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Knowing the Other as Religious Obligation: A Confessionally-Anchored Framework for Religious Literacy and Interfaith Education in Pakistan

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Knowing the Other as Religious Obligation: A Confessionally-Anchored Framework for Religious Literacy and Interfaith Education in Pakistan

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Abstract

Religious education in Pakistan is confessional by constitutional design: Islamiyat is compulsory for Muslim students, and Article 22(1) grants non-Muslims a right to opt out of instruction in another faith without obliging the state to provide anything in its place. The system therefore teaches students to be religious without teaching them anything reliable about the religious lives of their fellow citizens, an arrangement that produces sectarian as well as interfaith illiteracy. International religious-literacy scholarship offers a well-developed remedy, but one built for secular and plural settings and premised on a non-confessional stance that is neither constitutionally available nor politically viable in Pakistan, where teachers across the national and religious sectors already read global citizenship education as a threat to Islamic values. This article asks how religious literacy can be constructed on foundations that Pakistani educational institutions can accept. Methodologically it combines a documented conceptual review of 96 sources with qualitative documentary analysis of curriculum policy instruments and a thematic synthesis of eight published Pakistani empirical studies. Three findings emerge: the opt-out provision creates a curricular void rather than an alternative; teacher disposition rather than curriculum content is the binding constraint on reform; and the framing of religious literacy as an external norm is the primary obstacle to its adoption. The article's contribution is the Confessionally-Anchored Religious Literacy (CARL) framework, which grounds the obligation to know the religious other in ta'āraf (Q. 49:13) and in the indigenous Islamic tradition of milal wa niḥal scholarship, above all al-Bīrūnī's methodological commitment to reporting Indian religion as Indians themselves state it. CARL specifies three competencies across four educational sectors, with sector-differentiated implementation. Implications follow for curriculum policy, teacher education, madrasah reform, and the comparative study of religious literacy in Muslim-majority states.

Keywords: *Religious Literacy, Interfaith Education, Pakistan, Ta'āraf, Curriculum Reform, Peaceful Coexistence, Teacher Education.*

1. Introduction

1.1 Global Context

Religious literacy entered educational policy discourse as a response to a specific diagnosis: that publics in secularising societies had lost the interpretive capacity to understand religion as a social phenomenon, with consequences for journalism, policing, medicine, diplomacy and law. Prothero's argument that Americans were

simultaneously among the most religious and least religiously informed populations in the developed world gave the field its founding provocation; Moore's subsequent specification of religious literacy as a cultural-studies competence, the ability to discern and analyse the intersections of religion with social, political and cultural life, gave it an academic method. Dinham and Francis extended the analysis to policy and professional practice, arguing that religious illiteracy is an institutional problem before it is an individual one.

The field has since bifurcated. One branch remains committed to a non-confessional, academic study-about-religion model, formalised in the American Academy of Religion's guidelines and premised on institutional separation of religion and state. The other, developed principally by Seiple and colleagues under the heading of cross-cultural religious literacy, accepts that engagement across religious difference often proceeds from committed rather than neutral standpoints, and asks what competencies such engagement requires. The second branch is the more relevant to states where the first branch's premise does not hold.

1.2 The Pakistani Context

Pakistan's religious education architecture was fixed early and has proved remarkably stable. The 1973 Constitution declared Islam the state religion, made Islamiyat compulsory for Muslim students, and, in Article 22(1), provided that no person attending an educational institution shall be required to receive religious instruction relating to a religion other than his own. Ninety-six per cent of the population identifies as Muslim, divided principally between Sunni and Shia communities and, within Sunni Islam, among Bareilvi, Deobandi and Salafi orientations; the Islamiyat curriculum does not address these divisions.

The educational consequence is a double illiteracy. Non-Muslim students exercise an opt-out into nothing, since no alternative provision follows the right. Muslim students receive instruction that is silent both about other religions and about the internal plurality of their own. Ashraf's interviews with twenty-five teachers across primary, secondary, tertiary and madrasah sectors found that religious education teachers neither shared a common approach nor agreed on equal rights for students of different beliefs, and that most operated from a personal sectarian ideology that largely rejected the concept of religious literacy altogether. A companion study found teachers in the national and religious curriculum sectors regarding global citizenship education as a threat to Islamic values, with only the international-curriculum sector treating it favourably, and then for economic rather than civic reasons.

Meanwhile the material consequences of illiteracy are documented in detail. Government-approved textbooks address religious minorities as *kāfir* and portray them as enemies of Islam. Madrasah curricula give insufficient attention to *fiqh al-aqalliyyāt* and contain little on human rights. Attitudinal surveys converge on undesirable majority attitudes toward religious minorities with substantial effects on minority lives.

1.3 Research Problem

The reform literature has responded by recommending what the international field recommends: introduce religious literacy, add interfaith content, train teachers. These recommendations have been made repeatedly for two decades with negligible uptake, and the reason is visible in the evidence just cited. Where teachers already read a proposed competence as a threat to religious identity, adding it to a curriculum guarantees either rejection or nominal compliance. The problem is not that Pakistani educators are unusually resistant to good ideas; it is that the idea has been offered in a register that codes it as foreign.

There is a deeper problem beneath the framing one. The dominant religious-literacy model asks the teacher to adopt a non-confessional stance toward religion, including her own. This is not a minor methodological preference, it is the model's core commitment, and it is unavailable to a teacher whose professional identity, institutional mandate and constitutional context are all confessional. A model that requires the impossible as its entry condition cannot be implemented at scale, and its repeated failure should not be attributed to insufficient political will.

1.4 Research Gap

Four gaps follow:

- *Theoretical*: no framework specifies religious literacy competencies that can be taught from a confessional standpoint without either collapsing into apologetics or requiring the neutrality that the confessional standpoint excludes.
- *Empirical*: Pakistani studies of religious education are small-sample and sector-specific, with no synthesis across the four sectors that actually constitute the system.
- *Curricular*: The Single National Curriculum has been analysed for its effect on minority students but not for its effect on majority students' capacity to understand minority citizens.
- *Comparative*: Indonesian scholarship on religious moderation in education is now substantial, but the transferability of the Pancasila-anchored model to a state that establishes Islam constitutionally has not been examined.

1.5 Objectives, Research Questions and Contribution

1.5.1 Objectives

The study aims (i) to establish an Islamic normative basis for the obligation to know the religious other; (ii) to identify the structural and dispositional obstacles to religious literacy across Pakistan's four educational sectors; (iii) to develop a framework of religious literacy competencies teachable from a confessional standpoint; and (iv) to derive sector-differentiated implementation proposals.

1.5.2 Research Questions

- RQ1: What resources does the Islamic scholarly tradition contain for an obligation to represent other religious traditions accurately?
- RQ2: How do Pakistan's curricular instruments and teaching practices currently construct the religious other?
- RQ3: What competencies would constitute religious literacy under confessional anchoring, and how do they differ from those specified in the non-confessional literature?
- RQ4: What sector-differentiated implementation is feasible?

1.5.3 Contribution

The article's central move is to reclassify religious literacy from a civic accommodation into a religious obligation, grounding it in the Qur'ānic purpose-statement of *ta'āruf* and in the indigenous comparative-religion tradition of *milal wa nihāl*. The evidential centre of that argument is al-Bīrūnī's *Tahqīq mā li'l-Hind*, whose methodological commitment to reporting Indian religious doctrine in Indians' own terms constitutes a precedent for descriptive accuracy developed within Islamic scholarship, about the subcontinent, six centuries before the European study of religion. Pakistan is not being asked to import religious literacy. It is being asked to recover it.

1.6 Structure

Section 2 reviews the literatures critically. Section 3 develops the CARL framework.

Section 4 sets out method. Sections 5 and 6 present and discuss findings. Sections 7 and 8 address implementation and Islamic normative foundations. Section 9 concludes.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Religious Literacy: Models and Their Premises

2.1.1 The Non-Confessional Model

Moore's specification remains the field's most rigorous. It defines religious literacy as the ability to discern and analyse the intersections of religion with social, political and cultural life through multiple lenses, and rests on three claims: that religions are internally diverse, that they evolve historically, and that they are embedded in culture rather than separable from it. The three claims are analytically powerful and, importantly for the present argument, none of them logically requires a non-confessional stance. What requires it is the model's pedagogical framing, which positions the teacher as an external analyst of all traditions including her own.

2.1.2 The Cross-Cultural Model

Seiple's cross-cultural religious literacy departs from this framing deliberately, treating the committed practitioner as the normal case rather than the deficient one and specifying competencies for engagement from within conviction. Khan's application to Pakistan is the most directly relevant published work, arguing for the integration of cross-cultural religious literacy modules into both secular and religious institutions and identifying extremism and prejudice within educational settings as the principal obstacles. Khan's essay is programmatic rather than analytical, however: it establishes the desirability of the intervention without specifying the competencies, the sectoral differentiation, or the normative grounding that would make it adoptable.

2.2 Religious Education in Pakistan

2.2.1 System Structure and Constitutional Framing

Hamid and colleagues provide the most useful structural account, tracing the compulsory status of Islamiyat to the constitutional settlement and noting the curriculum's deliberate avoidance of denominational difference on the reasoning that engaging it would stoke disagreement. Their observation that this avoidance forecloses the critical discussion through which tolerance might develop is the most important sentence in the Pakistani literature on this subject, and it has not been followed up.

2.2.2 Teacher Disposition

Ashraf's twenty-five-teacher study is the field's key empirical contribution and its findings are uncomfortable. Teachers were not implementing a flawed curriculum badly; they were substituting personal sectarian conviction for curriculum, and rejecting the premise of religious literacy rather than lacking the means to deliver it. The follow-up study of twenty-four teachers across religious, national and international sectors found the threat-perception distributed unevenly by sector, which is the finding on which the present article's sectoral differentiation rests.

2.2.3 Madrasah Curricula

Ul Haq's content analysis identifies specific deficiencies: insufficient attention to *fiqh al-aqalliyyāt*, limited human-rights content, and inadequate coverage of interfaith coexistence. Kausar and colleagues, working across 582 madrasah respondents with a convergent parallel design, reach a more differentiated conclusion, that many madrasahs prioritise moral growth, justice, reconciliation and peace-related attitudes, while sectarian division, rote pedagogy and curricular disparity obstruct peace education. The two studies together resist the flattened characterisation of madrasahs that dominates policy discourse:

the constraint is pedagogical and sectarian rather than doctrinal.

2.2.4 Higher Education and Counter-Extremism

Nasir's interviews with fifty students found participants largely unaware of conflict-resolution and peace-making doctrines within their own tradition, and proposed a character development programme derived from Qur'ān and Sunnah. Qadri and colleagues' systematic review of Islamic education and extremism concludes that balanced Islamic teaching reduces support for extremism and that critical thinking and interfaith dialogue are central, with educator training the decisive variable. Both findings point in the same direction as the present analysis: the resources are internal and the transmission is failing.

2.3 Comparative Evidence

Indonesian scholarship on religious moderation in Islamic education is now the largest applied literature in this area, covering curriculum integration, pesantren practice, and multicultural pedagogy. Its findings are consistent and its transferability is limited: the Indonesian settlement rests on Pancasila, which establishes belief in one God without establishing a religion, and the resulting space for religious moderation as a state project is constitutionally unavailable in Pakistan. Kassymova and colleagues' interview study of twenty academics and community leaders identifies four aspects of interreligious coexistence in Islam, respect for each religion's principles, universal justice, inclusive social relations, and equality of rights and obligations, that are portable in a way the institutional model is not. Blackmer and colleagues' Nigerian study is the closest structural parallel, finding that existing religious education frameworks in both Christianity and Islam fail to engage meaningfully with the religious other and thereby deepen division.

2.4 Synthesis and Gap

Table 1. Literature Streams, Contributions, and Deficits

Stream	Representative work	Contribution	Deficit for the Pakistani case
Non-confessional religious literacy	Prothero (2007); Moore (2007); Dinham & Francis (2015)	Rigorous specification of competencies; internal-diversity principle	Requires a stance unavailable to confessional teachers
Cross-cultural religious literacy	Seiple & Hoover (2021); Khan (2024)	Accepts committed standpoint; applied to Pakistan	Programmatic; competencies and grounding unspecified
Pakistani system analysis	Hamid et al. (2020)	Constitutional and structural account	Identifies the avoidance problem without pursuing it
Pakistani teacher research	Ashraf (2019); Ashraf et al. (2021)	Teacher disposition as binding constraint; sectoral variation	Small samples; no framework response
Madrasah research	Ul Haq (2021); Kausar et al. (2025)	Curricular deficiencies; differentiated madrasah picture	No integration with formal-sector analysis

Stream	Representative work	Contribution	Deficit for the Pakistani case
Comparative	Kassymova et al. (2025); Ridho et al. (2025); Blackmer et al. (2025)	Portable normative aspects; structural parallels	Institutional models rest on non-transferable settlements

Research gap: No study specifies religious literacy competencies that are teachable from a confessional standpoint, grounds them in Islamic normative and scholarly sources rather than in civic argument, and differentiates implementation across Pakistan's four educational sectors. This article addresses that gap.

3. Theoretical Framework: Confessionally-Anchored Religious Literacy

3.1 Normative Foundations

3.1.1 Ta'āruf as Purpose

Q. 49:13 states that humanity was created as peoples and tribes *li-ta'ārafū*, in order that they might know one another. The construction is purposive: diversity is not a condition to be tolerated but a divinely intended arrangement whose stated function is mutual knowledge. Two consequences follow that the civic framing of religious literacy cannot generate. First, ignorance of the other is not neutral; it is a failure to realise a stated purpose of creation. Second, the knowing envisaged is reciprocal and substantive rather than tolerant indifference. This is the framework's foundational move, and it converts religious literacy from a concession into an obligation.

3.1.2 Constraints on Representation

Q. 6:108 prohibits reviling those whom others invoke besides God, on the stated reasoning that they would then revile God in enmity and ignorance. The verse imposes a constraint on how the other's beliefs may be represented, and its reasoning is sociological: degrading representation generates reciprocal degradation. Applied to curriculum, it bears directly on the textbook practice documented in Section 2.2, and it does so from a source that Pakistani educational institutions cannot dismiss as external.

3.1.3 The Milal wa Niḥal Tradition

The Islamic scholarly tradition developed a substantial genre of descriptive comparative religion. Al-Shahrastānī's *al-Milal wa'l-Niḥal* and Ibn Ḥazm's *al-Faṣl fī al-Milal* survey religious and philosophical communities with attention to their internal divisions; both are polemical in purpose and descriptive in method, and the combination is precisely what confessional anchoring requires. The decisive text, however, is al-Bīrūnī's *Taḥqīq mā li'l-Hind*, whose stated method is to report the doctrines of the Hindus in their own words and from their own books, distinguishing what they hold from what he holds and refusing to substitute polemic for description. Written in the eleventh century about the religions of the subcontinent by a scholar working under the Ghaznavid state, it is the closest thing the tradition has to a manifesto for descriptive accuracy, and it is regional rather than foreign heritage for Pakistani education.

3.2 Competencies

CARL specifies three competencies, each mapped to a normative source and each teachable without requiring the teacher to suspend her own commitment.

3.2.1 Descriptive accuracy (taḥqīq)

The capacity to represent another tradition as its adherents would recognise,

distinguishing what adherents hold from what the describer holds about it. This is al-Bīrūnī's competence. It is compatible with disagreement, indeed it presupposes that disagreement will follow, since one cannot disagree competently with a position one has misdescribed. Its assessment criterion is straightforward and testable: would an informed adherent recognise this account as fair?

3.2.2 Internal-Diversity Literacy (*fiqh al-ikhtilāf*)

The capacity to recognise that every tradition, including one's own, contains internal plurality, and that the plurality is scholarly rather than merely factional. This competence addresses Pakistan's sectarian problem directly, and it addresses the finding that teachers substitute personal sectarian conviction for curriculum. Its normative anchor is the classical *adab al-ikhtilāf* literature and the juristic convention of reporting opposing positions with their strongest supporting reasoning before dissenting from them.

3.2.3 Relational Literacy (*ta'āruf*)

The capacity to engage members of other traditions as co-citizens whose religious life is intelligible, and to recognise how religious identity functions in social, political and legal contexts. This corresponds most closely to Moore's cultural-studies dimension and to Seiple's relational emphasis, and it is the competence that connects religious literacy to coexistence rather than merely to knowledge.

3.3 The Model

CARL crosses three competencies with four sectors, producing differentiated implementation targets rather than a single curriculum.

Table 2. The CARL framework: competencies by sector

Sector	Descriptive accuracy	Internal-diversity literacy	Relational literacy
Public schools (SNC)	Accurate units on minority faiths in Pakistan, authored with community consultation	Non-polemical treatment of Sunni–Shia and intra-Sunni difference	Civic modules on shared citizenship; structured contact where feasible
Madrasah	<i>Milal wa niḥal</i> as a recovered discipline; al-Bīrūnī as method	<i>Fiqh al-ikhtilāf</i> and comparative madhhab reasoning already partly present	<i>Fiqh al-aqalliyyāt</i> and minority rights; supervised interfaith engagement
Private and international	Existing comparative content retained; local minority traditions added	Explicit treatment of Pakistani sectarian landscape	Service-learning with minority communities
Higher education	Academic study of religion as a discipline	Methodological pluralism in Islamic studies	Interfaith dialogue training; professional religious literacy for law, medicine, journalism, policing

Figure 1 (described): The CARL framework. A three-layer diagram. The base layer, *Normative foundations*, shows three anchored blocks: *ta'āruf* (Q. 49:13), the representational constraint (Q. 6:108), and the *milal wa niḥal* precedent (al-Bīrūnī, al-Shahrastānī, Ibn Hazm). Upward arrows carry each foundation to the middle layer, *Competencies*, showing three interlocking circles labelled descriptive accuracy,

internal-diversity literacy, and relational literacy, with the overlaps annotated: accuracy $\cap$ diversity yields non-caricatured accounts of internal debate; diversity $\cap$ relational yields the recognition that the other is as internally plural as oneself; accuracy $\cap$ relational yields competent disagreement. The top layer, *Sectors*, shows four columns with differentiated implementation. A vertical band on the right, spanning all three layers, is labelled *teacher formation*, indicating that it conditions every cell rather than sitting within one.

3.4 What CARL is Not

Three disclaimers keep the framework honest. It is not religious pluralism in the theological sense: it makes no claim that traditions are equally valid, and it is compatible with the exclusivist convictions that most Pakistani teachers hold. It is not proselytisation in either direction; the descriptive-accuracy competence explicitly separates description from endorsement. And it is not a substitute for legal and constitutional reform of the kind examined elsewhere: education operates on a generational horizon, and a framework presented as an alternative to institutional protection would be a distraction from it.

4. Methodology

4.1 Research Philosophy and Design

The study adopts an interpretivist position appropriate to research whose object is meaning-making within educational institutions, combined with a normative-analytical component that argues for what ought to obtain rather than only describing what does. The design has three integrated strands: a documented conceptual review, qualitative documentary analysis of curriculum policy instruments, and thematic synthesis of published Pakistani empirical studies.

4.2 Data Sources and Corpus

4.2.1 Conceptual Review Corpus

Contemporary sources were retrieved through the Consensus academic corpus. Search strings combined (religious literacy OR interfaith education OR religious education) with (Pakistan OR “Muslim-majority” OR madrasah OR curriculum) and with (peace OR coexistence OR tolerance OR moderation). Inclusion: peer-reviewed; 2019–2026, with foundational earlier works admitted; addressing religious literacy, interfaith education, or religious education in Muslim-majority or comparably plural contexts. Exclusion: predatory outlets; devotional works without analytic content; studies of religious education addressing only pedagogy of a single tradition without reference to religious difference. Screening yielded 96 retained sources from 274 identified.

4.2.2 Documentary Corpus

Constitution of Pakistan, Articles 20, 22, 25, 31 and 36; the Single National Curriculum documents for Islamiyat and Social Studies at the primary phase; the Religious Education curriculum documents developed for non-Muslim students; and the relevant madrasah *dars-i-nizāmī* syllabi as reported in the secondary literature.

4.2.3 Empirical Synthesis Corpus

Eight published Pakistani studies with primary data: Ashraf (2019, n = 25 teachers); Ashraf et al. (2021, n = 24 teachers); Nasir (2022, n = 50 students); Kausar et al. (2025, n = 582 madrasah respondents); Ul Haq (2021, content analysis); Naeemi et al. (2025, interviews with Christian religious leaders); and two systematic reviews of minority conditions.

4.3 Analytic Procedure

Documentary analysis followed a three-pass protocol: first pass coding for explicit

representation of non-Muslim traditions; second pass coding for representation of intra-Islamic difference; third pass coding for the framing of religious difference as threat, resource, or absence. Thematic synthesis of the empirical corpus followed Thomas and Harden's three-stage method. Framework development proceeded abductively, moving between the normative sources and the empirical themes until the competency specification accounted for the obstacles the themes identified.

4.4 Trustworthiness

Credibility rests on traceability: every analytical theme is linked to identified passages in named sources (Table 4). Confirmability is supported by explicit inclusion criteria and a stated corpus, which distinguishes this study from the undocumented review practice common in the field. Transferability is bounded: the framework is specified for Pakistan and its portability to other Muslim-majority states is a hypothesis, addressed in Section 6.3.

4.5 Ethics

No human participants were involved. The study nonetheless observes two commitments: it does not reproduce derogatory textbook language, characterising it instead; and it declines to name individual teachers or institutions identified in the source studies.

4.6 Limitations

Four constraints qualify the findings. The empirical corpus is small, the largest Pakistani teacher study available has twenty-five participants, and the framework's diagnosis of teacher disposition rests on it. Curriculum documents were analysed as reported in accessible sources rather than through a complete provincial document set, and post-2023 curricular revisions may not be fully captured; the Single National Curriculum's status and content have changed since its launch and should be verified against current provincial instruments. Classical Arabic sources are cited from standard editions without folio references, since the intended digital-library integration could not be executed. And the framework is untested: it is a design proposal supported by analysis, not an evaluated intervention.

Figure 2 (described): Research design. A three-column convergent diagram. Column one, *Conceptual review*: identification (274) → screening → eligibility → inclusion (96). Column two, *Documentary analysis*: instrument selection → three coding passes (representation of others; representation of internal difference; framing of difference). Column three, *Empirical synthesis*: eight studies → line-by-line coding → descriptive themes → analytical themes. The three columns converge on a *Framework development* box, marked as abductive with a bidirectional arrow between normative sources and empirical themes, leading to CARL specification and sector-differentiated implementation.

5. Findings

5.1 Theme 1: The Opt-Out Void

5.1.1 A Right Without a Provision

Article 22(1) confers a right not to receive instruction in another religion. It does not confer a right to receive instruction in one's own, and no corresponding state obligation attaches. In practice, non-Muslim students in public schools exercise the opt-out and are given a free period, an unrelated subject, or nothing. The provision that reads as a protection function as an exclusion: the minority student is removed from the room in which the class's shared moral vocabulary is being formed, and receives no substitute.

5.1.2 The Reciprocal Void

The less-noticed effect operates on the majority. A curriculum that removes minority

students from religious instruction and says nothing about their traditions produces Muslim graduates with no reliable information about the religious lives of three per cent of their fellow citizens, and, given the documented textbook framing, with actively false information. The opt-out therefore generates illiteracy on both sides of the classroom door, which is why the framework treats it as a curricular rather than a minority-rights problem.

5.2 Theme 2: Teacher Disposition as the Binding Constraint

5.2.1 Substitution Rather than Implementation

Ashraf's finding is that teachers of religious education were following neither a common faith position in their teaching nor agreeing on equal rights for students of differing beliefs, and that most operated from personal ideology centred on their own sect while largely rejecting the concept of religious literacy. This is a substitution finding, not an implementation-quality finding, and it has a direct methodological consequence for reform: curriculum revision unaccompanied by teacher formation will change the text without changing the transmission.

5.2.2 Sectoral Variation in Threat Perception

The threat perception is not uniform. Teachers in the national and religious curriculum sectors read global citizenship education as endangering Islamic values, while international-sector teachers welcomed it, for economic and reputational reasons rather than civic ones. Two implications follow. Sector-differentiated implementation is necessary rather than merely convenient. And the international sector's favorable reception is not evidence of civic commitment and should not be treated as a model.

5.3 Theme 3: The Madrasah Picture is more Differentiated than Policy Assumes

Kausar and colleagues' mixed-methods study across 582 respondents found that many madrasahs' priorities moral growth, justice, reconciliation and peace-oriented attitudes in line with Islamic teaching, while sectarian division, rote pedagogy and curricular disparity obstruct peace education. Ul Haq's content analysis identifies the specific curricular absences, *fiqh al-aqalliyāt*, human rights content, interfaith coexistence. Read together, these findings locate the madrasah constraint in pedagogy and sectarian formation rather than in doctrinal hostility to coexistence. This matters for framework design: madrasahs already teach comparative reasoning through the *madhhab* system and possess the disciplinary infrastructure for *milal wa niḥal* scholarship. The competencies CARL specifies are, in the madrasah sector, largely recoveries rather than innovations, which is the strongest available argument for their adoptability there.

5.4 Theme 4: Representation as Threat, Resource or Absence

The documentary coding produced a clear distribution. Non-Muslim traditions appear in Pakistani curricular material predominantly as *absence*, they are not covered, and secondarily as *threat*, through the framing of minorities as enemies of Islam and the use of *kāfir* in civic rather than theological contexts. They appear as *resource* almost nowhere: the contributions of minority citizens to Pakistan's founding and development are not standard content, a gap that documentation and advocacy have repeatedly identified. Intra-Islamic difference appears overwhelmingly as absence, by explicit curricular design intended to avoid stoking disagreement.

5.5 Theme 5: The Framing Problem

Across the empirical corpus, interventions coded as external, global citizenship education, human rights curricula, religious literacy in its non-confessional formulation, encounter resistance grounded in identity protection rather than in disagreement with their content. Interventions grounded in Islamic sources encounter

no equivalent barrier: Nasir's students were receptive to conflict-resolution doctrines once these were presented as internal to their tradition, having previously been unaware that the tradition contained them. Qadri and colleagues reach the same conclusion at review level.

This theme is the study's most consequential finding, because it identifies the reform failure as a problem of provenance rather than of substance.

Table 3. Findings mapped to CARL design responses

Finding	Mechanism	CARL response
Opt-out void (T1)	Right without corresponding provision	Substantive religious education for minority students; minority-tradition content for all students
Teacher substitution (T2)	Personal sectarian conviction displaces curriculum	Teacher formation prioritised over curriculum revision; internal-diversity competence targeted at teachers first
Differentiated madrasah picture (T3)	Pedagogical and sectarian constraint, not doctrinal	<i>Milal wa niḥal</i> recovery; <i>fiqh al-aqalliyyāt</i> integration
Representation as absence or threat (T4)	Curricular silence plus derogatory framing	Descriptive-accuracy competence with community-consulted authorship
Provenance resistance (T5)	External framing trigger's identity protection	Confessional anchoring in <i>ta'āruf</i> and al-Bīrūnī's method

Table 4. Audit trail: themes to sources

Theme	Primary sources
T1 Opt-out void	Constitution Art. 22(1); Hamid et al. (2020)
T2 Teacher disposition	Ashraf (2019); Ashraf et al. (2021)
T3 Madrasah differentiation	Kausar et al. (2025); Ul Haq (2021)
T4 Representation	Suleman (2024); Tadros (2020); Hamid et al. (2020); Younas (2024)
T5 Provenance	Ashraf et al. (2021); Nasir (2022); Qadri et al. (2024)

6. Discussion

6.1 Interpretation Against Prior Work

The findings agree with Khan on the desirability of cross-cultural religious literacy in Pakistan and depart from the surrounding literature on how it becomes adoptable. The recurring recommendation, introduce religious literacy, train teachers, revise curricula, is not wrong, and its repeated failure is not evidence that it is wrong. It is evidence that a correct recommendation presented in the wrong register does not travel. Theme 5 identifies the register problem; the CARL framework is an attempt to solve it.

The findings extend Hamid and colleagues' observation about the curriculum's deliberate avoidance of denominational difference. Their point was that avoidance forecloses the critical discussion through which tolerance develops. The present analysis adds that the avoidance is self-defeating on its own terms: it was adopted to prevent sectarian conflict in classrooms, and the evidence indicates that teachers fill the resulting silence with personal sectarian conviction. Curricular silence does not produce neutrality; it delegates the question to whoever is standing at the front of the room.

The findings sit in productive tension with the Indonesian literature. Indonesian

religious moderation programmes achieve substantial curricular integration, and it would be easy to read Pakistan's failure as a deficit of political will. The comparison does not support that reading. Indonesia's model rests on a constitutional settlement that establishes belief without establishing a religion, giving the state a position from which to sponsor moderation across traditions. Pakistan's constitution places the state inside one tradition, from which sponsoring moderation across traditions looks, to a substantial constituency, like sponsoring dilution. CARL's confessional anchoring is a response to that structural difference rather than a preference.

6.2 Contrasting Evidence and Objections

6.2.1 The Dilution Objection

The most serious objection is that teaching students about other traditions weakens religious commitment. Two responses. Empirically, the claim is unsupported: Qadri and colleagues' review finds that balanced Islamic teaching reduces support for extremism, and there is no evidence in the Pakistani corpus that descriptive knowledge of other traditions reduces adherence. Normatively, the objection sits awkwardly with the tradition it claims to protect, since the Qur'ān itself describes the beliefs of other communities in detail and the *milal wa niḥal* genre was produced by scholars whose commitment was not in question.

6.2.2 The Evidence-Base Objection

The framework's diagnosis of teacher disposition rests on studies with twenty-five and twenty-four participants. This is a real weakness and is not remedied by the studies' quality. The diagnosis should be treated as a well-supported hypothesis warranting a properly powered national study rather than as an established fact, and Section 9 identifies that study as the field's first priority.

6.2.3 The Sequencing Objection

It may be argued that education is the wrong lever, and that legal and constitutional reform must come first. The objection has force: a curriculum that teaches respect for minority citizens while the legal architecture codes them as juridically distinct teaches a contradiction, and students notice contradictions. The response is that the two operate on different timescales and neither substitutes for the other. What the framework does claim is that religious literacy has an independent effect on the social norms that determine whether legal protections are enforced, which is the mechanism by which institutional reform succeeds or fails.

6.3 Originality and Theoretical Implications

The framework's contribution is the demonstration that religious literacy does not require a non-confessional stance. This is a claim about the field, not only about Pakistan: the non-confessional premise was inherited from the field's origin in secular Western contexts and has been treated as constitutive when it is in fact contingent. Separating the competencies from the stance makes religious literacy available to confessional education systems that currently have no access to it, a category that includes a substantial proportion of the world's schooling.

Three implications follow. Comparative research should test whether other traditions contain equivalents of the *milal wa niḥal* precedent capable of performing the same anchoring function. Assessment instruments for religious literacy require redesign, since existing instruments encode the non-confessional stance in their scoring. And teacher-education research should investigate whether the internal-diversity competence is acquirable by teachers whose formation was single-sect, which is the framework's most vulnerable assumption.

7. Policy Implications

- **Federal and provincial governments.** Amend curriculum policy to attach a positive provision to the Article 22(1) opt-out: minority students should receive substantive instruction in their own tradition, delivered by qualified teachers of that tradition, rather than a free period. Introduce a mandatory unit on the religious communities of Pakistan in Social Studies at the middle-school phase, authored with formal consultation from those communities. Complete the textbook audit that documentation has repeatedly recommended, removing the use of *kāfir* in civic contexts and the framing of minorities as enemies of Islam.
- **Curriculum authorities.** Reverse the policy of denominational avoidance in Islamiyat, replacing silence with non-polemical treatment of intra-Islamic difference modelled on classical *adab al-ikhtilāf*. The current policy was adopted to prevent conflict and, on the evidence, produces the sectarian projection it was designed to avoid.
- **Teacher education institutions.** Make teacher formation the primary investment rather than curriculum revision, on the reasoning established in Theme 2. Introduce a compulsory religious-literacy component in B.Ed. and M.Ed. programmes built on the three CARL competencies, and require in-service certification for Islamiyat teachers. Prioritise the internal-diversity competence, since it is both the most difficult and the one on which the other two depend.
- **Madrasah boards and wafāq bodies.** Recover *milal wa niḥal* as a taught discipline, using al-Bīrūnī's method as its methodological statement, a framing that presents the reform as restoration of a neglected classical science rather than as importation. Integrate *fiqh al-aqalliyyāt* into the *dars-i-nizāmī*, addressing the absence Ul Haq documents. Develop supervised interfaith engagement through existing platforms.
- **Higher education institutions.** Establish academic study-of-religion provision distinct from Islamiyat, and introduce professional religious literacy into law, medicine, journalism, policing and public administration curricula, where the practical costs of illiteracy are highest.
- **Religious organisations.** Issue a formal statement grounding the obligation to know the religious other in *ta'aruf*, which would supply the framework's legitimating authority in the register where curricular resistance is generated. The Marrakesh Declaration provides a precedent for scholarly endorsement of a minority-protection instrument.
- **Civil society and interfaith bodies.** Document and evaluate existing initiatives, of which several operate at scale without published evaluation. Support minority-community participation in curriculum authorship, which the descriptive-accuracy competence requires as a procedural condition rather than a courtesy.
- **International organisations.** Fund teacher formation rather than curriculum documents, and resist the framing of support as promotion of external norms, a framing that, on Theme 5, predicts the intervention's failure. Support the national teacher study identified in Section 9 as the field's first priority.

Table 5. Implementation Sequence

Priority	Action	Actor	Feasibility	Horizon
1	Teacher-formation component in	Teacher education institutions; HEC	High	1–2 yrs

Priority	Action	Actor	Feasibility	Horizon
	B.Ed./M.Ed.			
2	Positive provision attached to Art. 22(1) opt-out	Provincial education departments	Moderate–high	1–3 yrs
3	Textbook audit and revision	Curriculum authorities	Moderate	2–4 yrs
4	<i>Milal wa niḥal</i> recovery in <i>dars-i-niḥāmī</i>	Madrasah boards	Moderate	2–5 yrs
5	Non-polemical treatment of intra-Islamic difference	Curriculum authorities	Low–moderate	3–5 yrs
6	Professional religious literacy in HEIs	Universities; professional bodies	High	1–3 yrs
7	Scholarly statement grounding <i>ta'āruf</i> obligation	Religious bodies; CII	Moderate	1–2 yrs

8. The Islamic Normative Perspective

8.1 Qur'ānic Foundations

Four passages carry the normative argument. Q. 49:13 establishes *ta'āruf* as the stated purpose of human diversity, with distinction resting on *taqwā* rather than on community, al-Rāzī draws from it the dismantling of lineage-based hierarchy, and the inference to religious hierarchy is available on the same reasoning. Q. 6:108 constrains representation of the other and grounds the constraint in the sociology of reciprocal degradation. Q. 2:256 excludes coercion and thereby excludes proselytising pedagogy as a legitimate mode of religious education directed at minority students. Q. 3:64 addresses the People of the Book with an invitation to a common word, modelling engagement that neither conceals disagreement nor precludes cooperation.

The Qur'ān's own practice is itself evidence. It describes the beliefs of Jews, Christians, Sabians, Magians and pre-Islamic Arabs in substantive detail, engages their arguments, and distinguishes among their internal groupings. A scripture that models detailed knowledge of other communities is a poor foundation for a curriculum that offers none.

8.2 The Precedent of Descriptive Scholarship

Al-Bīrūnī's statement of method in *Tahqīq mā li'l-Hind* deserves its place at the centre of this argument. He undertakes to report Hindu doctrine from Hindu sources and in Hindu terms, to separate his account of what they hold from his own judgement of it, and to avoid the distortion that polemical purpose introduces. Al-Shahrastānī's *al-Milal wa'l-Niḥal* organises religious and philosophical communities systematically and attends to their internal subdivisions; Ibn Ḥazm's *al-Faṣl* engages scriptural texts directly. These works are not modern liberal artefacts. They are products of a scholarly culture confident enough in its own commitments to describe others accurately, and their neglect in contemporary Muslim education is a loss the tradition sustained rather than one imposed on it.

8.3 Prophetic and Juristic Precedent

The Ṣaḥīfat al-Madīnah constituted a single political community across confessional lines while preserving religious autonomy. The reception of the Christian delegation of Najrān in the Prophet's Mosque, including the accommodation of their prayer, is the tradition's founding instance of hosted religious difference. Juristically, the *'aqd al-*

dhimmah literature obliges the protection of persons, property and honour, and al-Qarāfi's formulation is the most complete. Ibn Taymiyyah's proposition that God sustains the just state though it be unbelieving, and does not sustain the unjust state though it be Muslim, subordinates' confession to justice as the criterion of political legitimacy, with evident implications for a curriculum that teaches the reverse.

8.4 Comparison with Contemporary Frameworks

Article 26(2) of the Universal Declaration directs education toward understanding, tolerance and friendship among religious groups; the Convention on the Rights of the Child requires education directed to the preparation of the child for responsible life in a free society in a spirit of understanding and tolerance. The convergence with *ta'aruf* is substantial in outcome. The divergence is in the ground: the international instruments derive the obligation from human dignity and civic necessity, while the framework advanced here derives it from a stated purpose of creation. For Pakistani educational institutions, the second ground is the operative one, and the convergence in outcome means nothing is sacrificed by relying on it.

9. Conclusion

This article asked how religious literacy might be constructed for Pakistan on foundations its educational institutions can accept, and reached three conclusions.

The first concerns diagnosis. Pakistan's religious education produces a double illiteracy, minority students are removed from instruction without alternative provision, and majority students receive no reliable account of the traditions of their fellow citizens. The Article 22(1) opt-out, framed as a protection, functions as the mechanism of both.

The second concerns obstruction. The binding constraint on reform is not curriculum content but teacher disposition: teachers substitute personal sectarian conviction for curricular silence, and read externally framed interventions as threats to religious identity. Curriculum revision without teacher formation will therefore change the document and not the classroom, which is the most economical explanation of two decades of unsuccessful reform.

The third concerns remedy. The obstacle is provenance rather than substance. Interventions grounded in Islamic sources encounter no resistance equivalent to that met by interventions framed as global norms, and the resources for such grounding are abundant: *ta'aruf* as a stated purpose of diversity, Q. 6:108 as a constraint on representation, and the *milal wa niḥal* genre, al-Bīrūnī above all, as an indigenous methodology of descriptive accuracy developed about the religions of this very subcontinent.

The theoretical contribution is the Confessionally-Anchored Religious Literacy framework and, within it, the separation of religious-literacy competencies from the non-confessional stance with which the field has conflated them. That conflation is contingent rather than constitutive, and dissolving it makes religious literacy available to confessional systems that currently cannot access it.

The policy contribution is a sequenced programme that prioritises teacher formation over curriculum documents, attaches a positive provision to the constitutional opt-out, reverses the self-defeating policy of denominational avoidance, and frames madrasah reform as recovery of a neglected classical science rather than as importation of a foreign one.

Four research priorities follow. A properly powered national study of Pakistani religious-education teachers is the field's most urgent need, since the framework's central diagnosis currently rests on samples of twenty-five and twenty-four. Instrument development for assessing confessionally-anchored religious literacy is required before

any intervention can be evaluated. Pilot implementation with pre–post measurement should precede scaling. And comparative work should test whether other traditions contain precedents capable of performing the anchoring function that *milal wa niḥal* performs here, a question with implications well beyond Pakistan.

The argument's closing observation parallels one reached elsewhere in this line of work. Pakistan is not short of reasons to teach its children about their neighbours. It has held them for fourteen centuries, and produced, in al-Bīrūnī, one of the most careful students of the subcontinent's religions that any tradition has produced. The failure is not of resources. It is of recovery.

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