



Book Review:

A New “Bible” for Religious Literacy and Engagement

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A New “Bible” for Religious Literacy and Engagement

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Until recently, few books equipped readers with practical tools for engaging the ever-expanding world of faith. The post-9/11 wars drove policymakers and analysts to try to understand complex and ancient societies, but the religious landscape was often left unexplored. And when authors wrote about the role of religion and politics, they ignored or failed to understand the dynamics of lived religion as separate from theology and doctrine. Why? Because they needed greater literacy on the topic.

The salience of belief and faith touches every facet of society and governance, both at home and abroad. Some have smartly delved into this space. Peter Berger’s classics still ring true but are increasingly dated. Erin K. Wilson’s recent ["Religion and World Politics"](https://www.routledge.com/Religion-and-World-Politics/book/9781032000000) (Routledge, 2022) provides a practical but introductory guide to understanding religion and world politics. However, global events require more.

Thankfully, Chris Seiple and Dennis Hoover have collaborated to create an invaluable contribution to the field, a new “bible” for religious engagement.

The [*"Routledge Handbook of Religious Literacy, Pluralism, and Global Engagement"*](#) is an edited work highlighting the contributions of almost 40 scholars, activists, and academics. The book was made possible through the combined support of the Templeton Religion Trust and the Issachar Fund. And now the Handbook is entirely free online thanks to the Fetzer Institute providing a permanently open-access electronic version.

Seiple and Hoover frame the Handbook's three sections around two novel concepts: “covenantal pluralism” and “cross-cultural religious literacy.” Cross-cultural religious literacy, as they write, is a means to covenantal pluralism. These conceptual strings run throughout the Handbook's 456 pages divided into three sections.

“Covenantal pluralism,” as described in Chapter 2, is “characterized both by a constitutional order of equal rights and responsibilities and by a culture of reciprocal commitment to engaging, respecting, and protecting the other – albeit without necessarily conceding equal veracity or moral equivalence to the beliefs and behaviors of others.” (p. 30) In other words, individuals and groups respect and protect the rights of others to hold differing beliefs on fundamental issues without creating lowest common denominator theology that satisfies no one.

Seiple and Hoover in the introduction break down “cross-cultural religious literacy” into two elements: competencies and skills. “Put simply, we must first understand ourselves (a personal competency), and then understand others as they understand themselves (a comparative competency), and then understand the nature and requirements of leadership in crossing cultural and religious barriers for the sake of practical collaboration, which tends to yield civil solidarity (a collab-

orative competency).” (p. 11) But competency must be match with ability – or skill – “informed by historical experience and precedents of multi-faith endeavors” (p. 12) regarding evaluation, negotiation, and communication.

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With this foundation, Part I tackles the question “*What is religious literacy for?*” and examines different religious interpretations of the concept of covenantal pluralism against global faiths. Authors from various Christian denominations provide perspectives, as do authors from Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, and secular humanism. The concept of covenantal pluralism is still relatively new, so having its foundations means-tested against world faiths brings the concept into conversation with historic belief traditions and interfaith understanding.

Part II asks the question, “*Who needs religious literacy?*” Here, practitioners in the field of human rights, inter-faith engagement, and academia offer different takes on covenantal pluralism in the context of their work. In Part II, cross-cultural religious literacy comes to the fore, and topics touch upon religious literacy in edu-

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cation, development and humanitarian relief, diplomacy, journalism, and diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI). The differing perspectives and opinions demonstrate the relevance of covenantal pluralism to fields outside of religion and global affairs.

Lastly, Part III poses arguably the most crucial question of the book, *“Where can religious literacy and covenantal pluralism make a difference?”* Here, many esteemed activists and thinkers grapple with this question, examining almost every region of the world – North and South America, Europe, the Middle East, and Asia. However, other than a view from South Africa, the lack of an in-depth discussion about sub-Saharan Africa unfortunately overlooks the serious human rights challenges of colliding faiths across a deeply religious continent. The book, however, directly confronts complex issues in the U.S. context, such as LGBTQI rights, the development of pluralist leadership, and a case study of Muslims engaging with American Christian conservatives.

Overall, Seiple and Hoover, along with their dozens of authors, have created an indispensable resource that will expand religious literacy for those seeking to better understand the impact of lived belief upon world affairs. As Seiple and Hoover write in the introduction, “no matter our different spiritual epistemologies and/or ethical frameworks, it is in our collective self-interest to find a way to work together.” (p. 5) For this goal, we can all say “amen.”

About CFIG

The Center for Faith, Identity, and Globalization (CFIG) is the interdisciplinary research and publication unit of Rumi Forum. CFIG contributes to the knowledge and research at the intersection of faith, identity, and globalization by generating semi-academic analyses and facilitating scholarly exchanges. CFIG's spectrum of themes will cover contemporary subjects that are relevant to our understanding of the connection between faith, identity, and globalization, such as interfaith engagement, religious nationalism, conflict resolution, globalization, religious freedom, and spirituality.

About the Contributor

Knox Thames is currently a Senior Fellow at the Institute for Global Engagement and a Senior Visiting Expert at the U.S. Institute of Peace, with the Middle East and Religion & Inclusive Societies teams. Most recently, he served as the former Special Advisor for Religious Minorities in the Near East and South / Central Asia at the U.S. Department of State under Obama and Trump administrations. The first to serve in this special envoy role, he received a civil service appointment in 2015 to lead State Department efforts to support religious minorities in these regions. During his 20-year government career, among others, Knox has also served at the Helsinki Commission and the U.S. Commission for International Religious Freedom. In addition, from 2004-2012, he was a State Department appointee to the OSCE Panel of Experts on Freedom of Religion or Belief. He received a BA from Georgetown College (KY), a JD (cum laude) from American University's Washington College of Law, and an MA from the School of International Service at American University.

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when they interact.**



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