching about religion "has increasingly become colonised by themes such as citizenship and cohesion, which overlap with, but are not themselves, religion or belief."<sup>18</sup> Questioning the emphasis on, and propriety of, civic formation in teaching about religion, Dinham highlights the prevailing trend of framing religion in terms of developing skills for enhanced social cohesion. The challenge of viewing teaching about religion as primarily a "social task" intended "to form citizens who can connect across difference" is that social outcomes may come "at the expense of learning."<sup>19</sup> As Dinham points out, encouraging "young people to engage positively with ideas and concepts different from their own" also risks construing religion as a "threat to cohesion."<sup>20</sup> These two concerns, those of constrained learning and fostering the notion of religious threat, present challenges for teaching and curriculum development.

Instead, Dinham proposes what he views as an alternative. He calls for a religious literacy "concerned with preparing students for the practical task of engagement with a rich variety

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<sup>18</sup> Adam Dinham and Martha Shaw, "RE for Real: The Future of Teaching and Learning about Religion and Belief," *Goldsmiths, University of London* (2015): 3.

<sup>19</sup> Dinham and Shaw, "RE for Real," 3.

<sup>20</sup> Dinham and Shaw, "RE for Real," 3.

of religion and belief encounters in everyday, ordinary life.”<sup>21</sup> This emphasis on practical engagement differs, in his view, from the politically-motivated call to foster social cohesion against the backdrop of anxiety about terrorism, extremism, and threats to security.

Despite Dinham’s salient critique, he too falls into a similar trap. Although Dinham argues against comingling a civics agenda with religion teaching, it remains challenging to see how his version of religious literacy differs substantively from the approach he criticizes. Although the move away from civics training within a U.K. context presents a timely critique of teaching religion, Dinham fails to differentiate his aims from those of a civics project.

After all, is learning for “social cohesion” so different from “encountering variety well,”<sup>22</sup> in Dinham and Shaw’s formation? Perhaps the answer lies in the frameworks from which these decidedly different advocates for religious literacy are operating. Although Dinham remains critical of such instrumentalized views of religion within religion courses, he also calls for a religious literacy which aims to foster liberal-democratic ideals. Encountering variety well, although perhaps not as coercive as training in social cohesion, remains similarly outcomes-based and preoccupied with increasing civility.

Moore’s approach has the benefit of self-reflexively acknowledging its own “situatedness,” whereas Dinham’s critique does not differentiate itself sufficiently from the position it seeks

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<sup>21</sup> Dinham and Shaw, “RE for Real,” 3.

<sup>22</sup> Dinham and Shaw, “RE for Real,” 3.

to call into question. However, both Moore's and Dinham's approaches, although the latter might at first appear to challenge the former, end up in remarkably similar positions. Operating within the framework of liberal education, as these seemingly contrasting examples highlight, leads to inherent challenges for religious literacy. By dictating the terms of engagement, liberal-democratic formulations of religious literacy have the capacity to impact educational outcomes.

The extent to which liberalism acts as a formative order has direct implications for religious literacy. As the above examples highlight, despite their differing points of view, proponents of religious literacy advance similar agendas. Attending to the context in which religious literacy proposals come into being provides a useful starting point for examining and problematizing some of the proposals' tacit assumptions. Scholarship on liberal education, civics, and identity formation helps illustrate some of the potential complications of teaching religion within such contexts. In recent years, theorists have begun examining the secular, particularly as it is configured within liberal-democratic contexts, as a "mechanism," even a "micro-process" of self-fashioning, by which people come to form identity and orientations towards the world.<sup>23</sup> Such interventions point to new ways of viewing religious literacy training programs by highlighting the potential influence of "certain modern knowledges, sensibilities and discourses which have come to be referred to as secular" in liberal subject formation.<sup>24</sup> Pointing to the role of liberal state sovereignty and its educative

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<sup>23</sup> Reza Gholami, *Secularism and Identity: Non-Islamiosity in the Iranian Diaspora* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2015), Introduction.

<sup>24</sup> Gholami, *Secularism and Identity*, Introduction.

institutions, current scholarship has started drawing connections between liberalism and teaching about religion in ways that highlight the challenges of advancing a civic agenda.

The nexus of citizenship education and liberal subject formation have begun to come together in religious literacy. More broadly, within the past decade, there has been a renewed interest in civic formation, particularly as it impacts young people.<sup>25</sup> As education scholars have noted, civic formation comes with its own set of problematics. Education theorists, for one, have pointed to the challenges of civic education, citing the problematic conflation of “teaching citizenship” with “learning democracy,”<sup>26</sup> the distinction being that teaching citizenship implies essentially social engineering in the form of creating “good citizens,” whereas teaching democracy denotes a contextualized learning about democracy. An emphasis on the former has presented a complication for teaching civics in that it encourages identity formation conforming with democratic, civic norms.

The additional issue of educating for citizenship within the curricula has proven challenging for teaching religion, particularly within the U.K. Since 2002, when citizenship education became a statutory component of the National Curriculum, the theme of civics has occupied a central place within secondary education in particular.<sup>27</sup> Research has indicated that, although context-dependent, a commonly-held view in the early and mid-2000s was that

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<sup>25</sup> Robert Lawy and Gert Biesta, “Citizenship as Practice: The Educational Implications of an Inclusive and Relational Understanding of Citizenship,” *British Journal of Education Studies*, Vol. 52, No.1 (2006): 34-50.

<sup>26</sup> Gert Biesta and Robert Lawy, “From Teaching Citizenship to Learning Democracy: Overcoming Individualism in Research, Policy, and Practice,” *Cambridge Journal of Education*, Vol. 36, No. 1 (2006): 61.

<sup>27</sup> Reza Gholami, “The Art of Self-Making: Identity and Citizenship Education in Late-Modernity,” *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, Vol. 38, No. 6 (2017): 799.

“Religious education was the answer to citizenship education because it employs open inquiry and debate, is sensitive to controversial issues, and particularly because it is rooted in beliefs which motivate people to action.”<sup>28</sup> This assumption about religion’s inherent ability to act as a motivator to action helped provide a rationale for introducing civic concepts into religion teaching at the school level. This potentially uneasy relationship between civic and religion teaching, which Dinham and others have criticized, risks instrumentalizing religion in the service of promoting democratic ideals.

Adding religious literacy into the mix calls for its own examination and invites additional complications. The claim that “[c]itizenship education teaches children how to live”<sup>29</sup> points to the idea that learning civics is no mere ontological project. Rather, it is by definition rooted in the practical and the practicable. As education theorist Mark Pike writes, in citizenship education programs, “[c]hildren are not simply taught *about* liberal democracy but are being taught to *believe in* such a way of living.”<sup>30</sup> This move towards compliance citizenship, rather than critical citizenship, aims overtly “to inculcate specific forms of behaviour and ways of thinking.”<sup>31</sup> Given the emphasis on a civic rationale for teaching about religion, this argument also applies to religious literacy. The insistence from religious literacy proponents such as Moore that teaching about religion will “enhance democratic discourse” underscores a larger point: that religious literacy also aims to

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<sup>28</sup> Jacqueline Watson, “Educating for Citizenship—The Emerging Relationship between Religious Education and Citizenship Education,” *British Journal of Religious Education*, Vol. 26, No. 3 (2004): 263.

<sup>29</sup> Mark A. Pike, “Faith in Citizenship? On Teaching Children to Believe in Liberal Democracy,” *British Journal of Religious Education*, Vol. 30, No.2 (2008): 113.

<sup>30</sup> Pike, “Faith in Citizenship?,” 113. Emphasis original.

<sup>31</sup> Pike, “Faith in Citizenship?,” 113.

inculcate specific behavioral forms and norms.

Liberal education, inherently, promotes its own set of values, norms, and expectations. Political theorist Stephen Macedo offers a useful perspective for examining current religious literacy proposals, especially those of Moore. Identifying and advocating for “liberalism’s transformative aspirations,”<sup>32</sup> Macedo argues for the dependency of the liberal order on its own educative institutions. According to Macedo, “The success and health of a liberal democratic constitutional order depend upon the religious beliefs and other moral convictions that citizens form and act upon. The success of our civic project relies upon a transformative project that includes the remaking of moral and religious communities.”<sup>33</sup> This “transformative liberalism,” for which Macedo advocates, necessarily calls for religion to conform to its already-set parameters. In line with Moore’s thinking on the matter, far from being neutral, liberalism represents the best possible option for sustaining a shared civic ideal. As Macedo puts it:

Indeed, a liberal democracy counts on being nonneutral with respect to patterns of moral and social life that arise and persist. Liberal democratic public institutions count on shaping wider social norms and expectations so that people are gently encouraged to behave in ways that are broadly supportive of our shared civic project.<sup>34</sup>

Here, non-neutrality, rather than detracting from liberalism’s mission, bolsters and

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<sup>32</sup> Stephen Macedo, *Diversity and Distrust: Civic Education in a Multicultural Democracy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 15-16.

<sup>33</sup> Macedo, *Diversity and Distrust*, x.

<sup>34</sup> Macedo, *Diversity and Distrust*, x.

legitimizes its project. This illiberal liberalism for which Macedo advocates is predicated on what political philosopher Akeel Bilgrami might refer to as a “*lexigraphical ordering in which political ideals are placed first.*”<sup>35</sup> This approach necessarily subordinates religion to the demands of the liberal state. Although this discourse is framed all-too-often in terms of rights, it also applies to educational, rather than exclusively to legal, spheres. A religiously plural society, here, relies on principles of containment and regulation of diversity. In Macedo’s words, the aim is “to put diversity in its place by emphasizing the importance and legitimacy of a liberal educative project that shapes diversity for civic purposes.”<sup>36</sup> In this vision, there exist specific regulatory and educative mechanisms by which to foster community cohesion and to disincentivize nonconforming identities and attitudes.

Coming to the core of his argument, Macedo asserts that:

It is hoped that in a healthy liberal democracy beliefs in tension with fundamental liberal democratic commitments will gradually be diminished in importance. Transformative liberalism makes use, I would suggest, of many mechanisms, practices, and expectations that shape our commitments and habits very deeply.<sup>37</sup>

Civic identity supersedes any other identity claim. Views that do not cohere with the tenets of liberalism will, in this scenario, become marginalized over time and through the influence of education. As Macedo argues, public, state-funded schools are the ideal settings for socialization into such norms and ways of being: “The whole point of the common school

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<sup>35</sup> Akeel Bilgrami, *Secularism, Identity, and Enchantment* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2014), 12. Emphasis original.

<sup>36</sup> Macedo, *Diversity and Distrust*, 3.

<sup>37</sup> Macedo, *Diversity and Distrust*, 137.

is to be a primary arena where children from different normative perspectives that compose our polity encounter one another in a respectful setting, learn about one another, and discover that their differences do not preclude cooperation and mutual respect as participants in a shared political order.”<sup>38</sup> The emphasis on “shared political order,” here, supersedes other considerations. If students are able to hash out their differences respectfully, more the better. Their potential disagreements would be easily adjudicated within the realm of rational and civil discourse. Students, in this model, must uphold liberal norms of respectful disagreement and education helps foster such attitudes and inclinations.

However, the difficulty with Macedo’s case for absolute liberal state sovereignty is how to do so without becoming majoritarian. This “lexigraphical ordering,” to use Bilgrami’s formulation, leads to privileging certain manifestations of religion and potentially marginalizing others. As noted previously with Moore, an emphasis on democratic discourse invites only certain participants, be they “religious” or otherwise. Perhaps such considerations are necessary for sustaining a liberal order, but are they truly conducive to learning about religion? As Macedo puts it:

Civil liberalism will insist that children learn that the freedom to choose is the birthright of every citizen of a liberal political community: that they are rights holders, and that as adults they may leave oppressive associations and relationships without losing their status as equal citizens. Children must at the very least be provided with the intellectual tools necessary to understand the world around them, formulate their own convictions, and make their own way in life.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Macedo, *Diversity and Distrust*, 194.

<sup>39</sup> Macedo, *Diversity and Distrust*, 237.

This emphasis on autonomy, choice, and rationality provides a specific vision of both religion's and education's respective roles.

An increasingly common challenge to this privileging of autonomy is the role it may play in undermining parental choice. As Taylor and Maclure argue, in Western liberal democracies, state-funded education:

will favor development of students' critical autonomy. In exposing students to a plurality of worldviews and modes of life, the democratic and liberal state makes the task more difficult for parents seeking to transmit a particular order of beliefs to their children and even more difficult for groups wishing to shield themselves from the influence of the larger society in order to perpetuate a style of life based more on respect for tradition than on individual autonomy and the exercise of critical judgment.<sup>40</sup>

In this view, the liberal ideals of autonomy and critical judgement may come into conflict with alternatives. Their contention that, "by definition, the democratic and liberal state's neutrality cannot be absolute"<sup>41</sup> leads Maclure and Taylor to advance a pluralist vision: "For all individuals to truly have access to the same range of options, the rules that delimit their choices must not favor or disadvantage any category of citizens."<sup>42</sup> This availability of choices would help alleviate some of the pressures of conflicting modes of life and lead to fairer outcomes that result from exposure to a multiplicity of options.

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<sup>40</sup> Jocelyn Maclure and Charles Taylor, *Secularism and Freedom of Conscience* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011), 16.

<sup>41</sup> Maclure and Taylor, *Secularism and Freedom of Conscience*, 16.

<sup>42</sup> Maclure and Taylor, *Secularism and Freedom of Conscience*, 73.

The parental choice critique, however, still privileges autonomy, choice, and rationality—of the parent, rather than of the child, in this case. Such liberal values guide religion’s engagement. As Cécile Laborde has argued in her 2017 book, *Liberalism’s Religion*, secular liberal states have “the authority to define their own spheres of competence, as well as those of other institutions.”<sup>43</sup> This principle of state “*Kompetenz-Kompetenz*,” the prerogative of the state to serve as the “final legitimate arbiter” in matters of civil society, of which state-funded education is a part, leads to the same potential trap.<sup>44</sup> Although mainly construed in legal terms around questions of freedom of association and rights-based claims, this question of jurisdiction also pertains to areas of civil society such as education, as Laborde notes. In this way, liberal state sovereignty is more than a normative preference; it is an operating principle inherent to the process of liberal education. In line with Macedo’s argument for the incontestability of liberal state sovereignty, Laborde asserts forcefully that, although people may “reasonably disagree...about the scope of the substantive rights that the sovereign state should grant,” the question of jurisdiction is a “nonstarter.”<sup>45</sup> Again, this is not to conflate rights with broader questions of association. Rather, as Laborde’s powerful assertion highlights, operating within liberal frameworks comes with its own set of rules, norms, and epistemic assumptions. In line with Macedo and Bilgrami, Laborde highlights the perhaps necessary elevation of liberalism’s aims.

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<sup>43</sup> Cécile Laborde, *Liberalism’s Religion* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2017), 165.

<sup>44</sup> Laborde, *Liberalism’s Religion*, 165-166. Emphasis original.

<sup>45</sup> Laborde, *Liberalism’s Religion*, 171.

Such frameworks have implications for studying religion within liberal education. As education theorists including Arthur, Gearon, and Sears contend, “[t]here has been an essentializing of religion and religious practice as un- or anti-democratic.”<sup>46</sup> In response to this perceived incompatibility, there appears to be a growing impulse to frame religion as compatible with democratic frameworks. In the same volume Arthur, Gearon, and Sears argue that:

Religious views offer an important counterpoint and check to the dominant secular ideology. While we contend that religious systems and religion can operate in harmony with democracy, they are not the same thing and sometimes they are in conflict. We argue that this conflict itself is important and valuable for democracy.<sup>47</sup>

Emphasizing the role of religion in agonistic democracy, here, presents a strategy. Recalling Moore’s similar statement that “religious worldviews provide alternative frameworks from which to critique normative cultural assumptions,”<sup>48</sup> we see that democratic compatibility constitutes a priority. Tensions, presented here, offer further evidence of religion’s congruence with democratic aims. In this way, difference itself, becomes a sign of conformity to the conventions of democratic discourse.

In education theory and in specific instances of religious literacy, there is a desire to see religion conform with democratic standards. Whether so-called religious perspectives pose a necessary challenge to prevailing assumptions or helps bolster democracy by fostering an

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<sup>46</sup> James Arthur, Liam Gearon, and Alan Sears, *Education, Politics and Religion: Reconciling the Civil and the Sacred in Education*, (New York: Routledge, 2010), 4.

<sup>47</sup> Arthur, Gearon, and Sears, *Education, Politics and Religion*, 5.

<sup>48</sup> Moore, *Overcoming Religious Illiteracy*, 5.

ethos of enhanced participation, the above examples show how religion and religious viewpoints become framed in terms of democratic compatibility. Such concerns appear to lead proponents of religious literacy to emphasize religion's function within democratic discourse.

This framing, perhaps, is unsurprising, given the aims—both stated and unstated—of liberal education. In a discussion of liberal education and religion, educationalist Mark Halstead puts forward a definition of liberal education, which provides a helpful means by which to evaluate the concept. Halstead articulates three fundamental liberal values in education:

individual liberty (i.e. freedom of action and freedom from constraint in the pursuit of one's own needs and interests); equality of respect for all individuals within the structures and practices of society (i.e. non-discrimination on irrelevant grounds); [and] consistent rationality (i.e. basing decisions and actions on logically consistent rational justifications)."<sup>49</sup>

The third value of rationality, according to Halstead, mediates between the potentially competing interests of individual liberty and equality of respect.<sup>50</sup> Rationality, in his formulation, acts as the arbiter. Liberal education, in privileging "individual liberty" and "respect for individuals," presents a clearly delimited and defined notion of what it means to be a good citizen within such contexts. It also dictates, as evidenced by examples in Moore, Dinham, and Macedo, the parameters of engaging with religion within educational settings.

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<sup>49</sup> Mark Halstead, "Liberal Values and Liberal Education," in *Values in Education and Education in Values*, eds. Mark Halstead and Monica Taylor (London: Falmer, 1996), 18.

<sup>50</sup> Halstead, "Liberal Values and Liberal Education," 18.

This framing, which elevates autonomy and rationality, comes with its own set of complications. Religious literacy, in particular, with its frequent emphasis on students' abilities to "get" religion and understanding religion "on the ground," has the capacity to present religion and religious identities in ways that cohere with liberal democracies. Recent literature in education theory helps support the claim that educational programs in religion may reinforce liberal-democratic models. Within a European context, for example, education theorist Liam Gearon argues that religious education initiatives, rather than demonstrating a response to a perceived resurgence of religion, show the opposite—religion's increasingly conformity with secular, liberal norms:

Analysis of the convergence of European civil religion and European religious education means that trends in European religious education are a useful way not of witnessing counter-secularisation but of understanding a new and powerful potential agent of secularisation's confirmation, here meaning, if not marginalization in a classical sense but religion's incorporation into secular, political goals and ends, and this facilitated, consciously or otherwise, through education.<sup>51</sup>

Similarly, as education theorist Philip Barnes argues, teaching about religion, in its effort to conform to its liberal democratic contexts, fundamentally misrepresents the subject by using it to advance the aims of social cohesion. According to Barnes, "British religious education has misrepresented the nature of religion in efforts to commend itself as contributing to the social aims of education, as these are typically framed in liberal democratic societies such

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<sup>51</sup> Liam Gearon, "European Religious Education and European Civil Religion," *British Journal of Educational Studies*, Vol. 60, No. 2 (2012): 151-152.

as Britain in terms of furthering tolerance, respect for difference and social cohesion."<sup>52</sup> This misrepresentation causes educators and curricula to downplay any aspects of religion which might not advance the aim of furthering "respect for difference." Gearon and Barnes' contentions, that liberal education remakes religion in its image, also extends to religious literacy discourse. In positioning religious literacy within civic frameworks, proponents risk reproducing some of the liberal blind spots it may seek to challenge. For example, in training citizens to engage in productive conversations around religion, religious literacy advocates dictate the terms of engagement in ways that accord with the precepts of liberal democracy. Religious literacy, in this way, reproduces secular liberal categories and, in so doing, has the capacity to refashion religion in its own image.

As recent scholarship has noted, secularism, and in particular, liberal democratic forms of secularism, has the capacity to remake religion within its own parameters. As Saba Mahmood argues, "[s]ecularism here is not simply understood as the doctrinal separation of church and state but the rearticulating of religion in a manner that is commensurate with modern sensibilities and modes of governance."<sup>53</sup> This contention, stemming from Mahmood's conclusion that liberal democracies are ill-equipped to manage religious offense on the basis of their failure to attend properly to affective attachments, points to the ways in which liberal governments have the capacity to remake religion in its own image. Following Mahmood's argument, Mayanthi Fernando's contention that "secular tolerance

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<sup>52</sup> Philip Barnes, "The Misrepresentation of Religion in Modern British (Religious) Education," *British Journal of Educational Studies*, Vol. 54, No. 4 (2006): 396.

<sup>53</sup> Saba Mahmood, "Religious Reason, Secular Affect: An Incommensurable Divide?," *Critical Inquiry* 35 (2009): 836-837.

is less open to alterity than it imagines itself to be”<sup>54</sup> relates to liberal education and religious literacy, in that it points to the possible limitations of operating within such frameworks.

However problematic, a civic framing of religious literacy may be inescapable for the time being for a host of practical and pragmatic, rather than ideological, reasons. The reason for promoting religious literacy within the context of civic formation may be the result of an effort to make its aims more appealing and accessible. The need to justify curricular inclusion in outcomes-based, utilitarian terms may prompt proponents of religious literacy to advance a civic rationale. Simply put, there may be more resources available for civics than for religion. Such practical considerations may compel advocates to push for religious literacy in the service of creating “informed citizens.”

As noted previously, theorists have only just begun drawing connections among liberal education, citizenship, and education in religion. Recent calls, for instance, to “refurbish” liberal education have drawn attention to the potential deficiencies of liberal education in addressing current needs. In a 2017 volume *Education and Extremisms: Re-Thinking Liberal Pedagogies in the Contemporary World*, Panjwani et al. lament increasingly instrumentalist aims of current educational models, which focus on “employability” over “criticality.”<sup>55</sup> Although they focus on what they, and others, see as the growing securitization of education in religion, their critiques and calls for policy change have applicability for religious literacy.

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<sup>54</sup> Mayanthi Fernando, *The Republic Unsettled: Muslim French and the Contradictions of Secularism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 261.

<sup>55</sup> Farid Panjwani et al., *Education and Extremisms: Rethinking Liberal Pedagogies in the Contemporary World* (London: Routledge, 2017), Conclusion.

The prescriptive elements of these recent studies point to the need to attend to the mechanisms by which students come to learn about religion and form identity within liberal-democratic contexts and educative institutions. Attending to the possible deficiencies of liberal education, which religious literacy examples highlight, might suggest a path forward: one which self-reflexively considers its position and identifies its potential blind spots.

Liberalism's perhaps necessary assumption of state sovereignty causes problems for religious literacy within the context of sites such as state-supported public education. By encouraging prosocial behavior and the rationality of religious viewpoints, religious literacy might miss the mark. This is not, however, to fall into the opposite trap of assuming religion's inherent irrationality and corresponding need for containment within liberal democratic societies. As theorists such as Cavanaugh and Fitzgerald have argued,<sup>56</sup> the idea of religious threat and "barbarity" remains problematically entwined with discussions and conceptions of religion within liberal contexts. Rather, in privileging the rational, prosocial, and autonomous aspects of liberal subject formation, religious literacy puts forward a particular vision of religion: one that accords with the aims of the liberal state.

### **3.2 "From Head to Heart": Affect, Autonomy, and the Materialist Shift**

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<sup>56</sup> See: William T. Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence: Secular Ideology and the Roots of Modern Conflict* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); and Timothy Fitzgerald, *Discourse on Civility and Barbarity: A Critical History of Religion and Related Categories* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

Given the emphasis on the conventions of deliberative democracy, it is perhaps unsurprising that the long-standing battle between the perceived binary of reason and emotion comes to the fore in revealing ways within religious literacy discourse. Framing religious literacy as an educative project of liberalism constitutes an inbuilt blind spot, which challenges the endeavor from its inception because, in elevating the role of reason, it has the capacity to de-emphasize the role of emotions and bodies. The following section shows the ways in which a reason-emotion binary pervades the discourse of religious literacy and highlights the consequences of sidelining the affective, embodied dimensions of studying religions. In particular, this section shows the implications of the interrelated affect theory critiques of the cognitive and the autonomous liberal subject. Such critiques, specifically, help shine a light on the content of religious literacy proposals, showing the ways in which such assumptions lead to a privileging of the cognitive and the textual.

Although affect theory has only recently begun to interface with religious studies, its spotlighting of “aspects of embodied life that emphasize the role of nonlinguistic and non- or para-cognitive forces,”<sup>57</sup> has implications for the discussion around religious literacy. In calling attention to the confluence of other contributing factors to embodied life, affect theory highlights notion that “feelings, emotions, affects, moods, and sensations are not cosmetic but rather the substance of subjectivity.”<sup>58</sup> Such theories, in other words, point to connections between bodies and minds in ways that have previously gone unchallenged.

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<sup>57</sup> Schaefer, *The Evolution of Affect*, 1.

<sup>58</sup> Schaefer, *The Evolution of Affect*, 1.

Affect theory, in this way, has the capacity to shift the groundwork. By reorienting our approach towards the affective, emotive, and passionate dimensions,<sup>59</sup> new theories problematize the conception of transmission of knowledge about religions from purely textual, cognitive, and autonomous standpoints. Such connections, as the following shows, highlight some inbuilt challenges within the religious literacy discourse. Becoming attuned to the ways in which scholarship on religious literacy comes into contact with affective consideration points to possible stumbling blocks within the debate by predisposing advocates for religious literacy to sideline the affective and emotive dimensions of the potential content of their proposed programs.

As an example, in his book on religious literacy, Stephen Prothero constructs an etiology of loss in which emotive religion paves the way for a diminution of religious knowledge. This emphasis on religious transmission points to the ways in which proponents of religious literacy are already engaging—at times explicitly and in other instances indirectly—with conceptions of affect.

Specifically, Prothero traces the decline of religious literacy to the rise of Evangelicalism within the U.S. context. In his historical narrative, Prothero frames nineteenth-century

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<sup>59</sup> Although, for the sake of concision and convenience, my work uses the term “affect” to refer to the sub-rational and non-cognitive dimensions of embodied life, it is important to note that not all affect theorists employ the term exclusively in that way. For example, certain theorists distinguish among the terms “affect,” “emotion,” “feeling,” “passion,” and “disposition,” offering individual definitions for each word. For examples of the ways in which terms such as “affect,” “emotion,” and “passion” have been used, see: Teresa Brennan, *Transmission of Affect* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004), 5.

Christianity as a struggle between “piety and learning.”<sup>60</sup> According to Prothero, learning lost the day and, in so doing, paved the way for over a century of unapologetic, even defiantly proud, religious illiteracy. In Prothero’s account, “[w]hat for generations had been shameful—religious illiteracy—would become a badge of honor in a nation besotted with the self-made man and the spirit-filled Preacher.”<sup>61</sup> In the battle between head and heart, emotions prevailed.

A current of subtle anti-Evangelical sentiment runs through Prothero’s work. Although Prothero takes pains to note that his agenda is “civic and secular,” rather than “religious,”<sup>62</sup> his perspective points to an internal debate: one between mainline and evangelical Protestant denominations. Prothero’s view of history, admittedly presented with a popular readership in mind, advances a narrative of decline that shows nostalgia for a “thinking” Protestantism of the past. Evangelicalism’s eclipse of mainline, liberal Protestantism, for Prothero, heralded a diminution of religious knowledge that persists into the present. In his account:

[M]any of the causes of our collective fall into religious illiteracy are plain, as are some of the villains. And here the evildoers were not, as one might expect, diabolical secularists conspiring to banish religion from the public square. Rather, they were well-meaning Protestants, Catholics, and Jews intent on rescuing religion from the acids of modernity. This story—a tale of the demise of religious knowledge at the hands of people of faith—begins with the catalytic event in American religious, cultural, and social history called the Second Great Awakening.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Stephen Prothero, *Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know—And Doesn’t* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2007), 111.

<sup>61</sup> Prothero, *Religious Literacy*, 111.

<sup>62</sup> Prothero, *Religious Literacy*, 18-19.

<sup>63</sup> Prothero, *Religious Literacy*, 111.

Viewed in this light, stripped of any intellectual markers, American Christianity becomes anodyne and at the same time, possibly more accessible, to prospective adherents—at least initially. As Prothero describes, Christianity’s emphases shifted from “head to heart,” from “doctrine to storytelling,” from “theology to morality” and, finally, from “the Bible to Jesus.”<sup>64</sup>

This reorientation brought with it a current of unapologetic anti-intellectualism that privileged piety and emotion over knowledge and tradition. In the wake of the Second Great Awakening, American Evangelicals began to privilege “emotional and experiential religion” at the expense of doctrine.<sup>65</sup> Evangelicals even went so far as to take “pride in their ignorance of the finer points of doctrine, focusing their energies instead on pragmatic efforts to uplift their fellow citizens and to Christianize the nation.”<sup>66</sup> In Prothero’s interpretation, Evangelicalism is a fire that burns out quickly. His comments suggest that he views Evangelicalism as having the capacity to attract adherents through a low barrier to entry. However, in Prothero’s account, this model becomes increasingly unsustainable in the long run as enthusiasm wanes. Without sufficient intellectual underpinnings, Christianity cannot maintain its once-dominant place.

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<sup>64</sup> Prothero, *Religious Literacy*, 132-139.

<sup>65</sup> Stephen Prothero and Lauren R. Kerby, “The Irony of Religious Illiteracy,” in *Religious Literacy in Policy and Practice*, eds. Adam Dinham and Matthew Francis (Bristol: Policy Press, 2015), 58.

<sup>66</sup> Prothero and Kerby, “The Irony of Religious Illiteracy,” 58.

The challenge to which Prothero's comments point, then, is one of sustainability. As Prothero makes clear, he sees the continued vitality of religion, and of American Christianity in particular, as contingent upon religious knowledge, rather than upon religious enthusiasm. In *Religious Literacy*, Prothero invokes sociologist Danièle Hervieu-Léger's *Religion as a Chain of Memory* when he cites the importance of preserving the connection to past religious understandings. Although Hervieu-Léger's analysis centers on the intersection of religion and modernity in Europe, Prothero argues that her thesis pertains to the American context as well. At the core of Hervieu-Léger's thesis about modern religiosity is the contention that "[m]odernity has deconstructed traditional systems of believing, but has not forsaken belief."<sup>67</sup> Within a modern context, people retain their individual beliefs, but lose a sense of "comprehensive social memory."<sup>68</sup> This "crumbling of memory in modern society," as Hervieu-Léger phrases it, results in part from the profusion of individual associations.<sup>69</sup> Religious memory, which in modern societies can be differentiated from "a family memory" or "a class memory," belongs to individuals, rather than to collectives.<sup>70</sup> This fragmentation, or diffusion, of memory manifests as a societal loss of shared memory.

Although Hervieu-Léger foresees this problem as a matter that will afflict religious institutions "as the repository of the truth of belief shifts from the institution to the believer,"<sup>71</sup> Prothero sees the loss of a collective memory in both educational and civic terms. In

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<sup>67</sup> Danièle Hervieu-Léger, *Religion as a Chain of Memory*, trans. Simon Lee (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2006), 74.

<sup>68</sup> Hervieu-Léger, *Religion as a Chain of Memory*, 127.

<sup>69</sup> Hervieu-Léger, *Religion as a Chain of Memory*, 127.

<sup>70</sup> Hervieu-Léger, *Religion as a Chain of Memory*, 127.

<sup>71</sup> Hervieu-Léger, *Religion as a Chain of Memory*, 168.

Prothero's assessment, new conditions for belief within a modern context are "rooted not so much in doubt as in forgetting."<sup>72</sup> America, as he sees it, is in the process of losing its connection to its religious past. Prothero is concerned, above all, with the transmission of religious knowledge. He asserts that, although "[f]aith is more robust in the United States," Americans, like their European counterparts, "are forgetters too."<sup>73</sup>

Using Hervieu-Léger's language, Prothero argues that "broken links in the chain of memory that sustains faith through generations should not be of interest solely to believers and educators."<sup>74</sup> To Prothero, the loss of collective memory is not merely theoretical; it is an accurate depiction of reality, even in the U.S. Furthermore, Prothero frames his argument in civic terms: "Americans' inability to think clearly and speak confidently about Christianity and other religions should concern anyone who cares about American public life."<sup>75</sup> For Prothero, this inability derives from a loss of collective memory. The remedy, therefore, is for citizens to learn in order that they remember. Prothero closes his book with this telling passage:

[T]he solution is to educate ourselves—to follow the ancient admonitions of the Hebrew Bible to 'remember,' to read Genesis or Matthew or the Quran, and to reconstruct the chain of memory that binds us not only to our ancestors' religious traditions but also to America's first citizens, who understood attaining religious knowledge as both a personal challenge and a civic duty of the highest order.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Prothero, *Religious Literacy*, 8.

<sup>73</sup> Prothero, *Religious Literacy*, 8.

<sup>74</sup> Prothero, *Religious Literacy*, 10.

<sup>75</sup> Prothero, *Religious Literacy*, 10.

<sup>76</sup> Prothero, *Religious Literacy*, 184.

Prothero's comments demonstrate that he seeks to reconnect Hervieu-Léger's chain of memory. In wishing to connect students to the country's religious past, Prothero shows his desire to revivify religious understanding within the U.S. The answer to a perceived diminution of religious understanding is to teach students about America's religious past, thereby reconstituting the nation's collective memory about the role of religion.

In this account, affective religion, acting as a disruptor, frays the already tenuous links in the chain of religious memory. In many ways, by casting the affective dimensions of religious life as the villain in this narrative of decline, Prothero raises questions about the role of emotions, embodiment, and other non-cognitive elements in religious literacy. In so doing, he may also paint a picture of religious literacy that overlooks the ways in which affects intersect with, and potentially enhance, current understandings of religion. Within this model, providing students with information about religion will help them navigate a religiously inflected public sphere and remember the nation's religious past.

Prothero's polemic against emotion-religion suggests that he sees affective religion as weakening an already-tenuous connection to the past, which religious literacy might help restore. Here, affect and decline are intertwined. Prothero's focus on transmission and chains of memory show a concern that religious perspectives may no longer hold the same currency as they did in the recent past. In this way, the wider discourse around religious literacy, responds to a particular facet of the classic secularization paradigm. Religious literacy, in Prothero's understanding may emerge out of narratives of religious decline. The

history which Prothero constructs inclines him against affective religion from the very start. Emotive, evangelical tendencies within American Protestantism pushed the cognitive dimension to one side.

Prothero's vision of the past has present-day implications. Significantly, this understanding of America's history appears to inform Prothero's project of religious literacy. His version of religious literacy countervails against the affective aspects of religion by emphasizing the textual and cognitive features of religions. Recall, for example, his focus on content knowledge in the form of a "Dictionary of Religious Literacy,"<sup>77</sup> which lists basic facts about religious terminology—from key figures to sacred spaces. Such facts, for Prothero hold the answers. Tellingly, as Prothero for example asserts, "[m]aking the effort to learn basic information about Christianity can help you decode the code words politicians use when communicating to religious communities."<sup>78</sup> In this framing, religious literacy helps informed listeners crack the "code" contained within language. This is not, however, to say that learning to identify specific themes, terms, or tropes necessarily sets us on the wrong path. Rather, more specifically, such emphases set us on too narrow a path.

As the above example highlights, privileging the linguistic, cognitive, and textual elements of religion may cause proponents of religious literacy such as Prothero to miss other, equally crucial, elements. In other words, what are the dimensions of religion that are not captured

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<sup>77</sup> See Chapter 1 for a description and discussion of Prothero's "Dictionary of Religious Literacy."

<sup>78</sup> Prothero, *Religious Literacy*, 157.

if one views religion as composed of bits of information, as text to be read, decoded, and interpreted? Religious literacy pedagogy, in conforming with liberal structures, often foreground rationality, textuality, and individual choice. Such a framing predisposes, as Prothero's example highlights, proponents of religious literacy to conceive of religion in particular configurations which deliberately downplay the role of affects. Returning to Moore's contention that religious literacy must attend to the "rational consideration of religious worldviews,"<sup>79</sup> we see an eclipsing of non-cognitive aspects and an elevation of rationality at the expense of other factors.

In response, this section focuses on ways of displacing the existing model of liberal subjectivity and, in so doing, aims to provide a platform for rethinking religious literacy: one that would account for a fuller understanding of emotions, subjectivity, and relationality. Contemporary scholarship in affect theory challenges liberal axioms and provides a compelling critique of liberalism's flat discursive space. Theories of affect, bodies, and emotions may, in this way, challenge the ideas around subject formation, liberalism, and religious transmission advanced in certain religious literacy proposals.

In particular, affect theory critiques help illustrate the ways in which creating a liberal subject may prove more challenging than simply conveying information from instructor to student. In stressing the concept of "literacy" within religious literacy, the idea of the autonomous liberal subject comes to the fore. As an example, Moore's religious literacy

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<sup>79</sup> Moore, *Overcoming Religious Illiteracy*, 52.

focuses self-consciously on forming students who have the ability “to participate as active moral agents in the conscious social reproduction of society.”<sup>80</sup> Prothero, similarly, states his objectives plainly: to create an informed citizenry. Through his book, he hopes that citizens will become “empowered to talk about religion in their homes, at work, in houses of worship, and in the rough-and-tumble of local and national politics.”<sup>81</sup> This emphasis on talking about religion, suggests that Prothero believes in people’s capacity to make informed religious decisions. Armed with sufficient information, citizens will become “emboldened to ask questions of their own faith.”<sup>82</sup> This process of acquiring knowledge, in turn, will aid those willing to put in the work in reaching rational, measured, and studied decisions regarding their own beliefs and identities. This framing shows Prothero’s particular concern with forming the liberal subject, one that possesses the capacity to choose freely and rationally based on available information.

However, is it true that people are able simply to assimilate information and arrive at their own conclusions without other factors entering into the equation? This assumption should come as little surprise, given the legacy of this conception. The belief in an autonomous, self-contained subject represents a hallmark of Western liberal thinking. Turning to theory, Teresa Brennan offers a relevant perspective on deconstructing the reason-emotion binary. In her work, *The Transmission of Affect*, Brennan puts forward her conception of a “foundational fantasy” that challenges some of these fundamental assumptions about the

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<sup>80</sup> Moore, *Overcoming Religious Illiteracy*, 24.

<sup>81</sup> Prothero, *Religious Literacy*, 19.

<sup>82</sup> Prothero, *Religious Literacy*, 19.

nature of the individual. According to Brennan, a foundational fantasy builds the illusion that individuals are self-contained.<sup>83</sup> The misimpression that we are purely autonomous, rational subjects “explains how it is that we come to think of ourselves as separate from others.”<sup>84</sup> However, self-containment, in Brennan’s estimation, does not reflect accurately the situation on the ground. It is, in the psychoanalytic sense, an illusion. Brennan terms “this illusion the foundational fantasy because it is the foundation of the fantasy of self-containment.”<sup>85</sup> According to Brennan, bodies are not purely independent. Rather, affects entwine and interconnect bodies in ways that keep people from being wholly separate from one another.

This conclusion about the interconnectivity of bodies leads Brennan to posit, as her work’s title implies, a “transmission of affect” model that seeks to explain how emotions move from one person to the next. This movement of affect is not purely cognitive and self-contained as previously thought. Rather, there is a physiological, biological dimension involved in transmitting emotions from one person to another. As Brennan asserts, “[t]he origin of transmitted affects is social in that these affects do not only arise within a particular person but also come from without.”<sup>86</sup> In Brennan’s view, there is no discrete boundary between the “individual and the environment.”<sup>87</sup> Rather, in Brennan’s words, “the idea of transmitted affects undermine[s] the dichotomy between the individual and the environment and the

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<sup>83</sup> Teresa Brennan, *Transmission of Affect* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004), 12.

<sup>84</sup> Brennan, *Transmission of Affect*, 14.

<sup>85</sup> Brennan, *Transmission of Affect*, 12.

<sup>86</sup> Brennan, *Transmission of Affect*, 3.

<sup>87</sup> Brennan, *Transmission of Affect*, 6.

related opposition between the biological and the social.”<sup>88</sup> Transmitted affects, in this way, travel from person to person. People are distinctive entities, but we are not as autonomous or as impervious to external factors as previously believed.

As Brennan explains, “entrainment,” the neuroscience term for when people’s “nervous and hormonal systems” become alike as a result of contact and proximity, helps explain how affects travel between bodies.<sup>89</sup> In other words, people do not simply formulate judgments in a vacuum. Rather, they arrive at conclusions and feelings in response to a complex interplay of biological and social factors.

When viewed in this light, people are not fully capable of formulating judgments in self-contained, internal, and purely cognitive ways. To use Brennan’s own example, affective states such as depression have the capacity to travel from one person to another. As an example, if one person within a room feels depressed, another person in close proximity may also become sad about an unrelated issue without realizing the cause.<sup>90</sup> As Brennan notes, this may lead people to assume, erroneously, that they are “solely responsible” for their feelings, whereas in reality, they may unknowingly be responding to the affects of those around them.<sup>91</sup> This transmission of affect model challenges the sociobiological claim that individual biology determines social interaction and instead calls for an understanding of

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<sup>88</sup> Brennan, *Transmission of Affect*, 7.

<sup>89</sup> Brennan, *Transmission of Affect*, 9.

<sup>90</sup> Brennan, *Transmission of Affect*, 6.

<sup>91</sup> Brennan, *Transmission of Affect*, 6.

the ways in which “the social interaction shapes biology,” by causing affects to travel from one person to the next.<sup>92</sup>

Brennan’s model problematizes the notion of the self-contained, Enlightenment subject. Her contention highlights the potential limitations associated with conceiving of the subject as purely singular and autonomous, free from other’s affects. Brennan’s project points to the potential for deficient understandings that arise from viewing liberal subjects as purely rational, deliberative, and cognitively guided autonomous individuals.

Relatedly, Brennan’s theoretical insights about the transmission of affect challenge not only the conception of the liberal subject as purely autonomous, but also pave the way for critiques of cognitivism. In other words, such a model exerts pressure on the idea that decision-making results from cognitive processes alone. This idea of transmission of affect points to the multiple, at times embodied, forces and pulls impacting seemingly autonomous action. If affects travel from one person to the next, then cognition itself becomes interwoven with a variety of factors—both internal and external to the apparently autonomous individual. In this way, such theories bring into focus non-cognitive dynamics and, in so doing, reorient understandings to account for other possibilities in addition to the cognitive, autonomous, and rational.

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<sup>92</sup> Brennan, *Transmission of Affect*, 74.

Affect theory's interrelated deprivileging of the cognitive and the autonomous liberal subject, moreover, has consequences for current understandings of secularism. In a related move from a decidedly different disciplinary perspective, political theorist William E. Connolly applies affect theory to secularism with the intention of pointing out secular liberalism's potential limitations in fostering inclusive pluralism. In his book, *Why I Am Not a Secularist*, Connolly offers a critique of both Western liberalism and, relatedly, of secularism. Connolly makes the case for robust engagement of religious and nonreligious views in the public sphere. Liberalism, and secularism, by extension, have failed to take into account the "visceral register" needed to foster inclusivity and true pluralism.<sup>93</sup> By connecting affect with secular liberalism, Connolly amplifies Brennan's point about the interconnectivity of individuals challenging existing notions of liberal subjectivity. According to Connolly, the overemphasis on rationality has effectively disqualified other, equally crucial factors, from contributing to public discourse. Secularism has, in Connolly's words, its own "blind spots."<sup>94</sup> In so doing, secularism presents a barrier to inclusion in the name of inclusivity.

In Connolly's argument, secularism discounts and disfavors this so-called visceral register "in the name of a public sphere in which reason, morality, and tolerance flourish."<sup>95</sup> Paradoxically, the language of inclusivity bars certain forms of expression from entering—overtly, at any rate—the public domain. Connolly contends:

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<sup>93</sup> William E. Connolly, *Why I Am Not a Secularist* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 3.

<sup>94</sup> Connolly, *Why I Am Not a Secularist*, 4.

<sup>95</sup> Connolly, *Why I Am Not a Secularist*, 3.

The secular division of labor between “religious faith” and “secular argument,” where faith and ritual are to be contained in a protected private preserve and rational argument is said to exhaust public life, suppresses complex registers of persuasion, judgment, and discourse operative in public life.<sup>96</sup>

As Connolly’s statement indicates, there are additional factors at play in forming individual determinations.

Secularism, however, in Connolly’s view, “[n]eeds refashioning, not elimination.”<sup>97</sup> Secular liberalism, and its attendant biases, obscure the myriad contributors to decision-making and engagement with a religiously active public sphere. It therefore needs a new model for mapping relations among citizens and cultivating an “ethos of engagement”: one that takes seriously affects, feelings, and other non-linguistic dimensions of social interaction. Connolly’s contribution, here, points to the need to take additional, non-cognitive and non-linguistic factors into consideration. His project, in this way, calls for a “multi-dimensional”<sup>98</sup> pluralism that takes a range of views into account.

This application of affect to secular liberalism that Connolly advances finds a corollary in contemporary religious studies scholarship. The need for an affective definition of religion here comes into play and helps think through ways of implementing Connolly’s vision a “multi-dimensional” pluralism. Pushing back against viewing religions along a continuum

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<sup>96</sup> Connolly, *Why I Am Not a Secularist*, 20.

<sup>97</sup> Connolly, *Why I Am Not a Secularist*, 19.

<sup>98</sup> Connolly, *Why I Am Not a Secularist*, 186.

of cognitive and linguistic aspects, Thomas Tweed offers a new definition of religion that takes seriously ideas of embodiment. Tweed arrives at his analysis from the perspective of globalized religion. His work with Cuban Catholic communities in Miami led him to conclude that prevailing definitions of religion proved insufficient for capturing what he had observed on the ground. In his 2006 work, *Crossing and Dwelling: A Theory of Religion*, Tweed defines religions as “confluences of organic-cultural flows that intensify joy and confront suffering by drawing on human and suprahuman forces to make homes and cross boundaries.”<sup>99</sup> Notably, Tweed frames religion in terms of flows and feelings. In this way, he challenges the supremacy of cognitivist and textualist understandings of religion. Note, moreover, that references to text, belief, and tradition remain conspicuously absent from his definition. In Tweed’s model, space remains for embodied practice and material culture. In Donovan Schaefer’s interpretation, “Tweed suggests that religion’s efficacy is located in procedures for eliciting particular affective reactions in bodies.”<sup>100</sup> Religions, for Tweed, encompass far more than mere cognitive properties. They derive from relationships, feelings, movements, and, above all, from bodies, rather than exclusively from minds.

Rather than seeking to do away with past definitions, Tweed frames his approach as “locative,”<sup>101</sup> responding to context, location, time, and place. This approach supplements, rather than supplants, past understandings of religion. Tweed aims to “encourage greater

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<sup>99</sup> Thomas A. Tweed, *Crossing and Dwelling: A Theory of Religion* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), 54.

<sup>100</sup> Donovan O. Schaefer, *Religious Affects: Animality, Evolution, and Power* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 33.

<sup>101</sup> Tweed, *Crossing and Dwelling*, 165.

attention to the relational dynamics of religion in this era of transnational flows.”<sup>102</sup> As Tweed’s words suggest, this understanding emphasizes complex relationships over the notion of unadulterated autonomy.

Tweed’s understanding of religion—one that privileges relationality and fluidity—helps to undermine the conception of the liberal subject as an autonomous, self-contained, and purely cognitive being. Connecting back to Brennan’s transmission of affect model, Tweed’s definition takes up the challenge of understanding religion in terms of relational flows. His analysis, significantly, connects a critique of the autonomous, liberal subject directly to contemporary religious studies. Like Brennan’s work on transmission of affect, Tweed’s project deconstructs some assumptions underlying liberal subject formation and points to new ways of thinking through the relational, embodied, and non-cognitive dimensions of interaction.

Building on Tweed, Manuel Vásquez advances a critique of cognitivism that poses a challenge to current models of religious literacy. In his 2011 book, *More than Belief: A Materialist Theory of Religion*, Vásquez builds on Tweed’s project by calling for contemporary scholarship to “re-materialize” religious studies. Following Tweed, he posits a model that challenges the existing binary between cognitive understanding and embodied approaches. The intellectual history Vásquez constructs draws attention to what he describes as the “insurgent materialist countercurrents within religious studies,” which have

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<sup>102</sup> Tweed, *Crossing and Dwelling*, 166.

often been overlooked and eclipsed by concepts of “idealism, subjectivism, essentialism, and transcendence.”<sup>103</sup> These materialist currents have, he argues, always been present. However, textual and cognitivist tendencies have been foregrounded in religious studies as a result of a complex history of ideas and trends.

The globalized religions that Vásquez observes challenge Protestant “understandings of religion—religion as text-centered, heavily doctrinal, and cognitive.”<sup>104</sup> Rather than focusing exclusively on texts, scholars ought, from Vásquez’ perspective, pay critical attention to the elements of religion that push past text and take seriously embodied practice. Although Vásquez does not use the language of affect explicitly, his ideas connect closely with affect theory. For Vásquez, textualism is not merely an overemphasis on “sacred texts produced by religious elites,” but also according undue space in the field of religious studies to approaching “religious practices as if they were only texts, symbolic systems that scholars of religion must understand empathetically, decode through thick description, or endlessly postpone interpretively.”<sup>105</sup> Pushing back against Clifford Geertz’ emphasis on seeing cultures as texts to be interpreted and viewing “all human practices through the prism of representation and signification,”<sup>106</sup> Vásquez calls for contemporary religious studies to address the role of lived religion. This so-called materialist shift reorients religious studies away from a strict reliance on textualism and towards embodied religious practice. Vásquez’

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<sup>103</sup> Manuel A. Vásquez, *More Than Belief: A Materialist Theory of Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 4.

<sup>104</sup> Vásquez, *More Than Belief*, 253.

<sup>105</sup> Vásquez, *More Than Belief*, 15.

<sup>106</sup> Vásquez, *More Than Belief*, 212.

aim, as he makes clear, is not to do away with a focus on text, but rather to shift the emphasis towards materialist understandings.

The move away from textualism also necessitates a shift away from the “Cartesian dualism,” which according to Vásquez, has characterized religious studies. In Vásquez’ account, “ambivalent approaches”<sup>107</sup> to the body within Western intellectual history led to a privileging of cognition over embodiment. Tracing an intellectual lineage from Plato to Descartes, Vásquez’ narrative shows the origins of a nascent dualism between body and mind within Western thought. These strands came together in “Cartesian dualism,” which elevated *cogito* above all and fostered an uneasy stance towards embodied practice. Cartesian dualism, in Vásquez’ estimation, “provided one of Western modernity’s central pillars: the autonomous, rational, disembodied, unified and self-transparent cogito.”<sup>108</sup> In this way, mind and body became increasingly disassociated, seen as occupying antipodal ends of the spectrum between reason and emotion.

In response to Vásquez’ call for a “materialist shift” in the study of religions, Donovan Schaefer has made the case for connecting theories of affect to contemporary religious studies. His project has called attention to the potential inadequacy of linking religious understanding purely with language and text. According to Schaefer, there are additional,

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<sup>107</sup> Vásquez, *More Than Belief*, 43.

<sup>108</sup> Vásquez, *More Than Belief*, 43.

potent factors at play in shaping power relations and interactions between bodies. As Schaefer argues, affects challenge the liberal notion of self-sovereignty. In his words:

Affects, then, are forces that exceed the classic liberal thematics of self-sovereignty. *Liberalism* here refers to an intellectual lineage emerging out of Western modernity that places *liber*—the free man, the singular, rational, autonomous, speaking agent—at the center of its understanding of culture politics, reason, knowledge, and religion.<sup>109</sup>

This challenge to liberalism rests on the notion of the linguistic fallacy, the idea that decision-making results directly from language. In terms of religion, the linguistic fallacy plays a critical role in framing religion as inseparable from language. In other words, the “linguistic fallacy misunderstands religion as merely a byproduct of language.”<sup>110</sup> Further, as Schaefer explains, “[t]he linguistic fallacy assumes that the medium of power is language—that depth, complex responses, experiences and decisions cannot take place without the machinery of linguisticized reason.”<sup>111</sup> Language, when viewed in these terms, cannot simply be deployed in service of a particular agenda. Other factors, including emotions, feelings, and the complex interplay of bodies, all potentially contribute. In this way, “[t]he affective turn pushes a new understanding of bodies as driven primarily by mobile matrices of feeling, rather than bits and bytes of information.”<sup>112</sup> This focus on embodiment shifts the emphasis from cognitivist to materialist strands within religious studies.

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<sup>109</sup> Schaefer, *Religious Affects*, 23. Emphasis original.

<sup>110</sup> Schaefer, *Religious Affects*, 9.

<sup>111</sup> Schaefer, *Religious Affects*, 13.

<sup>112</sup> Schaefer, *Religious Affects*, 209.

This line of analysis proves useful for exposing some of the epistemological assumptions that underpin much of the discourse around religious literacy. Vásquez' push to re-materialize religious studies and Schaefer's highlighting of the "linguistic fallacy" shed light on the potential limitations of overreliance on textual understandings. Such approaches, including those of Brennan, Connolly, Tweed, Vásquez, and Schaefer, instead challenge readers to take seriously concepts of embodiment and other non-cognitive forces at play in human interaction. Such critiques of liberal models of subjectivity and of textualism challenge current models of religious literacy by showing the potential limitations of the discourse. For religious literacy, this approach highlights the potential pitfalls associated with presenting religion as a series of propositional statements or linguistics commands that students can evaluate in measured, deliberative, and, by extension, autonomous and cognitive, ways.

### **3.3 "The Integrity of the Teacher": Pedagogy, Neutrality, and Secular Subjectivity**

As the previous section has argued, the assumption of a reason-emotion binary has the potential to impact the subject matter of religious literacy. Affect theory, in addition, helps shine a light on some of the unforeseen obstacles within the pedagogical practices of religious literacy. Overlooking the affective and material dimensions of religions has the capacity to inform and impact the content of religious literacy trainings. As Prothero's example in particular shows, focusing on the linguistic and textual dimensions of religions

risks sidelining other approaches and overemphasizing content knowledge. Equally, such a focus, on a practical level, has the capacity to influence not only the content, but also the delivery of religious literacy programs. In other words, as the following aims to demonstrate, assumptions about agency and individual choice often guide the actual implementation of religious literacy programs and trainings. Taking a turn from theory to practice illustrates the problem at hand.

In recent years in particular, scholars have begun highlighting the cognitivist biases underpinning contemporary education by making connections between emotions and learning. Affect theorists such as Megan Boler, Megan Watkins, and Elspeth Probyn have pointed to the inseparability of emotions from cognitive learning. These theorists develop a promising direction for examining the questions around neutrality and fairness, which suffuse the writings on religious literacy. Using the tools of current scholarship on deconstructing the reason-emotion binary within educational settings, this section suggests that religious literacy, especially within the context of U.S. public school classrooms, provides a useful case study for examining the ongoing challenges of creating a non-dualist pedagogy and for exposing some of the epistemic assumptions about autonomy and student choice. Focusing in particular on the role of the student-teacher interaction, this section aims to bring into sharper focus the possible ways in which an emphasis on cognitive learning masks a suspicion of, and entanglements with, the body in contemporary education policy. Using religious literacy as a site from which to examine the challenges of implementing non-dualist pedagogy, this section proposes a reconsideration of agency and

student choice in contemporary education policy that begins to account for the affective, embodied, and non-cognitive dimensions of classroom interaction.

Within certain models of religious literacy, students learn about different religions, and emerge equipped to navigate democratic public life. The transmission of religious knowledge, then, represents a key player in cultivating the proper attitudes towards religions. Despite the concern for students evident in the discussion around religious literacy, there exists minimal concrete discussion about what implementing religious literacy trainings within pedagogical spaces such as classrooms, workshops, or even informational texts might entail. Careful to avoid accusations of promoting indoctrination, or alternatively, of denigrating religious viewpoints, proponents of religious literacy frequently take pains to highlight the even-handedness of their approach. This call to fairness, crucially, often relies on the contention that students, when presented with facts and reasonable arguments, will be able to make up their own minds in unproblematic, possibly even neutral, ways.

Teacher training, for these reasons, presents a significant theme within religious literacy and its potential implementation. Moore has even dedicated an entire chapter of her book to teacher education,<sup>113</sup> and supranational education documents, such as the “Toledo Guiding Principles”<sup>114</sup> and “Signposts,” all include calls for increased teacher training. Although

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<sup>113</sup> See: Moore, *Overcoming Religious Illiteracy*, 89-104.

<sup>114</sup> See: “Toledo Guiding Principles on Teaching About Religions and Beliefs in Public Schools,” *Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe* (27 November 2007); and Robert Jackson,

advocates for religious literacy vary in their approaches, several offer similar appeals to teacher training and the parameters of preparation for the classroom—all predicated on advancing deliberative democracy’s aims. As an example, Warren Nord, an early proponent of religious literacy, comments frequently about neutrality and fairness in teaching about religions within school contexts. When discussing teacher training in *Religion and American Education*, Nord contends that “the neutrality that seems morally required here is not one that prohibits the teacher or the text from taking sides but one that respects the moral integrity of students by not requiring them to agree.”<sup>115</sup> Significantly, Nord emphasizes the concept of neutrality that derives from students’ abilities to make up their own minds. In so doing, his statement calls attention to the potential cognitivist bias underlying religious literacy proposals. Teachers’ attitudes—whether conveyed non-verbally or stated explicitly—in this understanding, play a limited role in conveying ideas about religion. Reason and individual discernment act as buffers. Students, as autonomous, rational subjects arrive in the classroom already equipped to make up their own minds. This, for Nord, equates to fairness.

Further highlighting his assumptions about classroom interactions, Nord goes on to claim that “[r]easonableness, political civility and inclusivity, [and] respect for the integrity of students...all dictate a policy of fairness to, and neutrality among, those contending religious

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“Signposts—Policy and Practice for Teaching about Religions and Non-religious World Views in Intercultural Education” (Strasbourg: Council of Europe Publishing, 2014).

<sup>115</sup> Warren A. Nord, *Religion and American Education: Rethinking a National Dilemma* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1995), 241.

and secular ideas about which we so deeply disagree.”<sup>116</sup> This elevation of the liberal norms of respectful disagreement speaks to Nord’s understanding of religious literacy’s purpose. As Nord elaborates, “part of taking religion seriously is taking its claim to have truth seriously, and we cannot do this unless we allow it to enter the rough-and-tumble of intellectual competition.”<sup>117</sup> This passage highlights Nord’s view of fairness entails inclusion within the realm of reasonable public discourse. Elsewhere, Nord writes, in a co-authored book with Haynes, that teaching about religions in schools must be “objective, nonjudgmental, neutral, balanced, and fair.”<sup>118</sup> Although Nord and Haynes anticipate possible pushback against their preferred terms, they remain committed to promoting “neutrality” as an attainable standard. As they write, “[w]e have argued, in turn, that neutrality requires both fairness and refraining from judgement. When we disagree on religious grounds, we can achieve neutrality only by including everyone in the discussion. On this reading, ‘objectivity’ means being fair rather than being prejudiced—rather than prejudging conclusions by not taking everyone seriously.”<sup>119</sup> Fairness necessitates inclusion. However, this specific vision of fairness and neutrality is predicated on the ability of students to assess a variety of views and come to their own conclusions.

Tellingly, even critics of liberal education fall into the same potential trap of privileging deliberative democracy’s aims. Andrew Wright, a U.K. proponent of religious literacy, who

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<sup>116</sup> Nord, *Religion and American Education*, 258.

<sup>117</sup> Nord, *Religion and American Education*, 241.

<sup>118</sup> Warren A. Nord, and Charles Haynes, *Taking Religion Seriously Across the Curriculum* (Alexandria, Virginia: Association for Supervision & Curriculum Development (ASCD), 1998), 47.

<sup>119</sup> Nord and Haynes, *Taking Religion Seriously Across the Curriculum*, 41.

has criticized religion teaching for smuggling in Enlightenment biases about individual autonomy, perhaps does not go far enough in his own critique. In his book on religious education and religious literacy, Wright dedicates ample space to a discussion of neutrality.

Wright sets out the following argument:

The question of neutrality versus commitment seems to me to be fundamentally irrelevant. Given that every teacher of religious education will inevitably go into the classroom with a particular commitment, a particular set of attitudes and beliefs, the expectation that these beliefs are suspended and put to one side seems to me fundamentally dishonest, requiring the teacher, ultimately, to portray a false picture of themselves to their pupils. Not only is it dishonest, in the long term it actually fails to work: in reality the suspension of one's presuppositions cannot be hidden. Pupils should not be underestimated here: they are skilled at seeing through such a farce and are quick to pick up, through nuances of expression and by reading between the lines, a fairly good approximation of where exactly in the spectrum of religious belief their teacher is coming from.<sup>120</sup>

Attempts at neutrality, in this view, are unsuccessful because students have the ability to guess teachers' positions. This emphasis on a performative, and ultimately feigned, neutrality, misses the mark and risks alienating savvy students who are able to see through the charade.

Wright's answer to this problem of performative neutrality lies in transparency. Teachers must not patronize students. Nor should they be overly concerned with their own positionality:

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<sup>120</sup>Andrew Wright, *Religious Education in the Secondary School: Prospects for Religious Literacy* (London: David Fulton in association with the Roehampton Institute, 1993), 101-102.

The dangers of such presuppositions on the part of the teacher, the reality that they might deliberately or inadvertently allow their teaching to be swayed by their beliefs, are far less if such beliefs are on the public agenda, that pupils are made aware explicitly just where their teacher actually stands. By identifying explicitly such information, pupils have a much better chance of perceiving any attempt to misuse it.<sup>121</sup>

Although Wright himself criticizes the emphasis on autonomy,<sup>122</sup> he too relies on students' ability to make informed choices on the basis of transparency. Using language similar to that of Nord, who spoke of "moral integrity," Wright goes on to make the case for relying on students' discernment and rationality:

The integrity of the teacher lies not then in their ability to hide or admit their own beliefs, but in their ability to put such questions on one side as being, though always present, ultimately irrelevant to the educational process. Integrity lies rather in the ability to forego the role of expert and advocate and concentrate instead on the task of enabling one's students' own education in religion to develop.<sup>123</sup>

This is not to say that transparency constitutes an unworthy aim for teachers of religion, or of any subject for that matter. Few would argue that concealing, or deliberately misrepresenting, one's own beliefs or identity within educational settings constitutes the best course of action. Rather, the emphasis on student choice and discernment points to a privileging of the rational and the cognitive dimensions. In Wright's understanding, teachers' beliefs and, by extension, the feelings they might engender, are, in his own

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<sup>121</sup> Wright, *Religious Education in the Secondary School*, 102.

<sup>122</sup> Andrew Wright, "The Spiritual Education Project: Cultivating Spiritual and Religious Literacy through a Critical Pedagogy of Religious Education," in *Pedagogies of Religious Education: Case Studies in Research and Development of Good Pedagogic Practice in RE*, ed. Michael Grimmit (Essex: McCrimmon Publishing, 2000), 171.

<sup>123</sup> Wright, *Religious Education in the Secondary School*, 103.

emphatic wording, “ultimately irrelevant to the educational process.”<sup>124</sup> Although Wright appears to be arguing against teachers affecting an ultimately-futile-in-its-disingenuousness attempt at neutrality, his reliance on students’ ability to make informed choices points to the potential of cognitivist biases to overtake discussions of religious literacy. In other words, in presupposing a clear agential frame in which individuals make purely autonomous choices based on rationally assimilated information, proponents of religious literacy such as Wright risk presenting an incomplete picture of what happens on the ground within classroom settings.

Are minds and bodies, in other words, so easily separated? Recent scholarship on the intersection of affect and pedagogy suggests otherwise. As Megan Boler, for example, contends in *Feeling Power: Emotions and Education*, “within education, as in the wider culture, emotions are the site of social control.”<sup>125</sup> Drawing the connection between emotion and power formations, Boler points to the civic implications of attending to affects within classroom settings. Boler’s interconnection of emotions and power provides a useful way of examining arguments about the role of the teacher within religious literacy initiatives.

At the core of such theories is the notion that emotions interact collectively and are not merely contained within their originary point. Similar to Brennan’s central insight about the

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<sup>124</sup> Wright, *Religious Education in the Secondary School*, 103.

<sup>125</sup> Megan Boler, *Feeling Power: Emotions and Education* (London: Routledge, 1999), xiv.

transmission of affect, Boler's analysis of classroom education calls upon us to think about the interconnectivity of emotions. As she argues, emotions need to be re-envisioned "as collaboratively constructed and historically situated, rather than simply as individualized phenomenon located in the interior self."<sup>126</sup> Here, affect theorist Megan Watkins, strengthens Boler's claims by connecting observations about the formative presence of emotions and "affective production" within even "the most sterile and rational of classrooms"<sup>127</sup> to the prevailing neoliberal approaches to education, which privilege individual autonomy. According to Watkins, "[e]ducation's preoccupation with the mind at the expense of the body has major pedagogic repercussion."<sup>128</sup> These repercussions, in Watkins' view, can cause equally major oversights in understanding the role of the teacher in contemporary classroom settings. In her essay "Thwarting Desire: Discursive Constraint and Pedagogic Practice," Watkins critiques neoliberal approaches to teaching that have made inroads into contemporary pedagogic practices in Western democracies. In Watkins' view, neoliberal approaches to education, which privilege the "moral autonomy" of the rational individual fail "to consider the important relationship between degrees of competence and independence in learning, assuming the latter is simply a matter of a redistribution of power within the pedagogic relation, namely a move from teacher- to more student-directed learning."<sup>129</sup> This assumption, that knowledge travels seamlessly from teacher to student, problematically disregards the role of teachers' affects. How teachers

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<sup>126</sup> Boler, *Feeling Power*, 6.

<sup>127</sup> Boler, *Feeling Power*, 15.

<sup>128</sup> Megan Watkins, "Pedagogic Affect/Effect: Embodying a Desire to Learn," *Pedagogies: An International Journal*, Vol. 1, No. 4 (2006): 276.

<sup>129</sup> Megan Watkins, "Thwarting Desire: Discursive Constraint and Pedagogic Practice," *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, Vol. 20, No. 3 (May-June 2007): 314.

feel, react, and engage with the materials at hand has the potential to elicit responses from student.

Moreover, the resultant “marketization” of education, characterized “by a rationality of individual responsibility and consumer choice,” has changed the role of the teacher in marked ways within neoliberal contexts.<sup>130</sup> Teachers, in this model, must serve as facilitators who present their students with information. Equally, students, as budding consumers within this context, survey a range of choices and select the most appropriate option.

Watkins’ work challenges the notion of the student’s ability to make autonomous, rational choices on the basis of the information presented alone. Other factors, in her estimation, play a key role in eliciting responses from students. In her 2007 essay “Disparate Bodies: The Role of the Teacher in Contemporary Pedagogic Practice,” Watkins points to the role of embodiment in teaching. Watkins’ fieldwork within Australian and other Western liberal educational contexts led her to the key insight that “[t]he teacher’s body has a dubious status within contemporary pedagogic practice.”<sup>131</sup> As she asserts, “[r]elegated to the role of facilitator the teacher’s overall presence and bodily impact in classrooms has been greatly reduced.”<sup>132</sup> Watkins considers not only the “different ways in which teachers deploy their bodies,” but also “the differential embodiment of their students which results from the affects

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<sup>130</sup> Watkins, “Thwarting Desire,” 302.

<sup>131</sup> Megan Watkins, “Disparate Bodies: The Role of the Teacher in Contemporary Pedagogic Practice,” *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, Vol. 28, No. 6 (November 2007): 767.

<sup>132</sup> Watkins, “Disparate Bodies,” 767.

that their teachers' pedagogies engender."<sup>133</sup> Students, in Watkins' view, do not simply assimilate information. Rather, in her words, "[d]ifferent pedagogies, therefore, would appear to require different affective force, as they require teachers to perform quite distinct roles. In doing so, teachers use their bodies differently."<sup>134</sup> Watkins goes on to argue that a "teacher's performance can spark a reaction, which has a contagious effect amongst a corporate body of learners, who, within a whole-class context share common ground for learning."<sup>135</sup> If true, then Watkin's model offers a critique of the notion that students can simply assimilate information in neutral ways. Embodiment, within Watkins' model, plays a key role in transmitting information and, perhaps more importantly, in shaping attitudes towards said information.

This under-theorized dimension of student-teacher interaction has implications for religious literacy. Nord's argument that equality—serious exposure to a variety of religious ideas—serves as a guarantor of fairness subtly deemphasizes the role of the teacher in attitudinal formation. Equally, Wright's critique of performative neutrality in the classroom relies on transparency. Recall that, in Wright's assessment, if teachers disclose their own positions, then all will be well.

However, as Watkin's analysis suggests, if teachers' affects help form and inform students' attitudes towards materials, then instructors—whether knowingly or unknowingly—are not

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<sup>133</sup> Watkins, "Disparate Bodies," 768.

<sup>134</sup> Watkins, "Disparate Bodies," 768

<sup>135</sup> Watkins, "Disparate Bodies," 769.

merely facilitators. Their embodied attitudes can provoke or inhibit student responses. In her essay, "Teaching Bodies: Affects in the Classroom," cultural studies scholar Elspeth Probyn calls also attention to the role of bodies within the classroom. Students are not simply ambulatory "embodied minds," who receive and assimilate information passively. Rather there exists a complex interplay of feelings, emotions, and embodied practices that suffuse a classroom environment. This notion of "embodied pedagogy" that Probyn advances helps problematize the idea that knowledge, or religious knowledge specifically in this instance, can be transmitted in ways that are purely cognitive.<sup>136</sup>

Rather than focusing on ideas and conceptions, Probyn examines "the question of what ideas and concepts *do* in the classroom."<sup>137</sup> Probyn asks the seemingly simple, yet fertile question: "How can one possibly teach concepts concerned with bodies without acknowledging ways in which bodies are inhabited?"<sup>138</sup> Without such an acknowledgement, pedagogical practices may remain ill-prepared to address adequately the interaction between students and teachers, as well as between bodies and minds. Emotions, dispositions, and bodily connections inform and, possibly, change the neat presentation of bits of information into messy, human-emotion suffused, bundles. This student-teacher interaction, then, by its very nature, is anything but purely self-contained and cognitive. It is both—cognitive and affective at the same time.

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<sup>136</sup> Elspeth Probyn, "Teaching Bodies: Affects in the Classroom," *Body & Society*, Vol. 10, No. 4 (2004): 38.

<sup>137</sup> Probyn, "Teaching Bodies," 32. Emphasis original.

<sup>138</sup> Probyn, "Teaching Bodies," 33.

If we accept that emotions do not necessarily remain contained within a singular person, then this has implications for transmitting knowledge. The concept of “situated affectivity,” the notion that affective states may not arise simply from internal dispositions, but rather are responses to external factors, plays a role. In his essay, “Mind Invasion: Situated Affectivity and the Corporate Mind Hack,” Jan Slaby claims that “affect and emotion are never merely matters of ‘internal mental states,’ nor just narrow ways of being affected, but usually encompass sequences of active engagement with the world, usually in highly social and relational ways.”<sup>139</sup> Using white-collar workplaces as the basis for his case study, Slaby calls attention to the idea that people, employees in this specific example, tend to adopt “affective and emotional dispositions” of those around them.<sup>140</sup> In Slaby’s analysis, “affectivity is dynamically framed and modulated from without, often contrary to the prior orientations of the individuals in question.”<sup>141</sup> His work points to a new change within the philosophy of emotion from an emphasis on individuals as the originators of emotional states to a view that affects and emotions may arise from a complex interplay of “structures or processes within an emoter’s environment.”<sup>142</sup> Slaby’s focus on office culture and the interactions such spaces foster call into question the autonomy of individuals in making decisions about how to comport themselves and how to engage with others.

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<sup>139</sup> Jan Slaby, “Mind Invasion: Situated Affectivity and the Corporate Life Hack,” *Frontiers in Psychology*, Vol. 7, No. 266 (February 2016): 3.

<sup>140</sup> Slaby, “Mind Invasion,” 2.

<sup>141</sup> Slaby, “Mind Invasion,” 1.

<sup>142</sup> Slaby, “Mind Invasion,” 3.

Here, Sara Ahmed's understanding of the cultural politics of emotion contributes to theorizing the ways in which emotions challenge the perception of purely autonomous individuals. In her research, Ahmed asks "what do emotions do?," rather than the standard, "what are emotions?"<sup>143</sup> According to Ahmed, emotions do not inhere to objects or bodies. Rather, they move between bodies, often in unpredictable ways. For Ahmed, feelings towards objects are "not simply a matter of individual impressions, or impressions that are created anew in the present."<sup>144</sup> Emotions do not exist in a vacuum. Nor do they originate from within autonomous individuals. They instead "rehearse associations that are already in place," and in so doing, inform the perception of "truth" of a reading or interpretation.<sup>145</sup>

Like Brennan, who advanced the concept of the "foundational fantasy," Ahmed is also interested in the transmission of affect. How, Ahmed's research asks, do emotions travel from one body to the next? How do emotions circulate to produce collective feelings? In her analysis:

It is not simply that the subject feels hate, or feels fear, and nor is it the case that the object is simply hateful or is fearful: the emotions of hate and fear are shaped by the "contact zone" in which others impress upon us, as well as leave their impressions.<sup>146</sup>

Emotions are, to use Ahmed's phrasing, "sticky." They bind and come unbound in less than predictable ways. As Ahmed frames it, "emotions are not 'in' either the individual or the

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<sup>143</sup> Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004), 4.

<sup>144</sup> Sara Ahmed, "Collective Feelings: Or, the Impressions Left by Others," *Theory, Culture & Society*, Vol. 25, No.21 (April 2004): 39.

<sup>145</sup> Ahmed, "Collective Feelings," 39.

<sup>146</sup> Ahmed, *Cultural Politics*, 194.

social, but produce the very surfaces and boundaries that allow the individual and the social to be delineated as if they are objects.”<sup>147</sup> Following this line of reasoning, in her analysis on the role of emotions in forming collectivities, Ahmed argues that emotions do not originate within a subject. Emotions instead “work to create the very boundary between the inside and outside.”<sup>148</sup> Ahmed’s contention suggests that emotions are not static. They move from body to body through, to use her language, “contact zones.”<sup>149</sup> As Ahmed explains, “emotions are not a positive form of dwelling, but produce the effect of surfaces and boundaries of bodies.”<sup>150</sup> Bodies, in this way, are not self-contained, autonomous entities. Rather, through interaction with bodies, emotions and feelings move from one person to the next. As Probyn asserts evocatively, “[p]articles of bodies, bodies fragmented in affect, continually batter against the pedagogical body.”<sup>151</sup> Probyn’s comments suggest that the task of teaching or learning within a group setting may be well-nigh impossible to disentangle from the complexities of bodily interaction. Enthusiastic conveyance of material may prove equally, albeit differently, predictive of learning outcomes.

In this way, Probyn and other theorists who take seriously ideas about embodiment and attachment challenge the cognitivist, textualist biases underpinning our current pedagogical models. The model these scholars offer suggests that we do not simply assimilate grids of information. As Schaefer, puts it: “Affect theory repudiates the presupposition that bodies,

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<sup>147</sup> Ahmed, *Cultural Politics*, 10.

<sup>148</sup> Ahmed, “Collective Feelings,” 28.

<sup>149</sup> Ahmed, “Collective Feelings,” 28.

<sup>150</sup> Ahmed, *Cultural Politics*, 194.

<sup>151</sup> Probyn, “Teaching Bodies,” 37.

especially our human bodies, are best understood according to a rationally arranged grid of calculations, propositions, and decisions.”<sup>152</sup> People, in this assessment, do not respond to materials in obvious, predictable ways. We cannot simply feed in an input and expect a standard output. As Schaefer elaborates in his own critique of Prothero, “[r]eligion for Prothero, is a grid of linguistic commands, a current of force from concept and belief to moving bodies.”<sup>153</sup> This approach, however, as Schaefer points out, overlooks the myriad of other contributing factors and may, fundamentally, misunderstand knowledge transmission. Although Schaefer’s critique targets Prothero’s understanding of religion, it points to a broader challenge around liberal understandings of pedagogy. Viewing linguistic commands, in Schaefer’s phrasing, as the exclusive motivators of action misses the many non-linguistic forces that may play key roles in influencing pedagogical interactions and outcomes.

As current scholarship points out, language may not simply induce the desired response. This understanding of language has significant consequences for pedagogy. In her essay, “The Pedagogy of Buddhism,” Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick poses the following question: “Is it true that we can only learn when we are aware that we are being taught?”<sup>154</sup> As Sedgwick’s question highlights, knowledge transmission is rarely seamless. Buddhist pedagogy, as Sedgwick notes, has long encountered and taken into account such messiness and complexity. Using the example of nineteenth-century Westerners’ encounters with

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<sup>152</sup> Schaefer, *Religious Affects*, 16.

<sup>153</sup> Schaefer, *Religious Affects*, 20.

<sup>154</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, “Pedagogy of Buddhism” in *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 153.

Buddhism, Sedgwick points to the ways in which interpreters and practitioners of Buddhism have failed to take on board core teachings. Americans, for instance, “resisted most of the crucially negative aspects of Buddhism,” including the belief that never having been born or reborn represents the best outcome.<sup>155</sup> Although core Buddhist teachings conveyed one message, practitioners came away with a different interpretation. The nineteenth century Americans’ failure to assimilate core teachings points to the vicissitudes of teaching and learning from linguistic and non-linguistic perspectives.

In this model, teachers do not simply employ and deploy language. This phenomenon of “pointing at the moon,”<sup>156</sup> to use the language of Buddhist teaching, underscores a longstanding pedagogical problem. In other words, in this example, failed pedagogy results from a student’s failure to look past the instructor’s pointing finger and see the moon for herself. Do teachers convey what they mean to students and do students receive information in predictable and intended ways? The answer, it appears, is not always. This lack of predictability in learning challenges the notion that students will engage with learning materials in purely autonomous and cognitive ways. Despite the emphasis on cognition and autonomy the level of policy proposal and recommendation, the body often emerges as an uncomfortable site of negotiation and contestation within religious literacy proposals in ways that often go unacknowledged.

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<sup>155</sup> Sedgwick, “Pedagogy of Buddhism,” 168-169.

<sup>156</sup> Sedgwick, “Pedagogy of Buddhism,” 168.

This point comes into sharper focus within U.S. contexts. First Amendment concerns within the U.S. about Constitutionally impermissible faith formation in schools help illustrate the consequences of, and complications accompanying, the role of embodiment in learning. Returning to the example of Wertheimer's notes of caution referenced at the start of this chapter helps illustrate the complexity of the issues at hand. Recall how Wertheimer warned that engaging the body through experiential learning activities such as trying on "cultural" dress "can come close to simulating a religious act."<sup>157</sup> Her caution, in this telling way, calls for teachers to be vigilant and wary about embodied practices. According to this logic, once bodies enter the scene, minds easily follow.

Further, in addition to dress, other lesson activities are potentially filled with danger. Field trips, in particular, have the capacity to go wrong from the start. As Wertheimer advises, "Establish firm rules before taking students on field trips. Avoid going when there is active prayer. Make sure students and tour guides know the point is to observe, not participate, in any ritual."<sup>158</sup> Such strict rules governing bodily interaction with material objects and spaces signals a suspicion of the body within, and outside, the classroom. The emphasis, moreover, on observation, rather than on participation, speaks to a broader concern involving the susceptibility of the body to emotions and non-cognitive pulls. These warnings, taken together, attest to the real-world implications of Brennan's theory of transmitted affects. Bodies, as Wertheimer's example shows, become subject to forces other than language and

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<sup>157</sup> Wertheimer, "Teaching about Religion."

<sup>158</sup> Wertheimer, "Teaching about Religion."

reason. Cognition and language, in this scenario, become susceptible to other flows, forces, and pulls.

Although control or lack thereof—over environment, guest speakers, enactment of rituals, etc.—clearly presents an ongoing concern for teachers who venture away from textbooks into the uncharted territory of the human sensorium, there is another apparent challenge at play. Within the U.S., educators, perhaps rightly so given the consequences, fear the emotive-religion, concerned that engaging with embodiment might undermine the Constitutional permissibility of their endeavors. Separation of church and state, in this way, equates to a separation of mind from body.

The response, however, in addressing such potential hazards tends to swing the pendulum too far in the opposite direction by overemphasizing cognitive aspects such as critical thinking, rational debate, and content knowledge. Until educators and policymakers think through the implications of overlooking the non-cognitive aspects of both teaching and religions, educational programs pertaining to religion within the context of the U.S. will likely remain at an impasse. As religious literacy educators and practitioners such as Benjamin Marcus have remarked, the U.S.'s deemphasis of experiential learning in religious studies education puts the country out of step with current trends in pedagogical, and wider educational, practices.<sup>159</sup> Wertheimer's warning that students "did not need to wear a burka"

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<sup>159</sup> Benjamin Marcus, "The Current State of Religious Studies—Religious Studies and the K-12 Classroom: How Religious Studies Departments Might Help Prepare Future Educators," panel presentation at the *American Academy of Religion* Annual Meeting, Denver, Colorado, 17 November 2018.

to understand that “[r]eligion is part of many people’s culture, who they are, how they think and act,” points to a broader concern.<sup>160</sup> Although Wertheimer is likely correct in thinking that wearing a burka or similar experiments with experiential learning might not strengthen students’ overall understanding of religions or communities, such a caution betrays a larger fear about the perils of embodiment operative in classrooms and beyond. Our bodies, as such descriptions suggest, are perhaps more susceptible to influence than our minds. This concern leads, in Probyn’s formulation, to “a retreat from the experiential body”<sup>161</sup> within pedagogical spaces.

The suspicion of the body and emotions that results from a worry about proselytizing, devotional teaching, or, specifically within the U.S., unconstitutional faith formation, in many ways attests to the insights about the educative possibilities of “transmitted affects.”<sup>162</sup> Fears surrounding the susceptibility of bodies to their environments, supports the challenges theorists of affect and emotion level against assumptions of a strict reason-emotion binary within classroom settings. Classroom practices, this analysis suggests, need to begin making room for a critical reexamination that result from taking into account the idea that human bodies often “batter against the pedagogical body,”<sup>163</sup> to borrow Probyn’s phrasing, in ways for which policymakers have not yet accounted. Such critiques call for reconsidering assumptions about the agential frame within the modern scene of education.

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<sup>160</sup> Wertheimer, “Teaching about Religion.”

<sup>161</sup> Probyn, “Teaching Bodies,” 23.

<sup>162</sup> Brennan, *Transmission of Affect*, 4.

<sup>163</sup> Probyn, “Teaching Bodies,” 32.

In sum, this analysis connects theoretical insights from affect theory to the ongoing conversation about the place of religion in educational, especially state-funded school, settings. Although such concerns about embodied pedagogies are not exclusive to religious studies educational program, themes of fairness, equal weighting, and teacher training come to the fore when discussing religious literacy and its policy implications. Even though few proponents of religious literacy, with the notable exception of Nord and Haynes, advocate for strict neutrality in classroom teaching, their overreliance on the autonomy may cause them to overlook crucial factors in teaching for religious literacy. It may also help elucidate some of the barriers to implementing religious literacy trainings and help anticipate possible criticism of such programs.

This is not to suggest that the advocates of religious literacy previously discussed are all wedded to a myopic and deep cognitivism. Rather, their perhaps necessarily prioritization of the liberal education's aims causes them to elevate the roles of reason and autonomy as safeguards against indoctrination in religious literacy teaching. Examples such as Wertheimer's notes of caution about emulating religious dress or simulating rituals expose the cracks in the cognitive foundation and the resultant suspicion of bodies as sites of feelings, emotions, and, by extension, thoughts. Phrased in practical terms, if students were simply self-contained, rational subjects, then student-teacher interaction would play a limited role because students have the capacity to deliberate without the interference of external influences. Warnings surrounding student bodies within the classroom, however, tell a decidedly different story.

As this analysis has suggested, emotions matter. Affects matter. Non-linguistic factors matter. Interactions among people, far from the seemingly sanitized world of textbook knowledge, have the ability to inform opinions, orientations, and attitudes towards objects. As Sara Ahmed phrases it, through their complex interactions with bodies “[e]motions show us how histories stay alive, even when they are not consciously remembered.”<sup>164</sup> When viewed in this light, proponents of religious literacy would do well to bear in mind Sedgwick’s question: “Is it true that we are only learning when we are aware that we are being taught?”<sup>165</sup>

### 3.4 Conclusion

This move towards materialist understandings of religions and embodied pedagogies suggests potential applications for re-imagining existing models of religious literacy. If religions can be understood in terms of relationships and flows, then policymakers would do well to beware of advancing—either knowingly or unknowingly—conceptions of religions predicated on assumptions about the self-sovereignty of individuals in making assessments. Students, within religious literacy proposals, are assumed to be rational, autonomous agents, who possess the ability to choose in measured and deliberative ways. Equipped with the right knowledge, students will be able to pick and choose, as well as

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<sup>164</sup> Ahmed, *Cultural Politics*, 202.

<sup>165</sup> Sedgwick, “Pedagogy of Buddhism,” 153.

examine critically their own traditions. Current scholarship in affect theory, however, complicates this neat picture.

Such theories of emotion and embodiment challenge the concept of the autonomous, rational agent. In so doing, they also point to the attendant challenges of forming a liberal subject, a theme integral to the project of religious literacy. As the work of current critical theorists has indicated, understandings of religion have been weighted towards textual, cognitive, and doctrinal approaches. However, overemphasizing the “literacy” aspect of religious literacy overlooks the other, equally crucial, factors at play. Theories that take seriously the non-linguistic, non-cognitive dimensions of embodied experience call into question hallmarks of Western liberal thinking and key presuppositions of religious literacy: the notion of self-sovereignty itself and the supremacy of cognitive factors.

The space between education and affects, including the affective possibilities within classroom settings, remains undertheorized. Such gaps, as the religious literacy examples highlight, lead to challenges for formulating and implementing non-dualist pedagogies, ones that recognize the interdependency of mind and body. As scholars such as Boler, Watkins, and Probyn suggest, an overemphasis on the cognitive aspects of learning has had underexplored implications for current education policy and the resulting classroom practices. Insight from such scholars of affect and education point to the pedagogic possibilities that arise from acknowledging the role of bodies in the classroom.

Such theories gesture towards possible paths forward and open space for innovation in classroom practices. Pushing back against the mind-body dualism characterizing classroom education, recent scholarship from education theorist Jane Fried, for example, at first appears to offer a corrective. According to Fried, challenges with contemporary education result in large part from a failure to view the human subject holistically, as an assemblage of thoughts, feelings, and emotions. In her 2016 book, *Of Education, Fishbowls, and Rabbit Holes: Rethinking Teaching and Liberal Education for an Interconnected World*, Fried argues that “[l]earning is an integrated mind/body process. Ignoring elements of the cognitive/affective/meaning-making framework diminishes what students learn and their understanding of why it matters.”<sup>166</sup> Mind and body, for Fried, are inseparable and such a relationship must be factored into contemporary education policy and practice.

For Fried, the problematic grand narrative of Western education, the so-called fishbowl of her title, goes as follows: “Autonomy is one of the highest human values. People are separate from each other and have the right to determine their own stories and shape their own destinies.”<sup>167</sup> Further, “[l]ogic, reason, and/or critical thinking represent the highest, most comprehensive and accurate level of understanding the world, other people, and all the social, biological, economic, and physical systems in which we live.”<sup>168</sup> Put simply, reason and autonomy have, historically, guided educational approaches. This emphasis, in her telling, has gone relatively unquestioned until recently.

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<sup>166</sup> Jane Fried with Peter Troiano, *Of Education, Fishbowls, and Rabbit Holes: Rethinking Teaching and Liberal Education for an Interconnected World* (Sterling, Virginia: Stylus Publishing, 2016), 60.

<sup>167</sup> Fried, *Of Education, Fishbowls, and Rabbit Holes*, 4

<sup>168</sup> Fried, *Of Education, Fishbowls, and Rabbit Holes*, 4.

In response, however, Fried offers a recommendation that brings with it its own set of complications. In her answer to the following, rhetorical question, Fried underscores the challenge: “On what basis of authority do students decide what matters to them, what is real, how reliable knowledge is developed, and how they will use what they know?”<sup>169</sup> Her answer, tellingly, is the self, specifically, the concept of “self-authorship.” According to Fried, “self-authorship,” which draws on the work of other education theorists, constitutes “the ability to write and originate the story of one’s own life, one’s personal narrative.”<sup>170</sup> Significantly, in Fried’s view, self-authorship equates to self-authority. This emphasis on the personal, meant to empower students and push back against the top-down teacher-student pedagogical relationship, has an unintended consequence. Fried’s intervention, however promising in its critique of dualist pedagogy, also highlights an inbuilt contradiction and potential stumbling block for those seeking solutions. It places the emphasis squarely back on the individual. Students, in coming up with their own narratives, must contextualize and assimilate what they learn on the basis of their own situated selves.

The circularity in Fried’s arguments highlights some broader challenges. In the first place, acknowledging the role of affects in classroom settings and beyond presents a promising way forward because affects in pedagogic spaces often function as unmarked categories, impacting interactions in unacknowledged ways. Here, Fried identifies a pressing problem.

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<sup>169</sup> Fried, *Of Education, Fishbowls, and Rabbit Holes*, 43.

<sup>170</sup> Fried, *Of Education, Fishbowls, and Rabbit Holes*, 38.

However, the challenges are two-fold. In the first place, in calling for a reexamination of the role of affects, Fried ventures into the risky territory of instrumentalizing affect theory.

Using the example of higher education practices specifically, Fried asserts the following:

[T]here is generally no manageable way to continue the conversation because a large part of our dominant narrative [...] is that we should rely on our intellect to enhance our understanding and search for accuracy. There is no place in that narrative that tells us to use our emotions to enhance our understanding, to give credence to a range of emotional reactions, or to incorporate emotions into the domain of understanding what we study.<sup>171</sup>

In Fried's view, non-cognitive elements enhance, rather than detract from, classroom learning. However, in calling for "us to use our emotions to enhance our understanding"<sup>172</sup> Fried makes some crucial assumptions. In other words, advocating for leveraging such affects to achieve specific learning outcomes invites its own set of problems. Just because we know that non-rational, sub-cognitive forces are at work does not mean we would do well to leverage them, or, more practically, that we would know how to do this effectively.

Second, and perhaps more importantly, although Fried argues against the prevailing Cartesian dualism of contemporary education practices, she, at the same time, advocates for student "self-authorship," a concept predicated on the belief in an autonomous, rational subject. This, critically, is where the conversation reaches an impasse. Despite her call for a radical reframing of contemporary education practices, Fried falls into the same trap she

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<sup>171</sup> Fried, *Of Education, Fishbowls, and Rabbit Holes*, 47.

<sup>172</sup> Fried, *Of Education, Fishbowls, and Rabbit Holes*, 47.

herself identified: a privileging of the autonomous, rational subject. Her proposed solution of self-authority amplifies the main problem it aims to address in that it presupposes a self-contained subject, capable of making crafting a contextualized life narrative on the basis of individual discernment.

Herein lies the problem. Ultimately, the glass of Fried's metaphorical fishbowl still distorts. As Fried's educational call to action demonstrates, the path forward is filled with obstacles, and the inconsistencies of Fried's reflections point to a larger challenge. Even educational revisionists such as Fried continue to carry with them the same assumptions about the agential frame within the modern scene of education. The autonomous, liberal subject, against which Fried argues, still prevails in her analysis.

Are such challenges specific to religious literacy pedagogy? Certainly not. However, returning explicitly to the main theme of this chapter and thesis—the example religious literacy provides—highlights some of the main challenges within the broader discussion around affects and emotions in the classroom in illustrative ways. Although religion offers what has become a predictable example of a site of emotions, the religious literacy cases demonstrate the challenges of deconstructing the reason-emotion binary in practice. Appeals to overturn or at the very least rethink the reason-emotion split in educational settings, as Fried's seeming solution highlights, still prioritize individual autonomy in ways that mask some of the other conditions on the ground.

Although religious literacy proponents such as Moore self-reflexively acknowledge their own position—that of operating within liberal-democratic frameworks—they fail to account for the potential of attendant biases and blind spots such a position invites. Identifying one's own position does not equate to defending such a position from criticism. The liberal apologetics built into the endeavor of religious literacy presents an obstacle from the outset. As Connolly argues, refashioning liberalism to attend to the non-cognitive, sub-rational aspects of the “multidimensional pluralism”<sup>173</sup> for which he advocates, presents a challenge. Viewing the religious literacy discourse as a case study, or perhaps as a site of contestation and negotiation, with secular liberalism helps illuminate some of the potential stumbling blocks for preparing citizens to engage with a “religiously inflected public sphere,” to borrow Stephen Prothero's language.

In sum, this line of analysis proves useful for exposing some of the epistemological assumptions that underpin much of the discourse around religious literacy. Liberalism, here, as critical theorists have argued,<sup>174</sup> acts as a formative order that remakes religion within its own parameters. Within the context of religious literacy, students are assumed to be rational, autonomous agents, who possess the ability to choose and critically examine in measured and deliberative ways. Theoretical insights from affect theory, however, complicate this neat picture. Building on recent challenges to the notion that the secular constitutes a neutral

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<sup>173</sup> Connolly, *Why I Am Not a Secularist*, 186.

<sup>174</sup> See: Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press: 2003); Saba Mahmood, “Religious Reason, Secular Affect: An Incommensurable Divide?,” *Critical Inquiry* 35 (2009); and Winnifred Fallers Sullivan, *The Impossibility of Religious Freedom* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

space, theorists have called to “re-materialize” religious studies, such that it calls into question the Enlightenment binary between cognitive understanding and embodied approaches. As this chapter has discussed, affective approaches have questioned both cognitivism and the autonomous liberal subject. Applying such ideas to the classroom, moreover, scholars such as Boler, Watkins, and Probyn have used theories of embodiment to challenge the potential cognitivist biases underlying pedagogical practices. Connecting their critiques to the conception of religious literacy opens up new possibilities for identifying the potential complications that accompany religious literacy.

As Moore rightly notes, liberal education is far from neutral.<sup>175</sup> It comes with its own normative claims and expectations. Such a program of education, like any educational endeavor, is inherently value-laden. Attending to the context and framing helps illumine the processes at work in such discussions. Religious literacy within school contexts is, then, by extension, part of a larger project of sustaining the liberal-democratic order. Religious literacy, from its outset, encounters the challenge of aiming to cultivate public standards and functions as an educative project of liberalism. In so doing, this chapter has argued that it inscribes the terms of debate and potentially shapes the representation of religion within religious literacy initiatives. This predisposition, moreover, inclines proponents of religious literacy against the affective dimensions of religion and learning, which, in turn, risks amplifying the problematic binary between reason and emotion. It also causes them to overlook potential opportunities and obstacles within curricula and classrooms.

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<sup>175</sup> Moore, *Overcoming Religious Illiteracy*, 56.

Although influential new works such as Laborde's 2017 *Liberalism's Religion*<sup>176</sup> have defended liberalism against the charge of Western-centrism through a move to disaggregate integrity and identity-based aspects of religion, while at the same time acknowledging critical theorists' persuasive critiques of liberalism, religious literacy case studies show how cultivating public standards betrays its own set of Enlightenment biases about an assumed rational, autonomous liberal subject. At the core of these considerations sits the question of the extent to which religious literacy is about cultivating public standards and norms within the liberal democratic settings in which it operates. Information does not necessarily equal formation, and for this reason, religious literacy must consider its aims, parameters, and varying contexts. This chapter has suggested that recent theoretical interventions in secular studies and affect expose religious literacy's liberal-democratic epistemological assumptions about student choice, rationality, and self-sovereignty. In response, it argues that religious literacy inscribes the terms of the policy debate by situating the topic within liberal-democratic frameworks. Despite the variety of approaches to religious literacy put forward over the past twenty or more years, many fall into the same trap of presenting an understanding of religion and of liberal education which inscribes religion within liberal frameworks and positions religious literacy as an educative institution of liberalism.

Often positioned as a civic competency within a religiously plural society, religious literacy steps in as a democracy-building project. As this chapter discussed, religious literacy

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<sup>176</sup> See: Cécile Laborde, *Liberalism's Religion* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2017).

discourse provides a space to examine the implications for treatments of religion in settings where liberal-democratic subjectivity is the dominant discourse. This chapter relied on an analysis of current religious literacy proposals to expose some of the assumptions underlying religion and citizenship education and to problematize such interconnections. Using theories of the secular and affect that challenge the liberal conception of self-sovereignty to examine religious literacy case studies, this chapter suggested that religious literacy advances an understanding of religion that privileges those willing and able to engage in democratic discourse. In this way, such proposals may inscribe and dictate the terms for religion's engagement in a variety of contexts, but most especially, within state-funded schools. Using religious literacy proposals from the U.S. and the U.K. as examples of secular contestation and negotiation, this chapter advanced the case certain influential proponents of religious literacy tacitly dictate the terms for religion's engagement and potentially privilege religious understandings that cohere with liberal-democratic norms and expectations.

As demonstrated, this dynamic played out over religious literacy's role as a tool in democracy-building, its emphasis on the agency and rationality, and finally, the implications for religious literacy as a practice, in other words, the consequences of implementing religious literacy within classroom settings. Bringing discussions of embodiment into the conversation shows where religious literacy encounters challenges, especially in U.S. contexts. As this chapter has argued, in advancing a democracy-building project, religious literacy carries with it a series of liberal assumptions about democratic

deliberation and linguisticized reason as the main drivers of autonomous choice. This analysis, in response, focused on issues that remain unaddressed as a result of this inattention: namely a focus on deliberative democracy, biases of the agential frame, and an overreliance on individual choice.

The question then remains: Would it ever be possible or productive to decouple religious literacy from the need to sustain the liberal order? The answer, it appears, is that the two remain problematically entangled. In line with such recent attempts to “de-parochialize” liberalism, this chapter has demonstrated, through the lens of religious literacy, what continues to be transformed in liberal descriptions of religion.

## 4 Chapter Four – Tolerance and its Discontents: Managing Offense in Religious Literacy Discourse

“Thou shalt not offend,” according to Emile Lester, is the “first commandment” of teaching about religion within U.S. public education.<sup>1</sup> Lester, a political scientist, conducted extensive research into a world religions course in Modesto, California. His resulting research offers a significant intervention into the conversation on teaching tolerance within religious literacy education. In 2000, the Modesto, California public school system began an experiment: it launched a mandatory world religions course for students in their first year of high school. Although schools have experimented, generally on an *ad hoc* basis with implementing courses on religion, this one differed significantly in that it was required. Teachers underwent over thirty hours of specialized training, and Charles Haynes was on hand to consult. Billed as an effort to enhance religious literacy, the Modesto experiment was not simply about imparting knowledge about world religions. Significantly, in attempts to measure learning outcomes of the program, attitudes took center stage. Rather than simply aiming to quantify students’ knowledge about religions, the research wanted to assess whether students’ perspectives on religion had changed as a result of the course. Here, attitudinal change, rather than the assimilation of content knowledge alone, emerged as a key learning outcome.

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<sup>1</sup> Emile Lester, *Teaching about Religions: A Democratic Approach for Public Schools* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2011), 126.

The title of the resultant survey, “Learning about World Religions in Public Schools: The Impact on Student Attitudes and Community Acceptance in Modesto, California,” leaves little doubt about its objectives. The emphasis on “student attitudes” suggests that the course’s creators hoped to impact students’ behaviors. The study of over four-hundred students, suggested that students were more willing to speak out against insults to other’s religious sensibilities as a result of taking the course.<sup>2</sup> Although measuring attitudes also helps defend against the charge of proselytizing by emphasizing that the students did not feel compelled to change their religious beliefs or identifications after taking the course, the stress placed on student changed attitudes does hint at the curriculum creators’ goal: to promote increased civility and combat intolerance.

As Lester’s research highlights, themes of religious tolerance and peaceful coexistence underpin the endeavor of religious literacy. Analyzing varying conceptions, uses, and critiques of tolerance and toleration helps uncover the challenges of teaching religious literacy. More fundamentally, the tolerance discourse suffusing the conversation about religious literacy strikes at the heart of the endeavor: What does religious literacy aim to accomplish? In other words, what are its goals, learning objectives, and expected learning outcomes? Faced with a prevailing sense of social instability resulting from vitriolic speech within political and public discourse, it is perhaps unsurprising policymakers and educators

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<sup>2</sup> Emile Lester and Patrick S. Roberts, “Learning about Religions in Public School: The Impact on Student Attitudes and Community Acceptance in Modesto, Calif.,” *The First Amendment Center*, Nashville, Tennessee (2006).

often call upon the concept of religious literacy as a potential tool in solving current societal ills.

Given this context, a narrative of religious conflict and religion's potential threat to sociability lie at the core of this issue. Calls for religious literacy frequently invoke the language of tolerance and toleration when making a case for civic education. Often advocating for a move past passive toleration and towards a practice of cultivating either respect or adopting a stance of "active tolerance," such recommendations call for a rethinking of the potential limitations of the formulation and enactment of tolerance. In line with recent academic critiques of top-down, often coercive, tolerance policies, proponents of religious literacy often argue that such policies leave much to be desired and therefore urge for critical reconsideration of the concept.

Building on the previous chapter's discussion of affect, this chapter aims to show how, through close attention to the role of attitudes and dispositions, recent critiques of tolerance policy have the capacity to reproduce old challenges within new vocabularies. The example of religious literacy shows us why recent calls to reformulate tolerance policy in the form of "agonistic respect"<sup>3</sup> and "deep equality"<sup>4</sup> confront a different set of obstacles through an overreliance on, and assumption of, autonomous self-regulation. To this end, this chapter argues that, religious literacy, in certain manifestations, entails cultivating a particular

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<sup>3</sup> William E. Connolly, *Identity, Difference: Democratic Negotiation of Political Paradox*, expanded ed. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), xxvi.

<sup>4</sup> Lori Beaman, *Deep Equality in an Era of Religious Diversity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 13.

attitude or disposition towards religion: one that would help render recourse to legal mechanisms unnecessary.

In other words, as this chapter suggests, in many instances advocates of religious literacy aim to cultivate a habituated civility on the basis of fostering respectful communication about difference. Although religious literacy, as previous chapters have claimed, tends to emphasize the cognitive features both of religions and learning about religions, the illustrative examples under discussion show a project of cultivating particular attitudes and dispositions at work in religious literacy education programs. As a result, proponents of religious literacy, who tend to frame their project in terms of the cognitive, rational, and by extension, seemingly democratically compatible aspects and expressions of religion, are engaging in affective work in ways that frequently go unexamined. In certain forms, the project of religious literacy, although framed in terms of adherence to procedural conventions of democratic deliberation, often works to reconfigure arrangements of affects in the service of fostering prosocial behavior and habituated respect. An examination of tolerance discourse shows how religious literacy, in certain manifestations, functions as a social practice.

This chapter builds on recent scholarship on secularism's relationship to managing religious insult and critical literature on the topics of tolerance and toleration to expose the way in which certain religious literacy proposals may reproduce some of the existing challenges within everyday practices of tolerance cultivation. Delving into the narrative of conflict that

involves teaching religion in schools and some proposed remedies, shows the limitations not only of tolerance discourse and policy, but also of calls for respect, civility, and equality, which in recent years have been put forward as correctives to the limitations of tolerance policy. Locating religious literacy within tolerance discourse shows in particular how comportment, rather than simply content, dictates the terms of engagement for religion's inclusion in the public schools—and, by extension, the wider public sphere.

#### **4.1 “Allergic to Controversy”: Tolerance, Civility, and Religious Offence in Public Schools**

Returning to Emile Lester's research exposes the challenges underlying religious literacy as a skills-building endeavor. Lester's analysis of the Modesto experiment, which he published in a 2011 book *Teaching about Religions: A Democratic Approach for Public Schools* led him to conclude that American public schools should advance a mission of religious tolerance through increased religious literacy. In a chapter titled “The Distinctive Paradox of Religious Toleration,” Lester calls for educators to teach “active tolerance” towards religious minorities. In Lester's argument, people from minority religions will feel emboldened to participate in America public life, here defined in terms of engaging in democratic discourse, if the public-school curricula signals that their views will receive respectful treatment.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Lester, *Teaching about Religions*, 29.

Citing the rise of anti-Muslim sentiment post-9/11, Lester calls for schools to become training grounds for fostering toleration of minority religions within the U.S. In appealing to democratic principles, Lester calls for public schools to countervail against extremist views:

Public schools that are more democratic can play a crucial role in ensuring the triumph of civility and moderation over the manufactured prominence of rigid ideologues and extremists. The goal of these changes is not to preclude conflict or impose uniformity. Religious diversity and differences over values related to religion are crucial for a robust democratic discourse. But democratic discourse also suffers when uncivil views are exaggerated, especially when more measured views are more widely held. It is time for school to hinder, rather than help, this exaggeration.<sup>6</sup>

In Lester's estimation, public schools, in their current form, and religion have proven at times to be a combustible combination, which enflames and exaggerates potential religious conflict. Moderate voices, lost in the sea of media-fueled moral outrage, cannot compete for airtime.

In response, increasing religious literacy would help equip students to take an active stance against manifestations of bigotry and intolerance. Anticipating criticism, Lester acknowledges that religious literacy courses would not be a panacea:

Providing Americans with more accurate knowledge of other religious traditions will not, of course, automatically lead to more civic tolerance in all cases. Greater exposure to and knowledge of other religions might even increase aversion of some to other religions by encouraging them to dwell on differences between religions.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Lester, *Teaching about Religions*, 12.

<sup>7</sup> Lester, *Teaching about Religions*, 45.

In Lester's view, this challenge should not stop educators from implementing religion courses within public schools. In his words, "[s]ympathy for persecuted religious groups and outrage for the injustice of religious intolerance" can result from teaching about religions, thereby providing students with a compassionate perspective.<sup>8</sup> These virtues, "in turn, depend on a robust knowledge of religion and its central subjective value for many people's lives."<sup>9</sup> In this line of thinking, learning about religions would help students understand the rationale and motivations underpinning various perspectives. Knowledge, here, cultivates a sympathetic, but not necessarily concordant, attitude towards different religions and religious identities. Religious literacy is not simply an accumulation of "facts" about religion and religious traditions. Rather, it goes beyond content knowledge in its attempt to mobilize:

On a more explicitly political level, knowledge about religions will enable Americans to understand the logic of religious minorities who request exemptions from military service or from compulsory public school curriculum material that they find objectionable. When dominant religious groups display understanding of the practices of minority religions, minority religions are more likely to be willing to share and express their beliefs.<sup>10</sup>

Here, robust religious literacy entails minority protection and upholding the notion of exemption on the basis of individual conscience. In other words, this version of religious literacy entails dispositional, affective work, rather than simply informational work. Religious studies education, in this view, aims to teach students prosocial behavior, in the

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<sup>8</sup> Lester, *Teaching about Religions*, 50.

<sup>9</sup> Lester, *Teaching about Religions*, 50.

<sup>10</sup> Lester, *Teaching about Religions*, 28-29.

form of increased understanding of minority religious positions. This religious literacy aims at doing empathic work, helping students understand and, above all, empathize with other's views.

In addition, the notion that religion's presence in the curricula fans the flames of controversy pervades proposals calling for religious literacy. Cited as an obstacle to religion's inclusion in the curriculum, particularly within a U.S. context, the fear of controversy features prominently in calls for religious literacy. As Lester argues:

The real religious conflicts in the United States and, even more, the imagined religious conflicts the mainstream media harps on have left many American public school officials anxious. In an environment where saying anything could lead to recriminations and even lawsuits, silence about religion was the golden rule that governed much curriculum. Too harshly judging the overly careful decisions of administrators whose jobs were on consequences of their omissions would be unwise.<sup>11</sup>

The fear—real or imagined—of controversy, provides the backdrop for religious literacy proposals. Lack of knowledge, in this narrative, results from concerns about engendering controversy. In turn, this shying away from potential disagreement has the opposite of its intended effect: conflict that results from ignorance. Although proponents of religious literacy approach the topic of teaching about religion in varying ways, they make remarkably similar arguments for religion's inclusion and explaining its omission from the U.S. public school curricula.

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<sup>11</sup> Lester, *Teaching about Religions*, 48-49.

Stephen Prothero, for example, explains religion's absence from schools as a story of pragmatism, rather than of anti-religious bias or malice:

Textbook authors are probably not actively trying to disrespect religion. They are likely just attempting to avoid controversy. Textbook publishers are notoriously allergic to controversy, and religion has a way of stirring up controversy in a country where so many people have invested so much in so many different faiths. Simple prudence might suggest it is best to steer clear of this minefield of potential parental protests.<sup>12</sup>

In practical terms, textbook publishers' aversion to religion stems from practicality and concerns for generating profits. Recent controversies surrounding the coverage of various traditions highlight the stakes. In 2016, depictions of contested concepts such as the caste system, Hinduism, and Indian national identity within the California public school curriculum sparked public outcry and resulted in controversies surrounding what was seen as the outsize influence of various interest groups.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, in 2017, the U.S. Department of Education prompted local political backlash in the state of Florida when it made available a PBS Thirteen/WNET New York teaching resource for incorporating the topic of Islam into high school history lesson plans.<sup>14</sup> Further, the following year, the Sikh Coalition encountered opposition, but ultimately fought a hard-won battle to include Sikhism as a

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<sup>12</sup> Stephen Prothero, *Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know—And Doesn't* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2007), 65.

<sup>13</sup> Jennifer Medina, "Debate Erupts in California Over Curriculum on India's History," *New York Times*, 4 May 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/06/us/debate-erupts-over-californias-india-history-curriculum.html>.

<sup>14</sup> Amy Sherman, "Did the U.S. Education Department Introduce an Islamic Indoctrination Program for Public Schools?" *Politifact Florida*, 5 April 2017, <https://www.politifact.com/florida/statements/2017/apr/05/volusia-county-republican-party/did-us-department-education-introduce-islamic-indo/>.

world religion in the new 2018 Arizona public school curriculum standards in an effort to help “curb bullying” against Sikhs and other members of minority religions.<sup>15</sup> Taken together, such recent examples highlight the volatility surrounding the mere inclusion of religious studies topics within the curricula.

Taking the opposite approach, that of failing to include mentions of religions within classroom settings, has led to similarly contentious outcomes. This neglect, proponents of religious literacy argue, also has the capacity to cause controversy. According to Prothero:

But ignoring religion can be explosive too. During the 1980s, textbook controversies broke out in Tennessee and Alabama when parents charged that schoolbooks that ignored religion were violating the Constitution by preaching the religions of “secular humanism” and the “New Age.”<sup>16</sup>

In calling attention to past controversies that resulted from both religion’s inclusion and omission from the curricula, Prothero helps explain why religious literacy advocates take pains to justify both the neutrality and necessity of their endeavor.

Using similar language, Nord and Haynes explain the fear of controversy as a root cause of Americans’ religious illiteracy. They argue that “many educators and textbook publishers believe that including religion in textbooks and the curriculum is too controversial. But, of

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<sup>15</sup> Charles Lam, “Sikhism among World Religions Added to Arizona School Standards,” *NBC News*, 23 October 2018, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/asian-america/sikhism-among-world-religions-added-arizona-school-standards-n923286>.

<sup>16</sup> Prothero, *Religious Literacy*, 65-66.

course, it is also controversial to leave religion out of the curriculum.”<sup>17</sup> Include religion and risk backlash; neglect religion and face the consequences that result from ignorance or omission. This double-edged nature of controversy figures prominently in calls for religious literacy.

Equally forceful on the topic, Moore describes the need for religious literacy in sweeping terms. In making her case, Moore asserts that “[t]he consequences of this religious illiteracy are significant and include fueling the culture wars, curtailing historical and cultural understanding, and promoting religious and racial bigotry.”<sup>18</sup> According to Moore, ignoring religion within educational settings creates more conflict than it defuses. Educators, in Moore’s view, “understand that this is a climate ripe for misunderstanding and exploitation and the current culture wars are but one dramatic consequence.”<sup>19</sup> In her assessment of the present, Moore argues that religious illiteracy, to employ her preferred term, “thwarts understanding and diminishes the ability to engage in rational deliberation.”<sup>20</sup> This appeal to “rational deliberation” is suggestive of Moore’s position. Moore’s case for religious literacy, it appears, is not simply about mediating conflict or diminishing the so-called culture wars between secularist and Christian conservatives. As Moore puts it, “ignorance about religion itself and the world’s religious traditions promotes misunderstanding that

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<sup>17</sup> Warren A. Nord, and Charles Haynes, *Taking Religion Seriously Across the Curriculum*, (Alexandria, Virginia: Association for Supervision & Curriculum Development (ASCD), 1998), 6.

<sup>18</sup> Diane L. Moore, *Overcoming Religious Illiteracy: A Cultural Studies Approach to the Study of Religion in Secondary Education*, (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007), 3.

<sup>19</sup> Moore, *Overcoming Religious Illiteracy*, 4-5.

<sup>20</sup> Moore, *Overcoming Religious Illiteracy*, 28.

diminishes respect for diversity."<sup>21</sup> Moreover, according to Moore, "the purpose of education in our multicultural/multireligious democracy is to foster the skills, values, interest, and confidence in students to be able to participate as active moral agents in the conscious social reproduction of society in its most inclusive form."<sup>22</sup> In this statement of purpose, Moore makes her objectives clear. Religious literacy aims to promote diversity in the service of mediating conflict.

Anticipating potential challenges to her claims and acknowledging the possible shortcomings of religious literacy in managing religious offense, Moore explains that teaching about religion does not provide a simple, clear-cut remedy:

Exposing students to a more informed and sophisticated understanding of religion will not, in itself, end discrimination or unintended harm perpetuated through ignorance. It will, however, help diminish discriminatory practices while also providing information to help educators proactively shape their educational environments so that *all* students feel a sense of belonging.<sup>23</sup>

Although this appeal to non-discrimination appears fairly uncontroversial, it demonstrates a concern with regulating and promoting specific behaviors. Few would challenge Moore's assertion about the need to help lessen the incidence of discriminatory practices and to create welcoming learning environments. However, Moore's statement does hint at her view of religious literacy's purpose: to cultivate particular attitudes towards diversity, and by extension, towards mediating conflict.

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<sup>21</sup> Moore, *Overcoming Religious Illiteracy*, 31.

<sup>22</sup> Moore, *Overcoming Religious Illiteracy*, 24.

<sup>23</sup> Moore, *Overcoming Religious Illiteracy*, 33. Emphasis original.

Here, Moore is not alone. Nord and Haynes, for example, argue that their approach to religious literacy aims to “articulate a set of civic and educational principles that we might use for adjudicating our differences, and stake out common ground on which we might stand together.”<sup>24</sup> This appeal to civility, which undergirds Nord and Haynes’ educational program, also claims to help resolve conflict. They are, in this way, articulating a procedure for dialogue. The need to “stand together” on “common ground,” as they put it, highlights the endeavor’s aim: to set out a template for approaching and managing conflict. This underlying concern about achieving unity, not of belief, but of procedure, suffuses Nord and Haynes’ approach. The challenge, presented here, lies not in the existence of disagreement that purportedly results from difference, but rather in the mode of reconciling such disagreements. Standing on “common ground,” then, entails abiding by a code of democratic deliberation.

Building on his early work with Nord, Haynes put forward a project framed around cultivating civil discourse through religious literacy. In “Finding Common Ground: A First Amendment Guide to Religion and Public Schools” Haynes advances a “three Rs” approach to religion teaching in schools that emphasizes rights, responsibilities, and respect. This model, which informed curriculum development in California public schools and later elsewhere, frames religion teaching as a vehicle for “enabling Americans to live with our

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<sup>24</sup> Nord and Haynes, *Taking Religion Seriously Across the Curriculum*, 1.

deepest difference."<sup>25</sup> The "three Rs" approach neatly encapsulates Haynes' ideas about one of religious literacy's core purposes: mediating conflict through appeals to democratic discourse. Within his description of what constitutes "respect," Haynes declares that although "[c]onflict and debate are vital to democracy," it is the "how we debate, and not what we debate, [that] is critical."<sup>26</sup> In this statement, Haynes prioritizes form over content. Religion, seen here as a site of possible contestation, by implication, must adhere to a code of conduct in order to enter the public realm. Civility becomes the guiding principle and negotiating conflicts that might arise requires adhering to a particular procedural stance.

As Haynes claims, conflict resolution remains a clear goal for religious studies education. According to Haynes, using the "three Rs" as "ground rules for addressing conflicts, they [local stakeholders] were able to resolve peacefully a series of disputes involving the curriculum."<sup>27</sup> In this model, religious literacy, would help prevent conflicts either before they arise, or at the very least, before they escalate. In Haynes' view, insult, resulting from disagreement about curricular content on religion, poses a threat to social order that must be preempted. As Haynes asserts, "when these debates degenerate into personal attacks, ridicule, false characterizations of opposing positions, and similar tactics, they tear apart the fabric of our lives together and alienate large numbers of citizens from their local schools."<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Charles Haynes and Oliver Thomas, "Finding Common Ground: A First Amendment Guide to Religion and Public Schools," *First Amendment Center* (2007): 3.

<sup>26</sup> Haynes and Thomas, "Finding Common Ground," 18. Emphasis original.

<sup>27</sup> Charles Haynes, "From Battleground to Common Ground: Religion in the Public Square of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century" in *Religion in American Public Life: Living with Our Deepest Differences*, ed. Aziza Al-Hibri, Jean Bethke Elshtain, and Charles Haynes (New York: American Assembly, 2001), 109.

<sup>28</sup> Haynes, "From Battleground to Common Ground," 98.

This tearing of the fabric of shared civic life remains of central importance to Haynes, and increased religious literacy, in response, helps provide a template for civil conduct.

His answer to the challenge of insult and disagreement lies not in the content of people's views, but rather in their expression. Haynes asserts that "although a religious consensus in our diverse nation is not possible, agreement on civic principles is not only possible but also urgently needed."<sup>29</sup> Citing the following statement, "Religious Liberty, Public Education, and the Future of American Democracy: A Statement of Principles," Haynes goes on to argue for the importance of cultivating respectful communication:

Civil debate, the cornerstone of a true democracy, is vital to the success of any effort to improve and reform America's public schools. Personal attacks, name-calling, ridicule, and similar tactics destroy the fabric of our society and undermine the educational mission of our schools. Even when our differences are deep, all parties engaged in public disputes should treat one another with civility and respect, and should strive to be accurate and fair. Through constructive dialogue we have much to learn from one another.<sup>30</sup>

This emphasis on civility, respect, and constructive dialogue represent a laudable goal of peaceful communication. However, this stability is predicated on conforming conversation and disagreement to the procedural conventions of democratic debate.

The contributors to a recent volume on religious studies education and religious literacy, *Civility, Religious Pluralism, and Education* show collectively, through a series of essays, that

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<sup>29</sup> Haynes, "From Battleground to Common Ground," 108.

<sup>30</sup> Haynes, "From Battleground to Common Ground," 135.

Haynes' "three Rs" model continues to inform calls for increased religious literacy on the basis of respect and civility. Privileging the role of civility, the education scholars featured in this book spotlight religious literacy's role in fostering community cohesion within the context of U.S. public education curricula.

In his essay, "Virtue of Civility in Liberal-Democratic and Religiously Diverse Communities," Andrew Fiala, one of the book's editors, argues that finding a unified worldview or perspective to underpin civic life remains an unrealistic ideal. "Instead," he urges, "we must learn to live civilly together, while admitting our deep differences."<sup>31</sup> To live civilly together entails adopting particular codes of conduct and communication. Procedure, not perspective, must be universal. According to Fiala, "[c]ivility is a kind of tact and social skill that recognizes the human element in communication and dialogue. It is an especially important virtue for citizens in a religiously diverse democracy."<sup>32</sup> Civility, in his understanding, "stems from awareness of how what you say will be received by those to whom you say it. A crucial part of civility is often to refrain from judgmental criticism, mockery, and denigration. Some may argue that civility involves self-censorship."<sup>33</sup> Tellingly, Fiala follows his formulation of civility with a note of caution: "The reticence of civility should not be confused with censorship. Indeed, civility only makes sense in a context in which there is freedom of expression. Civility is a virtue for those who

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<sup>31</sup> Andrew Fiala, "Virtue of Civility in Liberal-Democratic and Religiously Diverse Communities" in Vincent Biondo III and Andrew Fiala, *Civility, Religious Pluralism, and Education* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 47.

<sup>32</sup> Fiala, "Virtue of Civility in Liberal-Democratic and Religiously Diverse Communities," 47.

<sup>33</sup> Fiala, "Virtue of Civility in Liberal-Democratic and Religiously Diverse Communities," 51.

are free to speak but who choose not to.”<sup>34</sup> Notably, here, although Fiala takes pains to distance the notion of civility from censorship, he advocates for an approach that seems to require strong self-restraint.

In this way, Fiala advocates for a civility based, not on censorship, but perhaps, on self-censorship. As Fiala admits, civil discourse, in this vision, rests on a shared civic vision that prioritizes the place of democratic debate: “We have also seen that civility may only operate within a community that shares some conception of the political or public sphere: civility, may, at most, be a virtue for relations among citizens who already share much in common.”<sup>35</sup> As Vincent F. Biondo III, one of the other editors of the volume reinforces, “[t]he ability to listen to dissenting views with civility while respecting the freedom of speech has benefits for democracy and is a vital skill for lifelong learning.”<sup>36</sup> Making the case for civility, Biondo, here, argues for the educational advantages of civil dialogue. Learning to encounter difference respectfully represents a crucial tool for navigating a varying range of perspectives within democratic public life. As Biondo frames it, “[a] new civil ideology of inclusion based on respect for democratic participation and religious freedom can provide a framework for civil discourse about the nation’s founding principles.”<sup>37</sup> This “civil ideology of inclusion,” as Biondo phrases it, has the capacity to safeguard against potential conflicts before they arise.

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<sup>34</sup> Fiala, “Virtue of Civility in Liberal-Democratic and Religiously Diverse Communities,” 51.

<sup>35</sup> Fiala, “Virtue of Civility in Liberal-Democratic and Religiously Diverse Communities,” 51.

<sup>36</sup> Vincent F. Biondo III, “Democracy, Freedom, and Service: A Consensus Response to Pluralism in Education” in *Civility, Religious Pluralism, and Education*, eds. Vincent Biondo III and Andrew Fiala (New York: Routledge, 2014), 218.

<sup>37</sup> Biondo III, “Democracy, Freedom, and Service,” 224.

An acute sense of vulnerability appears to underlie such calls for civility. Civility keeps the forces that might tear society apart at bay. Our hold on social order is, in this view, tenuous at best. Religious literacy, then, responds to a critical societal need for conflict resolution. As Fiala asserts, training in prosocial behavior would help minimize the dangers of outright antagonism arising from difference:

The conditions for dialogue and peaceful interchange are easily disrupted by judgmental and hostile remarks. Communication involves a deep level of social interchange; it is not merely an exchange of information. Civility reflects sensitivity to the larger social context of communication. Civility is needed today, as we struggle to come to grips with the nature of radical diversity—especially religious diversity, which pushes in the direction of radical disagreement about fundamental things.<sup>38</sup>

Disagreement poses a threat to social order and stability. For Fiala, there is a deep connection among tolerance, civility and students' cognitive development. Religious literacy provides the connective tissue between learning and sociability.

Precautionary measures aid civil dialogue within classroom settings. As Biondo and Fiala write in the introduction to their 2014 edited volume of religious studies education, successful religious literacy entails strategic avoidance of certain contentious topics:

Whereas books on religion and politics may devote considerable coverage to these lightning rod issues, they are toxic to interreligious cooperation and civil discourse. They should be avoided in public school classrooms, not in order to prevent the free exchange of ideas, or to limit the freedom of dissent to any extent, but for civil

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<sup>38</sup> Fiala, "Virtue of Civility in Liberal-Democratic and Religiously Diverse Communities," 47.

teachers to model the importance of mutual respect including generous hospitality.<sup>39</sup>

Concerned about classroom discussion devolving into open hostility, Biondo and Fiala write:

Indeed, it is unfortunate that these hot-button issues often distract educators and citizens from the more difficult and prosaic challenges of living together with differences that are less contentious, differences that include, topics such as fashion choices in headgear and hairstyles, holiday celebrations and greetings, food choices, and family expectations.<sup>40</sup>

In this attempt to identify best practices, Biondo and Fiala's focus on the "prosaic challenges" risks reducing religious literacy to a grid of acceptable and unacceptable responses to external differences. Significantly, framed in this way, religious literacy concentrates on the overt, often visual, markers of difference such as attire. Although this, perhaps sensible, approach makes practical sense, it has the capacity to collapse other forms of difference. This strategy, for Biondo and Fiala, presents religious literacy as a necessary civic competency, which must be approached with caution in order to obtain the correct learning outcomes:

[S]tudents will need religious literacy and skill of civil discourse as they move into careers and take on responsibilities of citizenship. Public schools are the crucibles in which students are formed into democratic citizens. Education about inter- and intrareligious diversity provides critical thinking and cultural competence for local and global prosperity.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Vincent Biondo III and Andrew Fiala, "Introduction: Civility and Education in a World of Religious Pluralism" in *Civility, Religious Pluralism, and Education*, eds. Vincent Biondo III and Andrew Fiala (New York: Routledge, 2014), 9.

<sup>40</sup> Biondo III and Fiala, "Introduction: Civility and Education in a World of Religious Pluralism," 9.

<sup>41</sup> Biondo III and Fiala, "Introduction: Civility and Education in a World of Religious Pluralism," 9.

This instrumentalist framing offers practical advantages of conflict reduction, but potentially sacrifices substantive content and discussion to a fear of causing unmanageable offense within a classroom setting.

Nuancing this vision and anticipating the criticism that operationalizing such a perspective would lead to a lack of substantive content, Fiala writes elsewhere that, although “[r]eligious ignorance can lead to gross misunderstandings that devolve towards violence” a “strategy of avoidance leaves citizens underprepared for the complex cognitive and emotional task of dealing with religious diversity.”<sup>42</sup> Such a program of education would provide the tools needed to navigate deep difference, without sacrificing substance. As Fiala claims:

The danger of neutrality is that it can prevent us (students and teachers) from engaging in those sorts of vigorous debates that help expose the truth, as people simply seek to avoid discussion and debate. We need open-minded and inclusive discussion of our diversity, not simplistic posters hung on classroom walls. In our increasingly diverse world, we need to find a way to include lively religious debates in schools.<sup>43</sup>

Neglecting real issues, according to Fiala, “is a bad outcome for democracy.”<sup>44</sup> Rather, challenging issues may, and should, enter classrooms, but only in carefully circumscribed and mediated ways. According to Fiala:

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<sup>42</sup> Andrew Fiala, “Tolerance, Civility, and Cognitive Development” in *Religion in the Public Schools: Negotiating the New Commons*, ed. Michael D. Waggoner (Plymouth, United Kingdom: Rowman & Littlefield Education, 2013), 22.

<sup>43</sup> Fiala, “Tolerance, Civility, and Cognitive Development,” 30.

<sup>44</sup> Fiala, “Tolerance, Civility, and Cognitive Development,” 33.

For democratic deliberation to work well, we need a substantial amount of empathy and the ability to reach the stage of ‘commitment within relativism.’ I submit that the increasing incivility in our public discourse is the result of our lack of preparation as citizens for the complex task of negotiating a world of diversity without sinking into relativism, apathy, and ignorance.<sup>45</sup>

Since “[t]he growing problem of incivility in the public sphere can be understood as a result of an educational system that avoids deep topics, prevents us from understanding our differences, and leaves citizens without the philosophical skills to negotiate complexity and diversity,”<sup>46</sup> a new educational foundation must take the place of conflict avoidance. In response, Fiala advocates for a strengthened “civility and civic solidarity” derived from “the hope that a secular liberal arts education can help us find a common ground.”<sup>47</sup> This educational vision, rather than censoring topics, instead inhibits actions. In advocating for particular attitudes, not necessarily towards content of other students’ views, but towards proper procedure for democratic deliberation, Fiala calls attention, once again, to the premium placed on cultivating attitudes, dispositions, and comportment around engaging in dialogue. The civility that underpins this envisioned educational project places the onus on the autonomous individual to self-regulate and adhere to particular codes of civil dialogue and debate.

Such approaches have even begun to make inroads into higher education contexts. New York University’s “faith zone” trainings of the Office of Global Spiritual Life, in particular,

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<sup>45</sup> Fiala, “Tolerance, Civility, and Cognitive Development,” 33.

<sup>46</sup> Fiala, “Tolerance, Civility, and Cognitive Development,” 22.

<sup>47</sup> Fiala, “Tolerance, Civility, and Cognitive Development,” 23.

offers a crucial example of religious literacy's participation in programs advancing attitudinal change. Ariel Ennis, who was involved in implementing the program and who subsequently wrote a handbook for religious literacy strategies within higher education contexts, identifies NYU's contribution as an emphasis on the "necessity of self-reflection and the ongoing process of reevaluating one's own beliefs about the world as we come into contact with more difference and diversity."<sup>48</sup> According to this model, religious literacy entails the following four facets:

1. *Knowledge*: Understanding religious traditions, their diverse historic and contemporary interconnections, and their different effects on local and global communities, cultures, and hierarchies.
2. *Ecumenical Orientation*: An interest in developing firsthand experiential knowledge of different religious traditions and an inclination to transverse religio-cultural boundaries.
3. *Self-Awareness and Reflection*: Demonstrated insight into the intersection of personal religio-spiritual identity and larger global forces.
4. *Application*: A commitment to using religious literacy to inform one's work to bridge intercultural divides.<sup>49</sup>

Religious literacy, here, involves gaining skills in order to cultivate a particular disposition towards religions, an openness to learning about others in the service of fostering goodwill. It is, tellingly, an "interest," "inclination," and "commitment." Religious literacy is a call to action. As Ennis explains, "we have created a definition of religious literacy that requires action as well as knowledge."<sup>50</sup> Ennis elaborates, "being religiously literate necessitates putting knowledge into practical use as an ally and by creating space for conversations

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<sup>48</sup> Ariel Ennis, *Teaching Religious Literacy: A Guide to Religious and Spiritual Diversity in Higher Education* (New York: Routledge, 2017), 9.

<sup>49</sup> Ennis, *Teaching Religious Literacy*, 9.

<sup>50</sup> Ennis, *Teaching Religious Literacy*, 10.

about religious diversity to flourish.”<sup>51</sup> Being religiously literate, in this definition, means developing a new stance towards religion: one of openness, receptivity, and active engagement with people of different backgrounds and traditions. Mere knowledge proves inadequate, unless it cultivates a particular disposition towards “religious” people or ideas.

Significantly, appeals to civility, cohesions, and peaceful cohabitation abound in the religious literacy discourse on both sides of the Atlantic. Turning to Europe and the supranational documents aimed at providing recommendations for North American and European countries, demonstrates the widespread nature of calls to cultivate civility within religious studies education settings. Such policy recommendations, in particular, bring the emphasis on attitude-formation into sharper focus.

“Signposts—Policy and Practice for Teaching about Religions and Non-religious World Views in Intercultural Education,” a 2014 Council of Europe supranational document, for example, shows a similar concern for cultivating attitudes and dispositions aimed at fostering civic cohesion. Written primarily by Robert Jackson, a prominent U.K. scholar of education, “Signposts” aims to provide guidelines for state education in religion for a variety of countries. Attempting “to combat prejudice or intolerance and to promote mutual understanding and democratic citizenship”<sup>52</sup> through intercultural education, “Signposts” outlines strategies for successful religious studies education and calls for students to develop

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<sup>51</sup> Ennis, *Teaching Religious Literacy*, 10.

<sup>52</sup> Robert Jackson, “Signposts—Policy and Practice for Teaching about Religions and Non-religious World Views in Intercultural Education” (Strasbourg: Council of Europe Publishing, 2014): 15.

skills related to engaging with religious difference. The document states its learning objectives clearly: “The emphasis is on developing competence, including well-selected knowledge together with appropriate skills and attitudes which facilitate intercultural and inter-religious understanding.”<sup>53</sup> Here, in addition to content knowledge and skills, attitudes and competencies also take priority. As the document emphasizes, “[t]he aim of the recommendation is to provide knowledge but also to cultivate sensitivity, reciprocity and empathy to combat prejudice, intolerance, bigotry and racism.”<sup>54</sup> Such attitudes, “Signposts” asserts, serve the purpose of increasing “self-awareness and awareness and understanding of the beliefs and values of others, as well as values affirming human dignity.”<sup>55</sup> The emphasis on self-awareness speaks to a desire for students to engage in critical self-reflection as a result of education and training in religious literacy.

This educational program serves the intended purpose of influencing and informing individual actions and attitudes. “Signposts” even asserts that “both the fields of theology and religious studies draw on similar techniques and dispositions, such as attitudes, skills and knowledge associated with the process of ‘dialogue.’”<sup>56</sup> In other words, religious studies and theology, from the author’s perspective, are particularly well-placed to foster civic cohesion because the subjects prompt introspection and critical self-assessment. Rather than being a liability, a threat to civility, religious literacy education, when portrayed in this light, offers a potential guide for polite, circumscribed discussion of difference.

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<sup>53</sup> Jackson, “Signposts,” 16.

<sup>54</sup> Jackson, “Signposts,” 16.

<sup>55</sup> Jackson, “Signposts,” 16.

<sup>56</sup> Jackson, “Signposts,” 22.

Throughout the document, "Signposts" offers a series of recommendations for religious studies education classes in schools. The document, in particular, highlights the importance of learning from others' values. Students, in this view, should take up the challenge of:

considering how the personal values from the individuals/groups/tradition studies are relevant to/might contribute to social values, such as citizenship. Such consideration raises questions about tolerance of others' world views; respect for others' world views or the ways in which individuals practise their ways of life (does this position command my respect?) and acknowledging how the values or actions of certain individuals and groups might be recognised by wider society as contributing positively to social harmony.<sup>57</sup>

Again, the emphasis rests on self-assessment in the service of "social harmony." Following this recommendation, "Signposts" goes on to recommend that students develop: "[s]kills such as: listening to people from other religions; interacting with people from other religions; how to collect reliable information about other religions; mediating exchanges concerning religions."<sup>58</sup> In addition, students should also cultivate "[a]ttitudes such as: respect for the right of a person to hold a particular religious or non-religious viewpoint; openness to people from different religions and cultures; openness to learning about different religions; willingness to suspend judgement; willingness to tolerate ambiguity; valuing religious and cultural diversity."<sup>59</sup> The explicit mention of attitudinal change demonstrates the document's aims. Specifically, "[a]ttitudes such as: openness to people from religions/other religions/other branches of one's own religion; willingness to suspend

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<sup>57</sup> Jackson, "Signposts," 38.

<sup>58</sup> Jackson, "Signposts," 39.

<sup>59</sup> Jackson, "Signposts," 39.

judgement and to tolerate ambiguity; valuing religious and cultural diversity; [and] flexibility in cultural and communicative behaviour”<sup>60</sup> represent stated goals. Here, as the document says, “valuing religious and cultural diversity” among other skills comes to the fore. Students should not only learn about other religions and traditions; they should also learn, through religious studies education, to value religious and cultural diversity as a societal good. In this way, through these series of recommendations, “Signposts” highlights the skills-building emphasis of this educational program. Despite its explicit aim of helping students “understand religions,” “Signposts” clearly takes an additional step. Rather than focus on content knowledge, the document clearly prioritizes an attendant goal: fostering “civic-mindedness”<sup>61</sup> through attitude formation.

Similarly, the influential “Toledo Guiding Principles,” another supranational document released by the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), cites “attitudes of tolerance and respect for the right of individuals to adhere to a particular religion or belief system” as a learning objective.<sup>62</sup> This skills-based learning objective prioritizes attitudes of respect and individual rights. Acknowledging that “a deeper understanding of religions will not automatically lead to greater tolerance and respect,” the document goes on to claim that “ignorance increases the likelihood of misunderstanding, stereotyping, and conflict.”<sup>63</sup> Although, according to the document “a better knowledge of

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<sup>60</sup> Jackson, “Signposts,” 40.

<sup>61</sup> Jackson, “Signposts,” 33.

<sup>62</sup> “Toledo Guiding Principles on Teaching About Religions and Beliefs in Public Schools,” *Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe* (27 November 2007): 48.

<sup>63</sup> “Toledo Guiding Principles,” 9.

religions and beliefs will not automatically foster tolerance and respect,” the endeavor of teaching about religions from a rights-based framework “has the potential to have a positive effect upon the perceptions of other’s religions and beliefs and their adherents.”<sup>64</sup> This strategy of modeling a correct attitude towards engagement among religion comes with a set of instructions for enacting such a vision for community cohesion.

To instill such behavioral standards in students, the “Toledo Guiding Principles” recommends including “references to sources drawn from various religious and belief traditions that reinforce the significance of tolerance, respect and caring for others.”<sup>65</sup> Framed in this way, curricula would deemphasize conflictual elements and highlight positive examples of peaceful coexistence and comity. Advancing this peacebuilding vision, the document states that “[l]earning outcomes associated with teaching about religions and beliefs should include the development of knowledge, attitudes, and competences.”<sup>66</sup> Again, here, attitudes and competencies, along with content knowledge, remain central to the endeavor of religious literacy.

Taking the discussion to the U.K., the recent All-Party Parliamentary Group on Religious Education (APPG on RE), cites the following in its 2016 report on religious literacy:

Religious literacy enables willingness and ability to live with religious and cultural tensions and with conflicting beliefs and practices. It supports social cohesion by

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<sup>64</sup> “Toledo Guiding Principles,” 18.

<sup>65</sup> “Toledo Guiding Principles,” 41.

<sup>66</sup> “Toledo Guiding Principles,” 48.

providing safe spaces where different views can be aired, listened to and engaged without pressure to conform to an overall perspective.<sup>67</sup>

This quote, which appears as a text box within the governmental report, highlights several key assumptions about religion education, and by extension, religious literacy's purpose. First, note the vocabulary choices. Here, "willingness" and "ability," occupy a prominent place. Religious literacy entails cultivating a particular attitude towards engaging with religious difference, a "willingness" as the texts phrases it. Observe, moreover, the reference to conflict and tension. The principle of non-coercion also plays an important role. Differences, in this assessment, are taken to be inherent sites of conflict, which require mediation strategies. This appeal to civics and cohesion, although perhaps unsurprising given that it stems from a government working group, demonstrates a significant assumption: the notion that religious differences pose an inherent threat to social order.

#### **4.2 "A Crisis of Civility": Critical Reconsiderations of Tolerance and Civil Discourse**

The notion that "we face a crisis of civility" has become an increasingly common contemporary trope, particularly post-2016.<sup>68</sup> Arguments about free speech, religious insult, and the need for toleration or civility permeate the public arena.<sup>69</sup> The resultant discourse around managing disagreement highlights the relevance of this topic. As political theorist

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<sup>67</sup> Members of the Department of Theology and Religious Studies at the University of Chester, quoted in "Improving Religious Literacy: A Contribution to the Debate," *All-Party Parliamentary Group on Religious Education* (July 2016): 7.

<sup>68</sup> Teresa M. Bejan, *Mere Civility: Disagreement and the Limits of Toleration* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2017), 1.

<sup>69</sup> Bejan, *Mere Civility*, 2.

Teresa M. Bejan puts it, “Western commentators” appear to agree that “uncivil speech is a threat to the tenuous balance between diversity and disagreement on which ostensibly tolerant—and civil—societies depend.”<sup>70</sup> Threats to social order have the capacity to destabilize the comity necessary for peaceful living. According to Bejan, the fears of incitement to violence underlie the rhetorical around calls for civility:

The rich metaphorical language used to describe our predicament conveys a danger deeper than poor manners. Words wound, rhetorical heat fans the flames, and vitriol corrodes the affective bonds between citizens. Incivility infects the body politic as a source of creeping social discord and decay. When wars of words rage unchecked it suggests, can wars of swords be far behind?<sup>71</sup>

As seen in the previously mentioned religious literacy examples, it is not only the fear of physical violence, but also the concern about social cohesion that underpins calls for civility. In Bejan’s words, “[t]he fears underlying declarations of a crisis of civility are the same: that even when they do not bring us to blows, our uncivil disagreements will exacerbate our fundamental differences and push us farther and farther apart.”<sup>72</sup> This tearing of affective, societal bonds paves the way for broader instability.

These concerns, of course, are not new. Inextricably tied to the European “Wars of Religion” and concomitant with state formation, tolerance and toleration have a decidedly political valence and a fraught history. Moreover, although the two terms are often used interchangeably, toleration generally implies “a set of social or political practices,” whereas

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<sup>70</sup> Bejan, *Mere Civility*, 8.

<sup>71</sup> Bejan, *Mere Civility*, 1.

<sup>72</sup> Bejan, *Mere Civility*, 1.

tolerance connotes “a set of attitudes.”<sup>73</sup> This distinction, between policy and practice, has implications for religious literacy and disentangling the distinction between practices and attitudes. Although tolerance and toleration extend past the theme of religion, concerns surrounding religion remain central to their expression and enactment. In the traditional narrative, conflicts of the early modern period set the stage for an articulation and formulation of religious toleration. Drawing on Locke’s famous “Letter Concerning Toleration” and other pre-Modern debates surrounding managing religious difference, the genealogy of tolerance and toleration have been a focus for scholars for many years.

Although tolerance and toleration had both supporters and detractors from their earliest articulations, there has been limited research into tolerance’s discursive frameworks. In response, recent scholarship has drawn attention to tolerance’s blind-spots and has called for a critical examination for the concept. This critical literature questions the notion of tolerance as an unproblematic, neutral virtue, and instead points to the social formations tolerance and policies of toleration create within the liberal state. In her 1990 essay, “Difference, Diversity, and the Limits of Toleration,” Kirstie McClure sets out to reframe the traditional narrative of tolerance as an unquestioned social virtue. Citing the “general chorus of approbation” around tolerance, McClure draws attention to the underexplored “political meaning and specificity of toleration itself.”<sup>74</sup> Although McClure acknowledges that tolerance “has never been without its critics,” writings on tolerance and toleration have

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<sup>73</sup> Andrew R. Murphy, “Tolerance, Toleration, and the Liberal Tradition,” *Polity* Vol. 29, No. 4 (Summer 1997): 593.

<sup>74</sup> Kirstie M. McClure, “Difference, Diversity, and the Limits of Toleration,” *Political Theory*, Vol. 18, No. 3 (1990): 362.

emphasized tolerance's function as a means by which to adjudicate between practices or beliefs that are deemed either tolerable or intolerable.<sup>75</sup> Rather than assess the suitability and application of toleration, McClure calls for investigation into the "discursive frame within which tolerance makes sense."<sup>76</sup> Disentangling tolerance as a social virtue from its application as a matter of state policy proves central to McClure's analysis.

Her challenge rests primarily on the assertion that tolerance "is not as politically benign as it might seem" when applied to the modern state.<sup>77</sup> Analyzing Locke, whose works on toleration constitute an essential component of the traditional political theory canon, McClure argues that tolerance, with its emphasis on private belief and developing idea of worldly harm, rests upon a connection to state power. The Lockean internalization of true religion and focus on private beliefs gets carried through history into the modern liberal state.

Similarly, Janet Jakobsen and Ann Pellegrini argue in their book on sexual politics, *Love the Sin: Sexual Regulation and the Limits of Religious Tolerance*, that tolerance must be examined critically, particularly within liberal democratic context. Jakobsen and Pellegrini go so far as to state that, despite tolerance's evocations of fairness and equity, "in practice it is exclusionary, hierarchical, and nondemocratic."<sup>78</sup> As they argue, toleration fails in its

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<sup>75</sup> McClure, "Difference, Diversity, and the Limits of Toleration," 363.

<sup>76</sup> McClure, "Difference, Diversity, and the Limits of Toleration," 363.

<sup>77</sup> McClure, "Difference, Diversity, and the Limits of Toleration," 364.

<sup>78</sup> Janet R. Jakobsen and Ann Pellegrini, *Love the Sin: Sexual Regulation and the Limits of Religious Tolerance* (New York: New York University Press, 2003), 45.

basic mission because it is not coterminous with freedom. Exercising tolerance entails exercising restraint which inherently excludes certain practices and people, while at the same time elevating those deemed to be normative. Toleration, in this assessment, while preferable to hatred, becomes a problematic regulatory mechanism for social difference.<sup>79</sup> In their estimation, counterintuitively, toleration, rather than disassembling “structures of hierarchy and discrimination,” instead upholds the structures “on which hatred is based.”<sup>80</sup> In other words, tolerance and practices of toleration become a “narrowly majoritarian” in their enforcement and enactment.<sup>81</sup>

This idea of the state’s role within the discourse of tolerance and toleration comes into sharper focus in political theorist Wendy Brown’s monograph, *Regulating Aversion: Tolerance in the Age of Identity and Empire*. Following McClure, Brown challenges the notion of tolerance as an uncritically benign virtue by calling attention to its entanglements with liberal power and hegemony. According to Brown, paying attention to the contexts in which people and government invoke the notion of tolerance, sheds light on some of the hidden epistemic assumptions behind a seemingly innocent term. This framing, in Brown’s view, “changes the status of tolerance from a transcendental virtue to a historically protean element of liberal governance, a resituating that casts tolerance as a vehicle for producing and organizing subjects, a framework for state action and state speech, and an aspect of

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<sup>79</sup> Jakobsen and Pellegrini, *Love the Sin*, 49.

<sup>80</sup> Jakobsen and Pellegrini, *Love the Sin*, 50.

<sup>81</sup> Jakobsen and Pellegrini, *Love the Sin*, 73.

liberalism's legitimation."<sup>82</sup> In her argument, Brown contends that tolerance is both inseparable from liberal democratic frameworks and at the same time a tool of the political order's very legitimation.

Tolerance, in this line of thinking, aims to regulate, as Brown's book title implies. The very act of "regulating aversion," implicit in enacting and practicing toleration, structures behavior and promotes the frameworks within which it operates. Western liberal tolerance, Brown argues:

involves not simply the withholding of speech or action in response to contingent individual dislikes or violations of taste but the enactment of social, political, religious, and cultural norms; certain practices of licensing and regulation; the marking of subjects of tolerance as inferior, deviant, or marginal vis-à-vis those practicing tolerance; and a justification for sometimes dire or even deadly action when the limits of tolerance are considered breached.<sup>83</sup>

In other words, tolerance acts as a structuring principle, a justification for fortifying existing social orders and upholding power structures. With cohabitation through regulating differences as the often-unstated objective, "[p]olitical and civic tolerance, then, emerges when a group difference that poses a challenge to the definition or binding features of the whole must be incorporated but also must be sustained as difference."<sup>84</sup> Tolerance, here, applies to certain people and in certain contexts. Reinforcing and re-inscribing existing hierarchies, tolerance discourse advances an agenda of western hegemony by designating

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<sup>82</sup> Wendy Brown, *Regulating Aversion: Tolerance in the Age of Identity and Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 11.

<sup>83</sup> Brown, *Regulating Aversion*, 13-14.

<sup>84</sup> Brown, *Regulating Aversion*, 71.

certain peoples and practices as deserving of tolerance and others as not. Tolerance, in Brown's analysis is only available to certain people at certain times:

Liberal tolerance, which simultaneously affirms the value of autonomy and consecrates state secularism, is understood as a virtue available only to the self-regulating individual, as a political principle available only to secular states, and as a good appropriately extended to individuated subjects and regimes that promote such individuation.<sup>85</sup>

Tolerance discourse, in Brown's argument, produces a particular conception of subjectivity. Here, the autonomous individual may grant toleration to others and, in turn, become the recipient of it. As Brown argues, "[t]olerance not only produces, organizes, and marks subjects, it also delineates a purview and the available alternatives to tolerance."<sup>86</sup> Tolerance, thus, becomes an organizing principle, rather than a universal value.

Moreover, in Brown's analysis, tolerance discourse may go so far as to promote a narrative of religiously motivated violence and discord. As Brown argues:

The overt promise of liberal tolerance, when applied to group practices (as opposed to idiosyncratic individual beliefs or behaviors), is that religious, cultural, or ethnic difference are sites of natural or native hostility. Tolerance is conceived as a tool for managing or lessening this hostility to achieve peaceful coexistence.<sup>87</sup>

In so doing, however, tolerance may amplify some of the challenges it aims to address, by promoting asymmetries and circumscribing difference. Moreover, by designating certain

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<sup>85</sup> Brown, *Regulating Aversion*, 173.

<sup>86</sup> Brown, *Regulating Aversion*, 29.

<sup>87</sup> Brown, *Regulating Aversion*, 151.

groups as sources of potential conflict, or “sites of native or natural hostility,” tolerance discourse advances and intensifies a narrative of religious threat. This narrative perpetuates the binaries of the secular rationality and religious irrationality, thereby justifying the use of “legitimate,” rational force. Tolerance discourse, with its assumption of the need for religion’s regulation, reproduces colonial narratives and power structures.

At the heart of recent post-colonial critical reconsiderations of tolerance is the question of whether scholarly and public discourse overplays the conflictual elements of religion. Recent scholarship has challenged “the conventional wisdom of Western societies” that “religion has a tendency to promote violence.”<sup>88</sup> In his 2009 book, *The Myth of Religious Violence: Secular Ideology and the Roots of Modern Conflict*, William Cavanaugh calls into question the constructed categories of “religion” and “secular,” which, to him, perpetuate a myth about religion’s purportedly violent nature. In his analysis, Cavanaugh asks, to what extent, if any, is it possible to know if violence is religiously motivated and whether such claims carry with them prior, unstated secular assumptions. Advancing the claim that associating religion with violence forms “part of a broader Enlightenment narrative that has invented a dichotomy between the religious and the secular and has constructed the former as an irrational and dangerous impulse that must give way in public to the rational, secular forms of power,”<sup>89</sup> Cavanaugh sees the religious-secular binary as a legitimating mechanism for secular liberal statist violence. Similar to Brown, Cavanaugh is concerned with the power

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<sup>88</sup> William T. Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence: Secular Ideology and the Roots of Modern Conflict* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 3.

<sup>89</sup> Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence*, 4.

structures that undergird claims about religious violence and its corresponding “need” for regulation. Citing scholars’ seeming “inability to find convincing ways to separate religious violence from secular violence,” Cavanaugh argues that religion’s purported propensity towards violence reinforces a religious-secular binary.<sup>90</sup> This binary becomes problematic because, in Cavanaugh’s estimation, under the veneer of rationality, it legitimates state-sanctioned violence against purportedly fanatical, emotion-driven “religious” actors. Cavanaugh goes so far as to call the idea of religion’s propensity towards violence “one of the legitimating myths of the liberal nation-state.”<sup>91</sup> Religion as inherently irrational or even antirational, justifies the use of force against it.

Following Cavanaugh’s critique and casting the debate explicitly in terms of a critical reconsideration of tolerance, Lori Beaman advances what she terms “deep equality” as an alternative to tolerance and religious accommodation. Using case studies from Western liberal-democratic contexts, primarily in present-day Canada, Beaman builds the case that casting difference as a problem in need of a solution presents a challenge because it creates issues where none exist and masks real areas of division and discord. According to Beaman, the notion of religious threat and its attendant need for management and regulation, which Cavanaugh identified, permeates current scholarship and public debate. As Beaman notes, “[s]cholarship disproportionately overemphasizes the ‘problems’ in almost every academic field that is turning its attention to religious diversity. Narratives of conflict and controversy

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<sup>90</sup> Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence*, 8.

<sup>91</sup> Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence*, 4.

dominate both scholarship and media coverage of religious difference.”<sup>92</sup> As a result of this asymmetrical coverage, “[s]tories of negotiation of difference, of how people get along on a day-to-day basis and narratives of successes and similarities remain largely out of view.”<sup>93</sup> Rebalancing the narrative, in Beaman’s view, would help identify the challenges tolerance and accommodation discourse obfuscate.

In Beaman’s analysis, “the concepts of tolerance and accommodation as they circulate in various realms” operate by “effectively maintaining the status quo, [and] preserving the hegemony of religious majorities and indeed of cultural majorities.”<sup>94</sup> Following Brown, Beaman points to the asymmetric power relations tolerance discourse fosters. Moreover, in framing religious difference as a problem in need of a solution, tolerance, in Beaman’s analysis, depicts difference as problematic in nature and inherently conflictual. This synthesis of both Cavanaugh’s and Brown’s critiques of religious violence and tolerance, respectively, highlights the problematic conflation of religion with violence in public discourse. In Beaman’s words, “[t]he rush to ‘solve’ the problem of diversity has produced a blindness to both the ways in which people resolve or work with difference and a failure to consult the ‘Other’ has produced top-down philosophies, policies, and solutions to problems that often did not exist in the first place.”<sup>95</sup> This challenge has real-world implications for policy and practice. As Beaman puts it:

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<sup>92</sup> Lori Beaman, *Deep Equality in an Era of Religious Diversity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 3.

<sup>93</sup> Beaman, *Deep Equality in an Era of Religious Diversity*, 3.

<sup>94</sup> Beaman, *Deep Equality in an Era of Religious Diversity*, 1.

<sup>95</sup> Beaman, *Deep Equality in an Era of Religious Diversity*, 2-3.

Thus, elaborate frameworks for the resolution of difference (as though it must always be something that is to be resolved) are destined to fail or slide into obscurity except to the small group of privileged academic elites who concoct them and circulate them amongst themselves, congratulating themselves on their cleverness or debating minute points of difference. In the meantime, all over the world, people confront, ignore, live with, and negotiate difference every day.<sup>96</sup>

Relegated to the realm of academic quibbling, the discourse of managing difference misses an equally relevant reality: the successful negotiation of difference in ordinary life. Rather than fixate on difference and threat, Beaman advocates a reframing of the current discourse “from one of tolerance and accommodation to one of deep equality.”<sup>97</sup> She calls, instead, for an approach based on “map[ping] micro-processes that make up the everyday negotiation of difference.”<sup>98</sup> This, in her view, would reorient the conversation towards the “habits, attitudes, values, approaches, and insights” that come together to create conditions for “deep equality.”<sup>99</sup> In other words, such approaches would turn navigating religious difference into a “non-event,” to use Beaman’s formulation.

#### **4.3 “Vigorous-Yet-Respectful Critique”: Religious Literacy’s Reframing of Tolerance Discourse**

Returning from theory to practice, even within calls for religious literacy, appeals to civility and invocations of tolerance in the face of difference have not gone unchallenged or unquestioned. Siding with recent critics of tolerance and bringing the conversation into an

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<sup>96</sup> Beaman, *Deep Equality in an Era of Religious Diversity*, 2.

<sup>97</sup> Beaman, *Deep Equality in an Era of Religious Diversity*, 3.

<sup>98</sup> Beaman, *Deep Equality in an Era of Religious Diversity*, 3.

<sup>99</sup> Beaman, *Deep Equality in an Era of Religious Diversity*, 3.

educational context, Stephen Prothero even goes so far as to list tolerance as one of the root causes of religious illiteracy. Tolerance, in his estimation, has the potential to collapse differences in problematic ways. In Prothero's view, in an attempt to demonstrate inclusivity and to avoid controversy, schools have disfavored religion teaching. As Prothero phrases it in a co-authored chapter with researcher Lauren Kerby, "[r]eligious literacy has been sacrificed on the altar of tolerance for nearly two centuries in America, but one does not preclude the other. Ignorance is cheap grace at best; the tolerance that comes with religious literacy comes at a higher price, but it is a far better investment."<sup>100</sup> For him, informed participation aids a civic mission and past attempts to ignore differences have done a disservice to promoting knowledge. By implication, despite the challenges, learning about religion may help foster civility and toleration. This goal, however, should not be the explicit program of religious literacy because an emphasis on tolerance has the capacity to gloss over real difference.

Sharing Prothero's criticism of tolerance within religious studies education, Jedd Medefind critiques tolerance as inadequate in its passivity. Invoking a narrative of civic crisis, Medefind advocates for a more active approach to take tolerance's place. He writes:

Given the centrifugal force pulling American civil life apart, we need an *active* civic virtue. Our exigency requires an influence that pulls vigorously towards a common

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<sup>100</sup> Stephen Prothero and Lauren Kerby, "The Irony of Religious Literacy in the USA," in *Religious Literacy in Policy and Practice*, eds. Adam Dinham and Matthew Francis (Bristol: Policy Press, 2015), 74.

*centrum* where we can engage together a shared civic life. Such a virtue we could call *robust pluralism*.<sup>101</sup>

Rather than focusing on tolerance and policies of mere toleration, Medefine calls for a “robust pluralism” to countervail against the “centrifugal” forces pulling apart society. Medefine insists that religious studies education will help promote “robust pluralism,” which he defines as follows:

*Robust pluralism vigorously pursues the broadest possible range of substantive participation in American public life. To this end, it cultivates both meaningful collaboration and respectful conflict. Robust pluralism affirms the value and upholds the dignity of others and their viewpoints, even when strongly disagreeing with them.*<sup>102</sup>

Notice, in particular, the emphasis on “respectful conflict” and “uphold[ing] the dignity of others and their viewpoints.” This notion of self-regulation, shared by so many advocates for revamped religious literacy education, takes pride of place here.

This framing shows a deep concern for identifying and modeling prosocial behavior in the service of promoting civic ideals. As Medefine elaborates:

It is not that we must address religion like we must address global AIDS. Far from it. Religion has the capacity to play a vital and utterly unique role in re-weaving the threads of character, conscience, and community, necessary to vibrant civic life.<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> Jedd Medefine, “Tolerance is Not Enough: Why Only a Commitment to Robust Pluralism can Rescue America’s Civic Life,” in Vincent Biondo III and Andrew Fiala, *Civility, Religious Pluralism, and Education* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 31. Emphasis original.

<sup>102</sup> Medefine, “Tolerance is Not Enough,” 31. Emphasis original.

<sup>103</sup> Medefine, “Tolerance is Not Enough,” 33.

Religion, not just religious studies education, serves a particular, instrumental end. Here, essentialized religion itself, provides the tools for promoting civic cohesion. Training in religious literacy, in response, represents a strategy for fostering shared civic life. Citing once again the inadequacies of tolerance, Medefine goes on to argue that a certain degree of disagreement fosters, rather than destabilizes, democratic life:

Tolerance and tepid forms of pluralism avoid giving overt criticism or waging controversy. They often call for, and sometimes enforce, the opposite: an ethic of non-critique for any religion, lifestyle, or group. In contrast, robust pluralism views vigorous-yet-respectful critique as an essential to a thriving democracy. It allows for real criticism—of everything from harmful manifestations of religion...to politically correct agnosticism. Robust pluralism does not require an attitude of moral equivalency toward all expressions of religion.<sup>104</sup>

This model, as the emphasis on “vigorous-yet-respectful critique” shows, criticism, provided it is mediated through codes of democratic discourse, constitutes an essential component of democratic living. The challenge, however, in this concern for slipping into relativism, lies in the emphasis on freedom of conscience demonstrated through deliberation and discourse. This approach calls essentially for believing what you want, but exercising self-restraint and self-regulation in public conduct. In advocating for robust pluralism, Medefine asks for religions to enter the public space according to the template of social engagement based on rational debate. Religions should be open to evaluation on the basis of their societal impacts. Although he calls for a critical rethinking of tolerance, the alternative he

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<sup>104</sup> Medefine, “Tolerance is Not Enough,” 37.

proposes functions similarly, and may, in turn, promote the same challenges seen in tolerance policy and practice.

The notion of religious literacy as a social practice also comes to the fore in examples from the U.K. Although religious literacy programs operate under decidedly different juridical frameworks and church-state configurations, appeals to religious literacy demonstrate similar concerns. Returning to an example of religious literacy as a democracy building project discussed in the previous chapter,<sup>105</sup> Adam Dinham offers a useful perspective on tolerance discourse in action. Dinham co-authored, along with another researcher, Martha Shaw, a report in 2015 titled “RE for Real: The Future of Teaching and Learning about Religion and Belief.” A project housed within the Goldsmiths, University of London Religious Literacy Programme of the Faiths and Civil Society Unit, the research aimed to produce a series of recommendations for improving and updating religious education within U.K. schools. As part of their project, Dinham and Shaw conducted social science research in nineteen U.K. schools, with the intention of assessing student, teacher, and parental attitudes towards teaching religion. The research focused primarily on gathering data on perspectives about Religious Education’s (RE) purpose and curricular content.<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> See Chapter 3 for an analysis of Dinham’s perspective on religious literacy and social cohesion within the context of civics-based rationales for studying religion at the primary and secondary education levels.

<sup>106</sup> Adam Dinham and Martha Shaw, “RE for Real: The Future of Teaching and Learning about Religion and Belief,” *Goldsmiths, University of London* (November 2015): 6.

In Dinham and Shaw's assessment, RE programs of the past have placed an undue, and possibly even damaging, emphasis on civic formation and social cohesion.<sup>107</sup> Questioning the purpose of RE, Dinham and Shaw cast a critical eye on current educational programs. Problematically, in their view, RE has become a site for mediating conflicts that purportedly result from religious difference. The assumptions about RE's purpose underlie current educational projects and, in this line of argument, amplify some of the existing presuppositions about religion. In Dinham and Shaw's view, "[i]t appears to be taken as a given that at least part of RE is the development of skills, attitudes and understanding which equip young people to engage positively with ideas and conceptions different from their own."<sup>108</sup> This, as they argue, "risks colluding with an idea of religion...as primarily a threat to cohesion about which something must be done."<sup>109</sup> Instrumentalizing religion demonstrates particular assumptions about religion: namely that, in its assumed capacity to stir up strong emotions, it presents a threat to cohesion and order. This functionalist approach, against which Dinham and Shaw argue, creates its own set of unhelpful presuppositions about religion education's purpose and ideas about the ways in which religion is seen to operate within liberal democratic society.

Their findings supported the observation that parents, teachers, and, farther down the line, future employers were more concerned with cultivating particular dispositions than with gaining facility with religious topics and themes. According to the interviews conducted,

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<sup>107</sup> Dinham and Shaw, "RE for Real," 3.

<sup>108</sup> Dinham and Shaw, "RE for Real," 3.

<sup>109</sup> Dinham and Shaw, "RE for Real," 3.

parents demonstrated concern with practical outcomes. Summarizing their findings, Dinham and Shaw conclude that amongst the parents, “attitudes are prioritized over knowledge and parents emphasise the development of tolerance and respect.”<sup>110</sup> Parents were not alone in their desire to inculcate specific attitudes and behaviors. Dinham and Shaw’s research supports the idea that employers also wished to regulate their future workers’ behaviors with regards to religion. Based on their interviews, Dinham and Shaw concluded that the employers they interviewed believed that learning about religions “should give young people a practical understanding of what are acceptable manifestations of religion and belief in the workplace and what are not.”<sup>111</sup> In their assessment, “[t]hese employers assumed that learning about religion and belief will result in the development of tolerance and respect.”<sup>112</sup> As Dinham and Shaw note:

Employers want a pragmatic, practical engagement with religion and belief, focused on lived experiences, and manifestations of religion and belief. Learning about beliefs and practices is seen as important, but largely in relation to what they mean for individuals and how this plays out in workplaces.<sup>113</sup>

Focusing on regulating behavior, this approach to teaching about religions might perpetuate the notion that religions are inherent sites of conflict and contestation. This utilitarian approach, perhaps unsurprisingly coming from prospective employers, carries with it several assumptions about the idea of educating about religion to help mediate conflict, may, if implemented, become focused on generating particular behavioral outcomes.

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<sup>110</sup> Dinham and Shaw, “RE for Real,” 21.

<sup>111</sup> Dinham and Shaw, “RE for Real,” 23.

<sup>112</sup> Dinham and Shaw, “RE for Real,” 24.

<sup>113</sup> Dinham and Shaw, “RE for Real,” 24.

Dinham and Shaw, for example, identify the challenges of appealing to conflict mediation strategies and calls for cohesion. As an alternative to current teaching strategies, they instead propose “preparing students for the practical task of engagement with the rich variety of religion and belief encounters in everyday, ordinary life.”<sup>114</sup> Even though they position their religious literacy approach as diverging significantly from that of RE, Dinham and Shaw may fall into the same trap they wish U.K. education to escape. As they put it, religious literacy means “learning for a task,” namely that of “encountering variety well, whereas RE, in their view, advances an explicitly “politically determined purpose” of creating social “cohesion” out of difference.<sup>115</sup> It remains unclear, however, how “encountering variety well” would not, in itself, be serving its own kind of political, social purpose, since learning to engage with difference arguably constitutes its own form of attitude and behavioral shaping.

This is not to suggest that training people to coexist peacefully is necessarily an unworthy goal. Rather, by emphasizing tolerance and prioritizing specific behaviors, current approaches to teaching about religion may not address the challenges they aim to remedy. Although Dinham and Shaw’s conception of religious literacy’s aims, are not immune from the same criticisms they level against current RE curricula, they do expose some assumptions. The presumption of conflict, violence, and threat underpins such endeavors. From so-called culture wars within the U.S. to concerns about social cohesion within the

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<sup>114</sup> Dinham and Shaw, “RE for Real,” 3.

<sup>115</sup> Dinham and Shaw, “RE for Real,” 3.

U.K. and continental Europe, religion teaching calls attention to the narratives of controversy that religious literacy either tries to ameliorate or downplay. In so doing, it sheds light on the discourse surrounding tolerance that religious literacy debates invoke. As the above shows, even attempts to critique top-down policies of social cohesion, frequently, also rely on attitudinal shaping maneuvers in the service of fostering increased civility. Religious literacy, even where its proponents aim to reconfigure and update tolerance policies, participates in a kind of behavioral regulation, predicated on the conventions of respect and democratic deliberation.

#### **4.4 The Limits of the Law: Does Religious Literacy Step in Where the Law Ends?**

A full discussion of the entanglements between secularism and the law, often framed in terms of secularism's operational equivalent,<sup>116</sup> "religious freedom," lies outside the scope of this analysis. However, recent critiques of the law's limitations in adjudicating matters of religion within liberal democracies sheds light on the religious literacy debate. How, religious literacy appears to ask, is it possible to mediate religious conflict without resorting to inadequate and often unsatisfactory legal mechanisms?

In her essay "Religious Reason and Secular Affect: An Incommensurable Divide?" Saba Mahmood calls attention to the potential insufficiency of liberal-democratic frameworks in mediating religious offence. Using the 2005 Danish cartoon controversy as her case study,

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<sup>116</sup> Thank you to Marek Sullivan for discussing this phrasing.

Mahmood aims to destabilize the constructed binary between secular reason and religious threat. By paying insufficient attention to, and in so doing directly misunderstanding, religious attachment, Western media coverage advanced a problematic and particular understanding of religious subjectivity. In framing the controversy in terms of religious freedom in the form of free speech versus “religious taboo,” the coverage amplified tensions and highlighted the potential for misunderstandings that may result from within liberal-democratic discursive frameworks.<sup>117</sup>

In Mahmood’s argument, the controversy, and the ensuing media coverage, highlighted the difficulty in managing and understanding religious offense. Framed in the language of freedom of speech, popular coverage of the controversy essentially missed the point. Construing the incident in terms of legal language “grounded in juridical notions of rights and state sanction,” the incident’s coverage led to further confusion.<sup>118</sup> The offence to religious sensibilities was unintelligible to both the liberal secular state and the media. Legal language, here, failed to capture adequately the affective attachments particular European Muslims experienced when they encountered disrespectful images of the Prophet Muhammad.

Although Mahmood, in appealing to European Muslims’ senses of offence, may be reproducing the binaries she aims to deconstruct—are Muslim sensibilities necessarily so

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<sup>117</sup> Saba Mahmood, “Religious Reason and Secular Affect: An Incommensurable Divide?,” *Critical Inquiry* 35 (Summer 2009): 838.

<sup>118</sup> Mahmood, “Religious Reason and Secular Affect,” 841.

different from Protestant or secular sensibilities?—Mahmood makes a compelling case for the limitations of democratic frameworks in mediating religious offense. The idea that people may have different religious subjectivities, whether right or wrong, calls attention to the idea that liberal-democratic frameworks arguably recognize particular types of subjectivities and overlook others.

Mahmood's critique, although part of a wider political ontology she aims to advance, is particularly salient to the religious literacy discussion because it highlights the potential inadequacies of the law in managing religious injury. Does the rise of religious literacy advocacy, then, signal a recognition of Mahmood's suggestion that democracies are ill-equipped to manage religious offence? To what extent, moreover, can disagreement be encapsulated and inscribed? These questions pervade religious literacy discourse. The need for religion's regulation carries particular currency in this narrative. As Brown notes, "[l]ike civility, with which it is often linked, tolerance is a political value and sometimes even a dictum, but it is not precisely formulated or enshrined in law."<sup>119</sup> The idea that toleration and civility as practices and lived lie beyond the scope of the law contributes to this discussion. As mentioned previously, appeals to religious literacy often cite the inadequacy and undesirability of juridical frameworks in mediating religious offence. Particularly within litigious U.S. contexts but also within the U.K., religious literacy discourse, with its appeals to sociability and informed debate, may perform a similar function. Like the tolerance and toleration that Brown describes, religious literacy may extend into places the law cannot.

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<sup>119</sup> Brown, *Regulating Aversion*, 11.

Offending religious sensibilities, while not illegal in many instances, remains undesirable. In response, regulating individual behavior and attempting to cultivate particular attitudes, then, play key roles in managing religious offence. Coming back to Brown's analysis of tolerance:

Conventionally, tolerance is adduced for beliefs or practices that may be morally, socially, or ideologically offensive but are not in direct conflict with the law. Thus, law constitutes one limit of the reach of tolerance, designating its purview as personal or private matters within the range of what is legal.<sup>120</sup>

Regulating disagreement that rests outside the scope of the law remains a central concern of religious literacy. When viewed within the context of religious literacy, the issue becomes procedural. In other words, form prevails over content. As Bejan puts it, previously, debates around tolerance and civility focused on "decline of civic solidarity and social capital," whereas now they increasingly center "on how individuals speak to each other and, more important, how they *disagree*."<sup>121</sup> This reframing of the conversation spotlights the new emphasis on obviating the need for recourse to juridical frameworks seen in current religious literacy examples. The task at hand, as religious literacy advocacy shows, is outlining templates for respectful communication.

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<sup>120</sup> Brown, *Regulating Aversion*, 12.

<sup>121</sup> Bejan, *Mere Civility*, 1. Emphasis original.

Returning to the previously mentioned California “Three Rs” project of rights, responsibility, and respect, Biondo and Fiala advocate for hospitability as a desired learning outcome of religious literacy education. The project, in their description:

aims to balance a passive respect or tolerance for the legal civil rights of others in private with an active responsibility to engage hospitably with civility in public. In other words, legal protections for religious freedom are necessary yet insufficient guarantors of religious freedom and civil discourse. Beyond the formal control of the federal legal system, religions are highly contextualized in local cultural spaces, so that informal networks in local communities determine the violent or peaceful negotiation of difference. For example, stiffer sentencing for violent assaults categorized as religious “hate crimes” represent a “top down” legal form of deterrent, whereas a local context can shape an environment that either tacitly sanctions or overtly condemns such actions from “the ground up.”<sup>122</sup>

Addressing the limitations of the law, this passage suggests that recourse to legal mechanisms fails to address the many of the on-the-ground problems that arise. The “top down” nature, moreover, of the law makes it an undesirable course of action. Rather, religious literacy can, and should, offer “bottom up,” community-based solutions. As Biondo and Fiala elaborate:

Given that it is not always practical for victims of discrimination to seek legal representation in particular sociocultural contexts, a respect for the right to dissent alongside a responsible hospitable effort become the key values with which to “engage” or “act” civilly in response to the new religious pluralism.<sup>123</sup>

This emphasis on correct action demonstrates an overall concern with using religious

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<sup>122</sup> Biondo III and Fiala, “Introduction: Civility and Education in a World of Religious Pluralism,” 5.

<sup>123</sup> Biondo III and Fiala, “Introduction: Civility and Education in a World of Religious Pluralism,” 12.

literacy to solve problems related to dissent. As Fiala goes on to assert in a single-authored essay:

Despite the large corpus of well-established law governing toleration and neutrality, a number of philosophical problems remain. Awareness of unresolved problems is an essential part of the liberal arts model of education, and this is itself productive of toleration: if we recognize the limitations of knowledge, law, and principle, we may be more willing to tolerate others with divergent ideas. Of course, a recognition of limitations and remaining philosophical problems cannot itself be on the basis of law: law must begin with an assertion of principles (such as the First Amendment), but outside of the law, things remain fraught with uncertainty.<sup>124</sup>

Religious literacy, here, steps in to combat the uncertainty that lies outside legal codes of conduct. Social codes of conduct, which are not enshrined in law, must supersede, or, at the very least, complement legal dictates. Unsettled social relationships call for a remedy and religious literacy, as represented here, provides a practical solution.

In a similar vein, Haynes calls for religious studies education to aid democratic discourse. Too often, Haynes laments, “litigation is the first recourse instead of the last” in responding to conflicts around both religion and its inclusion in the curricula.<sup>125</sup> According to Haynes, without the proper precautions in place, teaching about religion has the potential to result in “lawsuits, shouting matches at school board meetings and polarization in the community.”<sup>126</sup> The answer, in Haynes’ estimation, entails “civil debate.”<sup>127</sup> Although civility is preferable to hatred, it too comes with its own set of unstated expectations. It, by

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<sup>124</sup> Fiala, “Tolerance, Civility, and Cognitive Development,” 29.

<sup>125</sup> Haynes, “From Battleground to Common Ground,” 110.

<sup>126</sup> Haynes and Thomas, “Finding Common Ground,” 22.

<sup>127</sup> Haynes and Thomas, “Finding Common Ground,” 22.

definition, regulates behavior and casts particular ways of engaging with presumed difference as normative.

This analysis suggests that religious literacy aims to regulate the terms of engagement by suggesting that civil debate itself presents the civic ideal. Clearly, civility, tolerance, and mutual respect are preferable to bigotry, discrimination, and outright violence. However, in advancing such goals, religious literacy may function as a regulating system and an operational answer to the apparent limitations of the law in mediating religious offence.

How, then, should the possibility of religious insult be addressed in the first instance, if not adjudicated? The answer, for certain proponents of religious literacy as well as those calling for critical reconsiderations of tolerance, appears to lie in individual, habituated action and self-scrutiny in the service of the common good. In the place of tolerance, comes a form of individual, habitual action, rather than asymmetrical, top-down demands. Self-formation in the service of societal transformation plays an integral role. For example, John Bowlin, a scholar of Christian ethics, offers a relevant reformulation of tolerance that provides a telling perspective on the religious literacy discourse. Pushing back against post-colonial critiques of scholars such as Brown, Bowlin calls for tolerance to be “theorized as a virtue, as a habitual perfection of action and attitude.”<sup>128</sup> His aim, to reclaim tolerance from its critics, leads him to assert that “[w]hat’s needed, then, is a better account of tolerance as a concept, act, and habitual perfection, one that shows how it is in some ways natural to us, how its

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<sup>128</sup> John R. Bowlin, *Tolerance Among the Virtues* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 3.

act can be regarded as right and due in nearly every time and place and in all kinds of social and political relationships, and how it brings some measure of tranquility and autonomy wherever it is found.”<sup>129</sup> The overemphasis within tolerance discourse on resulting asymmetrical policies and practices, in this view, contributes to “the anxieties and discontents”<sup>130</sup> around the concept and draws necessary attention away from tolerance’s capacity to function as a habituated, individual practice. Tolerance, in this reframing, provides an individual, rather than social or political, code of comportment that derives from self-cultivation.

This move, away from cultural context towards individual action, represents a shift from policy to practice. In so doing, it shows a different angle of tolerance. Bowlin’s reformulation pertains to religious literacy in that it highlights a mechanism at work in the various education programs’ aims. Tolerance, here construed, entails individual work. When proponents of religious literacy enjoin students to become increasingly aware of the impact their words and actions can have on others, they appeal to an individual’s capacity for self-containment in the service of civility. Self-cultivation presents a technique and tolerance as an individual virtue has the capacity to ameliorate social relations as part of the process. With the emphasis squarely on the individual, tolerance comes from the inside, rather than from the outside. For Bowlin, tolerance represent a cultivated practice, not a top-down policy. This kind of habituated virtue carries cultural currency in that it calls upon

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<sup>129</sup> Bowlin, *Tolerance Among the Virtues*, 51.

<sup>130</sup> Bowlin, *Tolerance Among the Virtues*, 6.

individuals to better themselves through self-cultivation and self-regulation. In relocating tolerance from the state to the autonomous subject, Bowlin sets the stage for a crucial turn from collectives to individuals. When viewed in this light, it becomes clear that religious literacy, despite some proponents' emphasis on content knowledge, that information alone was never the only end goal of the project. Attitudinal shift, resulting from study and training, remains central.

#### 4.5 "Respect Your Neighbor": Agonistic Respect, Deep Equality, and the Self-Regulation Trap

"You have to have religious literacy in order to not tolerate, but respect your neighbor," remarked Chris Seiple, President Emeritus of the Institute for Global Engagement, during a 2018 panel discussion on "Religious Literacy in Global Affairs" at the Council on Foreign Relations.<sup>131</sup> Seiple's seemingly anodyne comment about the purpose of religious literacy encapsulates in a succinct summary many of the perspectives advanced within the religious literacy debate. Religious literacy aims to foster respect, rather than mere toleration. This trend within religious literacy reflects the wider turn within the academy and beyond against tolerance and towards a model of inculcated respect. In this way, the oft-invoked term "respect" has, in many instances, come to supplant tolerance. This shift, in pointing to the asymmetries—historic and contemporary—in tolerance policy, shines a necessary light on a problematic legacy and aims to correct such imbalances.

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<sup>131</sup> Chris Seiple, "Religious Literacy in Global Affairs," Remarks presented in a *Council on Foreign Relations* roundtable, 9 May 2018, <https://www.cfr.org/event/religious-literacy-global-affairs>.

Respect, at first glance, offers an appealing alternative to tolerance. Respect suggests reciprocity rather than hierarchy, bottom-up rather than top-down, and voluntary rather than mandatory actions and associations. Such attractive features appeal to modern sensibilities and recent scholarship has aimed to reformulate the debate around tolerance and accommodation in terms of respect and equality. Ultimately, however, religious literacy examples point to the theoretical cracks, not only in tolerance policy and practice, but also in attempts at reformulating and updating tolerance policy to meet a new standard.

Political theorist William Connolly's conception of "agonistic respect" constitutes an influential formulation for revising tolerance policy to meet a modern standard. According to Connolly's definition, agonistic respect, "is a civic virtue that allows people to honor different final sources, to cultivate reciprocal respect across difference, and to negotiate larger assemblages to set general policies."<sup>132</sup> This movement from individual to wider political assemblages has relevance for the varied community cohesion projects envisioned in religious literacy and critical reconsiderations of tolerance.

Despite its emphasis on community formations, the agonistic respect for which Connolly advocates carries with it the expectation of individual self-assessment and openness to the claims, perspectives, and persuasions of others who occupy the same physical and political

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<sup>132</sup> William E. Connolly, *Identity, Difference: Democratic Negotiation of Political Paradox*, expanded edition (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), xxvi.

space. Connolly's conception calls for the capacity for inward change motivated by contact with others within a diverse polity. As Connolly writes:

Agonistic respect carries the expectation that you may contest one another on the source of respect, particularly when one party insists that eligibility for respect requires you to accept the universal it affirms. It also includes the possibility that something said or done by others may nudge you to reinterpret your existential faith, or draw you toward conversion to another.<sup>133</sup>

The openness to persuasion and self-evaluation remains central to this project. Connolly, argues for agonistic respect to take tolerance's place because it "is both more expansive a civic virtue and more appropriate to the fast-paced world of late-modernity in which people of multiple faiths increasingly occupy the same political territory."<sup>134</sup> Civility, and openness to contestability of claims, underpin this vision of civic cohesion. In Connolly's formulation, agonistic respect has, as the term implies, two valences, which must be balanced: agonism and respect. According to Connolly, "[a]gonism is the dimension through which each party maintains a pathos of distance from others with whom it is engaged. Respect is the dimension through which self-limits are acknowledged and connection are established across lines of difference."<sup>135</sup> These two, in Connolly's vision, complementary notions, must come together to form assemblages predicated on both measured distance and dignity.

The conception of agonistic respect, by Connolly's own admission, still carries forward old challenges: "But the old question arises again in a new form: Must not respect for difference,

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<sup>133</sup> Connolly, *Identity, Difference*, xxvi.

<sup>134</sup> Connolly, *Identity, Difference*, xxviii.

<sup>135</sup> Connolly, *Identity, Difference*, xxvi.

to be respect, flow from a common source?"<sup>136</sup> The notion of "a common source," as Connolly frames it, is crucial to navigating difference within the liberal public sphere. Even if differences abound, some common procedure, must underpin their negotiation. This, however, returns us to the same place: the need to recognize and abide by a shared code of conduct and comportment, albeit one that is more expansive and inclusive than that of tolerance. In this case, as is also largely true of religious literacy proposals, it is the need to uphold, and even bolster, the notion of habituated self-regulation in the service of fostering civil, respectful communication about difference. Turning navigating religious difference into a "non-event," to use Beaman's phrasing, still entails reliance on a good deal of common, if unacknowledged, ground.

As critiques of Connolly's notion of agonistic respect from scholars such as Courtney Bender and Pamela Klassen suggest, the concept itself has the capacity to "hinge on exclusions and oclusions of various religious and political actors."<sup>137</sup> In furthering the "political project of pluralism,"<sup>138</sup> whether religious or otherwise, Connolly and those who advance his concept of agonistic respect have the potential to create exclusionary practices in the name of inclusion by prioritizing, while at the same time refashioning, the needs to the liberal state. This critique has merit within the context of religious literacy because it suggests that, even when broadening inclusivity, certain nonnegotiable fundamental values must remain in place. Despite the prioritization of contestable claims, certain procedures and norms stay

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<sup>136</sup> Connolly, *Identity, Difference*, xxvi.

<sup>137</sup> Courtney Bender and Pamela Klassen, *After Pluralism: Reimagining Religious Engagement* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 12.

<sup>138</sup> Bender and Klassen, *After Pluralism*, 12.

incontestable. As Bender and Klassen note correctly, such formulations of respect carry with them specific assumptions about normative behavior within a liberal polity. By extension, building on Bender and Klassen's critique, in prioritizing the liberal project, agonistic respect also brings with it liberal assumptions about individual autonomy.

More recent interpreters of Connolly bring the issue into sharper theoretical focus. Beaman's conception of deep equality, the result of religious "non-events" that make up the everyday successful negotiation of difference, shows a similarly processual stance towards social relations. Beaman rejects the use of the term "tolerance," with its hierarchical legacy, and instead advocates for an individual, "bottom up," rather than "top down," approach to navigating difference. Although Beaman conducts her research from within the setting of Canadian multicultural policies, her emphasis, in the first instance, appears to be individual, rather than purely communal as her concerns about community cohesion might imply. According to Beaman, "deep equality" extends beyond the purview of the law into the realm of individual, autonomous action:

Deep equality is not a legal, policy, or social prescription, nor is it achievable by a magic enshrined in human rights codes. It is, rather, a process, enacted and owned by so-called ordinary people in everyday life. Deep equality is a vision of equality that transcends law, politics, and social policy, and that relocates equality as a process rather than a definition, and as lived rather than prescribed. It recognizes equality as an achievement of day-to-day interaction, and is traceable through agonistic respect, recognition of similarity, and a concomitant acceptance of difference, creation of community, and neighbourliness. It circulates through micro-processes of individual action and inaction and through group demonstrations of caring. It is not the language or process of tolerance of accommodation, which is, at

present, the dominant discourse related to religious diversity and its management.<sup>139</sup>

In Beaman's conception, engaging with difference must start at the level of "individual action," and, crucially, "inaction." Self-regulation and adherence to certain normative behaviors, guides this type of equality. The "micro-processes" for which Beaman advocates originate in individual and habituated, rather than legislated, approaches to engagement across difference.

As Beaman argues, alternative mechanisms will not do away with the need for regulatory, juridical frameworks. She calls instead for "displacing law's dominance over equality discourse and reinscribing it in the domain of the everyday,"<sup>140</sup> thereby according "an equal place for practices of deep equality found in the everyday and a greater attention to those practices when sorting out the challenges of diversity."<sup>141</sup> This relocating of equality in the everyday results from law's inadequacies in "enforcing the sorts of elements that make the deep equality we see in day-to-day life" and its focus "on difference in a manner that reinscribes it, insulating particular identity characteristics from their contexts."<sup>142</sup> These limitations of the law require, in Beaman's words, "an extra-legal equality."<sup>143</sup> This move beyond the law necessitates a cultivation of micro-processes of living together, a move from macro to micro, from governance structures to individuals.

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<sup>139</sup> Beaman, *Deep Equality in an Era of Religious Diversity*, 13.

<sup>140</sup> Beaman, *Deep Equality in an Era of Religious Diversity*, 156.

<sup>141</sup> Beaman, *Deep Equality in an Era of Religious Diversity*, 157.

<sup>142</sup> Beaman, *Deep Equality in an Era of Religious Diversity*, 156.

<sup>143</sup> Beaman, *Deep Equality in an Era of Religious Diversity*, 174.

However, the challenge of achieving “extra-legal equality,” in Beaman’s formulation, lies in the ability to cultivate such individual attitudes, behaviors, and responses or non-responses to religious difference. The question, moreover, as Beaman admits, remains of scalability. As Beaman reflects, “[c]an social institutions reproduce these micro-processes to create models for deep equality?”<sup>144</sup> How, she asks, can individual action or inaction inform larger social configurations? Moving from individual action to broader societal action, once again, poses a challenge.

Although Beaman’s conception of deep equality points, correctly, to the harmful legacy and implications of tolerance policy, it also carries with it presumptions about individual actions. In Beaman’s revealing words, it is the “practices of deep equality”<sup>145</sup> that will aid its successful implementation. Operationalizing deep equality entails a practice, a habituated individual action. Beaman’s deep equality—a formulation presumably intended to contrast with a shallow conception of equality, one which entails only superficial program of non-discrimination—calls for a policy which allows for equal participation. That, for Beaman, equals equality.

However, despite that laudable goal, deep equality still assumes a hierarchy. In this way, even though Beaman anticipates, and defends, her project against charges of naïveté and utopian impulses,<sup>146</sup> it is not optimism that challenges the efficacy of Beaman’s project. After

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<sup>144</sup> Beaman, *Deep Equality in an Era of Religious Diversity*, 180.

<sup>145</sup> Beaman, *Deep Equality in an Era of Religious Diversity*, 157.

<sup>146</sup> Beaman, *Deep Equality in an Era of Religious Diversity*, 185.

all, Beaman is correct in noting that most instances of peaceful coexistence and cooperation go undocumented and therefore unremarked. Rather, it is the assumption that deep equality differs meaningfully from tolerance policy and practice in its emphasis on regulation. Returning to Beaman's previously mentioned question about the extent to which "social institutions [can] reproduce these micro-processes to create models for deep equality,"<sup>147</sup> illustrates some of the pitfalls of this model. The answer to this persistent question appears to be education and community engagement. Learning at the individual level, in this conception, might help scale the "practice" of deep equality to the institutional level. This community-based, bottom-up rather than top-down approach, despite its apparent difference from tolerance policy ultimately relies on the same mechanism for implementing such a management technique: a dependence on individual self-regulation.

#### 4.6 Conclusion

When seen in this light, advocates for religious literacy, although often critical of top-down tolerance policies, still advance similar tolerance policies to those they critique. By focusing on pedagogy as a venue to launch everyday practices of tolerance cultivation, albeit by another name—respect—religious literacy advocates subscribe to a logic comparable to that of Connolly and Beaman. In advocating for cultivating individual respect through the conventions of democratic deliberation as a corrective to top-down policies of toleration, religious literacy advocates call attention to the habits, attitudes, and dispositions entailed

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<sup>147</sup> Beaman, *Deep Equality in an Era of Religious Diversity*, 180.

in such acts of self-regulation. In this way, recent moves to reframe tolerance and toleration highlight the dispositional framework operative in calls for religious literacy.

Although the advocates for new approaches to tolerance do not refer explicitly to the notion of religious literacy, the example of religious literacy helps highlight the central paradox of revised approaches to accommodation and tolerance. Even such promising concepts as Connolly's "agonistic respect" and Beaman's "deep equality" encounter obstacles. At their core, such theories depend on an assumption about autonomy and self-regulation. If tolerance policy is too hierarchical, then, equally, "agonistic respect" and "deep equality" place too great an emphasis on the individual. These reformulations of tolerance and accommodation, in other words, assume that emphasizing the role of the individual somehow dismantles harmful hierarchies. However, self-regulation itself relies on a hierarchical form for its inculcation. Education and trainings, which by their very nature are predicated on hierarchy, provide the necessary mechanisms for developing self-regulation.

Religious literacy, with its demonstrated emphasis on attitudinal formation, highlights the inbuilt paradoxes of the tolerance policy revisionists' theories. Religious literacy's telling emphasis on attitudes suggests that the project aims to transform affective relationships, and not simply transmit information about religions. Habituated respect on matters of religion calls upon the same hierarchies as tolerance policy—only this time the strategy flows horizontally rather than vertically. This approach, arguably more palatable to modern sensibilities, brings with it a similar set of problems. Despite the calls for a more lateral

approach with which to decenter tolerance and accommodation, such strategies still remain management techniques at their core. Although theorists such as Beaman point to the harms of “managing religious diversity” policies, they still call for management: self-management in the form of a cultivated, habituated, self-regulation. The proposed solution, when seen in this light, is not so very different from the problem it seeks to remedy.

Although questions of navigating deep differences within liberal-democratic contexts is by no means specific to concerns of religion, religious literacy discourse, as the examples cited in this chapter demonstrate, provides a useful test-case through which to examine a timely issue. Religious literacy, in line with the critical literature on tolerance and toleration, points to the possible limitations of tolerance as it is currently conceived. The question of what will take tolerance’s place remains open and unanswered in policy and practice. As promising as Connolly’s call for “agonistic respect” and Beaman’s conception of “deep equality” at first appear, those ideas, as theorists such as Bender and Klassen have noted, may ultimately fall short in that they have the capacity, in Connolly’s formulation, to collapse and gloss over real differences and prioritize the demands of a liberal state in ways that reify difference, and place undue emphasis, in the case of Beaman’s formulation, on regulating individual action and behavior in the service of fostering community cohesion. As Bowlin remarks, tolerance, as currently construed, leads to unsatisfying self-regulation and self-censorship when imposed from the top down. His notion of reframing tolerance as a virtue, a habituated action, rather than a prescribed rule of conduct, has relevance for the discussion of religious literacy because it highlights the individual self-perfection and self-

regulation for which so many advocates of religious literacy appear to be calling. In this view, since legal mechanisms are undesirable in daily interactions and negotiations of difference, habits conducive to social cohesion and regulating the terms of disagreement must step in and do the hard work the law cannot.

The idea that religious literacy may provide a mechanism by which to help regulate religious offence features prominently in educational debates. Should religious studies education, often presented in terms of developing competencies in religious literacy, function as a social practice? Although religious literacy advocates such as Dinham and Prothero have critiqued the promotion of tolerance as part of the debate, others have advanced the case for religious literacy's urgency under the assumption that it will help foster enhanced civil discourse. As this chapter has shown, proponents of religious literacy do not speak with a unified voice on questions of tolerance and communicating across difference. Given their varying perspectives, ranging from advocating for eliminating the notion of tolerance entirely to arguing for its refashioning to suit the contemporary contexts, it proves challenging to say that religious literacy discourse advocates for a particular position on tolerance.

However, with that note of caution in mind, current religious literacy debates and perspectives demonstrate an overarching concern with finding new modes of engaging with difference—all of which rely on attitudinal shaping. The citizenship-promotion agenda at the heart of much of religious literacy casts incivility as a root cause of religious insult and

attendant conflict. The response, then, is to address uncivil action before it spills over into wider social instability. What better place to begin this project than in the formative settings of primary and secondary education?

In calling for a reconsideration of mere toleration and invoking the notion of respect as a substitute, religious literacy may amplify some of the issues it aims to resolve. The emphases on individual autonomy, self-regulation, and openness to perspectival difference on the basis of rational debate, demonstrate the liberal-democratic underpinnings of religious literacy's interventions into the tolerance debate. Such a starting point, although perhaps integral to liberal education within public institutions such as state-funded schools, risks depicting religion in instrumental terms. In linking religious literacy education to skills, competencies, and educational outcomes, often framed in terms of behavioral and attitudinal change, certain proponents of religious literacy may cause students to construe religions and religious communities—their own or others'—in terms of democratic compatibility. Justifying additions to the curricula in terms of attitudinal change makes practical sense in a world of measured learning outcomes and enhanced democratic discourse represents a sensible objective, given the stakes. Building competencies and learning about religions, however, represent separate, and not necessarily complementary, goals. This is not to say that the two are mutually exclusive. Rather, however, they are not as mutually reinforcing as proponents of religious literacy often depict them. In an effort to demonstrate religious literacy's democratic compatibility, advocates for this educational position risk conflating, or, at the very least, associating, religious literacy with religions,

broadly construed. In other words, by casting religious literacy as a tool of democracy, proponents may also instrumentalize certain manifestations of religion as potentially “good” for, and conducive to, democracy. A religious literacy educational program reliant on cultivating preferences for adherence to democratic processes has the capacity to present a limited view, which either omits challenging scenarios or, alternatively, which frames difference as a space that must call upon the tools of democratic deliberation for mediation.

Here, shaping attitudes obviates the need to resort to externally imposed regulatory mechanisms. If people receive appropriate training during a formative period, then they might become more likely to engage in prosocial behavior. When this logic is applied to religious literacy, the result is a practice, rather than a policy, of self-regulation. Managing religious insult, as religious literacy examples show, constitutes a top priority of educators and policymakers. Calls for peaceful coexistence and civility, now push back against tolerance policy. However, as this chapter has shown through the example of religious literacy, reframing the debate in terms of respect and equality leads to new challenges in the form of privileging autonomous understandings of the liberal subject. Such a framing assumes too great a capacity for self-regulation and ultimately renders such a project potentially unworkable.

If prosocial behavior and liberal subject formation are the intended goals, is religious literacy the best, and most appropriate, means to that end? Although it remains an open question as to whether learning about religions will lead to modified behavior, advocates

for religious literacy may continue to advance this claim for a variety of practical reasons. Religious literacy advocacy, often as a form of public scholarship, may not be able to escape the impulse to justify its necessity in anything other than utilitarian language. Perhaps unsurprisingly given the budgetary, time, and curricular space constraints that abound, proponents of religious literacy must articulate their call to action in practical, outcomes-oriented terms. Framed as a potential tool in the campaign against a perceived growing incivility, religious literacy might offer a seemingly attractive solution: a toolkit for managing religious offence and equipping people to think of mediating disagreements around religion within the terms of democratic debate. In this way, religious literacy as an illustrative case study shows the ways in which recent attempts to reformulate top-down tolerance policies into more peer-to-peer approaches of habituated respect ultimately takes us back to nearly the same starting place.

## 5 Chapter Five – “Literacy, Not Education”: Religious Literacy in the Workplace

In a 2017 Op-Ed in an industry publication for an online business learning community, Kamran Malik, a partner in Learning and Digital Engagement at Ernst & Young (EY), writes that businesses must focus on religious “literacy, not education.”<sup>1</sup> The simplicity and succinctness of Malik’s recommendation raises a number of issues and questions. Why, as a starting point, should encounter and engagement with religions within workplace contexts steer clear, explicitly, of education? How, moreover, do practitioners understand the notion of religious literacy within professional settings?

According to Malik, “religious literacy is about learning to sensitively approach the diversity of religion and beliefs already at large in the workplace.”<sup>2</sup> Religious literacy, in this vision, aims to cultivate a sensitivity, amenability, and, perhaps above all, tact, towards matters and identities seen as “religious” in workplace contexts. Arguing that religion, already present in workplaces, has received insufficient private sector attention, Malik offers a revealing perspective on religious literacy as an activity that moves past education.

The piece continues:

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<sup>1</sup> Kamran Malik, “Why Religious Literacy Might be the Most Significant Aspect of Your Future Diversity Training,” *Training Industry*, 9 May 2017, <https://trainingindustry.com/articles/performance-management/why-religious-literacy-might-be-the-most-significant-aspect-of-your-future-diversity-training/>.

<sup>2</sup> Malik, “Why Religious Literacy Might be the Most Significant Aspect of Your Future Diversity Training,” *Training Industry*.

A drive toward greater religious inclusion might naturally inspire organizations to consider educating employees about religion, such as briefing them on specific beliefs, festivals or dietary requirements. However, the spectrum of belief and practice is as diverse as the people who hold those beliefs, and organizations must adopt a more nuanced, flexible outlook in approaching matters of faith and religious belief. There is no one-size-fits all. *This is where religious literacy—rather than education—is invaluable.* Organizations need to reach a position where individuals feel their beliefs are respected, so they are comfortable in openly discussing their beliefs and any issues of sensitivity that their employers might need to address.<sup>3</sup>

Malik's assessment highlights a tension at the heart of religious literacy that plays out over the varied literature and training course offerings. Education, in this view, amounts to an unnecessary accumulation of facts, whereas literacy, in contrast, offers an approach or framework for engaging with matters understood as "religious." Unlike education, literacy presents a model for respectful communication about difference. The need for such a fierce distinction, as this chapter will show, is integral, rather than incidental, to understanding religious literacy's recent ascent within the workplace.

Relatedly, a clue for considering the need for a rhetorical separation of education from literacy lies in Malik's remarks about approaching religion sensitively and respectfully. As his above commentary suggests, religious literacy within business contexts also taps into a broader conversation, namely, concerns surrounding diversity and inclusion. Creating diverse and inclusive corporate cultures has risen within the private, and public sectors, as a top priority in hiring, employee retention, and engagement. Not without criticism,

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<sup>3</sup> Malik, "Why Religious Literacy Might be the Most Significant Aspect of Your Future Diversity Training." *Training Industry*. Emphasis added.

including that programs such as unconscious bias training inadvertently amplify the problems they aim to ameliorate,<sup>4</sup> the paired terms diversity and inclusion have entered the realm of corporate policy and practice.

Writing for the *Harvard Business Review*, Karen Brown, a former Global Head of Diversity and Inclusion at various high-profile multinationals, comments that “identity covers,” a phenomenon whereby “employees who differ from their colleagues in religion, gender, sexual orientation, socio-economic background, and generation often hide important parts of themselves at work for fear of negative consequences,”<sup>5</sup> may have a detrimental impact on business performance. Although, in Brown’s estimation, businesses are largely positioned to succeed on the diversity front by attracting increasingly demographically diverse workforces, success on the inclusion front remains elusive.<sup>6</sup> “The key to inclusion,” according to Brown, “is understanding who your employees are.”<sup>7</sup> Understanding individuals—their backgrounds, motivations, and aspirations—has risen as a priority within many organizations’ agendas.

As a corrective to the missing inclusion piece, in recent years, the concept of religious literacy has gained currency in workplace contexts. Aimed at helping workers show what they take to be their authentic selves in places of employment, religious literacy,

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<sup>4</sup> Pilita Clark, “The Big Problem with Unconscious Bias Training,” *The Financial Times*, 21 October 2018, <https://www.ft.com/content/899c3ee0-d37f-11e8-a9f2-7574db66bcd5>.

<sup>5</sup> Karen Brown, “To Retain Employees, Focus on Inclusion—Not Just Diversity,” *Harvard Business Review*, 4 December 2018, <https://hbr.org/2018/12/to-retain-employees-focus-on-inclusion-not-just-diversity>.

<sup>6</sup> Brown, “To Retain Employees, Focus on Inclusion—Not Just Diversity,” *Harvard Business Review*.

<sup>7</sup> Brown, “To Retain Employees, Focus on Inclusion—Not Just Diversity,” *Harvard Business Review*.

increasingly, participates in the conversation about leveraging human capital for organizational aims. The idea of “bringing your whole self to work” has surged in popularity within human resources, leadership studies, and organizational management circles.<sup>8</sup> Religious literacy as a concept has begun participating in this ethos of presenting one’s true self, rather than a carefully curated persona, at work. Construed as an identity characteristic, religion has become the latest, underexplored, and potentially underexploited, facet of individual authenticity at work.

As the above suggests, recent years have witnessed an increasing focus on the role of religion in the workplace and a growing number of consultancies and corporate training programs have come into being in response. Through an analysis of workplace religious literacy case studies, this chapter builds on the previous chapter’s discussion of tolerance to offer an examination of the ways in which religious literacy trainings play out in practice, in sites other than schools.

From non-profits to academic institutions, and from independent consultancies to high-profile businesses in the private sector, several major players have entered the growing workplace religious literacy space. Although this chapter focuses primarily on the illustrative examples of the Ernst & Young and Coexist House collaboration, and the Tanenbaum Center for Interreligious Understanding, other organizations and partnerships such as the Religious

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<sup>8</sup> See: Henna Inam, “Bring Your Whole Self to Work,” *Forbes*, 10 May 2018, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/hennainam/2018/05/10/bring-your-whole-self-to-work/#2b3606046291>; and Mike Robbins, *Bring Your Whole Self to Work: How Vulnerability Unlocks Creativity, Connection, and Performance* (Carlsbad, California: Hay House, 2018).

Freedom & Business Foundation,<sup>9</sup> the Religious Freedom Center of the Freedom Forum Institute<sup>10</sup> and the Boniuk Institute for Religious Tolerance at Rice University<sup>11</sup> have also developed programs for cultivating religious literacy within workplace contexts. Even though these organizations often collaborate, partner, and share resources, each offers a distinctive perspective on religious literacy in the workplace, which this chapter will discuss. Through the two cases discussed in detail, this chapter shows how even seemingly contrasting approaches—one prioritizing skills and the other prioritizing content knowledge—both share similar attitude-shaping aims.

Building on the line of analysis established in the previous chapter and focusing in particular on the role of religious literacy within the professions, the following shows the ways in which religious literacy functions in helping cultivate a particular attitude or disposition towards religion: one that would render recourse to legal mechanisms unnecessary. In particular, this chapter demonstrates how religious literacy participates in fostering a “post-compliance” moment, a time during which attitudinal shaping aims to replace, or at the very least, displace, the need for recourse to top-down policies of tolerance and accommodation. The following case studies, specifically, examine the use of religious literacy as part of corporate diversity and inclusion human resources strategies in order to point to some implications of promoting religious literacy as a social practice. Rather than

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<sup>9</sup> “People & Contacts,” *Religious Freedom & Business Foundation*, Accessed 3 September 2019, <https://religiousfreedomandbusiness.org/people-contacts>.

<sup>10</sup> “Business Leaders,” *Religious Freedom Center of the Freedom Forum Institute*, Accessed 3 September 2019, <https://www.religiousfreedomcenter.org/programs/business-leaders/>.

<sup>11</sup> “About,” *Boniuk Institute for Religious Tolerance, Rice University*, Accessed 1 September 2019, <https://boniuk.rice.edu/about>.

focusing on the well-studied area of caselaw surrounding workplace religious accommodation, this chapter instead centers on religious literacy as an enterprise aimed at promoting good relations among coworkers, maximizing productivity through worker satisfaction, and thereby minimizing the need for recourse to legal mechanisms to settle potential work-related disputes before they arise. To accomplish such aims, the proposed trainings advance a vision of religious literacy as a disposition-cultivating and attitude-shaping endeavor.

## 5.1 Ernst & Young (EY) – Coexist House

Although non-profit organizations and foundations have largely initiated the workplace religious literacy agenda, they are not the only players in the growing conversation. Recently, major for-profit entities have entered the space and invested in religious literacy in significant ways. In one especially notable instance, religious literacy received an influx of cash from Ernst & Young (EY). A member of the so-called big four accounting firms, EY offers assurance, advisory, tax and transaction advisory services.<sup>12</sup> At first glance, such specialties make EY a seemingly unlikely candidate to invest in religious literacy trainings. However, EY corporates decided to underwrite the development of a religious literacy training program and market it to clients as a relationship management and team-building toolkit for diversity and inclusion (D&I) strategy. Co-developed with a London-based non-

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<sup>12</sup> "What We Do: Our Services," *Ernst & Young (EY)*, Accessed 3 September 2019, [https://www.ey.com/en\\_gl/what-we-do](https://www.ey.com/en_gl/what-we-do).

profit, Coexist House, EY launched its religious literacy learning training curriculum, “Religious Literacy for Organisations,” in 2016. This online learning module, with an optional in-person training component, was designed as an “interactive non-faith-based learning experience”<sup>13</sup> for workplaces.

An overview brochure advertising the initiative sheds light on EY-Coexist House’s attitudinal-shaping and skills-building approach. According to the promotional materials, aimed at attracting prospective clients, the religious literacy training promises to help with “giving you and your teams the confidence and knowledge you need to work successfully with the ever more diverse religions and beliefs we all encounter in everyday work and life.”<sup>14</sup> Framing religious literacy as a pragmatic need, the brochure leads with the following question: “How equipped are you and your managers to navigate the increasingly complex religious landscape of your staff, customers, partners, suppliers and the public where your reputation is determined?”<sup>15</sup> In response to this motivating question, EY and Coexist House position their program as an entry into addressing this prompt.

Under the heading, “Why choose the Religious Literacy for Organisations module?,” the brochure lists its learning objectives and rationales for undertaking a religious literacy training program. First, the brochure asserts that “[o]rganisations have not evolved in their

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<sup>13</sup> “Steve Varley,” Religious Freedom & Business Foundation, Accessed 3 September 2019, <https://religiousfreedomandbusiness.org/steve-varley>.

<sup>14</sup> “Religious Literacy for Organisations: Overview,” *EY-Coexist House*, 2017, <https://www.de.ey.com/gl/en/newsroom/news-releases/news-ey-launches-religious-literacy-training-program-for-organizations>.

<sup>15</sup> “Religious Literacy for Organisations: Overview,” *EY-Coexist House*.

treatment of religion and belief in the same way they have for other protected characteristics, such as race, gender and sexual orientation—where we have made significant strides over the last few decades.”<sup>16</sup> This positioning of religious literacy makes it part of an evolving corporate diversity strategy. As the overview document acknowledges, “[g]etting any diversity agenda shaped takes up time and can be difficult. Religion is often seen as somewhere between irrelevant and problematic—a risk to be managed—rather than a key to inclusive diversity practice.”<sup>17</sup> The EY-Coexist House approach, however, calls for companies to leverage the insights of religious literacy to create better diversity policies and practices. In many instances, the brochure explains, “[r]eligion and belief are easy to trivialize as politically correct, or nice but not necessary.”<sup>18</sup> The promotional materials, however, urge businesses to take a proactive approach and frames a lack of religious literacy as a deficit. As the brochure claims, rather than trivializing religion and religious expression in the workplace, companies should consider the benefits of crafting better approaches: “But we know from experience in these other equality areas that workplaces thrive where they are not only diverse but also skillfully welcoming of that diversity. This programme aims to bring religion and belief up to speed with all other D&I [diversity and inclusion] imperatives.”<sup>19</sup> In this view, businesses should harness, rather than ignore, religion in the workplace.

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<sup>16</sup> “Religious Literacy for Organisations: Overview,” *EY-Coexist House*.

<sup>17</sup> “Religious Literacy for Organisations: Overview,” *EY-Coexist House*.

<sup>18</sup> “Religious Literacy for Organisations: Overview,” *EY-Coexist House*.

<sup>19</sup> “Religious Literacy for Organisations: Overview,” *EY-Coexist House*.

Offering their own description of religious literacy for corporate contexts, the creators of the “Religious Literacy for Organisations” program put forward the following rationale:

The concept of religious literacy starts from the observation that there is a lack of understanding about religion and belief in the workplace, while globalisation and migration make for more religious diversity than there ever has been before. Proactively supporting and engaging with religious diversity in the workplace can therefore have a positive impact on business.<sup>20</sup>

Again, religious literacy goes beyond risk management and enters the realm of enhancing competitive business performance. Following from this, the EY-Coexist House training program tries to “[s]upport team cohesion, satisfaction and performance—enabling colleagues to bring their ‘whole selves’ to work,” “[a]ttract and retain key employees, customers, clients and partners,” and “[e]nhance client and stakeholder experience and relations.”<sup>21</sup> The pitch concludes with the promise that religious literacy trainings “can also provide some practical tools and tips to help you engage with your colleagues more easily and start to feel more open about discussing religion at work.”<sup>22</sup> Religious literacy promises to help with employee retention and satisfaction, international markets, and client relations, to name only a few of the enumerated benefits.

The EY-Coexist House’s business case for religious literacy presents only one facet of its strategy and approach. Its application, and understanding, of religious literacy also reveal a crucial dynamic at play in religious literacy: its role as a competency. In a 2018 promotional

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<sup>20</sup> “Religious Literacy for Organisations: Overview,” *EY-Coexist House*.

<sup>21</sup> “Religious Literacy for Organisations: Overview,” *EY-Coexist House*.

<sup>22</sup> “Religious Literacy for Organisations: Overview,” *EY-Coexist House*.

piece about workforce inclusivity at EY, the company outlines its approach to religious literacy clearly:

To build a workplace fit for a more diverse future, organizations must make sure their employees feel that they can openly discuss their beliefs at work and can raise any issues they face in relation to their religion. Getting to that point will take some serious work. But that doesn't mean businesses should bring in more religious education—teaching employees about different faiths, their practices and festivals. Religions are too complex and varied for such an approach to be wholly successful. Instead, organizations should focus their programs on increasing religious literacy—the skills and understanding people need to effectively respond to issues relating to religion and belief, as and when they arise.<sup>23</sup>

Here, in its nuanced portrayal of the concerns and considerations surrounding academic study of religions, EY presents an illuminating distinction between religious education and religious literacy. Religious education, replete with connotations of academic rigor and perhaps some accompanying tediousness, misses the mark for the purposes of the private sector. Religious literacy, positioned as a skill, on the other hand, represents a competency to be mastered. This telling differentiation between religious education (i.e., religious studies) outlines the stakes of the game. Religious literacy, in this conception, should not simply enhance knowledge. Rather, as this passage implies, it should help cultivate a particular attitude and dispositions towards religions. With a corporate audience in mind, religious literacy must downplay any educational components and instead elevate the skills it might enhance.

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<sup>23</sup> "Do You Need to Change Your People or the Way You Work?" *Ernst & Young (EY)*, Accessed 3 September 2019, [https://www.ey.com/en\\_gl/workforce/will-your-people-remain-your-greatest-asset-or-become-your-bigge](https://www.ey.com/en_gl/workforce/will-your-people-remain-your-greatest-asset-or-become-your-bigge).

This distinction—between religious studies as educational and religious literacy as practical—in many ways, characterizes the “Religious Literacy for Organisations” training program that emerged from the EY-Coexist House collaboration. At the event launch in November 2016, Adam Dinham,<sup>24</sup> one of the main academic contributors to the project, gave a presentation outlining the core objectives of the training program. In it, he urged corporations to think strategically about the presence of religion in workplaces and consider the opportunities of religious literacy. With a business audience in mind, Dinham primarily focuses on making the case for religious literacy as part of a comprehensive diversity and inclusion strategy. Citing factors such as increasing globalization and migration, Dinham presents the EY-Coexist House training program as a tool for engaging global markets and diverse workforces.

Although Dinham’s presentation does acknowledge the role of knowledge, citing for example the enhanced understanding of the legal provisions around religion in the workplace that might result from religious literacy trainings, the true emphasis rest on attitudinal change. In his words, “[i]ndifference, hostility, tolerance, respect are all positions which might be in the mix. The training is designed to explore the range of stances which might be taken and how you can locate your own organisation within them. The goal is to work through the assumptions and feelings which can make the conversation difficult, some

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<sup>24</sup> For a fuller discussion of Adam Dinham’s religious literacy projects, see Chapter 1.

of which may be subconscious.”<sup>25</sup> Invoking the theme of unconscious bias, these telling words, with their emphasis on “stances,” “assumption,” and “feelings,” highlight the dispositional quality of religious literacy trainings. Revealingly, Dinham does not rely heavily on the vocabulary of “knowledge,” “education,” or “learning.” Seen as beyond the scope of the program, or possibly as dead ends, such goals recede in the wake of how employers or employees might be trained to “feel” about the presence of religion in the workplace. Prompting self-reflection and self-assessment, this approach to religious literacy deemphasizes the role of content knowledge about specific traditions, communities, or identities.

At the same launch event, moreover, Roger Gifford, an invited high-profile speaker and former Lord Mayor of the City of London, puts it succinctly and frankly. Religious literacy, “is not so much learning about religion, it’s about understanding people better. Understanding your colleagues and your employees better.”<sup>26</sup> This vision places religious literacy squarely within the realm of Emotional Intelligence, measured in terms of Emotional Quotient or EQ, a long-favored term among organizational management and behavioral psychology professionals to describe empathic behavior.<sup>27</sup> The goal of religious literacy, in

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<sup>25</sup> “Religious Literacy for Organisations—Online training programme launched by EY on 8 November 2016,” *Religious Literacy Partnership*, Accessed 12 December 2017, <https://religiousliteracy.org/2015/12/07/corab-recommendations-are-already-underway-2/>.

<sup>26</sup> “Religious Literacy for Organisations—Online training programme launched by EY on 8 November 2016,” *Religious Literacy Partnership*.

<sup>27</sup> For an analysis of the implications of elevating EQ as a private-sector competency and a discussion of leveraging emotional “skills,” see: Megan Boler, *Feeling Power: Emotions and Education* (London: Routledge, 1999), 66-71.

this presentation, is to understand others, thereby possibly cultivating the ability to empathize better with colleagues and clients as a result. In this calculus, higher empathy equates to higher performance, and religious literacy provides a tool for fostering such a workplace competency.

The EY-Coexist House co-developed curriculum highlights religious literacy's function within corporate settings and provides an illustrative example of the ways in which religious literacy might be leveraged within business contexts. When presenting the organization of the "Religious Literacy for Organisations" e-learning module, the brochure subdivides the learning objectives into the sections of "category," "dispositions," "knowledge," and "skills."<sup>28</sup> The summaries of each section offer insights into the course's framing and its creators' views about the role and function of religious literacy within places of business.

In a seemingly surprising turn, given its stated deemphasis of academic religious studies definitions and theory, the module begins with a discussion of the category of religion. In the words of the overview document, the category section of the online training covers "how definitions of religion have broadened and changed."<sup>29</sup> Again, despite the assertions that the course does not rely on a religious studies model, it does leave room for some, albeit abbreviated, academic discussion about the category of religion. Moving along quickly, the promotional materials next list "dispositions" as a core component of the training.

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<sup>28</sup> "Religious Literacy for Organisations: Overview," *EY-Coexist House*, 2017.

<sup>29</sup> "Religious Literacy for Organisations: Overview," *EY-Coexist House*, 2017.

Examining dispositions involves asking “what is your attitude to religion?” and reflecting on the answer.<sup>30</sup> This cultivated self-awareness, evidently, represents a feature of the training. Following dispositions is the knowledge section of the training. Offering an explanation of the materials, the brochure reassures prospective clients that “you can’t know everything but we refer to ‘a degree of general knowledge about at least some religious traditions and beliefs’ and ‘the confidence to find out about others’”<sup>31</sup> In other words, “knowledge” is not content knowledge, conventionally construed. Rather, it is, in many ways, another facet of the disposition-cultivating endeavor at work in this training. Participants, rather than learning unwieldy, and possibly inapplicable, facts about various religious traditions, will instead increase their “confidence” about asking questions and learning more in an effort to foster collegiality.

Finally, the section description ends with a summary of the skills section of the module. According to the promotional materials, skills equals “what to *do* about religion and belief in practice and especially in public and workplaces.”<sup>32</sup> Skills, in this conception, flow from the other topics. It situates religious literacy within the realm of the practical, rather than the theoretical. The skill-based component of the training, according to Adam Dinham, “doesn’t tell you what to do” prescriptively.<sup>33</sup> Rather, the training “shows what sorts of problems have arisen, and how they have been resolved in other situations. That’s designed to help you

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<sup>30</sup> “Religious Literacy for Organisations: Overview,” *EY-Coexist House*, 2017.

<sup>31</sup> “Religious Literacy for Organisations: Overview,” *EY-Coexist House*, 2017.

<sup>32</sup> “Religious Literacy for Organisations: Overview,” *EY-Coexist House*, 2017. Emphasis original.

<sup>33</sup> “Religious Literacy for Organisations—Online training programme launched by EY on 8 November 2016,” *Religious Literacy Partnership*.

think through what's right for your organisation. And the training also highlights practical ways in which this has sometimes been done elsewhere."<sup>34</sup> The skills portion of the training, in this way, frames religious literacy as a competency, and positions trainings, such as the EY-Coexist House partnership program, as the toolkits.

Religious literacy, in sum, provides structure and guidance for comportment, interaction, and interchange. As an illustrative example, the U.K.-based organization, the Religious Literacy Partnership, led by the Coexist House religious literacy team, frames the conversation in instructive ways. According to the organization, whose leaders co-developed the "Religious Literacy for Organisations" program, "Religious Literacy is not a formula but a framework, pointing to key questions and issues to address."<sup>35</sup> Religious literacy, here, provides the support, the scaffolding on which to build effective diversity and inclusion practices. As a result, religious literacy, in this model, must emphasize skills over content. Knowing about someone is not nearly as important as having a respectful attitude towards that person. Put differently, select knowledge, attitudes, and skills work together to reframe the conversation around religion in the workplace as an asset, rather than as a risk. Capitalizing on the recent recognition of the importance of religion in public life, religious literacy, and its resultant workplace training programs, make the case that understanding and engaging with workplace religious diversity has the capacity to create opportunities for companies.

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<sup>34</sup> "Religious Literacy for Organisations—Online training programme launched by EY on 8 November 2016," *Religious Literacy Partnership*.

<sup>35</sup> "Home," *Religious Literacy Partnership*, Accessed 12 December 2017, <https://religiousliteracy.org>.

## 5.2 The Tanenbaum Center for Interreligious Understanding

The Tanenbaum Center for Interreligious Understanding's small office space in lower Manhattan belies the non-profit organization's broad reach. With major corporate clients such as Accenture, Dell, IBM, PricewaterhouseCoopers, Toyota, and Shell Oil Company, Tanenbaum offers services to some of the most recognizable businesses in the private sector.<sup>36</sup>

Forming part of a broader organizational mission to combat religious prejudice, Tanenbaum's approach aims to tackle "religious bias in the workplace" through online resources, individual consultations, and customized in-person trainings.<sup>37</sup> Founded in 1992 with the vision to help create "a safe world in which religious differences are respected and daily life reflects the highest values of our shared religious and ethical traditions," Tanenbaum aims, "[t]hrough practical programs," "to change institutional and individual behaviors."<sup>38</sup> Tanenbaum's history and organizational mission to combat religious prejudice informs its approach to current programs such as its "Religion at Work" religious literacy initiative.

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<sup>36</sup> "Workplace Clients," *The Tanenbaum Center for Interreligious Understanding*, Accessed 3 September 2019, <https://tanenbaum.org/programs/workplace/clients/>.

<sup>37</sup> "Workplace," *The Tanenbaum Center for Interreligious Understanding*, Accessed 3 September 2019, <https://tanenbaum.org/programs/workplace/>.

<sup>38</sup> "Tanenbaum's History," *The Tanenbaum Center for Interreligious Understanding*, Accessed 3 September 2019, <https://tanenbaum.org/about-us/history/>.

With the goal of identifying and addressing workplace bias, Tanenbaum has compiled a workplace “Bias Danger Signs” tip sheet for employers to take stock of their organizational environment. The warning signs include implicit or explicit restrictions around “attire,” “devotion,” “diet,” “holidays,” “icons,” “networks,” “prayer,” “scheduling,” and “socializing.”<sup>39</sup> Moreover, the list also mentions “ridicule” as an obvious danger sign.<sup>40</sup> Challenges ranging from employees being “barred or discouraged from wearing facial hair, certain hairstyles, or garb” to “[e]mployees encountering difficulty when requesting time off to pray, meditate, or reflect during the workday,” according to Tanenbaum, should put an employer on notice that trouble may be afoot. From clear indications of bias such as open mockery to more subtle forms such as labeling employees “as anti-social when they don’t attend company-sponsored parties for religious reasons,”<sup>41</sup> bias danger signs, in Tanenbaum’s parlance, have the capacity to crop up in unexpected places and employers must become hyper-vigilant in response.

Equipped with a list of potential challenges, Tanenbaum encourages employers to become proactive about addressing the abovementioned signs of bias. Tellingly, and invoking tolerance discourse, Tanenbaum advances what it terms the “Accommodationist Mindset” to approaching religion within the workplace.<sup>42</sup> Such a mindset, according to Tanenbaum,

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<sup>39</sup> “10 Bias Danger Signs,” *The Tanenbaum Center for Interreligious Understanding*, 2016, <https://tanenbaum.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/10-Bias-Danger-Signs-Definitions.pdf>.

<sup>40</sup> “10 Bias Danger Signs,” *The Tanenbaum Center for Interreligious Understanding*.

<sup>41</sup> “10 Bias Danger Signs,” *The Tanenbaum Center for Interreligious Understanding*.

<sup>42</sup> “Eight Steps to the Accommodationist Mindset,” *The Tanenbaum Center for Interreligious Understanding*, Accessed 3 September 2019, <https://tanenbaum.org/programs/workplace/workplace-resources/eight-steps-to-the-accommodation-mindset/>.

is a starting point in shifting your attitude towards diversity initiatives. Managers who have a more complete understanding of the benefits that come from diversity initiatives can begin to approach the incidents and conflicts that arise in their diverse employee populations as opportunities to create a more comfortable work environment for your employees. Starting with a positive attitude opens the door to move beyond accommodating your workforce, and can help companies and individuals get ahead of the curve.<sup>43</sup>

Advocating for an attitudinal shift at multiple levels of corporate management, Tanenbaum enumerates multiple steps towards achieving said mindset. Steps include imperative statements such as “recognize all employee needs,” “ask respectful questions,” and “educate.”<sup>44</sup> Recognizing employee needs, for example, entails an awareness of identified workplace bias and discrimination. Asking respectful questions constitutes a fact-finding mission to eliminate unhelpful guesswork in which employers initiate a dialogue by asking “respectful questions to find out more about the employee’s practice, belief, and an accommodation solution that will not cause the employer an undue hardship and will provide the employee with the accommodation they require.”<sup>45</sup> Such steps aim to help employers identify the ways in which they might not be accommodating the needs of a diverse workforce.

The education piece features prominently in Tanenbaum’s workplace strategy and this is where religious literacy comes heavily into play. According to the organization’s website, “[t]ensions often arise around religious difference due to a lack of information or the

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<sup>43</sup> “Eight Steps to the Accommodationist Mindset,” *The Tanenbaum Center for Interreligious Understanding*.

<sup>44</sup> “Eight Steps to the Accommodationist Mindset,” *The Tanenbaum Center for Interreligious Understanding*.

<sup>45</sup> “Eight Steps to the Accommodationist Mindset,” *The Tanenbaum Center for Interreligious Understanding*.

presence of misinformation. Be prepared. Provide employees with resources that can give them more information about each other's religions. Americans don't know much about others' religions."<sup>46</sup> Invoking the idea that a lack of information leads to a lack of respect, Tanenbaum advocates for religious literacy as a natural corrective. Content knowledge, as a result, represents a core component of Tanenbaum's approach to workplace religious diversity. Information combats the incivility that results from ignorance.

As an example of this method, Tanenbaum has created distributable resource sheets on world religions. These handouts list major world religions and include demographic data, along with short summaries of practices and beliefs. Similar to Prothero's "Dictionary of Religious Literacy,"<sup>47</sup> Tanenbaum's resource sheets provide short, simple, and accessible summaries of religions, ranging from Christianity to Zoroastrianism. The texts even provide cursory summaries of demographically smaller groups such as Wicca, Neo-paganism, and folk religions.<sup>48</sup> As a companion document to the world religions fact sheet, Tanenbaum has compiled a list of accompanying discussion questions. Although this resource is located in the educational handouts for school classrooms, it also relates to the religion and workplace initiative. Questions such as "Do you think it is important to be aware of various world religions?" and "How could knowledge of different religions enhance our interactions with

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<sup>46</sup> "Eight Steps to the Accommodationist Mindset," *The Tanenbaum Center for Interreligious Understanding*.

<sup>47</sup> See: Stephen Prothero, *Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know—And Doesn't* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2007), 185-292.

<sup>48</sup> "World Religions Resource Sheet," *The Tanenbaum Center for Interreligious Understanding*, 2016, <https://tanenbaum.org/combat-extremism/>.

people from diverse backgrounds?" all flow from the world religions handout.<sup>49</sup> Even though such discussion questions likely have greater salience for Tanenbaum's educational initiatives, rather than its corporate resources, such discussion questions highlight Tanenbaum's educational approach to exploring religious traditions.

Perhaps the best illustration of Tanenbaum's approach is its "December Dilemma" fact sheet. In Tanenbaum's words, the "December Dilemma is that time of year where multiple holidays collide and people with good intentions can find themselves in the middle of potentially toxic misunderstandings."<sup>50</sup> To preempt such misunderstandings, and potentially resultant conflicts, the "December Dilemma" fact sheet enumerates multiple holidays and observances that take place in the month of December. From Diwali to Kwanzaa, the fact sheet gives short summaries of holidays in an effort to prepare and inform employers. The fact sheet includes a "December Dilemma Checklist" aimed at fostering inclusion and preventing conflict. The checklist enjoins companies to "review your policies," "be curious and ask respectful questions," "avoid scheduling mishaps," be aware of "dietary needs," "learn new phrases" in an effort to "[h]onor differences with *appropriate greetings for your co-workers*," and, above all, to "celebrate inclusion."<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> "World Religions: Questions for Consideration," *The Tanenbaum Center for Interreligious Understanding*, 2015, [https://tanenbaum.org/programs/education/curricula\\_for\\_educators/](https://tanenbaum.org/programs/education/curricula_for_educators/).

<sup>50</sup> "The December Dilemma Fact Sheet," *The Tanenbaum Center for Interreligious Understanding*, 2018, <https://tanenbaum.org/programs/workplace/workplace-resources/>.

<sup>51</sup> "The December Dilemma Fact Sheet," *The Tanenbaum Center for Interreligious Understanding*. Emphasis original.

Celebrating inclusion, in Tanenbaum's formulation, involves contextualizing religious displays or moving towards nonsectarian, and thereby away from potentially distancing sectarian, language. This move towards fostering inclusivity entails, in Tanenbaum's vision, "re-evaluating any long-standing traditions."<sup>52</sup> The tips sheet offers practical advice around fostering an unintentionally exclusionary environment through traditions such as "Secret Santa" gift exchange practices.<sup>53</sup> Rather, Tanenbaum suggests renaming the office gift-giving to "grab bag" to avoid alienating employees.<sup>54</sup> In addition, Tanenbaum advises employers who are unwilling to remove religious displays or traditions from company practice to take a step towards contextualization and education to circumvent possible challenges. For example, the fact sheet states that "if your office chooses to put up holiday decorations, accompany those decorations with appropriate educational materials that address the significance of the holiday."<sup>55</sup> Here, content knowledge in the form of educational materials acts as a safeguard against potential misunderstanding—contextualization in the service of preventing conflict.

Perhaps most revealing of Tanenbaum's approach is its "Respectful Communication" tip sheet. This educational resource puts forward strategies for successful interactions within the workplace around issues of religion. Under headings such as "avoid assumptions," "avoid spokesperson syndrome," "be curious and ask respectfully," "listen actively," "debunk stereotypes," "address behavior, not beliefs," "encourage learning," and

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<sup>52</sup> "The December Dilemma Fact Sheet," *The Tanenbaum Center for Interreligious Understanding*.

<sup>53</sup> "The December Dilemma Fact Sheet," *The Tanenbaum Center for Interreligious Understanding*.

<sup>54</sup> "The December Dilemma Fact Sheet," *The Tanenbaum Center for Interreligious Understanding*.

<sup>55</sup> "The December Dilemma Fact Sheet," *The Tanenbaum Center for Interreligious Understanding*.

“acknowledge and apologize for mistakes,” the “Respectful Communication” tip sheet dispenses simple, clear-cut advice for creating inclusive workplaces.<sup>56</sup>

Tanenbaum’s approach, at first, appears to offer a strong contrast to that of the EY-Coexist House partnership in its emphasis on facts and figures about religions. Although Tanenbaum’s explicit focus rests on content knowledge, as exemplified by the emphasis on fact sheets and guidance about facing the so-called December Dilemma, ultimately even such a knowledge-focused endeavor aims to cultivate a particular set of dispositions surrounding religion within the workplace. The prescriptive statement, “address behavior, not belief,”<sup>57</sup> found in the “Respectful Communication” tip sheet, encapsulates Tanenbaum’s approach to religion within the workplace. As the tip sheet states, “All individuals are free to *believe* whatever it is they believe. However, it’s critical that all employees *behave* respectfully towards one another in the workplace.”<sup>58</sup> Such language creates a significant distinction between belief and behavior. With an explicit emphasis on self-regulation, this clear recommendation, in particular, calls for individuals to behave in specific ways.

In this way, religious literacy, even when focused on content knowledge, participates in this behavior-shaping endeavor. Content knowledge, such as awareness of the basics of major world faiths, underpins this conception of religious literacy by preventing causing offense

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<sup>56</sup> “Respectful Communication,” *The Tanenbaum Center for Interreligious Understanding*, 2016, <https://tanenbaum.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/Respectful-Communication.pdf>.

<sup>57</sup> “Respectful Communication,” *The Tanenbaum Center for Interreligious Understanding*.

<sup>58</sup> “Respectful Communication,” *The Tanenbaum Center for Interreligious Understanding*. Emphasis original.

or behaving insensitively out of ignorance. Once again, although Tanenbaum emphasizes content knowledge about specific religious traditions, identities, and practices in the service of fostering inclusive workplaces, its resources and recommendations aim to cultivate particular attitudes and dispositions in the service of reshaping how feelings circulate through groups by changing office culture and traditions. Such a focus highlights a key theme of workplace religious literacy—the disposition-cultivating aspect of such trainings.

### **5.3 The “Post-Compliance” Moment**

Taken together, the approaches to workplace religious literacy discussed in this chapter gesture towards a wider goal: minimizing recourse to legal mechanisms for conflict resolution. In aiming to bring about a desired “post-compliance” moment, religious literacy trainings participate in initiating this change. For EY-Coexist House, this strategy entails building competencies to help employers and employees to understand one another’s religious commitments and identities before conflicts arise. For Tanenbaum, contextualized content knowledge in the service of promoting congenial work environments helps employers and employees avoid misunderstandings or worse.

Given the ample caselaw resulting from examples of discrimination or harassment along the lines of religion, this move represents an understandable strategy for shifting the conversation away from legal compliance and towards emotional management. Egregious examples of discrimination, and the resulting burdensome legal compliance, often color the

conversation about religion within workplaces. Such well documented instance of harassment or discrimination—past and present—cast religion as a challenge to be managed, contained, and possibly curtailed.

Legal compliance and protections vary from country to country and case law from both sides of the Atlantic suggest inconsistencies and complexities surrounding legal protections and anti-discrimination laws and their enforcement. Frequently focused on dress codes, religious symbols, observances, the ample caselaw around religion in the workplace shows a workplace landscape filled with potential pitfalls and violations. To mitigate possible instances of harassment, bias, and outright discrimination, various, and well-studied, legal mechanisms have come into being in response to such persistent challenges. Within the United States, for example, “Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 prohibits discrimination in employment based on race, color, national origin, sex, and religion.”<sup>59</sup> Appointed by Congress to oversee the Title VII claims, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) helps manage violations as they arise.<sup>60</sup>

Similarly, the U.K. bases its workplaces religious protections on a particular set of laws. The Equality Act of 2010, in many ways modeled after the language of the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR), codified previous legislation to ensure protections for religion at work.<sup>61</sup> Far-reaching in its scope, the protections of “religion and belief” afforded by the

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<sup>59</sup> Raymond Gregory, *Encountering Religion in the Workplace* (Ithaca, New York: ILR Press, 2011), 3.

<sup>60</sup> Gregory, *Encountering Religion in the Workplace*, 3-4.

<sup>61</sup> Lucy Vickers, *Religious Freedom, Religious Discrimination and the Workplace*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Oxford: Hart Publishing, 2016), 1.

Equality Act of 2010 apply to “all employers, religious or secular, and to the public as well as the private sector.”<sup>62</sup> Additionally, the Equality Act of 2010 extends to “partnerships, barristers, office-holders, agency workers and other categories of workers not always protected by employment-related legislation.”<sup>63</sup> Such expansive, but often poorly understood, protections aim to help employers and employees navigate fraught territory.

Understandably wary, employers on both sides of the Atlantic avoid topics of religion and take pains to steer clear of possible litigation. As Adam Dinham of the EY-Coexist House collaboration summarizes, “[a] number of legal cases have drawn attention to religion as problematic and difficult.”<sup>64</sup> Against this background, religious literacy intervenes. Religious literacy, here, presents a strategy that transcends mere risk management. In Dinham’s words:

Religious Literacy says it’s important to take these risks seriously. But there are opportunities too—internal to your organisation, about bringing the whole person to work, and nurturing diverse but cohesive teams...And external too, in sensitive relationship management wherever you’re doing business.<sup>65</sup>

Companies, by this logic, all too often recognize a problem only after the situation has resulted in litigation. Trainings and consultations—such as those offered by the EY-Coexist House and the Tanenbaum Center—aim to reframe the conversation and thereby potentially obviate the need for recourse to legal mechanisms.

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<sup>62</sup> Vickers, *Religious Freedom, Religious Discrimination and the Workplace*, 161.

<sup>63</sup> Vickers, *Religious Freedom, Religious Discrimination and the Workplace*, 161.

<sup>64</sup> “Religious Literacy for Organisations—Online training programme launched by EY on 8 November 2016,” *Religious Literacy Partnership*.

<sup>65</sup> “Religious Literacy for Organisations—Online training programme launched by EY on 8 November 2016,” *Religious Literacy Partnership*.

Getting to the heart of the matter, Dinham, in an earlier mentioned speech given at the launch of EY's "Religious Literacy for Organisations" program, discusses the limits of the law. Making the case for religious literacy, he describes the challenges of mere legal compliance within the workplace:

Legal compliance is a given, and our training helps. But it isn't a legal training. It goes broader because, on its own, law hasn't been especially helpful in enabling work places to know what to do on religion and belief. In fact there is evidence of the opposite because every case turns on its own complex facts, and none necessarily points to the solution for next time.<sup>66</sup>

He continues:

There is also evidence that if you leave it only to law, you get a turn to rights and away from conversation—exactly the sort of workplace that can be unpleasant to work in and prone to ill-feeling. The risk is also trivialising religion and belief. We've long realised that gender diversity isn't about introducing women's toilets! Likewise, religious literacy is not about veils and pork-free microwaves. When difficulties arise, these are often symptoms, not causes, of deeper deficits in designing workplaces which make sense for people from all kinds of backgrounds and in which they can feel included and valued—part of the team...So we're talking about shifting from superficial tolerance to deep respect.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> "Religious Literacy for Organisations—Online training programme launched by EY on 8 November 2016," *Religious Literacy Partnership*.

<sup>67</sup> "Religious Literacy for Organisations—Online training programme launched by EY on 8 November 2016," *Religious Literacy Partnership*.

In other words, in Dinham's interpretation, religious literacy must move beyond the superficialities of accommodation. Having a holiday "grab bag," rather than a "secret Santa," in, say, Tanenbaum's example, represents a possible trivialization of religion in workplace contexts. Reminiscent of the debate around tolerance and its limitations as a form of mere accommodation, a begrudging acknowledgement of disagreeable differences, Dinham's call to religious literacy advocates for what he describes as "deep respect."

Following Dinham and speaking at the same EY-Coexist House launch event, Roger Gifford summarizes this view succinctly. Religious literacy, to him, is "about engendering respect rather than mere tolerance and about promoting engagement rather than disdain."<sup>68</sup> The key, here, lies in the distinction between laws and norms, and, tellingly, the elevation of the latter.<sup>69</sup> Put differently, although religious literacy participates in the legal conversation around legal protections, anti-harassment and anti-discrimination policy, and reasonable accommodations, it endeavors to go a step further and initiate a change in the norms surrounding the treatment of religion within the workplace. Recourse to legal mechanisms brings with it, as many religious literacy trainings will note, costly lawsuits, losses in productivity, and general employee ill-will. Changing norms, however, represents a less costly, more productive, option that can encourage employers to set more inclusive standards before any litigation occurs.

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<sup>68</sup> "Religious Literacy for Organisations—Online training programme launched by EY on 8 November 2016," *Religious Literacy Partnership*.

<sup>69</sup> Thank you to Benjamin Marcus of the *Religious Freedom Center* of the *Freedom Forum Institute* for discussing this helpful distinction.

Put cynically, religious literacy, in certain instances, markets itself as a litigation-prevention strategy, yet another component to an ever-growing arsenal of risk management tools for beleaguered corporate legal and human resources departments. Put more charitably, religious literacy, when framed as an opportunity, an asset even, becomes a strategy for capitalizing on already-present religious diversity. Avoiding obvious, or perhaps not so obvious, flashpoints in all likelihoods represents a sound approach for companies seeking to avoid internal discord. However, taking risk management thinking a step further and casting religious literacy as a tool of employee and company engagement reframes the discussion. Internally, as a component of employee retention and engagement, and externally, as a metric of global competitiveness, religious literacy, positioned as a tool, helps businesses avoid costly litigation and gain a competitive edge.

#### **5.4 Conclusion**

The business case for religious literacy, then, rests on attitudinal shift and avoiding missteps or worse. In other words, religious literacy, positioned in this way, is not simply about risk management, but rather about value creation, to use private-sector parlance. In the words of the Religious Freedom Center, a frequent collaborator with the Tanenbaum Center, religious literacy training teaches seminar participants to see “the value that religious liberty, religious diversity, and religious inclusion play in business strategy, corporate policy and

economic growth.”<sup>70</sup> “Value,” in this understanding, invokes the term’s social and monetary valence. Learning to identify the value of religion—both social and monetary—casts religion as a workplace asset. As such an example illustrates, religious literacy, to gain traction in corporate circles, must participate in the conversation around value creation and growth.

The Religious Freedom Center, for example, makes a straightforward business case for religious literacy. As the website puts it, religious literacy promises to help with global competitiveness:

Demographers project that the world’s religiously affiliated population will outgrow the religious unaffiliated population by a fact of 23-1. This means that religion will be increasingly important for employees and potential customers in the global marketplace. How is your company positioning itself for success?<sup>71</sup>

Such a call to action shows the business case for religious literacy. Claims of religion’s prevalence and endurance set the stage of an untapped area of future investment. Hesitate and miss an opportunity, the promotional materials warn.

To include the topic of religion in workplace trainings, employers must assess the value added from such endeavors. For that reason, making the business case for religious literacy inevitably conforms to expectations of profitability, productivity, and enhanced future value.

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<sup>70</sup> “Business Leaders,” *Religious Freedom Center of the Freedom Forum Institute*, Accessed 3 September 2019, <https://www.religiousfreedomcenter.org/programs/business-leaders/>.

<sup>71</sup> “Executive Seminars & Training,” *Religious Freedom Center of the Freedom Forum Institute*, Accessed 3 September 2019, <https://www.religiousfreedomcenter.org/programs/business-leaders/executive-seminars-training/>.

However, there is, of course, a difference between a hook, designed deliberately to capture attention and bring people in the door, and the reality on the ground.<sup>72</sup> In other words, merely stating that religious literacy would constitute a social good would likely prove insufficient for attracting corporate clients. Likewise, avoiding discrimination and harassment, although important from a legal and practical standpoint, might seem like yet another box to check on an already-long list of obligatory trainings aimed at minimizing risk.

Increased religious literacy, to gain traction within the private sector, therefore must come across as adding value, rather than simply minimizing risk, for an organization. Bringing religious literacy to the private sector necessitates a business case, a clear rationale to justify its inclusion. Why, in other words, should managers and members of the C-suite invest time and resources in religious literacy, when so many other demands compete for attention? Proponents of religious literacy, for this reason, must present their cause in often-reductive economic, human capital terms. Framing religious literacy as an educational project might, justifiably, prove insufficient for motivating companies to invest in yet another time- and resource-consuming training. Framed as a competency, however, and religious literacy becomes a tool with which to give a company a competitive edge in an increasingly global market. These realities—the constraints of time, money, and other resources—inevitably shape and reconfigure the dialogue around religious literacy in instrumentalizing terms.

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<sup>72</sup> Thank you to Benjamin Marcus of the *Religious Freedom Center* of the *Freedom Forum Institute* for discussing this helpful distinction.

This discussion, however, does not aim to find fault with workplace religious literacy, or its advocates, *tout court* for presenting a commodified packaging of religious studies to advance organizational aims. Nor should it suggest that a link with profit-driven activities somehow sullies the purported purity religious studies as an educational activity. For starters, religious literacy within the workplace has the commendable aims of protecting against discrimination, making employers and employees aware of barriers to places of “soft power,”<sup>73</sup> and creating an overall more congenial work environment, to name only a few of its stated goals. It would miss the mark to challenge such goals as inherently unworthy or undesirable ends.

Rather, the religious literacy workplace case studies examined here, show the implications of putting religious literacy forward as a social practice. The EY-Coexist House partnership, as noted previously, focuses on skills for employers and employees, but does so from the perspective of moving beyond the mere superficialities of accommodation. This approach has the clear benefit of being explicit about its aims: providing a framework for good relations among coworkers. Tanenbaum’s focus on information about religious traditions and corresponding actions such as appropriate greetings and attention to time off from work for religious observances all make sense in the effort to make workplaces more congenial,

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<sup>73</sup> Thank you to Zahra Jamal of the *Boniuk Institute for Religious Tolerance* at Rice University for raising this point.

and as a result, more productive. Such an approach has the merit of focusing on information and practical guidance that flows from knowledge about certain traditions.

However, the program's similarities eclipse their differences in that both—whether explicitly or not—focus on leveraging religion, or in some cases knowledge about religions, to modify employer and employee behavior. Even though the approaches vary in the degree to which each program either prioritizes or deemphasizes content knowledge in favor of skills-building, each workplace case study highlights a different facet of religious literacy as a disposition-cultivating endeavor.

In many ways, then, the workplace religious literacy case studies highlight a different facet of the policy conversation: a need for legitimation. In other words, such instantiations of religious literacy point to a broader need, and desire, for justifying religion's inclusion in private-sector priorities and beyond. Religious literacy, in this way, taps into a broader discourse around public engagement with religion and applied religious studies, asking to what extent can, and should, knowledge and skills about religion be leveraged to advance a prosocial agenda?

Returning, then, to the opening opposition of education versus literacy, religious literacy, by its own admission, is not simply—or, in many cases, not at all—about education within workplace contexts. If religious literacy were just about learning about others or acquiring new skills, then education might be the primary goal. The elevation of literacy over

education, and the implied distinction between the two, suggests that religious literacy constitutes a disposition-cultivating, attitude-shaping form of training. Locating religious literacy within the diversity and inclusion conversation shows the instrumentalized nature of religious literacy as part of the liberal project of tolerance, now recoded as respect. Examining the way in which religious literacy gets deployed within workplace contexts shows how such starting points have the capacity to set the terms of engagement.

## 6 Chapter Six – “Labels Can Be a Barrier”: Religious Literacy and the Question of Category

In 2017, the BBC commissioned a review of its public programming on religion. After taking stock of its varied content—ranging from the longstanding Radio 4 *Beyond Belief* program to a popular drama about an intergenerational Punjabi Sikh family’s experience of modern Britain—the BBC arrived at a seemingly contradictory conclusion: going forward, the BBC would need to enhance its expertise on religion in response to popular demand and, at the same time, possibly do away with the term “religion” entirely. Above all, the BBC concluded, public programming must reconsider the term religion itself for the purposes of public consumption and access. According to the resulting report, audience research yielded a key finding: “The term ‘religion’ isn’t engaging to the broader audience—it features low down on areas of consumption/appeal/news/ interest and can have negative connotations/prove a barrier.”<sup>1</sup> This discovery prompted a critical reconsideration of the category of religion at the BBC. In an attempt to appeal to a wider audience and to stay relevant, new content would have to reflect the concerns of the present. As part of a broader campaign to “[h]elp people develop their religious literacy,”<sup>2</sup> the BBC vowed to “[r]aise [its] game across all output”<sup>3</sup> in its coverage of religion.

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<sup>1</sup> “BBC Religion & Ethics Review,” *British Broadcasting Company* (December 2017): 33, [http://downloads.bbc.co.uk/aboutthebbc/insidethebbc/howwework/reports/pdf/religion\\_and\\_ethics\\_review.pdf](http://downloads.bbc.co.uk/aboutthebbc/insidethebbc/howwework/reports/pdf/religion_and_ethics_review.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> “BBC Religion & Ethics Review,” 17.

<sup>3</sup> “BBC Religion & Ethics Review,” 6.

Under the telling headline “Labels can be a barrier,” the report goes on to assert that “[a]s a programme category, ‘religion’ can restrict the potential audience—particularly for those without faith.”<sup>4</sup> Concerned that the term religion would be distancing for religiously unaffiliated audiences, the BBC now seeks to expand and reframe its coverage. The issue of remaining relevant, especially with younger audiences, represents a pressing concern for the popular media. Similarly, the BBC also found the terms “philosophy” and “ethics” off-putting to its audiences, with respondents viewing such categories as “academic and inaccessible, appealing only to the most cerebral.”<sup>5</sup> Seen as obsolete, obscurantist, exclusivist, and elitist, such terms, according to the report, were deemed out of step with modern, pluralist, egalitarian sensibilities. Paradoxically, however, despite such reservations about terminology, respondents did not advocate for a dramatic overhauling of BBC content. Audiences, in other words, wanted to continue the conversation about topics which previously fell under the rubric of “religion,” but did not want this content labeled strictly as such.

Bracketing off the question of how the BBC perceives its stakeholders’ and audience members’ intellectual capabilities and academic capacities, the report, at a minimum, shows the concern with selecting appropriate and appealing categories with which to engage audiences. Although the BBC has yet to propose alternatives to the categories of “religion,” “philosophy,” or “ethics,” critical reconsideration of such terms highlights the

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<sup>4</sup> “BBC Religion & Ethics Review,” 34.

<sup>5</sup> “BBC Religion & Ethics Review,” 36.

practical need to address challenges that might arise. Such a move also aims to anticipate audiences' content preferences and points to possible perceptions of the term religion as somehow exclusionary, elitist, and distancing. Rather than doing away with the content previously designated as "religious" entirely, the report's findings pointed towards a rebranding strategy, reframing content to prioritize personal narratives that impact people's lives directly and to showcase a diversity of perspectives within British public life.<sup>6</sup>

Despite the inevitable handwringing that often accompanies attempts to define religion within the academy and beyond, the definitional question still looms large in public discourse. As the recent BBC example illustrates, at the level of policy and public access, definitions and categories are, for better or worse, inescapable. Regardless of whether or not the BBC's recent report represents a bellwether of change to come, the BBC's assessment of the need for critical reconsiderations of the category of religion signals the continued relevance of definitions of religion and helps outline the stakes of the upsurge in recent policy proposals on religious literacy.

More importantly, the BBC assessment points to a broader paradox in which religion, as a subject of public interest, is at once desired and disdained. That the BBC's respondents wanted more varied and relevant content on themes of what had been previously designated as "religion" but did not want the new programs to be labelled as "religion" shows a change in public perceptions. Such a contradiction signals a shift in public understandings of

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<sup>6</sup> "BBC Religion & Ethics Review," 16.

religion as something that, on the one hand, still engages public imaginations, and, on the other, cries out for possible terminological updating to keep pace with the times.

How, the report appears to ask, does religion need to be packaged, framed, and presented in order to appeal to current sensibilities and interests? Among the top findings of the report was the need to identify “[m]ore inclusive language” which would help “shift the language towards more mainstream appeal.”<sup>7</sup> As a scholar of nonreligion Lois Lee emphasizes, widening participation and expanding the ethic of inclusion present real concerns for education and public discussion of religion.<sup>8</sup> With the apparent rise in religiously unaffiliated populations comes the question of inclusivity. Relatedly, concerns about appealing to a younger generation (those under age 45) feature prominently in the BBC report. As a result, efforts to include programming for religiously unaffiliated audiences show a recognition of the demographic rise of the so-called nones.

Against this dynamic background, recent years have witnessed a rise in scholarship which interrogates the category of religion, calling into question fundamental assumptions about the status, efficacy, and power configurations accompanying the deployment of religion as an analytic term. Such theories, often termed “critical religion,” aim to highlight the limitations and blurred boundaries of religion and religions. The proponents of critical reconsiderations of the term religion point frequently to the tyranny of typologies, the

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<sup>7</sup> “BBC Religion & Ethics Review,” 13.

<sup>8</sup> Lois Lee, “Nonreligion and the State,” opening lecture, Eurel “Formatting Nonreligion in Late-Modern Society—Legal and Institutional Perspectives” conference, University of Oslo, 26 September 2018.

inherent challenges of using the term “religion” as part of a classificatory project. Highlighting, moreover, the potential for problems to arise from the religious-secular binary, scholarship on critical religion points to the consequences of often-unreflexive uses of the “secular” as religion’s apparent foil. These critiques, in addition to pointing to the instability of the category of religion, have also underscored the term’s tendency to elevate Christian, often specifically Protestant, belief-based understandings of religion in colonial, juridical, and liberal-democratic contexts.

At the same time, a growing awareness of rising religiously unaffiliated populations has prompted a scholarly examination of the “nones,” respondents who claim to have no organized religious affiliation. In light of recent empirical studies, scholarship on nonreligion has attempted to map the contours of nonreligious populations and to develop new vocabularies and theories for understanding the changing landscape of the present. With vocal atheistic groups receiving an outsize amount of attention and notoriety, scholarship has attempted in recent years to widen its academic lens to include less visible unbelieving and unaffiliating people, asking to what extent, if any, these unaffiliated populations share characteristics, identities, and conventions. Such scholarship calls us to look away from the intellectual, noisy anti-religious interventions, such as the New Atheists, because organized groups of that kind are not representative of the full story. Rather,

scholarship in nonreligion instead calls for a refocusing on the less visible, every day, ordinary engagements with nonreligion.<sup>9</sup>

At its core, this chapter, by way of rounding out the analysis of this thesis, returns to a key motivating question of this study: what types of understanding of religion does the current policy conversation on religious literacy configure? Connecting the critical insights of theorists about the constructed category of religion to recent work on mapping the contours of nonreligious populations, this chapter takes up Christopher Cotter's recent call<sup>10</sup> to bridge the gap between the two areas of study by examining the ways in which religion and nonreligion as concepts are treated in religious literacy proposals. This chapter suggests that defining what constitutes religion, in this instance, is not simply an ontological project aimed at discovering the "nature" of religion. Rather, since religious literacy is by definition rooted in the practical and the practicable, examining what gets included and what gets left off the table has consequences for the presentation of religion in such initiatives. Arguing that the problem and implications of defining religion and, correspondingly, of delineating nonreligion have not been faced fully in policy proposals, this chapter shows that religious literacy programs provide a site from which to question the ethic of inclusion in the growing discussion around interacting with and engaging increasingly self-identified nonreligious

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<sup>9</sup> The "Understanding Unbelief Programme" based at the University of Kent forms the vanguard of this approach. Under the direction of Lois Lee and Jonathan Lanman, the John Templeton Foundation-funded, multimillion-pound project aims to advance social scientific understandings of religiously unaffiliated populations across the globe. To this end, the project hosts a variety of conferences and public programs, and also funds research on related themes. For additional information about the project, see: <https://research.kent.ac.uk/understandingunbelief/>.

<sup>10</sup> Christopher Cotter, "The Critical Study of Nonreligion: An Invitation," *Nonreligion and Secularity Research Network Blog*, 10 September 2018, <https://nsrn.net/2018/09/10/the-critical-study-of-nonreligion-an-invitation/?fbclid=IwAR0XPEfp0ldsGFBqXar1qSr7qqamtx35Y1gqDTNLeJsw5UDFF2Yd2X2bqDY>.

populations. Against the backdrop of increasingly demographically religiously unaffiliated populations, religious literacy reveals itself as a problem space from which to examine the efficacy, and consequences, of critical religion arguments. The following analysis, using insights from critical religion, shows the ways in which the discourse around religious literacy has the capacity to resurrect essentializing and universalizing tendencies. Finally, in bringing critical religion critiques into conversation with the emergent discussion of nonreligion as a category, this chapter proposes that, whereas innovating new vocabularies in response to operationalizing critiques from critical religion faces specific impasses, further theoretical reflection on the categories of analysis suggests a possible path forward.

## 6.1 “Religion is Not a Native Category”: Critical Religion and World Religions

At their core, “critical religion” arguments call for a reconsideration of the category of religion and the power formations it reifies and reinforces.<sup>11</sup> Jonathan Z. Smith’s contention that “religion is not a native category,”<sup>12</sup> often sets the stage for discussions about religion and religions. Pushing back against the essentialism of the “history of religions” school, which presumed that religion had an essentialized nature, Smith argued that religion is an externally-imposed, constructed category—one which often takes shape in response to colonial exploration and conquest.

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<sup>11</sup> For a discussion of key interventions into critical religion, see: Mitsutoshi Horii, “Historicizing the Category of Religion in Sociological Theories: Max Weber and Emile Durkheim,” *Critical Research on Religion*, Vol. 7, No. 1 (2019): 24-37.

<sup>12</sup> Jonathan Z. Smith, “Religion, Religions, Religious,” in *Relating Religions: Essays in the Study of Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 269.

Taking postcolonial, and, increasingly, decolonial, critique as a starting point, such theories challenge the universality of religion as a category and point to the power relations they knowingly, or at times unknowingly, configure and uphold. Insights into critical religion often begin with Talal Asad's key assertion that the category of religion is both historically and geographically contingent. In other words, religion as a category comes into being within particular locations and periods. Arguing against the universality of the category, Asad makes the case that the definition of religion itself is both "historically specific" and "the historical product of discursive processes."<sup>13</sup> It arises out of a particular conception of European modernity and has the capacity to inform, or misinform, understandings of experience, identity, and expression. Religion is, therefore, a category of the modern West, and one that carries limited, if any, analytic weight in the past and outside modern Christian contexts.

Correspondingly, the category of the secular, too, takes shape in response to specific times, spaces, and places. Such formations of the secular, in Asad's phrasing, often conflate the secular "as an epistemic category" with secularism "as a political doctrine."<sup>14</sup> Rather, according to Asad, "the secular is neither singular in origin nor stable in its historical

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<sup>13</sup> Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 29.

<sup>14</sup> Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 1.

identity.<sup>15</sup> Arguing that “nothing is *essentially* religious,” Asad pushes back against the notion of either religion or the secular as fixed, stable, essential categories.<sup>16</sup>

Connecting such insight to religious studies, recent theoretical works have highlighted the challenges of defining religion for the purposes of scholarship. One of the main challenges against which such theorists argue is the notion that religion is *sui generis*. In Russell McCutcheon’s words, such a conceptualization of religion “deemphasizes difference, history and sociopolitical context in favor of abstract essences and homogeneity.”<sup>17</sup> Such an essentialism invites problems, in part because it overlooks the power structures behind uses, and misuses, of the term religion. It also, confoundingly, engenders a universalism, in which religion as an essential entity exists across space, time, and tradition. Pushing back against the notion that religion as a category within the academy and beyond is “sociopolitically autonomous,” theorists such as McCutcheon point to the need for caution and attention to contexts and agendas within deployments of the term religion.<sup>18</sup>

In a similar vein, scholars such as David Chidester, Tisa Wenger, Brent Nongbri, and Tomoko Masuzawa, have pointed to religious studies’ complicity in the colonial project and reification of religion as an exclusionary, Western-centric, ahistorical category. Chidester, for example, points to the ways in which religion as a category has been applied

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<sup>15</sup> Asad, *Formations of the Secular*, 25.

<sup>16</sup> Asad, *Formations of the Secular*, 25. Emphasis original.

<sup>17</sup> Russell T. McCutcheon, *Manufacturing Religion: The Discourse on Sui Generis Religion and the Politics of Nostalgia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997) 3.

<sup>18</sup> McCutcheon, *Manufacturing Religion*, 4.

asymmetrically. In Chidester's analysis, religious studies itself imposes the category of religion and remains problematically entwined with colonial and missionary vocabularies. Citing the variable usage of the term religion within African colonial contexts, Chidester argues that religion as a category was deployed as a tool of colonial power, recognizing local practices as alternately religious and not religious in ways that served colonial interests.<sup>19</sup>

More recently, Wenger, in her writings on indigenous peoples of the American Southwest and the conception of religious freedom, points to the challenges and attendant power configurations entailed in the project of defining religion within colonial contexts. In her analysis of the 1920s Pueblo dance controversy, Wenger shows, through her examination of Pueblo tribal leaders' struggle to present Pueblo dances as religious rituals and therefore as worthy of religious freedom protections, the difficulty of framing religion as a concept which would be intelligible to governmental powers. Similar to Chidester's project, Wenger's work highlights the "discursive and conceptual shift"<sup>20</sup> that resulted from reconfiguring the Pueblo dance to fit the legal vocabulary of religious freedom. This shift, according to Wenger reframed not only linguistic description, but also self-understanding, as people came to view their activities as "religious," in accordance with the classificatory scheme of religious freedom.

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<sup>19</sup> See: David Chidester, *Savage Systems: Colonialism and Comparative Religion in Southern Africa* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1996).

<sup>20</sup> Tisa Wenger, *We Have a Religion: The 1920s Pueblo Indian Dance Controversy and American Religious Freedom* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 6.

Using a decidedly different example, that of the ancient world, Nongbri advances a similar challenge to the notion of religion as a systematically unified, consistent category. In *Before Religion: A History of a Modern Concept*, Nongbri problematizes the notion that religion is “simply there.”<sup>21</sup> Rather, as his analysis suggests, religion may not have a singular, identifiable referent as is commonly assumed in academic and public usage. The notion that religion itself “has a history” contests the idea that religion is either “natural or universal.”<sup>22</sup> As Nongbri argues, the word religion itself often “refer[s] to a genus that contains a variety of species, that is, the individual religions of the world, or World Religions. In such usage, these individual religions are generally presumed to be ‘manifestations’ of some sort of unitary ‘Ultimate Concern.’”<sup>23</sup> In particular, this focus on a Tillichian understanding of religions as being concerned with ultimate meaning has the capacity to distort and universalize. Citing the prevalence and power of such formulations of religion, particularly within U.S. legal and educational context, Nongbri goes on to argue for reexamining uses of the term religion in ways that attend to historical context and location.<sup>24</sup>

Although Chidester, Wenger, and Nongbri all call for a critical reevaluation of the term religion—a nuanced understanding that advocates for using the term with greater specificity and caution—other scholars propose the more radical solution of doing away with certain

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<sup>21</sup> Brent Nongbri, *Before Religion: A History of a Modern Concept* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 24.

<sup>22</sup> Nongbri, *Before Religion*, 154.

<sup>23</sup> Nongbri, *Before Religion*, 20.

<sup>24</sup> Nongbri, *Before Religion*, 19.

terminology. For example, in her influential 2005 book, *The Invention of World Religions: Or, How European Universalism was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism*, Masuzawa calls attention to the capacity of the World Religions Paradigm to perpetuate “inherently asymmetrical, unilaterally conceived systems of classification [which] exude a pretense of symmetry that appear to balance ‘East’ and ‘West.’”<sup>25</sup> In Masuzawa’s analysis, the “logic” of the World Religions Paradigm “has become so naturalized in our discourse that it seems as though it were no logic, no ideology at all, but a mere reflection of the way things are.”<sup>26</sup> This naturalization of world religions as a classificatory scheme leads to assumptions about what constitutes religion and under what circumstances. As a result of this classificatory scheme, the category of world religions itself, in Masuzawa’s estimation, becomes intrinsically violent or oppressive in its capacity to reproduce and disseminate Orientalist tropes across the globe. Such a diagnosis warrants the abolition of a problematic concept—that of world religions—rather than a mere critical reappraisal.

Such critiques have prompted reflection within the academy, but the challenge of how to respond meaningfully at the level of both scholarship and practice still remains an open question. One of the most vociferous and outspoken critics of religion as a category, Timothy Fitzgerald, has, in certain writings, called for abandoning the term religion in both scholarly and popular discourse. In his book, *The Ideology of Religious Studies*, Fitzgerald argues that, as the title implies, religious studies itself constitutes an ideology which reifies,

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<sup>25</sup> Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions: Or, How European Universalism was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 3.

<sup>26</sup> Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions*, 6.

and accordingly, misrepresents its object of study. The term religion, for Fitzgerald, lacks analytic validity and usefulness. Religion's "analytic counterproductivity" masks its failure to work cross-culturally and its often-hidden capacity to smuggle in assumptions of ecumenical theology.<sup>27</sup>

Such critiques have motivated a call to action within certain parts of the academy. Following Fitzgerald, for example, critical religion scholar Naomi Goldenberg has called for the abolition of the term religion within a variety of contexts. A new wave of scholars such as Goldenberg advocate for "curtailing the use of the category of 'religion' in discourse about law, culture, and the state."<sup>28</sup> According to this line of thinking, the category of religion itself is devoid of meaning in a variety of settings and therefore should not be used. In this conception, not only does the term religion have limited analytic value, but also does active harm in its application.

Such anxieties about the analytic power, or lack thereof, of the term religion have implications for contemporary public policy and education. Seen in this light, the idea that religion is not a "natural" or "native" category, of course, is far from new. It would be easy to argue that little results from rehearsing and rehashing such debates. However, the constructed category of religion still has currency within policy discourse, and it is therefore worthwhile examining some of the prevailing assumptions.

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<sup>27</sup> Timothy Fitzgerald, *The Ideology of Religious Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), x.

<sup>28</sup> Naomi R. Goldenberg, "Theorizing Religions as Vestigial States in Relation to Gender and Law: Three Cases," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, Vol. 29, No. 1 (Spring 2013): 40.

Religious literacy advocacy highlights some of the possible pitfalls viewing religion as a self-evident category and of perpetuating the World Religions Paradigm. Early variants of religious literacy highlight the problem of defining and categorizing religion for the purposes of teaching. In their 1998 book, for example, Nord and Haynes dedicate ample space to thinking about the question of category. Arguing against, in their view, the disproportionate emphasis on “secular categories” within liberal education in the U.S., Nord and Haynes put forward the following:

When students do, on occasion, study religion (in a history course, for example), they are taught to interpret its historical meaning in secular categories; they will not learn to interpret history in religious categories. This goes without saying. Indeed, nowhere in the curriculum is any effort made to justify the use of secular rather than religious categories and conceptual nets. Their adequacy is assumed and they are used uncritically—in spite of the fact that their adequacy is deeply controversial.<sup>29</sup>

Although Nord and Haynes intend these sentences as challenges against elevating “secular” views over “religious” ones, their writing highlights a separate, perhaps unintended, point about categories. Despite Nord and Haynes’ focus on how categories are applied asymmetrically, with the “secular” triumphing over the “religious” in curricular content, their views show a more fundamental assumption about the nature of the category itself. For Nord and Haynes, as this passage shows, “secular categories” are easily distinguishable from “religious categories.” The agenda of calling for the inclusion of “religious” interpretive

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<sup>29</sup> Warren A. Nord and Charles Haynes, *Taking Religion Seriously Across the Curriculum* (Alexandria, Virginia: Association for Supervision & Curriculum Development (ASCD), 1998), 41.

categories suggest that Nord and Haynes have something specific in mind, a particular understanding of religion as apparently separable from the secular. Religions, and “religious perspectives,” provide alternatives to the dominant “secular” narratives of modern, liberal education.

Anticipating clarificatory questions, Nord and Haynes venture into the fraught territory of defining religion for the purposes of public-school curricula. After brief treatments of Supreme Court definitions, ideas about “Ultimate Concerns,” functional definitions of religion, and contemporary spiritualities, Nord and Haynes offer the following generalizations about so-called world religions:

1. Each of them discerns a *richer reality* than does modern science. Ultimate reality (be it God or Brahman or Nirvana or the Tao) can’t be grasped in scientific categories, expressed in scientific language, or analyzed in scientific laboratories; 2. From within each tradition, religion can’t be *compartmentalized*; it isn’t simply a matter of what one affirms or does on Friday evening or Sunday morning. The implications of God’s existence extend to all of life—to how we act the rest of the week, and how we make sense of the world; 3. And, of course, religion is *important*. Religions deal, as Tillich argued, with matters of ultimate concern. People are not free to ignore God. Religion is a matter of concern not just to scholars and antiquarians.<sup>30</sup>

Revealingly, this passage provides a prime example of falling for the “ultimate concerns” trap identified by critical religion scholars. Such attributes of religion, which both Nord and Haynes admit constitute generalizations, advance a specific understanding of the category of religion. For one, in their first and third points, they assume that religions are concerned

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<sup>30</sup> Nord and Haynes, *Taking Religion Seriously Across the Curriculum*, 4. Emphasis original.

primarily, “with matters of ultimate concern” in Tillich’s formulation. Moreover, returning to their first point, for Nord and Haynes, “God or Braham or Nirvana or the Tao” constitute manifestations of the same thing: ultimate reality. Eliding differences, in this way, allows them to propose a particular configuration of religion that privileges the universal. Despite superficial differences, all religions, share the same concerns, or so the logic goes. With reminiscences of Wilfred Cantwell Smith’s mid-twentieth century contention that the term religion itself masks the underlying universality of the category,<sup>31</sup> Nord and Haynes’ views also presume an essentialized underlying category that transcends the seemingly superficial differences of time and place. This tendency, as theorists such as McCutcheon, have noted, has the capacity to downplay difference and assume homogeneity.<sup>32</sup>

Getting to the heart of the matter, in a later, single-authored work, Nord writes about religion as a conceptual category. Significantly, Nord makes the sweeping claim that “[f]or virtually all of human history—until at least the last half century or two in the West—culture was pervasively religious (though religions could be wildly different).”<sup>33</sup> He continues, “[w]hatever the explanation, the virtually universal presence and influence of religion are remarkable.”<sup>34</sup> He goes on to state that “[b]elief in God (by some name) appears to be a massive and perhaps unalterable fact of human existence.”<sup>35</sup> Nord’s assumptions that “culture was pervasively religious,” that religion has a “universal presence,” and belief in a

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<sup>31</sup> See: Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991).

<sup>32</sup> McCutcheon, *Manufacturing Religion*, 3.

<sup>33</sup> Warren A. Nord, *Does God Make a Difference?: Taking Religion Seriously in our Schools and Universities* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 289.

<sup>34</sup> Nord, *Does God Make a Difference?*, 289.

<sup>35</sup> Nord, *Does God Make a Difference?*, 289.

singular divinity constitutes an “unalterable fact of human existence,” each highlight Nord’s perspective about the universality of the category. Despite his comment about religions’ internal differences and variations, the overarching narrative is of universality in which religions manifest different presentations of the same overarching genus.<sup>36</sup> This view of religion inevitably shapes his conception of religious literacy. If religion represents a comprehensive essentialized category, characterized in large part by a belief in a deity, then religious literacy becomes about identifying and making space for particular ideas about religion that resurrects the kind of universalism scholars of critical religion have long critiqued.

The intention here is not to argue the opposite, that religions are somehow incommensurable, so contextually specific that they cannot be analyzed for the purposes of scholarship. Rather, examining both Nord and Haynes’ joint and separate writings about religion offers insight into the ways in which early forms of religious literacy advocacy came into being. The presumption of religion as a universal category underlies early versions of this endeavor. The idea that religion is “simply there,”<sup>37</sup> in Nongbri’s formulation, comes to the fore in religious literacy in ways that might impact educational programming.

Such fallacies about religion’s universality and self-evidence do not simply reside in the past. More recent perspectives on religious literacy, despite their nuance and critical stance

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<sup>36</sup> For a discussion of viewing religions as forming part of the same genus, see: Nongbri, *Before Religion*, 20.

<sup>37</sup> Nongbri, *Before Religion*, 24.

towards the question of religion as a constructed category, also carry with them some key assumptions about the nature of religion. At the start of her book on religious literacy, for example, Moore claims that “the vast majority of citizens are woefully ignorant about religion itself and the basic tenets of the world’s major religious traditions.”<sup>38</sup> Further, “[t]he consequences of this religious illiteracy are significant,”<sup>39</sup> she contends. Such seemingly anodyne statements, however, point to broader challenges within the endeavor of religious literacy: that of identifying, describing, and discerning religion for the purposes of education, policy, and public discussion.

Thinking about the notion of “religion itself,” in Moore’s telling words, presents a pressing concern for this analysis. A fundamental question underpins the policy discussion around religious literacy: What does it actually mean to be religiously illiterate?<sup>40</sup> In other words, what assumptions about religion—as an object of study—do such statements presume? Examining the objectives of various religious literacy projects helps point to some of the definitional challenges and circumlocutions surrounding the endeavor. What should people know in order to be considered religiously literate? The project of religious literacy itself takes as an unstated assumption that religion can be found in the world, if only people were equipped with the right set of tools with which to identify it. According to Moore, one crucial aspect of religious literacy entails “the ability to discern and explore the religious

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<sup>38</sup> Diane L. Moore, *Overcoming Religious Illiteracy: A Cultural Studies Approach to the Study of Religion in Secondary Education* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007), 3.

<sup>39</sup> Moore, *Overcoming Religious Illiteracy*, 3.

<sup>40</sup> Thank you to Elizabeth Shakman Hurd for inspiring this useful reformulation of the question.

dimensions of political, social and cultural expressions across time and space.”<sup>41</sup> Although Moore hastens to add that “[t]here is nothing ‘essential’ about religion that lends itself to an accurate portrayal of any given tradition as ideologically or epistemologically ‘uniform,’” she still falls into the trap of assuming that religions have easily definable and identifiable features that are simply there to be discovered in the world.<sup>42</sup> Spotting the “religious dimensions,” as Moore calls upon students to do, demands a particular kind of discernment: one which privileges specific configurations of religion and religions.

In spite of Moore’s sensitivity to internal diversity within traditions and corresponding calls not to collapse difference among and within traditions, her model is still, to a large extent, predicated on the assumptions of the World Religions Paradigm. A dropdown menu on the Religious Literacy Project’s website, a research center of Harvard Divinity School, of which Moore is the founding director, reveals an example of World Religions Paradigm in action. Under the “religions” tab, the menu lists “Buddhism,” “Christianity,” “Hinduism” “Humanism,” “Islam,” and “Judaism” as possible options for further exploration.<sup>43</sup> Select any of the headings and you will find a short, approximately three-hundred word, summary of each tradition, followed by dropdown subheadings containing additional information such as glossaries of key terms and case studies aimed at challenging stereotypes. It would be hard to deny that these summaries offer accessible introductory information, neatly packaged and concisely presented. Intended for a popular readership, these pages give

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<sup>41</sup> Moore, *Overcoming Religious Illiteracy*, 56-57.

<sup>42</sup> Moore, *Overcoming Religious Illiteracy*, 77.

<sup>43</sup> “Religions,” Religious Literacy Project, *Harvard Divinity School*, Accessed 22 April 2019, <https://rlp.hds.harvard.edu/religions>.

clear-cut information, while at the same time emphasizing the internal diversity within each tradition. Highlighting, for example, in an accompanying educational video clip, that what has been come to be known as “Hinduism” originated as a term within nineteenth century colonial contexts and that the forms of beliefs and expression are, in reality, varied, the Religious Literacy Project’s educational resources point to the heterogeneity and dynamism encompassed, and collapsed, by such designations.<sup>44</sup>

Despite such nuance, however, the traditions themselves within this schema remain bounded entities in the sense that each “religion” forms part of a composite whole of the world religions. Significantly, even “Humanism” qualifies as a world religion, replete with its own set of core texts and beliefs. For all the internal diversity noted—including the geographic, linguistic, and cultural variants of each religion listed—there remains a presumption that each tradition falls decisively within a broader “taxonomic and discursive”<sup>45</sup> framework. Nearly all the summaries come with a discussion of major texts, a glossary of key terms, and accompanying maps of geographic distribution of “adherents.” As scholars such as Masuzawa have highlighted, the “current epistemic regime,”<sup>46</sup> which grew, in her argument, out of a model of nineteenth century European universalism, still has implications for academic study today. The notion itself “that religion is a universal, or at least ubiquitous, phenomenon to be found anywhere in the world at any time in history,

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<sup>44</sup> “Traditions in Brief,” Religious Literacy Project, *Harvard Divinity School*, Accessed 22 April 2019, <https://rlp.hds.harvard.edu/religions>.

<sup>45</sup> Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions*, 291.

<sup>46</sup> Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions*, xxii.

albeit in a wide variety of forms and with different degrees of prevalence and importance,<sup>47</sup> still, as the Religious Literacy Project's materials demonstrate, sets the stage for current educational programs. The taxonomic legacy of the World Religions Paradigm carries through in Moore's project.

Moore's Religious Literacy Project demonstrates the continued relevance of such critical perspectives for public scholarship. Although the need for accessibility and ease of use likely represent key motivations for presenting materials in such a fashion, the project of religious literacy, in Moore's vision, risks reproducing some of the past challenges of ideal types within the present conversation. Becoming religiously literate, or overcoming religious illiteracy, in Moore's flipped formulation, entails learning about neatly bounded, yet internally diverse, religions. Unlike Nord and Haynes, whose earlier and highly influential visions of religious literacy risks running into the territory of essentialism, Moore's model presents a self-reflexive way of deploying the religious literacy framework. However, in spite of the self-awareness of her presentation, with its emphasis of the genealogies of commonly used terms and cautions about not presenting religious communities or teachings monolithically, Moore's nuanced model still carries with it some key assumptions about the bounded nature of the category of religion. The example of "Humanism" as a world religion, replete with core texts and communities, highlights a broader challenge. Sorting religions into the neatly bounded categories of world religions reproduces some of the past, but not forgotten, problems of the academic debate on the category of religion.

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<sup>47</sup> Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions*, 1.

A similarly sophisticated picture emerges in recent U.K. interventions into religious literacy. As Dinham and Francis argue in the opening chapter of their 2015 edited volume, *Religious Literacy in Policy and Practice*, the British public is “not sure what religion is, how much of it there is, what it looks like, what it’s for, or what to do about it.”<sup>48</sup> Although Dinham and Francis do not use the term religion unreflexively, devoting space to problematizing the term in their introduction, their analysis focuses primarily on decentering the religious-secular binary from public discourse.

Rather, despite their consideration of category, they appear to assume that religion can be measured, quantified, and identified according to specific, and easily identifiable, criteria and characteristics. As they note, the term religion itself “is a useful shorthand to refer to a range of beliefs, rituals, symbols, institutions and communities,”<sup>49</sup> rather than a fixed, essential, *sui generis* category. Their treatment of religion, however, carries with it an additional set of assumptions about what constitutes religion and about religion’s presumed function. If the British populace is unable to identify religion, as Dinham and Francis bemoan, then presumably religious literacy would aid the project of helping people point to religion in informed and productive ways. After all, understanding what religion “looks like” and “what it’s for” presupposes a particular configuration of religion and religions as possessing easily identifiable and discernible sets of characteristics, attributes, and uses.

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<sup>48</sup> Adam Dinham and Matthew Francis, *Religious Literacy in Policy and Practice* (Bristol: Policy Press, 2015), 4.

<sup>49</sup> Dinham and Francis, *Religious Literacy in Policy and Practice*, 11.

With the right tools—those of religious literacy—people will, in this understanding, be able to speak sensibly and sensitively about religion and religions.

Returning to the earlier question of what it means to be religiously illiterate, it is clear that definitional concerns are rarely far from view. If the project of religious literacy aims to help people spot, understand, and engage with religion within contemporary contexts, then knowing what constitutes religion must underlie the endeavor. Writing about religious freedom, Elizabeth Shakman Hurd argues that prevailing discourse gets it wrong by assuming that “religions and religious actors are identifiable. It is obvious who they are. They are inherently different and distinguishable from secular actors.”<sup>50</sup> A similar logic appears operative within religious literacy advocacy. Decentering the secular from its purportedly privileged place within education and policy presumes the distinctiveness of religious and secular perspectives. Gaining competency in identifying, understanding, and engaging with religious perspectives—often the stated objectives of religious literacy programs—shows some of the underlying assumptions of the endeavor. As a result, critical religion’s cautions about avoiding the essentialized and recognizing the contingent aspects of the definition have relevance for today’s policy conversations.

The endeavor of religious literacy, as this discussion shows, is predicated on the specialness of the category of religion. If it were possible to collapse religion into broader categories of

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<sup>50</sup> Elizabeth Shakman Hurd, *Beyond Religious Freedom: The New Global Politics of Religion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 25.

culture, then religious literacy itself would be rendered unnecessary. Religious literacy risks presuming that religion constitutes a self-evident category with set boundaries, attributes, and characteristics. The issue, from the perspective of religious literacy advocacy, lies in an inability to understand, and by extension, discern categorically bounded religions. In this way, the religious literacy examples provide a means of examining the persistent challenges for religion as a category. For this reason, paying attention to uses of “religion” within religious literacy discourse helps highlight some of the potential sites of contestation or cooperation in policy conversation. Identifying the uses of religion—functionalist, instrumentalist, universalist, or otherwise—within the project of religious literacy points to some of the attendant, and often overlooked, issues for policymakers. Acknowledging the history of the term religion and the instability of the category will only help with recognizing specific configurations of religion and what those formations obscure or elevate. If religious literacy aims to teach how to recognize and engage with “religion,” then it remains critical to identify and, potentially critique, what certain proponents of religious literacy mean when they talk about religion as if it were “simply there,”<sup>51</sup> waiting for our discovery and understanding.

## **6.2** Nonreligion as the New Frontier of Interreligious Dialogue and the Seeming Solution of Worldviews

Having seen the hazards of viewing religion from an essentialist perspective or from a dominating and possibly distorting World Religions Paradigm, what would it then mean to

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<sup>51</sup> Nongbri, *Before Religion*, 24.

create religious literacy projects in light of critical religion critiques? At the same time, a growing sense of rising religiously unaffiliated populations has prompted scholarly and popular considerations of what it means to not identify as religious. In view of such themes, a new wave of scholars and policymakers have resurrected an old term to face the descriptive challenges of the present: worldviews. Once a mainstay of the academy, the concept of worldviews, has slowly fallen out of favor. Today, however, worldviews are making a comeback in educational and policy circles to address the complications of the category of religion and, perhaps more importantly, to help address the rise in religiously unaffiliated populations in ways that do not reinforce religious-secular binaries. The following discussion shows the ways in which recent efforts to include religiously unaffiliated populations, by innovating a more inclusive vocabulary, results in new, and often unforeseen, complications.

The categories of “no religion,” “not religious,” and “nones,” have emerged in popular discourse in recent years as types of self-identification. Policymaker and others frequently view such categories of self-identification for the purposes of forms, surveys, and official documents as indicators of society’s increasing secularity or evidence of the secularization narrative at work.<sup>52</sup> Within the U.K., empirical studies have begun to suggest that “no religion” has begun to “rival ‘Christian’ as the preferred self-designation of British people.”<sup>53</sup>

The seeming emergence of this “new cultural majority” has given scholars and governments

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<sup>52</sup> Lois Lee, “Secular or Nonreligious? Investigating and Interpreting Generic ‘Not Religious’ Categories and Populations,” *Religion*, Vol. 44, No. 3 (2014): 466.

<sup>53</sup> Linda Woodhead, “The Rise of ‘No Religion’ in Britain: The Emergence of a New Cultural Majority,” *Journal of the British Academy*, Vol 4 (December 2016): 245.

pause.<sup>54</sup> Even within the U.S., according to recent surveys, respondents increasingly answered, “none,” in response to the question “what is your religious tradition?”<sup>55</sup>

Giving credence to the data, popular discourse about religion and nonreligion has come to reflect such categories and adopt such terminology as descriptors of the current state of affairs. Although self-identified atheists and humanists often monopolize scholarly and popular attention, a recent wave of scholarship in nonreligion has begun shifting the focus to include a variety of perspectives, and not focus undue attention on the most vocal populations.

A prominent voice in the current conversation, Lois Lee has called for closer analysis of nonreligious perspectives, identifications, and characteristics. As part of her project, Lee differentiates between the secular and the nonreligious, defining the nonreligion as “any phenomenon—position, perspective, or practice—that is primarily understood in relation to religion but which is not itself considered to be religious. Alternatively expressed, nonreligion is a phenomenon understood in contradistinction to religion.”<sup>56</sup> Pushing back against “subtraction stories” which assume that stripping back religion would reveal a neutral absence, Lee advocates for viewing the secular as “substantial,” rather than “insubstantial.” In other words, the substantial secular, in Lee’s analysis, constitutes an

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<sup>54</sup> Woodhead, “The Rise of ‘No Religion’ in Britain,” 245.

<sup>55</sup> Jack Jenkins, “‘Nones’ Now as Big as Evangelicals, Catholics in the US,” *Religion News Service*, 21 March 2019, [https://religionnews.com/2019/03/21/nones-now-as-big-as-evangelicals-catholics-in-the-us/?fbclid=IwAR3a\\_t1TPa0kbA6lr8er3JvnaFvEY9D-LbKwzBHOKeeWYy4YO5yW6oCWxXo](https://religionnews.com/2019/03/21/nones-now-as-big-as-evangelicals-catholics-in-the-us/?fbclid=IwAR3a_t1TPa0kbA6lr8er3JvnaFvEY9D-LbKwzBHOKeeWYy4YO5yW6oCWxXo).

<sup>56</sup> Lois Lee, *Recognizing the Non-Religious: Reimagining the Secular* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 32.

underexplored concept that comes with its own positive life stances, norms, values, social configurations.<sup>57</sup>

At the same time, national and supranational educational guidelines demonstrate a growing awareness of the “nones,” the religiously unaffiliated. In an effort to include such groups, policy recommendations have ventured into new territory: that of including so-called nonreligious perspectives. What that term might mean, however, for the purposes of policy remains opaque. As scholars of nonreligion such as Lee have noted, behind the attempts at inclusive language lies a fundamental lack of clarity about terms and their intentions. Educational policy documents have begun adding “nonreligion” to their proposals, without dedicating sufficient space to addressing what such a term might mean and what it encompasses. A related challenge for the endeavor, moreover, comes in the form of identifying, defining, and cataloguing nonreligious views for the purposes of scholarship, legal protection, and government regulations.<sup>58</sup>

Signaling a change, education policy guidelines have increasingly included references to nonreligion. For instance, the “Toledo Guiding Principles,” a supranational document, frequently places religion alongside nonreligion, following mentions of religion with the term nonreligion. As an example, the document recommends that “[p]reparation of curricular, textbooks and educational materials for teaching about religions and beliefs

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<sup>57</sup> Lee, *Recognizing the Non-Religious*, 50-51.

<sup>58</sup> Lois Lee, “The Conundrum of How to Prove You Hold a Nonreligious Worldview,” *The Conversation*, 26 January 2018, <https://theconversation.com/the-conundrum-of-how-to-prove-you-hold-a-nonreligious-worldview-90405>.

should take into account religious and non-religious views in a way that is inclusive, fair, and respectful.”<sup>59</sup> In line with the document’s overall focus on fostering fairness and inclusivity, the “Toledo Guiding Principles” appear to view the inclusion of the term nonreligion as a move towards increased inclusivity. As the document states, “[i]t should be noted that the Principles address not only teaching about religions, but also about beliefs, that is, non-religious conceptions of life and world.”<sup>60</sup> Significantly, according to the document’s authors, the common refrain of “religions and beliefs” entails a seeming inclusiveness. The “beliefs” portion of the statement encompasses, for the authors, any perspective or identity not classified as religious. Although the document does not concern itself overly with confronting definitional questions, it does presume an equivalency between, and a clearly delineated separability of, religious and nonreligious views.

Another later supranational document on religion and education, “Signposts,” also demonstrates a growing awareness of non-religious perspectives and identities. The report’s full title “Signposts—Policy and Practice for Teaching about Religions and Non-religious World Views in Intercultural Education” shows a concern for engaging with the so-called nonreligious. This document, which dedicates ample space to the issue of nonreligion, also fails to offer any clear-cut guidance or definitions. An entire chapter dedicated to the topic, titled “Non-religious convictions and world views,” contains only scant mentions of what a nonreligious view might entail, never mind a religious one, its presumed counterpart. As

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<sup>59</sup> “Toledo Guiding Principles on Teaching About Religions and Beliefs in Public Schools,” *Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe* (27 November 2007): 17.

<sup>60</sup> “Toledo Guiding Principles,” 20.

the text itself acknowledges “[d]efining non-religious convictions appears to be at least as problematic as defining religions.”<sup>61</sup> Admitting the complexity of the issues, however, does little to help resolve it in practice. “Signposts,” after reviewing other European education literature, mentions the term “life stance” as a possible alternative, noting, in addition, the prevalence of the similar term “worldview.”<sup>62</sup>

Turning to the U.K., in a similar turn of phrase, the All-Party Parliamentary Group of Religious Education’s 2016 report on religious literacy cites as a motivation for its inquiry the “increasing adherence to non-religious worldviews such as Humanism, internal diversification within religions and large demographic changes.”<sup>63</sup> This formulation of nonreligious worldviews, for this Parliamentary working group, functions similarly to that of religion. People, in this language, are classified as adherents to nonreligious views. The presumed equivalency treats Humanism as an alternative, but comparable, way of life based on adherence to a particular view.

Underlying such new, seemingly inclusive language, is an effort to bring together religious and nonreligious populations in comity and mutual understanding. Similar to the interreligious dialogue initiatives of the past, educational and government documents have

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<sup>61</sup> Robert Jackson, “Signposts—Policy and Practice for Teaching about Religions and Non-religious World Views in Intercultural Education” (Strasbourg: Council of Europe Publishing, 2014): 68.

<sup>62</sup> Jackson, “Signposts,” 70.

<sup>63</sup> “Improving Religious Literacy: A Contribution to the Debate,” *All-Party Parliamentary Group on Religious Education* (July 2016): 3-4, <https://www.fionabruce.org.uk/sites/www.fionabruce.org.uk/files/2018-02/All-Party%20Parliamentary%20Group%20on%20Religious%20Education%20-%20Improving%20Religious%20Literacy%20-%20A%20Contribution%20to%20the%20Debate.pdf>.

tried to facilitate community cohesion. The idea of bridge-building remains central for this project. A narrative of contact and the possible need for conflict resolution underlie recent calls for religious literacy. Thinking about the area of higher education in particular, Dinham and Jones write that it remains to be seen whether educational spaces “can adapt to the challenges of a world in which both religious and secular worldviews will inevitably come into more frequent contact.”<sup>64</sup> The answer, for the authors, lies in the tools of religious literacy. Although Dinham elsewhere critiques calls for community cohesion through teaching religion,<sup>65</sup> his own concerns about contact demonstrate a worry about an inability for members of shared space to get along and understand one another.

A conciliatory tone suffuses recent religious literacy proposals, particularly those from the United Kingdom. Tellingly, the language of the previously mentioned All-Party Parliamentary Group on Religious Education’s report on religious literacy contains calls for a kind of civic and community cohesion that entails bringing together religious and nonreligious people. As the Parliamentary group recommends, in addition to more robust interreligious engagement:

[i]t is also important to emphasize that many people who do not identify as religious also participate in local projects which aim to improve the public’s religious literacy. Further opportunities for formal dialogue between religious and non-religious groups are needed to help people deepen their understanding of others with different beliefs.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Adam Dinham and Stephen H. Jones, “Religion, Public Policy, and the Academy: Brokering Public Faith in a Context of Ambivalence?,” *Journal of Contemporary Religion* (2012): 199.

<sup>65</sup> See: Adam Dinham and Martha Shaw, “RE for Real: The Future of Teaching and Learning about Religion and Belief,” *Goldsmiths, University of London* (November 2017).

<sup>66</sup> “Improving Religious Literacy,” *APPG on RE*, 42.

In a similar tone, the report goes on to discuss the merits of bringing people of religious and nonreligious outlooks together in “interreligious” dialogue spaces:

Organised visits and open days encourage dialogue between people of different religious and non-religious backgrounds. They can provide an informal space to deepen participants’ understandings of each other’s perspectives, and they can lead to the forming of positive long-term relationships between different groups in that community.<sup>67</sup>

The emphasis on “positive long-term relationships” as the intended outcome of dialogical approaches demonstrates the APPG on RE’s aim. Religious literacy, here, serves a particular agenda. According to the Parliamentary report, government should allocate resources towards advancing initiatives that foster dialogue and communication between religious and nonreligious community members:

government funding initiatives are specifically intended to encourage community cohesion through community work and social action. By bringing together different religious and non-religious groups, they help break down barriers and can contribute to the development of participants’ religious literacy.<sup>68</sup>

Given the origin of this report, stemming from a government working group, appeals to community cohesion perhaps constitute an unsurprising gesture. However, predictability of sentiments aside, the use of religious literacy as a tool for inspiring productive and peaceful conversations across difference says something about religious literacy’s intended function.

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<sup>67</sup> “Improving Religious Literacy,” *APPG on RE*, 47.

<sup>68</sup> “Improving Religious Literacy,” *APPG on RE*, 48.

Here, it expands the frontier of interreligious dialogue to include nonreligion as a bounded entity.

Many of these varied thematic strands came together in a recent U.K. policy document. Seeking inclusive language, a new education policy document presents a prime example of the issue at hand. When the Commission on Religious Education (CoRE) released its report in the fall of 2018, nonreligious perspectives and identities provided an obvious backdrop for the recommendations the Commission advanced. Aimed at providing guidance for religious education (RE) within the U.K., the report, “Religion and Worldviews: A Way Forward,” devotes considerable space to nonreligious populations within RE courses. Signaling its motivations, the Commission opens with the contention that RE must be revamped and reframed to meet “the changing nature of society.”<sup>69</sup> With a particular focus on demographic changes, increasing religious diversity, and the rise of nonreligious perspectives, the report endeavors to create a framework for preparing students to make informed decisions about timely, and potentially controversial, issues. Although the Commission’s guidance does not translate directly into policy, its recommendations have the capacity to inform curricula and textbooks across the U.K. As a result, when the report was released it received widespread media coverage and prompted public discussion.

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<sup>69</sup> “Religion and Worldviews: A Way Forward,” *Commission on Religious Education* (September 2018): Forward, <https://www.commissiononre.org.uk/final-report-religion-and-worldviews-the-way-forward-a-national-plan-for-re/>.

Significantly, in addition to calls for increased standardization and higher quality teacher training, the report advocates reframing the conversation about religious education. The report puts forward a bold suggestion: renaming RE to reflect current trends. “Religion and Worldviews,” the proposed new title for RE, would, according to the Commission, “offer a new vision” that accounts for “the important role that religious and non-religious worldviews play in all human life.”<sup>70</sup> This move towards greater inclusivity demonstrates a willingness to acknowledge a variety of perspectives. In so doing, it also calls for a rebranding of RE that aims to move past the seeming impasse of the term religion.

The Commission’s emphatic statement that “[e]veryone has a worldview” highlights the authors’ position.<sup>71</sup> According to the Commission, everyone has a “way of seeing, making sense of and giving coherence and meaning to the world and their own experience and behaviour.”<sup>72</sup> The Commission, moreover, distinguishes between “institutional worldview” and “personal worldview,” the former constituting formal, organized, and recognized group associations and the latter accounting for “an individual’s own way of understanding and living in the world, which may or may not draw from one, or many, institutional worldviews.”<sup>73</sup>

The Commission’s proposed changes to the RE curricula gesture towards, and signal a resurgent interest in, a wider conversation about worldviews. From Immanuel Kant in the

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<sup>70</sup> “Religion and Worldviews,” Forward.

<sup>71</sup> “Religion and Worldviews,” 26.

<sup>72</sup> “Religion and Worldviews,” 27.

<sup>73</sup> “Religion and Worldviews,” 27.

eighteenth century to Ninian Smart in the twentieth century, worldviews have come and gone within the academy. Today, however, worldviews are making a notable return, especially within education policy as a framework for schoolteachers. Within the past decade or so, educationalists have taken a particular interest in advancing the concept of worldviews, focusing specifically on the need to include both religious and secular worldviews in schools. John Valk, for example, links religion and worldviews to moral education in public schools, arguing that “[e]ducating about worldviews—religious and secular—is important,” because “[e]ncouraging students to deepen their own worldview,” will help them become “effective citizens with a coherent moral vision grounded in their worldview.”<sup>74</sup> Here, worldviews education aims to encourage sociability and civics by helping students understand both their own perspectives and those of others. Similarly, Siebren Miedema, calls for an “inclusive worldview education” to cultivate a strategy of “personhood education.”<sup>75</sup> Building on such approaches and refocusing attention on the role of the teacher, a more recent publication from Ryan Gardner, Kate Soules, and John Valk argues that “secular and religious worldview education” must be leveraged “to help students understand, appreciate, and learn from others with differing worldviews.”<sup>76</sup> Such approaches, originating within education circles, suggest that a worldviews model is coming

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<sup>74</sup> John Valk, “Plural Public Schooling: Religion, Worldviews and Moral Education,” *British Journal of Religious Education*, Vol. 29, No. 3 (2007): 283.

<sup>75</sup> Siebren Miedema, “A Plea for Inclusive Worldview Education in all Schools,” *Koers—Bulletin for Christian Scholarship*, Vol. 77, No. 1 (2012): 1.

<sup>76</sup> Ryan Gardner, Kate Soules, and John Valk, “The Urgent Need for Teacher Preparation in Religious and Secular Worldviews Education,” *The Religious Education Association*, Vol. 112, No. 3 (May-June 2017): 242.

increasingly into favor as a tool for engaging with a variety of perspectives within school settings.

Another recent and influential attempt to resurrect, reshape, and re-envision the conception of worldviews come from religious studies scholar Ann Taves.<sup>77</sup> According to Taves, worldviews provide a way forward for acknowledging the varieties of human experiences and identities not currently captured sufficiently within contemporary religious studies. For Taves, Ninian Smart, who originally connected the idea of worldviews to religious studies in an effort to facilitate cross-cultural comparisons,<sup>78</sup> faced a limitation in that he failed to define worldviews for the purposes of scholarship.<sup>79</sup> Moreover, in contrast to the more recent works of educationalists such as Gardner, Miedema, Soules, and Valk, Taves worries about the capacity of current understandings to reinforce a problematic religious-secular binary.

In response, Taves sets out to redefine worldviews in contemporary terms. In a recent article, Taves and her co-authors promote a change in terminology. Taves, in her own words, “advocate[s] a shift from ‘religions’ to ‘worldviews’” and defines “worldviews in terms of the human ability to ask and reflect on big questions (BQs: e.g., what exists? how should

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<sup>77</sup> Ann Taves and David G. Robertson, “Worldviews and Ways of Life,” *The Religious Studies Project* (Podcast Transcript), 21 May 2018. Transcribed by Helen Bradstock.

<sup>78</sup> See: Ninian Smart, *Worldviews: Cross-cultural Explorations of Human Beliefs* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2000) 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition.

<sup>79</sup> Ann Taves and David G. Robertson, “Worldviews and Ways of Life,” *The Religious Studies Project* (Podcast Transcript), 21 May 2018. Transcribed by Helen Bradstock.

we live?).”<sup>80</sup> This pivot on terminology would, in Taves’ estimation, enable academic and public discourse to include a more nuanced view of positions such as “atheism,” “agnosticism,” and “theism.”<sup>81</sup> Such a move would address a growing awareness of nonreligious populations without locking the conversation into problematic religious-nonreligious binaries. Rather than attempting to differentiate religious from nonreligious perspectives, a worldviews model would instead focus on the areas of “ontology,” “epistemology,” “axiology,” “praxeology,” and “cosmology.”<sup>82</sup> This additional terminology would, according to Taves, help discern how people make meaning in their lives and bracket off the problematic usage of religion as a classificatory scheme. Such a move to further disaggregate religion and nonreligion into component parts would, in this view, help resolve some of the fundamental critiques of category leveled against religion by critical religion scholarship. This “building-block” approach,<sup>83</sup> in Taves’ formulation, presents a bottom-up organizational schema that pushes past exclusionary categories.

Such an approach has already begun to gain influence. Despite expressing initial skepticism about the term, Lee, following Taves, similarly invokes the concept of worldviews within her research on nonreligious populations. According to Lee, “nonreligious worldviews are anchored in and shared through common cultures.”<sup>84</sup> As Lee contends, governments face

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<sup>80</sup> Ann Taves, Egil Asprem, and Elliott Ihm, “Psychology, Meaning Making, and the Study of Worldviews: Beyond Religion and Non-Religion,” *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*, Vol. 10, No. 3 (2018): 207.

<sup>81</sup> Taves, Asprem, and Ihm, “Psychology, Meaning Making, and the Study of Worldviews,” 207.

<sup>82</sup> Taves, Asprem, and Ihm, “Psychology, Meaning Making, and the Study of Worldviews,” 208.

<sup>83</sup> See: Ann Taves, *Religious Experience Reconsidered: A Building-Block Approach to the Study of Religion and Other Special Things* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009).

<sup>84</sup> Lee, “The Conundrum of How to Prove you Hold a Nonreligious Worldview.”

challenges with understanding, describing, and regulating nonreligious populations since such groups lack a clear institution affiliation. Without an obvious source of authority—textual, institutional, or otherwise—governments confront the challenge of identifying leadership and coherent sets of beliefs and practices for the purposes of protections. In Lee’s words, “public bodies are struggling to understand how nonreligious people come to their views about the nature of existence and the meaning of life without the help of institutions such as churches.”<sup>85</sup> Despite the amorphous nature of such a designation, Lee notes similarities among those who identify as nonreligious. For example, she finds that nonreligious people, steer clear of “poems and songs to use in registry office wedding ceremonies or humanist funerals.”<sup>86</sup> She elaborates:

Existential ideas—about what it means to be alive, and what makes life worth living—run through this material. These choices might seem personal, but there are common themes that communicate and establish nonreligious norms and values.<sup>87</sup>

In this view, certain characteristics and choices underlie nonreligious positions and identities. Despite the variety Lee describes, her comments also suggest a degree of underlying unity of viewpoints and perspectives. Although governing bodies, as Lee notes, may face challenges with unaffiliated populations, this analysis suggests commonalities among and within a varied group.

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<sup>85</sup> Lee, “The Conundrum of How to Prove you Hold a Nonreligious Worldview.”

<sup>86</sup> Lee, “The Conundrum of How to Prove you Hold a Nonreligious Worldview.”

<sup>87</sup> Lee, “The Conundrum of How to Prove you Hold a Nonreligious Worldview.”

Such scholarship faces the challenge, as theorists such as Cotter have noted, of grouping people according to nonreligious identities and identifications, which risks presuming that such markers present “distinct groups with coherent attitudinal correspondences.”<sup>88</sup> Mapping the contours of nonreligious populations has the capacity to extend the taxonomic regime of religion into new territory for the purposes of identification, classification, and regulation. Worldviews, in this way, promises to push past the challenges of reproducing problematic religious-secular binaries by disaggregating people’s beliefs, outlooks, and identifications into their component parts.

The assertion that “everyone has a worldview,” in the words of the recent Commission on Religious Education (CoRE) report, entails its own assumption: that every person has a discernable, describable, identifiable position. Equipping people with the tools to understand such worldviews would, according to this view, lead to greater clarity, transparency, fairness, and, above all, inclusivity of perspectives in the democratic public sphere.

This decentering of religion as a privileged category appears to come from a place of inclusivity, a response to growing religiously unaffiliated populations. In this way, the worldviews model at first appears to offer an appealing, inclusive alternative. Worldviews,

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<sup>88</sup> Christopher Cotter, “Ideal Types, Semantic Anarchy, and the Study of Atheism (etc.),” *The Religious Studies Project Blog*, 12 April 2019, [https://www.religiousstudiesproject.com/2019/04/12/ideal-types-semantic-anarchy-and-the-study-of-atheism-etc/?fbclid=IwAR0Xplheuqd2DJOIzwjFrSzXqQ8p7OBMLO\\_A3sagrKpa98HHF\\_NxYzeZbxs](https://www.religiousstudiesproject.com/2019/04/12/ideal-types-semantic-anarchy-and-the-study-of-atheism-etc/?fbclid=IwAR0Xplheuqd2DJOIzwjFrSzXqQ8p7OBMLO_A3sagrKpa98HHF_NxYzeZbxs).

here, step in to solve some of the policy challenges of religion's specialness as a category. The idea that everyone has a worldview, in many ways, acts as a great equalizer.

However, upon closer reflection, the resurgent worldviews model also invites new difficulties in the name of inclusion. Despite the seeming merits of widening the terminological tent, risks accompany such an endeavor. As scholars have contended in recent years, employing the term "nonreligion" might resurrect the World Religions Paradigm in problematic ways, by simply carrying forward, at best unhelpful and at worst oppressive, taxonomies into a new domain.<sup>89</sup>

Moreover, although such perspectives aim to address critiques from critical religion, they carry with them assumptions already questioned within critical scholarship on the category of religion. Taves' focus on "big questions" and Lee's elevation of "existential ideas," for example, suggest a resurrection of Tillichian "Ultimate Concerns" refashioned for current sensibilities. Despite their terminological differences, "big questions" and "existential ideas" both unmistakably gesture towards matters of ultimate meaning. Such new vocabularies, in this way, have the capacity to return us, rather than move us past, the holdovers religious studies scholarship that existed before the insights of critical religion.

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<sup>89</sup> Christopher Cotter, "The Critical Study of Nonreligion: An Invitation," *Nonreligion and Secularity Research Network Blog*, 10 September 2018, <https://nsrn.net/2018/09/10/the-critical-study-of-nonreligion-an-invitation/?fbclid=IwAR0XPEfp0ldsGFBqXar1qSr7qqamtx35Y1gqDTNLeJsw5UDFF2Yd2X2bqDY>.

Further, although Taves' project, in particular—with its focus on ontology, axiology, praxeology, and epistemology—at first appears to push past the uncritical religion-secular binary, such a model invites a different set of terminological difficulties. Rather than opening up new avenues for conversations and new vocabularies, the worldviews model has the unintended potential to reproduce challenges of the World Religions Paradigm against which it argues, albeit in a more inclusive form.<sup>90</sup> This gesture towards creating more pluralist, inclusivist categories, despite its merits, risks playing a game of semantic reconfigurations.<sup>91</sup>

Does the conception of worldviews do away with exclusivist language and lead to greater intelligibility of perspectives? In many ways, the worldviews model fits with a broader trend within the academy and beyond. Recent scholarly perspectives, such as those of political theorist Cécile Laborde, aim to address critical religion critiques by calling to disaggregate religion into component parts.<sup>92</sup> Such a move might be useful for the purposes of adjudication and regulation, but its use is limited for the purposes of education. Despite its promise, the disaggregating move does little to address the critical religion critique in practice. Rather than adding the called-for intelligibility and precision, separating conceptions often associated with religions into their component parts has the potential to obfuscate rather than to clarify. Returning to Taves, the categories of “ontology,” “epistemology,” “axiology,” “praxeology,” and “cosmology” might offer more inclusive

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<sup>90</sup> See: Brent Nongbri, *Before Religion: A History of a Modern Concept* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 20.

<sup>91</sup> Thank you to Marek Sullivan for inspiring this phrasing.

<sup>92</sup> Cécile Laborde, *Liberalism's Religion* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2017), 3.

options than that of the co-constitutive religion-secular binary. However, at this level of granularity, precision comes at the expense of coherence.

The concept of worldviews as an answer to the critical religion critique spotlights the attendant challenges of trying to move past the definitional challenges the term religion poses. Despite worldview's laudable emphasis on fairness and inclusion of multiple perspectives, including a growing recognition of nonreligious populations, the term might inadvertently facilitate extremes. From one perspective, positioning individual beliefs in terms of worldviews might risk entrenching positions, calling upon students to identify and articulate points of difference between their views and those of others. If the educational task entails identifying worldviews, including one's own, then such reflection would frame differences in a potentially adversarial way. In this way, the worldviews model has the capacity to yield the opposite of its intended outcome: fortifying positions in opposition to others. Alternatively, worldviews, if disaggregated into many component parts, potentially loses coherence and thereby analytic value. If each individual possesses a completely personal, possibly idiosyncratic, way of understanding the world, then how would identifying such positions help students learn about the world they inhabit? Either way, despite the promising recent scholarship on the subject, the worldviews model presents pedagogy with a possible dead end.

### **6.3 Conclusion**

Recall the BBC religious literacy example cited at the beginning of this chapter in which survey respondents called for more of what had previously been called “religious” content matter and at the same time rejected the term religion as uninviting and unreflective of present times. Responding to such a scenario, it seems, leads to superfluous new vocabularies arising to describe essentially the same themes as before. This conundrum, as the discussion of this chapter suggests, not only demonstrates the need to consider the importance of categories, but also ultimately highlights the need to be cautious when trying to implement the recommendations of the terminological abolitionist strand of critical religion. As examples of religious literacy show, we are still falling into the traps the critical religion critique helped identify and, as a result, should keep such critical perspectives’ calls for nuance and caution in mind when invoking a potentially fraught term. However, the worldviews model—arguably in part the result of taking on board critical religion’s critique and trying to operationalize it for the education policy space—presents a different kind of stumbling block. Acknowledging critical religion’s necessary call for epistemic humility and self-reflection will likely aid scholarship and public discussion, in pointing to the contextually specific nature of the term. Nevertheless, parsing religion into ever-smaller discrete parts or alternatively zooming out to collapse religion into the wider area of cultural studies further complicates matters. In an effort to push past the religious-secular binary and create more inclusive language, scholars have invented increasingly labyrinthine vocabularies that have the capacity to obfuscate or entrench, rather than to clarify.

Although such attempts at incorporating many viewpoints demonstrates a commendable move towards inclusivity and fairness, policymakers and educators would do well to attend to the implications of deploying terms such as religion and nonreligion uncritically. In all likelihood, for a variety of practical considerations, policy recommendations cannot begin with a critique of categories. The position, for example, that the category of religion has no analytic validity does not lend itself naturally to the clear-cut world of policy discussion and ensuing recommendations. Despite the merits of such critiques, which urge for considering assumptions about categories, theories of critical religion reach a possible limitation for their applicability on the ground.

Policymaking, in other words, in all likelihood would struggle to operate from a position of terminological indeterminacy. Equally, it cannot start from a position of incommensurability.<sup>93</sup> Despite claims about religion's and religious studies' lack of clarity about definitions or purported ideological function,<sup>94</sup> it does not then follow that we should move away from the term itself, at least for the purposes of education, provided we keep in mind its limitations, histories, and contingent power formations. In the first place, as this chapter argues, with new terminologies come old problems. In other words, although terms

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<sup>93</sup> This vocabulary has a particular legacy and associations. Philosophers of science, Thomas Kuhn and Paul Feyerabend, for example, each published influential works on the possible incommensurability of scientific theories. See: Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970); and Paul K. Feyerabend, "Explanation, Reduction, and Empiricism," *Cambridge University Press*, 1981. Relatedly, the challenge of facilitating comparison, without collapsing difference, has accompanied academic approaches to the study of religion from its inception as a field. For example, sociology of religion approaches, such as Max Weber's "ideal types," have prompted, and continue to prompt, methodological reflection on the question of accurate cross-cultural comparison. See: Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1930), translated by Talcott Parsons.

<sup>94</sup> See: Fitzgerald, *The Ideology of Religious Studies*.

have histories and implications that extend far beyond their assumed, and often contestable, “common-sense” meanings, innovating new vocabularies reproduces past challenges and introduces new ones. Moreover, although simple and seemingly self-evident terms have the potential to mask underlying assumptions, unwieldy terminology, hinders, rather than facilitates, understanding.

As Jonathan Jong frames it, the problem of defining religion is often one of extremes. On the one hand, it is too capacious to have any analytic use. On the other, it becomes too narrow, and, as a result, inherently exclusionary. This challenge of the “*Football Problem*” and the “*Buddhism Problem*,” in Jong’s words, highlight the danger of falling into the extremes of either “promiscuous inclusivity” or “stingy specificity.”<sup>95</sup> Religion as a category, in this view, struggles to strike the right balance between including either too much or too little. Although such challenges persist, they should not necessarily function as deterrents to using the term religion in educational contexts.

Here, Kevin Schilbrack’s position helps cut through the seeming impasse. In his essay, “Religions: Are There Any?,” Schilbrack summarizes a key point of tension of religious studies’ past and present. In it, he refers to the idea of “naïve realism,” against which scholars of critical religion push back.<sup>96</sup> Such a fallacy assumes that “religion has a certain objective

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<sup>95</sup> Jonathan Jong, “On (Not) Defining (Non)Religion,” *Science, Religion and Culture*, Vol. 2, No. 3 (2015): 18. Emphasis original.

<sup>96</sup> Kevin Schilbrack, “Religions: Are There Any?,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Vol. 78, No. 4 (November 2010): 1113.

character and the scholar's task is to discover it."<sup>97</sup> This idea, rightly debunked by the critical religion school, points to the assumption that religion exists as an essential, ahistoric entity, outside of social, linguistic, and other structures. Rather than slipping into the trap of naïve realism or taking the opposite stance of anti-realism which assumes religions do not exist, Schilbrack calls for scholars to adopt a stance of "critical realism."<sup>98</sup> Such a position, in Schilbrack's view, allows for genealogical reflection, "but nevertheless sees the study of religion as the study of a social reality that is in the crucial respects independent of the scholar."<sup>99</sup> Maintaining a stance of critical realism, the acknowledgement of both the term religion's "modern western provenance" and the understanding of "the study of religion as the study of a social reality,"<sup>100</sup> helps push past the terminological confusion and contention. The critical religion perspectives rightly challenge scholarship not to be glib about the category of religion, but, equally, being ruthless about dispatching with the category does little from a pedagogical standpoint.

A possible way forward, however dissatisfying for the advocates of the terminological abolitionist standpoint, would entail a cautious and internally critical return to the category of religion, at least for the purposes of pedagogy. Focusing on the discursive,<sup>101</sup> rather than on the deconstructive, might aid educational endeavors. As a result, educators and

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<sup>97</sup> Schilbrack, "Religions: Are There Any?," 1113.

<sup>98</sup> Schilbrack, "Religions: Are There Any?," 1113.

<sup>99</sup> Schilbrack, "Religions: Are There Any?," 1113.

<sup>100</sup> Schilbrack, "Religions: Are There Any?," 1113.

<sup>101</sup> Christopher Cotter, "Ideal Types, Semantic Anarchy, and the Study of Atheism (etc.)," *The Religious Studies Project Blog*, 12 April 2019, [https://www.religiousstudiesproject.com/2019/04/12/ideal-types-semantic-anarchy-and-the-study-of-atheism-etc/?fbclid=IwAR0Xplheuqd2DJOIzwjFrSzXqQ8p7OBMLO\\_A3sagrKpa98HHF\\_NxYzeZbxs](https://www.religiousstudiesproject.com/2019/04/12/ideal-types-semantic-anarchy-and-the-study-of-atheism-etc/?fbclid=IwAR0Xplheuqd2DJOIzwjFrSzXqQ8p7OBMLO_A3sagrKpa98HHF_NxYzeZbxs).

policymakers should build on a critical realist understanding of religion in order to advance the discussion. Eliminating challenging language, as we have seen, does not eliminate its attendant challenge: it only reconfigures old dynamics in new ways, or worse, brings in unanticipated new challenges that result from unclear terminology.

Although such a move risks elevating religion over other categories in potentially problematic ways, such a project might be feasible if educators and policy makers heeded critical religion's warning that the categories of religion and secular are both constructed and contingent. Genealogical accounts of religion as a category, might do the work of critical religion without changing the terminology: to not only point to the historical, contingent nature of our categories, but also to suggest ways forward for applying them critically and self-reflexively. Even though such vigilance about the implications and contingencies of category would not safeguard completely against uses and abuses of the category of religion, it would help clarify for the purposes of academic study and public discourse. If we accept the critical religion position of religion as a contested, contingent, historically and geographically dependent category, then the next step entails continuing to be vigilant about, and attuned to, the ways in which the category gets deployed in educational contexts and public discourse.

Disaggregating moves, such as those recently advocated by Laborde, might have the clear benefit of equal legal treatment of varying viewpoints, but may not aid scholarship or enhance understanding. Laborde's theory, by her own acknowledgement, aims to target the

legal dimension of civic life—construed in terms of protections for individual and group identity claim. An ability to treat individuals and groups fairly and “on the same terms”<sup>102</sup> represents a critical benefit of such an approach.

Applying such a logic to educational spaces, however, has the capacity to produce confusion, rather than clarity. Therein lies the challenge. One possible explanation for the resurgence of worldviews, and the attendant move towards a disaggregation of terms, is the conflation of legal with educational aims. Laborde’s model, for example, advances an understanding of viewpoints that lends itself to juridical spaces. After all, the need for adjudication of rights-based claims faces a challenge when certain claims receive varying weightings, depending on the nature and origin of such claims. Although such a move might lend itself to equality before the law, it might generate confusion when applied as a teaching strategy. Going forward, as a result, it will be critical to disentangle such aims. What works for the law does not necessarily serve the interest of education. As the religious literacy example highlights, rather than veering into the territory of legal strategies of disaggregation, scholars and policymakers would do well to stay on the path of critical realism: both acknowledging the fraught history of the term religion, and, at the same time, reaping the benefits of using language that serves a function in educational contexts.

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<sup>102</sup> Laborde, *Liberalism’s Religion*, 3.

## 7 Conclusion

Returning to Hirschkind's question raised in the introduction of whether or not there is a secular body—with distinct configurations of secular subjectivities and sensibilities—helps bookend this project. At the start of this thesis, I reformulated Hirschkind's question by asking, is there a secular student body? In other words, in what ways are the subjectivities, secular or otherwise, of the intended learners of religious literacy—whether they be primary or secondary school pupils, private-sector workers, diplomats, media professionals, etc.—shaping religious literacy as a discourse and what religious possibilities do such configurations afford and enable?

The answer Hirschkind offers to the original question of whether or not there is a secular body brings the material of this study into sharper focus. On the whole, Hirschkind argues that the difficulty of attempting to pin down a separable, easily differentiated and identifiable set of secular sensibilities and subjectivities points to “an instability at the heart of the secular.”<sup>1</sup> Put differently, the answer would appear that “religious” and “secular” sensibilities are not so easily differentiated, if they are to be distinguished at all. Following from this, the recent affective turn within critical secularism studies suggests new ways of viewing embodied commitments and attachments. Such an intervention has implications for the project of religious literacy, in that it calls us to consider the moving

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Hirschkind, “Is There a Secular Body?,” *Cultural Anthropology*, Vol. 26, No. 4 (October 2011): 644.

“boundaries of the categories of religious and secular” and, perhaps more significantly, the ways in which such categories “are continuously determined.”<sup>2</sup> Paying attention to the habituated, embodied sensibilities and subjectivities of our times in ways that do not reproduce uncritical religious-secular binaries remains the task at hand.

In light of this new scholarship, secular formations—in their historically, geographically, and socially contingent forms—must be examined further. Religious literacy case studies provide timely examples for thinking through some of the implications and complications of examining “the secular as a concept that articulates a constellation of institutions, ideas, and affective orientations that constitute an important dimension of what we call modernity and its defining forms of knowledge and practice.”<sup>3</sup> The religious literacy cases that occupied the pages of this thesis help illustrate how these “defining forms of knowledge and practice” operate.

Specifically, my project has raised concerns about religious literacy as both a discourse and a practice. As a fundamental premise, the foregoing thesis took the perspective that religious literacy’s connection to liberal norms and precepts needs to be reconsidered and revised. Showing the blind spots that arise from such emphases—the policy conversation’s elevation of rationality, autonomy, choice, and textuality—this project has called attention to the inbuilt challenges of religious literacy. Religious literacy, despite

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<sup>2</sup> Hirschkind, “Is There a Secular Body?,” 643.

<sup>3</sup> Hirschkind, “Is There a Secular Body?,” 633.

its advantages in aiming to inform and engage wider publics, risks positioning understandings of religions within the context of civility, civics, and enhanced democratic discourse. As this thesis has suggested, such starting points and agendas have the potential to shape depictions of religions in accordance with liberal precepts of reason and language. These emphases preclude other, equally relevant, possibilities and limit the scope from the outset.

Acknowledging and pushing past some of these challenges opens up new possibilities for religious literacy in policy and practice. On the whole, this thesis has aimed to generate some fresh thinking towards the project of religious literacy by developing the case that the discourse, and resulting implementation, must be rebalanced to account for the affective, lived, and embodied potentials in religions and teaching about religions. The emergent areas of critical secularism studies and affect theory shine a light on what gets left behind if policymakers and educators fail to take such critical factors into account. From ambivalence towards the role of bodies in the classroom to promoting democratic discourse as a learning outcome, religious literacy as a discourse advances a particular construal of religion and, by extension, of pedagogical approaches to the subject.

Perhaps, above all, religious literacy offers a seemingly attractive solution in the face of an increasing focus on standards of measurability and outcomes. Considering what makes a person “religiously literate,” then, points inevitably to learning models which

lend themselves to evaluation metrics in the form of increased religious literacy. However, as this thesis urges, there is a need for increased reflection about the discourse and its accompanying aims among academic, educational, and policy professionals—in other words, those key stakeholders in shaping religious literacy’s future.

This thesis started with the question of how religious literacy, as an organizing framework for understanding religions, functions in public policy production. Further, in so doing, it asked what the current discourse overlooked. In examining these questions, I proposed that paying attention to the role of the affective and embodied possibilities within the “secular” points to new ways of seeing the ever-expanding policy conversation. As developed over the course of the six body chapters, religious literacy tells us as much about current understandings of the category of religion as it does about the varying ways in which we inhabit the secular. The strategy of framing religious literacy as a set of tools for navigating and engaging with religions in liberal contexts suggests particular configurations of religions in policymaking. The thesis has shown that an emphasis on democracy-building in the form of advancing one or more of the agendas of equity, social cohesion, active citizenship, and democratic self-awareness shapes the possibilities for the presentation of religions in such programs. Concerns about prosocial behavior in religiously pluralist settings guide the debate and, in so doing, dictate the terms of engagement from the start.

Taken together, the six chapters present a note of caution and propose a new perspective on religious literacy that widens the theoretical lens to include affective, embodied possibilities and their implications. Chapter 1 told the story of religious literacy's entanglements with themes of secularity. Through analyzing multiple approaches to religious literacy, this chapter showed the emphases on values, content knowledge, and skills-building that characterize much of the discussion around religious literacy. Further, in examining the critical responses to calls to action, Chapter 1 showed religious literacy's engagement with the concept of the "secular" and pointed to what such tensions suggest about current secular formations. It demonstrated how liberal precepts functioned as structuring principles for operationalizing religious literacy—something both proponents' and distractors' commentaries suggested. Chapter 2, with its focus on religious literacy as public scholarship and its corresponding configurations of the so-called public sphere, pointed to the possibilities behind the discourse. Using Taylor's concept of "Secularity 3" as a starting point for the analysis, this chapter examined the strategy of emphasizing the notion of student choice as part of a wider project of democracy building and calling for increased public attention to religions. Further, in critiquing religion's purported marginalization from public life, advocates of religious literacy aim to reclaim such a narrative from theocrats, and, in so doing, risk tacking too far in the opposite direction: framing religion in terms of voluntarism, individual discernment, and choice. Such emphases, this chapter argued, results from religious literacy's positioning as a tool of active citizenship and democratic self-awareness in ways that have the capacity to shape presentations of religions in religious literacy.

Chapter 3 problematized religious literacy's entanglements with the aims of liberal education, exposed its emphasis on textuality, and pointed to possible stumbling blocks within the pedagogical practices of religious literacy that result from such starting positions. This chapter reconsidered assumptions about the agential frame within the modern scene of education to argue that religious literacy must begin attending to the affective dimensions both of understandings of religions and of pedagogic practices, or risk reproducing existing challenges. Chapter 4 advanced the previous chapter's critique by connecting religious literacy to discussions of liberal tolerance and toleration. This chapter demonstrated that religious literacy proposals engage in affective work by putting forward a project of cultivating particular attitudes and dispositions about and towards religions. It rounded out the discussion by evaluating the concepts of "agonistic respect" and "deep equality," pointing to the ways in which recent critiques of tolerance policies have the capacity to reproduce old challenges through an overreliance on, and assumption of, autonomous self-regulation. Building on the discussion of the previous chapter, Chapter 5 focused on workplace religious literacy case studies to examine the implications of using religious literacy to habituate and inculcate particular attitudes towards religion and religions. In so doing, it examined the implications of deploying religious literacy as a social practice aimed at promoting enhanced coworker relations, better business practices, and strategies for engaging with increasingly globalized workforces and clienteles. Chapter 6 took on the definitional challenges accompanying the category of "religion," addressing precisely what proponents of religious literacy mean by "religion" when they call for increased knowledge and skills on the subject. It

argued that, against the backdrop of an apparent rise of religiously unaffiliated populations, religious literacy advances a bridge-building project between purportedly identifiably “religious” and “nonreligious” populations in ways that have the capacity to collapse difference. Problematizing such a project, this final chapter critiqued recent calls to innovate more inclusive vocabularies in the form of the resurgent focus on “worldviews” as a corrective to exclusionary understandings of religions.

Where, then, does this leave us? Acknowledging the normative distinctions religious literacy as a discourse promotes represents the first step in not reproducing such approaches in future studies and proposals. Recognizing, moreover, that religious literacy has come to function as a structuring principle for the public understanding of religions heightens the urgency and timeliness of this recognition. If such a conversation continues to configure educational and policy discourse, then religious literacy must begin to show a more complete picture of religions and the “secular” in ways that push past an overemphasis on language and reason.

As a start, constructing a religious literacy that is vigilant in not reproducing essentializing and universalizing understandings, while at the same time making sufficient room for critique and complexity, would constitute a significant move in the right direction. Relatedly, future religious literacy programs should address the role of religiously unaffiliated populations in ways that do not turn “nonreligion” uncritically into another categorically bounded world religion. Second, updating the content of religious literacy

programs to help learners think critically about how, why, and when we make something “religious” would help advance the discussion by highlighting the ways the categories of “religion” and the “secular” get constructed and deployed. Third, and perhaps most importantly, recognizing the ways in which promoting the aims of democratic discourse through religious literacy has the capacity to impact the subject material of such trainings in ways that emphasize the textual, cognitive, and rational would be crucial in rebalancing the content towards the embodied, material, and the lived dimensions encompassed in the subject.

Acknowledging blind spots constitutes a steppingstone towards “materializing” religious literacy. Continuing to rethink religious literacy in practice for our purportedly secular age remains the project at hand. One possible way forward, as this thesis has proposed, calls for educators and policymakers to think about “secularity as a social and cultural reality, richly textured by embodied performance as well as commitments, attachments, hopes, obligations, fears and joys.”<sup>4</sup> Until we do so, religious literacy will continue to reach the impasses discussed in this thesis, such as a sidelining of the affective, embodied dimensions of religions and educational settings.

The implications of this critique extend beyond the context of religious literacy and into broader pedagogical conversation around world religions within religious studies. Out of

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<sup>4</sup> Monique Scheer, Nadia Fadil, and Birgitte Schlepelern Johansen, “Secular Embodiments: Mapping an Emerging Field,” in *Secular Bodies, Affects and Emotions: European Configurations*, eds. Monique Scheer, Nadia Fadil, and Birgitte Schlepelern Johansen (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019), 1.

new research and public perceptions regarding a changing religious landscape emerges a need to engage with religions, and the “secular,” in ways that speak to present concerns and considerations. Within the past few years, religious studies scholars have, increasingly, turned their attention to evaluating and revising the World Religions Paradigm (WRP) as a teaching tool. Although such critiques have circulated for a number of years, only recently has the idea of critically overhauling the WRP not only in theory, but also in practice, taken hold. As an example of this shift and renewed interest, recent edited volumes have suggested that we are converging on a moment “after world religions,”<sup>5</sup> a time in which the past taxonomic schemes no longer serve the interests of the present. Such academic interventions have called for a revamping of religious studies curricula to move beyond the holdovers of the past, such as essentializing tendencies, universalizing Protestant Christian understandings of religions, and colonial power configurations embedded in world religions courses.<sup>6</sup>

Out of this conversation emerges the question of whether or not secularism, itself, constitutes a world religion.<sup>7</sup> A newly released issue of the religious studies journal *Implicit Religion*, for example, takes up such concerns and asks the provocative question: Is secularism a world religion?<sup>8</sup> Such calls for critical consideration, some of which urge

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<sup>5</sup> See: *After World Religions: Reconstructing Religious Studies*, eds. Christopher Cotter and David G. Robertson (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016).

<sup>6</sup> Christopher Cotter and David G. Robertson, “Introduction: The World Religions Paradigm in Contemporary Religious Studies,” in *After World Religions: Reconstructing Religious Studies*, eds. Christopher Cotter and David G. Robertson (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), 7.

<sup>7</sup> Christopher Cotter and Donovan O. Schaefer, “Is Secularism a World Religion?,” *Implicit Religion*, Vol. 22, No. 1 (2019): 30-41.

<sup>8</sup> Cotter and Schaefer, “Is Secularism a World Religion?,” 30.

for critique from within the WRP<sup>9</sup> while others advocate for the complete abolition of the existing model,<sup>10</sup> point to the need for new case studies with which to examine whether or not current teaching strategies reflect concerns of the present.

This thesis has invited theoretical reflections into “materializing” liberalism, or better yet, acknowledging its embodied and affective possibilities, to push past some of the current impasses. Religious literacy, as a growing policy discourse, in this way provides a timely case study for examining what works and what does not, within this wider conversation among the academe and broader publics. It also, perhaps more significantly, points to the need for increased engagement with critical secularism studies as a teaching tool. To date, the majority of scholarship focusing on secular themes engages with political secularism. However, as suggested throughout this project, much work remains to be done on examining secularity as a social and cultural practice—and its attendant impact on policy and practice.

How, then, will we confront questions of secularity within teaching about religions, without turning the “secular,” uncritically, into another world religion within the much-critiqued WRP? Moreover, how will policymakers and educators avoid the “will to religion” trap, what Beaman identifies as the erroneous assumption in policy contexts

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<sup>9</sup> See: Cotter and Schaefer, “Is Secularism a World Religion?,” 30-41.

<sup>10</sup> See: Tenzan Eaghll, “Secularism is Not a World Religion,” *Implicit Religion*, Vol. 22, No. 1 (2019): 42-49.

that suggests “that we are all religious or that we all have spiritual needs”?<sup>11</sup> In other words, how can we think critically about themes related to religions without resurrecting a “renewed religious universalism” that places “an overemphasis on religion”<sup>12</sup> by elevating, and thereby imposing, the concept in policy circles? These questions remain largely unanswered at present and still open for further debate, reflection, and consideration.

Just as we need a revisioning of the WRP, so too do we need a reconsideration of religious literacy: one that helps push past some of the existing challenges. The conversation around religious literacy, as the chapters of this thesis have suggested, raises questions about the future of teaching about religions and secularity—replete with accompanying contexts, concerns, and complications. There is a wider story to tell, and, as a result, these questions remain open for further study and must occupy future work. In response, the perspectives and approaches offered by critical secularism studies and affect theory enable us to begin rethinking teaching about religions in ways that account for emotional attachments and embodied experiences within our own settings—in other words, within the wider cultures of liberal democracies. Going forward, this necessary work would help create an increasingly critical, complex, and reflective religious literacy for our ostensibly secular age.

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<sup>11</sup> Lori Beaman, “The Will to Religion: Obligatory Religious Citizenship,” *Critical Research on Religion*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (2013): 143.

<sup>12</sup> Beaman, “The Will to Religion,” 143.

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