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## Perspectives

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### THE ISSUE

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### Seeing Religion in Language Teaching Contexts and in Language Learning Processes

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THE *PERSPECTIVES* COLUMN THIS YEAR brings to the fore some of the many issues connecting religion, faith, or spirituality to the fields of educational and applied linguistics. Regardless of the way you see the world, what your belief system or teaching context is, I hope the anchor piece by Huamei Han will inspire reflections on your own research and teaching. Han brings deep expertise into the research of religion, beginning with an ethnographic study of Chinese immigrants to Canada who converted to evangelical Christianity. Han grounds the discussion by offering readers important background about how the study of religion has emerged throughout the history of our field, as well as an argument for the more prominent inclusion of religion across multiple research agendas in the field of applied linguistics. Han lays out a blueprint for ways researchers might take up religion in their work. Language learners and teachers are so often asked to leave core parts of their identities at their classroom doors, including religion. Like many other identities, some people who are religiously minoritized can hide their faith, while other groups cannot due to visible identity markers. Some identity markers are most noticeable to insiders (e.g., the *Ichthus*) and there are others that attract or ignite outsider attention such as wearing the *hijab*. Han's article makes the case for looking into the linguistic as well as the

sociopolitical and historical levers at work when religion is at play.

The commentaries in response to Han's piece amplify and extend Han's argument in fascinating ways that are also grounded in empirical work in many different religious and linguistic contexts. They offer ethical and philosophical arguments for the role of religion in the research and practice of language teaching and learning. For example, Avni's commentary illustrates how studying religion and language can both build on core tenets of our field and open up new theoretical spaces for exploring language policy, socialization, and ideologies. Like Han, Avni's commentary details how her own experiences with language and religion shaped her research and then illustrates how the teaching and learning of religious languages in secular educational settings can meet intersecting personal, community, and educational needs. Ushioda's commentary raises critical questions related to motivational and ethical complexities of researching across religious lines. She cautions us to consider carefully whose motivations our research serves and asks that we examine thoughtfully the impact on society of disseminating research with potentially charged ideological messages. Could our research with some religious communities be subverted in unintended ways? Goulah's commentary draws on Buddhist and humanist ways of knowing and leverages Dewey to make linkages to the many communities involved in education, writ large. Goulah's work has uncovered ways for learners to enact a full range of identities (including spiritual and faith-based beliefs) to experience personally and socially meaningful learning, which is clearly an aim

in much of the identity work in our field. Sarroub's commentary reminds us that scholarship engaged with religion, and its intersectionalities, has not been completely neglected in our field. Her anthropological and ethnographic work with Muslim youth and their literacy/ies has been very influential in my own scholarship. Sarroub concurs with Han in her call for more work that addresses current displacement and migration in today's political and economic landscapes, but she points out that not all researchers are equipped with the lenses or sensitivities needed to interpret nuanced cultural and religious practices. This is another steep learning curve for the academy. Finally, Watson's commentary reminds us that religion is far more than a set of cultural and linguistic practices. Watson challenges us to consider that the experience of the sacred does not depend on formal religion or even on language. The proposal for a new subfield that seriously includes religion, should, according to Watson, be approached holistically through scholarship, exploration of self, and with the highest aims of individual transformation across teaching and learning endeavors.

Most of the commentaries use a relatively large amount of their space in this column to discuss the researcher's own positionalities with respect to religion. It seems that positionality in research

on religion is critical for our scholarly community. This gives me pause because positionality statements are often sacrificed in our publications because of space constraints. Sometimes, the excuse is epistemology or genre because "it's just not done in the sort of writing I do." If we embrace the notion that the researcher is a critical part of the inquiry and brings experiences, ideologies, and assumptions to the work, regardless of paradigm or topic, shouldn't all of us have to find a way to show who we are in the research process? Collectively, the viewpoints in this year's *Perspectives* help us ponder our ideas about researcher positionality (i.e., the [non]religion of the researcher), which frequently (and perhaps overly) informs readers' abilities to trust the research produced. Religion is as complex as categories such as race, class, gender, and sexuality, but this complexity has yet to be thoroughly understood in our highly secularized mainstream research agendas. In the context of the culture wars of today, including vast misunderstandings of religious communities, the hope is that this column will inspire and support efforts to begin to acquire new cultural and methodological lenses that will help us understand the religious beliefs, practices, artifacts, and histories of individuals and communities, all manifested through language.

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## THE POSITION PAPER

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### Studying Religion and Language Teaching and Learning: Building a Subfield

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The historical reversal over the course of several centuries in the West is striking: while language has become much *more* central to public life and *more* politically contentious, religion has become *less* central to public life and *less* politically contentious, notwithstanding the resurgence of public religion in recent decades, and despite the fact that understandings of nationhood remain deeply permeated by particular religious traditions and their secular legacies. (Brubaker, 2015, p. 6)

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In this opening quote, Brubaker (2015) made three observations: (a) Our understanding of nationhood is deeply permeated by particular religious traditions and their secular legacies, (b) the reversal of religion and language is central to, but politically contentious in, the public and private domains in social life in the West in the past several centuries, and (c) there has been a resurgence of public religion in recent decades. I believe that the first two observations underpin

the need for applied linguists to take religion seriously. The third point offers an opening for the field of applied linguistics to study the intersection of language and religion systemically and rigorously, and even build a subfield.

Language and religion have interacted in different ways in various regions and over time with varied socioeconomic, political, linguistic, and religious consequences. For instance, religious orders have had a long history of

providing health care, education, and social services worldwide. Since the 1960s, the racial and religious diversity has increased in secular institutions in many Western countries resulting from more relaxed (im)migration policies. At the same time religious institutions remain key players in various social domains. For instance, in Canada, Catholic schools are publicly funded, but in Ontario, other faith-based schools receive no public funding. Higher education in the United States has deep roots in and continues to be influenced by religion, particularly Protestantism (Gross & Simmons, 2009), and Catholic schools are serving religiously and racially evermore diverse populations (LeBlanc, 2017). Through state-funded faith schools and other provisions, Britain and many other European countries allow religion to play a role in education, and faith-based schools have continued to grow in England in the last few decades (Hemming, 2011).

On the other hand, language plays a prominent role in religion because “to know and interact with an otherworld tends to demand highly marked uses of linguistic resources” (Keane, 1997, p. 47). Language, in both written and spoken forms, is one of the most important mediums to access religious texts and beliefs and to practice religious rituals and routines such as reading and reciting scripture, preaching and responding, singing, praying, testifying, confessing, meditating, chanting, and so on. In fact, the “distribution of major types of writing systems in the world correlates more closely with the distribution of the world’s major religions than with genetic or typological classifications of language” because the spread of a major religion often simultaneously introduced “the use of writing into a nonliterate speech community” (Ferguson, 1982, p. 95). As to the importance of spoken language, the Urapmin, a community with less than 400 members in Papua New Guinea, all of whom converted to Protestant Christianity without active Western missionizing in the late 1970s and completely discarded their traditional religion within a year, summarized their impression and understanding of their new faith as “God is nothing but talk” (Robbins, 2001). More importantly, in the process of colonization, language and religion became ever more entangled, which seems to at least partially coincide with the reversal of the roles of religion and language in the public and private domains of social life in the West that Brubaker (2015) observed. Both have significant consequences for language teaching and learning, and for researching language issues today. Religion is deeply entrenched in public life, and

religious leakages, or residues and influences in secular institutions can be traced through language.

Given the importance of historical, political, social, and linguistic roles that religion has played in institutions, communities, and homes, there is surprisingly little research on this topic in the field of applied linguistics in general and in language teaching and learning in particular. Among many possible reasons that may have contributed to this gap, I highlight two. First, it has much to do with the influence of secularization, or the separation of church and state, in the democracies of the Western world. The prediction and declaration that “God is dead” has not made religion disappear. Instead, secularization has pushed religion largely to the private sphere (Stepick, 2005). Atheists are the smallest but are perceived as the most morally suspect group, even in secular states, and even in the view of atheists themselves (Gervais et al., 2017). Despite variations in fields and types of institutions, less than a quarter of university and college professors in the United States, including in elite research institutions, are complete nonbelievers in private (Gross & Simmons, 2009). Spolsky (2003) speculated that “many of the scholars interested in language contact were themselves so steeped in secularism that they did not easily become aware of the depth of religious beliefs and life” (p. 82). I am not aware of any empirical research on religious orientation or beliefs in secularization among linguists, or applied linguists, but secularization, along with the legal protection of the freedom of religion and a lack of knowledge of world religions, have contributed to the disinterest, unease, anxiety, and fear of dealing with or discussing religion in the West in general (Skerrett, 2014). Applied linguists probably are not an exception.

Another explanation for neglecting the role of religion are the narrow conceptualizations of language, the learner, and teaching and learning in the field of applied linguistics. Here I limit applied linguistics to refer to its Anglophone tradition, which is based mainly in North America and Britain, and to some extent Australia (e.g., Block, 2003). With second language acquisition (SLA) theory at its core, mainstream SLA has traditionally treated language as an autonomous linguistic system, and learning as cognitive processes (e.g., Johnson, 2004). Associated with this frame is a narrow focus on improving pedagogy as a major concern of applied linguistics, with social contexts and individual variations as mere interfering factors that need to be controlled or excluded to better study internal

cognitive processes (e.g., Firth & Wagner, 1997). Secular language classrooms are the *de facto* research sites. While identity has been taken up enthusiastically by applied linguistics (see Block, 2007; De Costa & Norton, 2017) in line with “the social turn” in the field of SLA (Block, 2003), cognitively oriented SLA research is likely to report a participant’s age, languages, and gender as variables, but not other identity markers, and certainly not religion. Today the dominant assumptions of language, learning, and learner in SLA remain narrowly framed. Few scholars research language learning and teaching in non-classroom settings, and traditional SLA research by and large continues studying secular language classrooms in the global North in ways as if societal forces and ideologies do not penetrate the classroom walls; and when they do, religion is often neglected.

Combining these two circumstances, it is not surprising that students and teachers alike are often assumed, or expected, to leave their religious beliefs, practices, and identities at the door when they enter secular language classrooms. In applied linguistics, empirical studies of religion and language teaching and learning in religious or secular institutions are relatively rare, and theoretically and methodologically rigorous ones are even more scarce.

## THE TIME IS NOW

Recent social changes indicate that there is an acute need to understand religion in social life today, coupled with a growing awareness of its importance and complexity among some segments of the population. One telling example is the debate that erupted over labels such as “terrorist or disturbed loner” after an attack near a mosque in London in June 2017 (Fisher, 2017), and then again following the Las Vegas mass shooting in October 2017. Discussion of the media coverage of these events (Desai & Tessier, 2017) showed that some people have come to realize how religion and race, among other social categories, intersect to underpin labels such as “home-grown terrorists” and “radicalized youth” which have occupied news headlines and public consciousness since the September 11 attack in 2001.

On the surface, the debate over labels came about largely due to the increasing number and frequency of terrorist attacks around the world, but particularly on the home soils in secular Western countries in recent years, particularly since 2015 (Fisher, 2017). Of course, terrorism is not the only issue that links religion to contemporary life. Issues of abortion rights, contraception

drugs, gender roles, creation or evolution, and sexuality in public school curriculum, and more recently vaccination, assisted death, and so on, have all ignited strong reactions from the religious right. Indeed, some religious traditions and their secular legacies have permeated public understanding of nationhood, and there has been a resurgence of public religion (Brubaker, 2015). But it probably took the 2016 U.S. presidential election and its aftermath, built on divisive ideologies of race, immigration, citizenship, gender, and religion among others, with Islam often under attack, to force more people to face the reality that religion continues to play important roles in secular Western societies, and that religion often intersects with other identity markers. These recent social changes and the associated awakening undoubtedly make the interdisciplinary study of religion significant and timely.

Understandably, the recent awakening regarding religion in the West in general is also reflected in the field of applied linguistics, in terms of interest and the state of knowledge. In the past couple of years, publishers and academic journals seem to have become more interested in and more open to topics pertaining to religion. However, the recency of this awakening also means that the study of language and religion is still emerging. As of now, with several edited volumes published, the most visible research on religion in applied linguistics seems to have focused on the controversy of (untrained) Christian English teachers proselytizing covertly under the pretense of teaching English. However, with the exception of a couple of non-Christian scholars (e.g., Johnston, 2017; Varghese & Johnston, 2007), empirical studies remain scarce and rigorous study is even rarer in this strand of research (see Kubanyiova, 2013, for a sympathetic critique). On the other hand, in the past decade or so, a number of empirical studies that centered on religion of our time, mostly ethnographic and mostly in the form of journal articles and dissertations (with the exception of one journal special issue, Avineri & Avni, 2016), have emerged in applied linguistics with the work of Patricia Baquedano-López, Loukia K. Sarroub, Carolyn Kristjansson, Leslie Moore, Huamei Han, and Martha Bigelow, among others. There are relevant publications in related fields too, including from Caroline Zinsser immediately following Shirley Brice Heath’s seminal ethnography in the 1980s, and from Ayala Fader, Lucila Ek, Vally Lytra and colleagues, and Stephen Pihlaja. Together, these studies can be coalesced into a solid base upon which to build a subfield.

Undoubtedly, the first attempts at drawing a few strokes of a blueprint or laying down a few bricks for a foundation are likely to be clumsy or even ill-conceived. Nevertheless, I hope these attempts will help create conditions and opportunities for, or at least encourage or intrigue, more applied linguists to pay attention and contribute to this area of research. Time will tell whether it will grow, and how. Having conducted two ethnographies focusing on churches, I feel obligated to at least share what I have learned, and to call attention to this area.

#### CRITICAL REFLEXIVITY, SOME GAPS AND DIRECTIONS

I stumbled onto this line of research in 2002, when I started my dissertation research: I entered the field as an adult immigrant, a racialized person, a so-called nonnative English speaker, a PhD student, a woman, and an atheist who had no interest in any organized religion. I see the researcher as the most important research tool in a project (Han, 2009), and researcher reflexivity (England, 1994; Lawrence, 2017) as fundamental for rigorous research. With religion being thoroughly personal and social simultaneously—very much like language—it is particularly important for researchers to be transparent and critical about their subjectivity in this line of research. My trajectory to and interest in studying church and then religion more broadly, and my multiple identities, have shaped my views and approaches to this line of research, as well as my vision of a subfield, which I have tried and will continue to account for. I hope being transparent about my positionality helps readers to make a more informed interpretation of my account, and also helps scholars with other views, approaches, and visions on the widest spectrum possible to critique mine and see how they may contribute to this area of research.

So let me trace a bit further back. I am a Chinese person who was born, raised, and educated in the People's Republic of China (PRC). Growing up in a small village in Shandong province in the north in the 1970s, I followed my parents when they practiced ancestral worship, while to my father's dismay, his two sisters were leaders of underground house churches with quite a following in the extended family and in our two neighboring villages. At age 10, I was sent to the nearby city for better schools, then later went to Shanghai for university and graduate studies, where I eventually became a faculty member specialized in Chinese linguistics. Throughout my years in

PRC, people around me practiced multiple religions, but I had an atheist inclination.

After immigrating to Canada in 1999, I soon discovered that there were few full-time or stable jobs teaching Mandarin in Toronto and in the rest of Canada despite the long history and the sizable population of diverse Chinese backgrounds. Still wanting to teach at the university level, I applied for and started a PhD program in 2000. In downtown Toronto, street evangelists often waved brochures at me or pushed flyers into my hand, and occasionally missionaries knocked on my apartment door to offer free Bible lessons in English, but I was not interested in religion. Faced with many challenges in the first year of my PhD program, with English as a major one, in 2001, I decided to focus my dissertation research on English learning among adult immigrants to Canada, to save myself but also to help immigrants like myself. At that time, PRC had been the largest immigrant source country to Canada for several consecutive years, with skilled immigrants as the core. However, skilled PRC immigrants had great difficulties finding jobs—for many complex and systemic social and economic reasons which I would learn in subsequent years through my research. But back then, all stakeholders, including PRC immigrants themselves, identified English as the problem, and indeed, as *their* problem. So naturally, I wanted to discover strategies to improve English oral proficiency. However, the traditional SLA research I read did not speak to the complexity of my lived experience as a skilled adult immigrant and my observations of others around me. I decided to try ethnography instead.

When I started my dissertation project in 2002, I had no interest in religion, but I *happened* to meet a group of atheist PRC immigrants who joined a free English conversation group organized by an American missionary. They ended up going to church, and gradually converting to Christianity. In retrospect, it *happened* because religious conversation among PRC immigrants in settlement has been common. I spent 3 years conducting fieldwork across secular and religious settings in Toronto, and discovered that minority churches, or the so-called 'immigrant' and 'multi-cultural' churches led and pastored by former immigrants and their grown children born or raised in Canada respectively, were the most supportive institutions in socializing many skilled PRC immigrants (Han, 2007a). With socioeconomic exclusion from mainstream educational institutions and workplaces, these minority churches supported their congregants' linguistic, identity,

and economic needs (Han, 2007b, 2009, 2011a). Their spiritual needs were met by a meaning system that rationalized being the racialized Other in the prosperous West as a part of God's plan (Han, 2011b). A large number of PRC immigrants converted to evangelical Christianity, embraced social values that were more conservative than the mainstream, and joined a booming transnational Chinese evangelical Christian community which comprises a large part of a global Protestant movement (Han, 2007a, 2011b). This movement has been underway for several decades in Africa, Asia, Latin America (e.g., Englund, 2011; Freston, 2001; Gifford, 2004; Hallum, 1996; Hefner, 2013) and in the diasporas in the West (e.g., Ebaugh & Chafetz, 2000; Nyiri, 2003; Yang, 1999; Yang & Tamney, 2006).

After relocating to western Canada to take up a faculty position, I was surprised to see several mainland Chinese churches, that is, churches largely ministered and run by formerly atheist PRC immigrants, for themselves and their children born or raised in Canada (Han, 2013). This means that, within a short time, some PRC immigrants not only converted to Christianity, but also become pastors and lay leaders, and some evangelized transnationally in addition to ministering their own congregations. I conducted an 18-month ethnography exploring multilingual development and religious participation among minority youths in a mainland Chinese church with three congregations (Han, 2013). In addition to confirming major findings from the previous project, this project led to critical reflections on issues of access, language, and religion (Han, 2014b) intersecting with race, racism, and nationalism (Han, 2011b, 2013, 2014a).

Findings from these two church projects regarding pedagogy, identity, and language policy confirmed, refined, and extended relevant literature in applied linguistics. However, some of my key findings corroborate research in other fields, but seem to have received little attention in TESOL and applied linguistics. These key topics from my own work include:

1. The economic effects of religion in general and Christianity in particular;
2. The phenomenon of the missionized becoming the missionizers;
3. The increased religiosity among the marginalized in the West and among the masses in the rest of the world;
4. The mainstream Western secularization trend in the current climate of globalization; and

5. The enduring effects of today's dominant language ideologies on language teaching and research that originated in missions and colonization.

Through these two church ethnographies and other projects over the years, I have gradually centered my research on linguistic and socio-economic inclusion of individuals and groups marginalized on a linguistic basis in the process of globalization, who often are simultaneously marginalized along the lines of religion, as well as race, class, gender, citizenship or immigration status, nationality, sexuality, and so on. It suffices to say that, having experienced my share of hardship and despair in settlement, my extended and at times intense engagement with my key participants helped me to sympathize with religious conversion, which unexpectedly helped me to become a more conscious atheist.

I argue that the subfield of religion and language teaching and learning should (a) focus on but also go beyond pedagogy and language classrooms at places of worship, such as churches, synagogues, mosques, and temples, or at religious schools, and into the wider religious and secular contexts in general; (b) treat language, religion, and economy as intertwining and political; and (c) simultaneously address local and global issues, contexts, and processes. These views stem from my work on churches as an atheist applied linguist, which also resonate with a body of scholarship on missions, which curiously has largely been neglected by applied linguists studying religion today.

#### LESSONS FROM HISTORY AND SOME OVERARCHING QUESTIONS

A robust body of scholarship on missions in colonial time, mostly in the field of linguistic anthropology but also in religious studies focusing on history, recovers and reveals how religion and language became deeply entrenched in colonization. It speaks powerfully about how economy, religion, and language were deeply entangled in the processes of colonization, how each was political, and how the religious and the secular were always entangled and inseparable. The main body of this scholarship focuses largely on European missionaries proselytizing Christianity in various contexts, but there were also encounters with Islam and indigenous religions (e.g., Brenner, 2000, 2001; Keane, 2007; Robbins, 2001). The following findings from this scholarship offer important insights for building the subfield.

First, language work was integral to colonization in that missionary linguists acted as the vanguards and missionaries as the willing or hesitant agents of colonization through their professional services. They compiled word lists and dictionaries which prepared for and aided colonial advances, created language description and Romanized orthographies for indigenous speeches, and demarcated and mapped indigenous languages (Errington, 2001; Fabian, 1986; Irvine & Gal, 2000). They disseminated and promoted their ideas about language through writing and debates (e.g., Meeuwis, 1999), ran schools to teach languages and other skills in colonies (Comaroff & Comaroff, 1991; Fabian, 1986), the semi-colony of China (Si, 2009; Snow, 2013), and to indentured migrant workers in Canada (Wang, 2006). Missionaries and missionary linguists were essential in establishing and maintaining the power of colonial rule on the level of symbolic power, which was vital to colonial success. Fabian (1986) observed that “[w]atching over the purity of Christian doctrine and regulating correctness of grammar and orthography were intrinsically related as two aspects of one and the same project” (p. 83). Through the large variety of activities, the domain of language, literacy, and culture is where colonialism has left the most entrenched and most lasting effect on the colonized (Comaroff & Comaroff, 1991).

Second, today’s dominant language ideologies were formed during and through colonization in which religion was deeply entrenched. The presupposition of languages’ writability undergirded early missionary linguistic work such as Spanish missionaries’ imposing an orthography of Mayan speech in the 15th to 16th century, and of Tagalog in the late 16th and early 17th century (cf. Errington, 2001). Over several centuries, colonial linguistic practices and policies that facilitated colonial rule in Latin America, Asia, and Africa also perpetuated linguistic ideologies, including *the ideology of linguistic territoriality*, *sociolinguistic hierarchy*, *linguistic purity* (Errington, 2001), and *linguistic nationalism* (Irvine & Gal, 2000), as well as emerging notions of modernity, time, space, and personhood (Keane, 2007; Robbins, 2001; Schieffelin, 2000). Today these enduring language ideologies continue to shape language policies, practices, and discourses in various Christian and non-Christian institutions and contexts at multiple levels, ranging from underpinning national language policies to regulating institutional and interpersonal language policies and practices (e.g., Han, 2011b, 2014a, 2014b).

Third, this body of scholarship demonstrates the importance of going beyond language classes and pedagogy in studying religion and language teaching and learning, and the insights this approach can offer for language studies and beyond. For instance, Fabian (1986) described how Belgian missions had to compete with British Protestants, which led to the suppression of English and the African varieties that British Protestants had already adopted. The Belgian missionaries ran schools in the colony in exchange for the rights and privileges to proselytize, which underscored why and how they decided on what levels of which language to teach children, and to train salaried colonial workforces and low-level administrative functionaries. These decisions eventually led to establishing one variety of Swahili, a lingua franca and a product of colonial contact, as the most important language in the region. This and other studies demonstrate the importance of going beyond language classes and pedagogy to provide nuanced accounts of the social, political, and economic contexts that are essential to understanding the intersection of religion and language beliefs, policies, and practices. Studying language classrooms and pedagogy alone may help to understand the *what* and *how* of language policies and practices, but would be unlikely to help us understand the *why*.

Consequently, going beyond classroom and pedagogy often can lead to insights about language and beyond. Again, with his language-focused but expansive study, Fabian sees how the missions played a crucial role in helping the colony “enter the world-system” by helping to

set up a colonial mode of production—that is, those economic, social, and political conditions which prepared the colony for profitable utilization (mostly through the extraction of natural resources, secondarily through the creation of new markets) by the Belgian State and the country’s ruling class (both of whom had their international connections and ramifications) (Fabian, 1986, pp. 72).

Further Fabian remarks:

Imperial expansion, Christian evangelization, and the development of modern linguistics and anthropology have not been merely coincidental. Each of these movements—economic, religious, scientific (and all of them political)—needed a global perspective and a global field of actions for ideological legitimation and for practical implementation. To object that individual colonial agents, missionaries and field-anthropologists/linguists were mostly quite limited in their political horizons and in their subjective consciousness does not discredit the ‘world-system’ or similar notions as heuristic tools in writing history.

What counts is the factual existence of conditions allowing global circulation of commodities, ideas and personnel. (Fabian, 1986, pp. 72–73)

These insights shed important lights on the entanglement among economic, religious, scientific forces (in this case, the development of linguistics and anthropology), the role of individual agents, and the conditions allowing global circulation of commodities, ideas, and personnel, in the process of colonization.

I see applied linguistics as transdisciplinary (The Douglas Fir Group, 2016) and as an applied field concerned with real life issues in which language plays an important role (Brumfit, 1980). This means to draw on, but also intentionally aim to contribute to, other disciplines. Conceptualizing language and language teaching and learning broadly as not only linguistic, but also as socio-economic practices and ideologies, fits nicely into such a vision of applied linguistics. Studying the intersections of language and religion demands drawing on, and has great potential to make a unique contribution to, other fields such as language studies, sociology and anthropology of religion, and migration and globalization studies, among others.

History is known for repeating itself, albeit often in (slightly) modified forms. For example, those who were missionized (by Western missionaries) often eventually became the missionizers in the colonies in Latin America, Asia, and Africa. South Korea made this transition in mere decades, and has further become the second largest missionary-sending country in the world, following the United States; and South Korean and Korean American missionaries have been actively missionizing in Africa (Han, 2015) and worldwide. In the meantime, immigrants have been missionizing their co-ethnic new arrivals in the United States, Canada, and Australia (e.g., Ebaugh & Chafetz, 2000; Ley, 2008; Woods, 2004; Yang, 1999). PRC immigrants in Canada have merely become new players in this larger phenomenon. More surprisingly, Chinese Christians in the officially atheist PRC are quietly becoming the missionizers too—like with any group, most missionizing activities are mundane and go unnoticed, but some make headlines. In May 2017, a young woman and man from the PRC were kidnapped in Pakistan, and were killed a month later. While the young man's mother thought that her son went there to teach Mandarin, the two went to “spread the word of Christianity in the unlikeliest and most dangerous of places in conservative Muslim Pakistan”

(Ponniah et al., 2017). Therefore, it is not new for the missionized to become missionizers, but new players, new dynamics, and new mechanisms emerge all the time, with consequences found both locally and globally.

International missionary work raises the questions about the current capitalist globalization that is still unfolding and how language and religion intersect in the process. I suspect that it probably is not merely coincidental that language and religion have reversed their roles in terms of centrality and political contentiousness in the public and private domains in social life in the West in the past several centuries (Brubaker, 2015). The contrast between the steadily secularizing mainstream of the West and the increasing religiosity of the marginalized in the world is not a surprise, either. Therefore, in the complex web of globalization, how do individual agents, groups, and institutions of varied (non)religious inclinations and in different contexts, form or contest economic, religious, and scientific forces that help to set up conditions allowing global circulation of commodities, ideas, and personnel? How do religious traditions and their secular legacies permeate an understanding of nationhood in various contexts, in what forms, and how? How do religion and language, including applied linguistics as a discipline and language teachers in secular and religious classrooms as individual agents, feature in these processes, via what we say we do, what we really do, and the discrepancies among them? Applied linguists and language teachers can make a unique contribution to help tackle these questions, or can claim that we are too limited in our political horizons and subjective consciousness, and like missionary linguists and missionaries, hope to be excused.

#### A RESEARCH AGENDA: PRINCIPLES, STARTING POINTS

There are many interesting ways to study religion, as it is intertwined with language, of which language teaching and learning has been the major concern. I see religion broadly “as the field of cultural expression that focuses specifically on communication and relationship between human beings and those (usually) unseen spiritual entities and/or forces that they believe affect their lives” (Brenner, 2000, p. 164; also see Keane, 1997). Recognizing the importance of faith for individuals and for social life, I see each religion as inherently heterogeneous, and existing in an ecology with other religions as well as secular forces. I see religion as comprising both

faith beliefs and practices, at both individual and institutional levels, which, along with secular beliefs and practices, constitute social processes.

I take a materialist and processual view that sees language as always embedded in power relations (Bourdieu, 1991; Han, 2011a; Heller, 2007). I see language as linguistic resources that are fluid and multiple, but are distributed unequally across individuals and groups, and the valuation of a particular form of linguistic resource is fundamentally related to its material conditions of acquisition, distribution, and circulation. I see interactional orders as constitutive of social orders, and linguistic practices underpinned by ideologies as constitutive of social processes (Han, 2011a; Heller, 2007). I see *language ideologies*, defined as cultural systems of ideas that serve as the link between language and social relations, which are loaded with political, socioeconomic, and moral interests (Woolard, 1998), as essential to understanding the symbolic power of language. Language ideologies can be expressed directly in discourses, or can be deciphered from what people do with or about language. Semiotic ideology (Keane, 2007) seems a very useful extension of language ideology that can be productively explored (Fader, 2008, 2016).

I view language teaching and learning from the lens of language socialization with a critical bent, e.g., as processes of socialization to use language, and socialization through language (Ochs, 1986), which inherently involves processes of identity and ideology formation. I see identity as relational, performed and co-constructed by interlocutors through interactions situated in specific social contexts that are shaped by power differentials based on various fault lines or social categories. I see learners and teachers as situated social actors who are enabled or constrained by their material and symbolic conditions and resources. I recognize that hegemony is never complete (Heller & Martin-Jones, 2011).

Therefore, I propose four considerations as guiding principles in future research connecting learning, language, and religion:

1. Critical, or attending to power dynamics which may include, but are not limited to, power differentials between social actors, languages and language varieties, religions and religious institutions, and states in the world-system;
2. Empirical, or attending to observable and observed actions and practices, as well as discourses, under specific conditions and in specific context at a given historical time;
3. Ideological, or attending to systems of ideas underlying practices and discourses, particularly language ideologies as they inevitably intersect with ideologies of other social categories, such as race, class, gender, religion, citizenship, immigration status, ability, sexuality, among others;
4. Reflexive, or intentionally exercising reflexivity in the entire research process, by attending to and critically reflecting on how researchers' religious/atheist inclinations and other relevant identity dimensions may shape and influence their selection of topic, frameworks, and methodologies, access to people and sites and information, generation of data, interpretation of data, and representation of findings. This is particularly important given how personal and significant faith is to many people, and how religion is deeply entrenched in social life.

Authors along the (non)religious continuum have applied these guiding principles in a co-edited special issue (Han & Varghese, forthcoming): the process has been challenging, but rewarding.

I recommend a few options as starting points. First, it is important to start with and maybe focus on one institution or context at a time. I see institutions and spaces in secular states as ranging from explicitly religious to explicitly secular as self-stated, but it is a continuum of various combinations of both with neither end being pure. Religious institutions, including places of worship such as synagogues, churches, mosques, temples, and religious schools such as Muslim schools, Islamic academies, Catholic schools, Baptist universities, or Sunday schools at church are explicitly religious and doctrinal, but structurally they often contain secular elements or elements from other religions. For instance, churches routinely welcome non-believers (Han, 2009); church-based English classes intentionally recruit non-believers (Kristjánsson, forthcoming); with intensified migration, Catholic schools in Australia and the United States have been enrolling students from increasingly diverse religious and racial backgrounds (LeBlanc, 2017; Scarino, Liddicoat, & O'Neill, 2016). Secular institutions in secular states receive and serve religiously diverse populations, such as public schools and universities in the West that have seen an increasing enrollment of Muslim students (e.g., Bigelow, 2008, 2010; Mir, 2009; Rich & Troudi, 2006; Zine, 2001). Additionally, religion routinely seeps into secular institutions.

Individual studies can start from one institution or context, and then expand to another. Studies by Baquedano-López (1997), Zinsser (1988), McMillon and Edwards (2000) and Ek (2009a, 2009b) all offer examples of study designs that include at least one religious institution. As a subfield, rich and detailed ethnographies of different institutions offer the potential to examine patterns across a whole spectrum of institutions across religious and secular boundaries.

Another starting point could be individuals and/or groups, maybe a number of individuals at a time or one to two age groups at a time. Both religion and language socialization are age-sensitive domains. As to religion, socializing children into their parents' religious beliefs and practices rarely registers much public concern. Faith among adolescents and young adults does concern clergies, parents, and some academics (e.g., Smith, 2009). The public has become concerned about the radicalization of this age group, particularly young Muslim males. However, socializing adults into a new religion often raises eyebrows when concerning immigrants converting to Christianity. The concern seems often centering on whether it is genuine, or truly spiritual, instead of motivated by material and pragmatic gains. The Chinese term "rice-bowl Christians" speaks volumes about this concern (Yang, 1999), which seems to be rooted in the belief that religion should be otherworldly, or spirituality should be separated from secular material needs and desires. At the same time, the debate over (untrained) Christian English teachers' covert proselytization has dominated the study of religion and language in SLA for the past 25 years, but neither side distinguished targeted age groups, or analyzed the socioeconomic and political conditions that make English teaching and Christianity desirable, with what possible gains and consequences. For individual researchers, it is possible to examine the same or similar topic across different life stages through cross-sectional designs. As a subfield, various studies may be combined to gain insights about religion and language across the entire life span.

I see great value in ethnographic approaches when starting with either approach outlined above. My preference for ethnography also aligns with the way I see religion, teaching, and learning, outlined previously. The value in ethnography lies in actual observation of how interactions, practices, discourses, and relations unfold in real time, which can enable more informed, nuanced, and complex analysis. Ethnography provides rich information to contextualize and historicize

practices, discourses, and beliefs of individuals, groups, and institutions at multiple scales and dimensions, ranging from present to historical and from local to national, regional, and/or global.

Detailed ethnographies have the potential to suggest and even reveal larger patterns or social processes (Fader, 2006; Han, 2007b). Richly detailed ethnography also makes it possible to examine common threads across individuals and groups in different settings, and from different religious traditions. For example, reading studies by Zinsser (1986), Moore (2006, 2008), Fader (2006, 2008, 2016), Peele-Eady (2011), and Baquedano-López (1997, 2008), we can see how young children were socialized into linguistic and religious performances in different religious traditions that all valued memorization, which entailed identity formation, particularly religious and linguistic identities across all cases, but also, for some, gender (Fader, 2006, 2008, 2016) and ethnic/racial and national identity (Baquedano-López, 1997). We see language socialization through interactions of a teenage girl (Ek, 2009a) and an adult immigrant couple, particularly the wife (Han, 2007a), that constituted gender identity formation processes that involved both conformation and negotiation.

My nonexhaustive review of scholarly work done to date that included religion and language socialization, broadly defined, has thus far focused on pedagogy, identity, language policy, political economy of language and religion, and religion in secular settings. I see each as underpinned by ideologies and each as needing expansion.

### *Pedagogy*

A number of studies have examined pedagogical approaches and interpersonal interactions that make religion-based language classes and institutions more effective in language socialization. Caring relations manifested in thoughtful pedagogical approaches and interpersonal interactions tend to support language learning for children in Sunday school classes at various churches (e.g., Baquedano-López, 1997, 2008; Ek, 2009b; Peele-Eady, 2011), for adult immigrants at minority churches (Han, 2009) or in English classes sponsored by mainstream churches (Chao & Mantero, 2014; Kristjánsson, forthcoming), among high school students (Smith et al., 2007), and for women at a missionary English school in Poland (Johnston, 2017). Curriculum materials (Han, 2014b; Johnston, 2017; Smith et al., 2007), and occasionally program design (Han, 2009, 2014b), were explored. To gain a

deeper understanding as to *why* in addition to the *what* and *how*, necessarily entails examining ideological underpinnings, which only a few have attempted so far (Han, 2009, 2014b; Smith, 2007, discussed spirituality in place of ideology). Therefore, awareness of and sensitivity to (language) ideology is much needed to move this line of work forward.

### *Identity*

As non-evangelicals, Varghese and Johnston's (2007) sensitive interview study of pre-service Christian English teachers in the United States is widely recognized as the first empirical study on the debate of evangelicalism and English teaching, and teacher identity. But Christian scholars researching Christian English teacher identity often relied on thin, self-reported data (cf. Kubanyiova, 2013) and lacked critical reflection of researcher subjectivity. Johnston's (2017) most recent work offers a nuanced account of the relationships established between North American missionary teachers and their adult students in Poland, and emphasizes that the neocolonial tendency warrants, and in fact demands, much more scrutiny. As mentioned earlier, positive learner identities are often explored in the framework of language socialization in studies focusing on pedagogy; occasionally gender(ed), ethnic/racial and national identities are discussed. More research is needed, particularly in the latter areas. Similar to the above strands, relevant social ideologies in the broader social context are under-explored in most cases (see Han, 2014a, for an exception). Moreover, issues of religious meaning-making and global evangelism may be more observable among adults (Han, 2011a) and emerging adults. Overall, a lot more research is needed in terms of identity and ideological formation. Analysis of interactional order as constituting social order seems one of the most promising lines of inquiry (e.g., Fader, 2006; Han, 2007b).

### *Language Policy*

This line of work generally demands a sociohistorical view of dynamics between languages, and sensitivity to language ideologies. Several studies sensitive to language ideologies ventured to examine institutional language policies in terms of medium of instruction (Baquedano-López, 2004), or institutional language policies at minority churches pertaining to adult immigrants (Han, 2011b) and for teenagers and young adults (Han, 2013) respectively. Moore (2016) examined family language policies pertaining to Islam in

northern Cameroon, but was silent on ideologies. More work is needed in this area.

### *The Political Economy of Religion and Language*

The economic effects of Christianity, actual or imagined, have underpinned the rapid growth of evangelical Christianity in various settings (e.g., Friedner, 2014; Gifford, 2004; Hallum, 1996; Ley, 2008; Nyiri, 2003; Okyerefo, 2011). Economic effects are also central in Weber's Protestant ethics of hard work, discipline and frugality (Weber, 1976/1958), and more recently in Social Gospel, Liberation Theology, and Prosperity Gospel (cf. Gifford, 2004; Hallum, 1996). But with the exception of Kim (2017) and my own work, this dimension seems to be missing in most studies on religion and language teaching and learning. If the subfield intends to be rigorous and to contribute to other fields, the political economy of language and religion probably needs to be front and center.

### *Religion in Secular Settings*

Finally, a lot more research needs to be done about religion in secular settings. The most concerning right now might be the experiences of religious minorities in secular settings who often are not only underserved but also discriminated against based on race, religion, language, gender, and immigrant or refugee status. This is particularly urgent for the increasing number of Muslim students in secular schools and universities (e.g., Bigelow, 2010; Mir, 2009; Rich & Troudi, 2006; Zine, 2001), as well as in community, educational, and justice systems (Bigelow, 2010). We need rich ethnography of individuals and institutions, preferably observation of interactions. Amidst largely negative relations in secular institutions (also see LeBlanc, 2017, for a Catholic school), Scarino et al (2016) provides a rare example of an exemplary girls' Catholic school in Australia where Muslim students reported feeling valued and positive. This school's policies and programming supported Muslim students and parents' linguistic and religious needs by providing dedicated English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) supports to students as well as staff, thoughtful translation services for parents by hiring former students, hiring a male Muslim counsellor, and making spaces available for Muslim students' prayers, and so on. It would be enormously informative to see a political economy analysis of the school, and its faith statement explained in terms of doctrine to pinpoint whether the welcoming policies can be implemented in other religious or secular schools. It

would also help to go beyond self-reported data to see how the welcoming and accommodating faith and polices, and associated social ideologies, manifest at interpersonal interaction level, to see what lesson can be gleaned.

I find it fascinating how religious expressions spread into secular forums, particularly in mass and social media but also in everyday discourses and conversations. Christian expressions such as 'mission,' 'confession,' 'witness,' 'testimonies,' 'blessings,' 'prayers,' and so on have found their way into political debates, speeches and events, advertisements on billboards, TV and social media outlets, as well as sports events, news reports, corporate boardrooms, and many Web sites. I wonder what functions these religious terms serve. Are they used intentionally, and how can we study them? Pihalaja (2013) followed a group of evangelical Christians using YouTube to debate religious issues amongst themselves (and with atheist users too), in which the detailed analysis of their discourse moves and their use of metaphors illuminates the pitfalls of intra-faith (and inter-faith) dialogue. I imagine that similarly detailed analyses can be done about religion-based controversies alluded to earlier in this article. Recently, Pihalaja (2017) analyzed how a popular Facebook evangelist used metaphors and Biblical stories in Facebook preaching. This line of research can inform discussions of religion in both secular and religious institutions, and probably can be easily adapted as curriculum materials for language classrooms and teacher training programs, or for materials for public debate and discourse.

I also find the concept of 'vicarious religion' intriguing, which is seen, for example, in a larger number of religiously non-active members understanding and approving of religious performance by an active minority (Davie, 2007, cited in Hemming, 2011, p. 1071). For instance, some religiously nonpracticing parents expect religious and even secular schools to provide their children with some forms of religious education, while special occasions such as deaths, births, or illnesses often put regular secular practices on hold to make way for religious practices. Again, how do these incidents unfold, what functions do they serve, and what do they mean in our time of globalization and secularization in the West?

## CONCLUSION

Given the historically and presently deep relationships between the religious and the secular across all aspects of society, I suggest that we

broaden the scope of the study of religion and language teaching and learning to not only focus on language classrooms and pedagogies in places of worship and religious schools, but also to situate them in relation to the secular sector and the larger society, bearing in mind that the social processes of the current capitalist globalization are unfolding as we speak. I believe we would benefit from recognizing and analyzing the social, political, and economic conditions of linguistic and religious practices, discourses, and beliefs. Indeed, socioeconomic and political analyses of religion and language learning and teaching may help us investigate the dynamics between the reversal of religion and language in the public and private domains in local and global contexts and processes. I argue that this work has the potential to make a unique contribution to both applied linguistics and to other fields.

While we have scholarly work that includes religion and/or language, we must not leave out ideologies that are connected to these topics which also include pedagogy, politics, and economy, including in the secular contexts in which so many of us do our work. When we have built a bit more empirical research along these lines, we will be closer to being able to discuss how to approach teacher training regarding religion for language teachers of all (non)religious inclinations, and possibly for others too.

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**THE COMMENTARIES**


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**What Can the Study of Hebrew Learning Contribute to Applied Linguistics?**

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Huamei Han's article directly addresses the need for applied linguistics to pursue a research agenda that moves religious language use from the margins toward the center of the discipline. Despite the great interest in religion and spirituality in the social sciences, scholars of applied linguistics have shown a general hesitancy to integrating notions of religious beliefs, practices, and identities into their theories of language learning. Yet as Han astutely notes, ignoring or not fully accounting for religion when attending to the social phenomenon of language acquisition and use means missing a crucial opportunity to further explore applied linguists' core concerns, including the interconnections among language learning and identity. In response to Han's call for the inclusion of religion across research in applied linguistics, I draw from my own scholarly work on Hebrew teaching and learning to concretely show the ways in which studying religion and language builds on central ideas in the field, as well as opens up new theoretical space for thinking about language policy, socialization, and ideologies.

Situated at the intersection of applied linguistics and religious education, my research has sought to address these concerns (Avni, 2011, 2012a, 2012b, 2012c, 2016). Specifically, I focus on the communal mobilizations of different varieties of Hebrew to construct and challenge forms of American Jewishness. Like Han, I "stumbled into this line of research" when, as a 1st-year doctoral student at New York University, a friend asked me why it was that American Jews had such low proficiency in Hebrew. Unbeknownst to her, she had tapped into a curious paradox in Hebrew education. Though the vast majority of liberal (in contrast to Chasidic and fundamentalist Jewish communities) American Jewish families send their children to Hebrew schools (or what are also referred to as synagogue supplementary schools or Sunday schools) to learn Hebrew and Jewish holidays, history, and beliefs, most graduates have minimal Hebrew-English bilingualism or biliteracy. In fact, the running joke I have heard repeatedly is that Hebrew school is the best place not to learn Hebrew. I could relate to this strange paradox because I was one of those successful fail-

ures; I had graduated from a Hebrew school at my synagogue in a suburb of New York City with excellent Hebrew decoding skills, but I could not read with any comprehension or speak at all. Those skills were only acquired years later when I was doing graduate work at Tel Aviv University. My own experiences piqued my interest at the time and has led me to undertake a series of ethnographic studies that are guided by two overarching questions: How do Jewish youth think about and use Hebrew in the process of learning to be part of the diasporic American Jewish community; and in what ways do language policies promote or impede this process? One of the primary discoveries I have uncovered is that Hebrew learning has very little to do with language acquisition outcomes in the traditional sense, and much more to do with how the act of Hebrew learning is utilized for ideological and symbolic purposes. Put differently, Hebrew learning is instrumental in socializing identity projects centering on what it means to be a Jewish American, in all its diversity and difference.

Understanding the role of Hebrew in becoming a "speaker of [American Jewish] culture" (Ochs, 2002) has led me to think more critically about Hebrew language ideologies, and the beliefs about Hebrew in regard to communal values and priorities. As a religion, Judaism is steeped in language beliefs, including when and by whom prayers are recited, as well as ways of writing and handling sacred books. Moreover, Jewish tradition has a lot to say about Hebrew, and particularly the importance of teaching reading skills to one's children so that they can perform rituals and pray. What one scholar calls the "textuality of the Jewish condition" (Steiner, 1985, p. 5) perfectly captures the ideology of the centrality of sacred texts in preserving and sustaining Jewish religious practices, particularly in the diasporic context. Yet what is important to recognize is that Hebrew is not a singular, monolithic code. Rather, it is an umbrella term that subsumes numerous varieties—Biblical, Mishnaic, Medieval and Modern — each linked to a distinct sociohistorical period going back thousands of years and shaped by language contact forces and the geographic dispersion of its speakers. For much of this

history, Jews acquired reading skills in older varieties of Hebrew in order to participate in Jewish rituals and prayer, while adopting the vernacular(s) of the communities in which they lived. This diglossic pattern dramatically shifted in the early 1900s when Jewish leaders re-vernacularized Hebrew as part of the nationalistic project to create a Jewish state, which resulted in the founding of Israel in 1948. As a central component of Zionist ideology, Modern Hebrew took on a hegemonic position and became the de facto official language of the emerging nation. Although many elements of the earlier varieties of Hebrew were incorporated into Modern Hebrew, the distance between the varieties remains substantial and was referred to by one scholar as the distance between “Shakespeare’s and today’s English” (Gold, 1989, p. 370).

The pivotal shift from being a language of sacredness to a revitalized vernacular has had direct implications for the teaching of Hebrew outside of the state of Israel. Jewish educators, already competing for their students’ time and attention, must decide which varieties of Hebrew to teach in the limited time they have, as each offers learners access to different practices, texts, and communities. Because the vast majority of Hebrew learners in the United States are not traditional heritage learners (i.e., are not coming from homes in which Hebrew is spoken), their main interaction with Hebrew is liturgical. Hence, the decision in most formal Jewish educational settings has widely favored the advancement of literacy skills so that children are able to participate in a *bar/bat mitzvah* ceremony—a rite of passage when 12- and 13-year-old children are recognized as adults and able to be counted in the prayer quorum. According to a Pew Survey (Pew Research Center, 2013) of Jewish Americans, half of U.S. Jews (52%) say they know the Hebrew alphabet, though far fewer (13%) say they can understand most or all of the words when they read Hebrew. Moreover, only one in ten Jews say they can carry on a conversation in Hebrew, with only 5% claiming they can “sort of” have a conversation in Hebrew. Not unsurprisingly, the Pew study findings have burst open a fierce debate and pitted Hebrew educators who promote teaching Modern Hebrew as a means of socializing children to nationalistic ideologies against those who construe Hebrew as a core component of canonical text-based practices. Hence, whether the finding that 52% of American Jews are able to recognize and read the Hebrew alphabet reflects a glass half full or half empty is perspectival and entangled in ideologies of what the goal of Hebrew learning is.

What these figures suggest to me is that despite its sociolinguistic particularities, Hebrew functions in many ways like other ethnic, religious, and minority languages in the United States. That is to say, American Jews like other religious and ethnic groups mobilize their language of heritage as a socializing mechanism in order to meet their varying political, social, and cultural needs and desires. Like other minoritized linguistic communities, American Jews look to their ‘heritage’ language to maintain and/or strengthen group identification and behavior. Indeed the idea that knowledge of language can be called into service for social means is at the fulcrum on which much of the scholarship on language revitalization, bilingual education, and language policy in multilingual communities is based. Yet, as Han convincingly argues, one can no longer study language learning as part and parcel of communal identification, continuity, and endangerment anxieties, without considering religion. The need for a better understanding into the interconnections between language learning and religion complement and extend important conversations regarding how groups mobilize languages as symbols of history, identity, and community.

Hebrew education in the United States also reveals a distinctly novel learning context that warrants the attention of applied linguists: the teaching and learning of religious languages in secular educational settings. Along with Kate Menken, I have been studying the phenomenon of the expansion of dual language bilingual education programs in New York City (Menken & Avni, 2017). Focusing on a Hebrew–English program at a public middle school in Brooklyn, our study has shown that Hebrew is utilized to meet varying and overlapping communal needs, which include religious identification and nationalistic affiliations, as well as pragmatic desires such as access to a neighborhood school that offers a strong secular academic education. Additionally, our research connects to the alternative ways in which Hebrew learning is being framed, particularly by the growing number of Hebrew charter schools across the United States (Avni, 2015a, 2015b). These schools teach Modern Hebrew to approximately 5,000 students across the country from different racial, religious, linguistic, and socioeconomic backgrounds. Consider, for example, the Hebrew Language Academy, a K–5 elementary school located in Brooklyn, NY, which states that the study of Modern Hebrew (as well as the comparative study of Israel and of the students’ local community) ensures that students will

grow to be ethical and informed global citizens (see for example Hebrew Language Academy 2: <https://hla2.org/about-hla2/>). Hebrew is not alone in making this move. According to its Web site, since 2009, Qatar Foundation International (QFI) has provided direct support to American schools to set up or expand Arabic language and culture programs in K–12 public and public charter schools, at the elementary, middle, and high school levels. According to their Web site, currently, QFI supports 28 schools in 10 states and Washington, DC, and reaches over 2,500 students (see <http://www.qfi.org/programs/arabic-language-and-culture/partner-schools/>).

The movement toward untethering languages from their religious attachments, repurposing them, and enlisting public schools to teach them beyond the borders of those in the faith requires applied linguists to rethink notions about language and religion, public versus private education, secular versus religious, and global versus parochial. It also raises questions as to who owns a ‘heritage’ or religious language, and when and how language learning can function as a proxy for religious education. Finally, it begs us to remember that language learning, whether in the case of missionization or in other contexts, is never completely value free or completely devoid of political or social attachments. Taking these new dual language bilingual educational spaces seriously means moving beyond seeing a religious language as part of a particular religious community, and understanding its ripple effects both in the religious community and in secular educational efforts more generally. It also requires that applied linguists account for the possibility that neither of the categories of language or religion is monolithic or fixed. In their malleability and fluidity, language and religion are available to all for appropriation, manipulation, and mobilization. Hence, to ask, as Huamei Han does, whether applied linguistics is prepared to shed its ambivalence toward religion and take on the intersection of language learning and religion in all its complexity is in many ways a rhetorical device that marks a particular time in the discipline that in

some ways has endured, and in other ways has already ended and transformed itself into something both new and potentially transformational.

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## Motivational and Ethical Complexities: A Response to Han's "Studying Religion and Language Teaching and Learning: Building a Subfield"

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In her fascinating article, Huamei Han makes a strong case for giving more explicit research attention to the possible role of religion in the experiences of people learning, teaching, or engaging with particular languages. Indeed, alongside political, cultural, and economic values, religion features among the belief systems and values constituting the macro level of ideological structures in the Douglas Fir Group's (2016) recent transdisciplinary framework for SLA, while places of worship feature among the sociocultural institutions and communities comprising the framework's meso level. In short, we recognise the importance that religion may play in the language contexts we research, but as Han discusses in her article, its place in our research field has largely remained implicit or emergent rather than focal. In responding to her argument for a research agenda that gives greater prominence to the role of religion in language teaching and learning, I would like to consider some possible motivational and ethical complexities in such a research agenda.

### MY OWN ORIENTATION AND BACKGROUND

Before articulating my response, however, I will first clarify my personal orientation and background in relation to the focal theme of religion and language teaching and learning. As I have previously recounted when writing another commentary piece on a similar theme (Ushioda, 2013), I do not subscribe to a particular religious faith and would describe myself as broadly agnostic in my personal philosophy of life. Yet, I am also deeply appreciative of the rich cultural value and heritage of the world's great religions, and of their significant influence on the course of human history and on our ways of thinking, living, and interacting with one another. I am also very open-minded toward the religious beliefs and practices of others, and understand the importance and power of religious faith for many people in their lives. In large part, this appreciation and

understanding stem from my upbringing as a child born to Japanese émigrés in Ireland and educated at Catholic convent schools in Dublin. This was during an era when the Church played a far more significant role in Irish society than in the present day, and so I grew up immersed in the culture, beliefs, morals, and practices of the Christian faith, despite being almost the only child in my convent school who did not belong to this faith.

Moreover, the Roman Catholic education I received was shaped by a strong arts and humanities ethos, in comparison with the more scientific orientation of a Protestant education in an Ireland divided by history and religion (see Loulidi, 1990). This contributed to an emphasis on the learning of languages, and undoubtedly influenced the course of my educational and professional trajectory, from the study of Irish, French, German, and Latin at school (and the acquisition of Japanese at home), through to a university degree in English and French studies, and to a subsequent career in language education and language teacher education. This professional career in language education included an extensive period at a Christian women's college in Japan and at its overseas branch in the United Kingdom that was in partnership with a Church of England college of higher education.

In short, I approach this response piece as an applied linguist whose life and professional career have been influenced by immersion in Christian cultural traditions and values, but who does not personally subscribe to a religious faith. In this sense, I bring to this commentary a degree of intellectual detachment. Yet, through my long-standing academic research on the psychology of language learning, I also bring to this commentary a profound interest in understanding the values, beliefs, and purposes shaping people's motivations to learn and use particular languages; and a recognition that, for some people, these values, beliefs, and purposes may have a religious orientation or may be bound up with their membership of particular faith communities.

## RESEARCHER POSITIONALITY AND REFLEXIVITY

For a short response article, I have dedicated considerable space to describing my personal background and stance. This is because I strongly feel that our own positionality as commentators and researchers is particularly significant when we are dealing with a complex social category and ideology such as religion, in relation to language teaching and learning. Among her guiding principles for future research connecting learning, language, and religion, Han draws attention to the importance of “researcher reflexivity”—that is, the importance of reflecting carefully on our own positionality, belief systems, and relevant identity dimensions, and on how these may shape our conceptual and methodological approaches to identifying and investigating issues, accessing research sites, interpreting data, and representing findings. In my view, “doing reflexivity” (Dean, 2017) in qualitative inquiry is important not only to enhance our critical self-awareness as researchers and strengthen the rigor and trustworthiness of our research. It is important also because it helps to illuminate the relational and ethical complexities of how we engage with the informants, participants, communities, or institutions under focus, and with their associated cultures, beliefs, values, and practices, which may or may not diverge significantly from our own.

As Kubanyiova (2008) observed a decade ago, applied linguistics research has increasingly shifted away from controlled laboratory studies to more situated, ethnographic, or ecological research approaches. Not surprisingly, this is the kind of approach favoured by Han in the agenda she articulates for the study of religion and language teaching and learning, and it is certainly the kind of approach that I favor in my own work on language learning motivation (see, for example, Ushioda, 2009). However, as Kubanyiova (2008) further commented, such approaches bring a range of relational and situationally embedded complexities in research ethics that are not easily captured by general “macroethical” (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004) principles, as embodied in professional ethical codes or institutional review board protocols. In particular, for those like myself who have a keen interest in motivational perspectives in language learning research, significant ethical questions arise as to how we engage (or, in effect, motivate) language learners, teachers, parents, or other stakeholders as informants, participants, collaborators, beneficiaries, or agents of our research;

and, importantly, how we manage the respective (and perhaps conflicting) motivational agendas of the ‘researcher’ and the ‘researched’ in such applied linguistics inquiry. Where such motivational agendas are shaped in part by a concern with religious evangelizing or faith-based ideologies or purposes, the “microethics” (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004) of how we manage our interactions with the ‘researched’ and represent their voices and perspectives may require very sensitive handling. The need for such sensitivity may be especially acute when we ourselves do not share participants’ religious motivations or ideologies or feel unable to empathize. However, sensitivity is also important when we experience connectedness with their values and belief systems, so that we continue to privilege their voice and perspectives rather than overlay these with our own versions of these belief systems.

## WHOSE MOTIVATIONS WILL APPLIED LINGUISTICS RESEARCH ON RELIGION SERVE?

Looking beyond the microethics of how relationships and motivations between ‘researcher’ and ‘researched’ are managed, I think it is also important to address the wider context of how a focus on religion fits within the remit of applied linguistics in general. Here too, I think there are ethical and moral complexities to consider in terms of how, as an academic discipline, we manage the representation of particular religious belief systems, values, and ideologies, and for what purposes and for whose purposes, and with what consequences for the field and for society at large. Applied linguistics as a discipline may be broadly comfortable with research that ostensibly promotes religious values such as tolerance, ecumenicalism, humanism, spirituality, and so on; and with critically oriented research that exposes contexts where religion and language interact to create discriminatory practices or power structures. But, as an academic discipline, are we entirely comfortable with research that would seem to privilege a particular religious belief system or ideology; or with research that would seem to endorse the language-related practices of a particular faith community motivated to reach out to and draw in new members? Whose motivations might such research serve, and what might be the impact on society of disseminating such research and its underlying ideological message?

In the current climate, principles of research ‘impact,’ ‘benefit to society,’ and ‘public engagement’ have become central to the discourses of

funded research and research evaluation, particularly for academic disciplines with an explicitly ‘applied’ orientation like ours. Moreover, ‘relevance to society’ has also become an increasingly contested issue in populist discourses around the value and purpose of academic research on both sides of the Atlantic and elsewhere, especially in relation to the humanities and social sciences. However, in our well-intentioned efforts to make applied linguistics research more socially responsive and to produce knowledge that can bring about positive change and benefits for society, I think we may need to tread quite carefully when it comes to engaging with issues of religion and language. We must make sure that we do not unwittingly serve the ideological agendas of particular faith communities (or individuals) who may wish to collaborate in our research for their own ends, such as to strengthen their profile and influence, or to have their version of ‘truth’ represented in a particular manner. Ontological and epistemological issues of ‘truth’ and ‘reality’ and how these are understood and represented in our research clearly take on new layers of complexity when the focus is on belief in a transcendent reality. Navigating this complexity and managing how we represent particular versions of ‘truth’ and their relevance to society and linguistic practices will necessitate very careful handling. Finally, in an academic climate where research funding for the social sciences and humanities is becoming increasingly limited and where we may look to alternative funding sources and organizations to sponsor our research, including perhaps religious

organizations and charities, we need to make sure we are fully comfortable with the underlying message and mission of this research.

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## Religion, “the Religious,” and Language Education into the Anthropocene: A Response to Huamei Han’s “Studying Religion and Language Teaching and Learning: Building a Subfield”

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### RELIGION AND “THE RELIGIOUS” IN LANGUAGE EDUCATION

Huamei Han calls for the creation of a subfield of applied linguistics research on religion and language education that should go beyond language teaching and learning in religious schools and into “the wider religious and secular contexts,” see language, religion, and economy as interconnected and political, and recognize local and global issues, contexts, and processes.

As a language teacher, language teacher educator, and language education researcher, my

work in bilingual, second, and world language education has for many years engaged the intersection of religion and language learning and instruction theoretically, curricularly, and empirically, particularly with regard to adolescent learners (Goulah, 2006, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2011, 2012a, 2012b, 2015, 2017a, 2017c). However, this engagement has never been about exploring religion just for religion’s sake. Rather, my work considers religion (and here I would add spirituality and faith) more broadly, that is as one part of all that makes us fully human. In other words, my engagement aims at understanding how

language learners enact and articulate (or do not) consciously and unconsciously established and emerging spiritual, religious, and faith-based dimensions of identity within the context of the taught and untaught curriculum, both in and outside the margins of schooling, and at local and global levels. Put differently, it seeks to explore what we might call humanity's deep interiority, or the sense of spirituality and interconnectedness that Daisaku Ikeda (1991–2011) calls the “religious sentiment” (Vol. 101, pp. 354–378; cf. Ikeda, 2010b, pp. 49–74) and John Dewey (1934) calls “the religious.”

Although Han advocates for exploration of language education and applied linguistics into “the wider religious and secular contexts,” it is not clear if she conceives something akin to Ikeda's and Dewey's position. For Dewey, rather than focusing on specific religions, which Ikeda argues can fall into dogmatism and fanaticism, special focus should be placed on that which is “religious,” those aspects beyond the institution of religion which have the power to “unify interests and energies” and to “direct action and generate the heat of emotion and the light of intelligence” (Dewey, 1934, p. 51; see also Ikeda, 1991–2011, Vol. 2, pp. 418–433; cf. Ikeda, 2010a). It is thus the secular experience of “the values of art in all its forms, of knowledge, of effort and of rest after striving, of education and fellowship, of friendship and love, of growth in mind and body” that Dewey views as “the religious” and argues we should seek and develop as our common faith (Dewey, 1934, p. 51; see also Ikeda, 1991–2011, Vol. 2, pp. 418–433; cf. Ikeda, 2010a).

Such “religious” experience has arguably always been a purported, if implicit, *raison d'être* of language education and the cultural and personal engagement it affords. Indeed, cultural experiences contextualized by language and deep communication with the target language community can and should engender the growth in mind and body, friendship and love, and education and fellowship that Dewey and Ikeda envision. However, in language education today, deliberate focus on fostering such experience often gets lost in the wake of essentialized treatments of culture, narrowly linguistic examinations of language for language's sake, and acquisition for instrumental purposes of standardized testing, college admissions, occupational preparation, and military training. Seeking the ‘religious sentiment’ in applied linguistics and language education, then, necessarily positions target language proficiency differently, as just a means; it is social self-actualization—

the profound becoming in the dialogic space of the linguistic and cultural Other—that is the end goal. Through such dialogic experience, our beings are “tempered and refined. Only then can we begin to grasp and fully affirm the reality of being alive ... [and] bring forth the brilliance of a universal spirituality that embraces all humankind” (Ikeda, 1991–2011, Vol. 101, p. 362; cf. Ikeda, 2010b, p. 57). As Dewey (1925) puts it: “Of all affairs, communication is the most wonderful ... [its] fruit ... participation, sharing, is a wonder by the side of which transubstantiation pales” (p. 166).

But focusing on “the religious” in language education does not mean that religion is not important. Indeed, it is. And Han's call, like my own work in this area, pushes us beyond just the *implicit* and secular “religious” experience of culture and identity through language learning and instruction into *explicit* realms of how religion, spirituality, and faith can and do actualize this sentiment in language education and applied linguistics.

In this regard, Ikeda's perspective, which informs my own research agenda and which stems from Japan's historical intersection of religion and education in developing humanity, provides an informative theoretical foundation. According to Isomae (2003), Buddhism (仏教) and education (教育) have historically coexisted in Japan as twin realms of a single underlying process of developing human beings, combined under the rubric “kyō” (teaching, 教). Isomae argues the Edo-period distinction between what was religion (i.e., Buddhism) and what was moral conduct and national learning was not clear in the Japanese vocabulary. The contemporary Japanese term *shūkyō* (religion; 宗教) was originally a coined word occurring in Chinese Buddhist dictionaries meaning only “the teachings of a school of Buddhism” until the Edo Period. It was transformed in the late 19th century into a translation for the Western term “religion,” thereby completely changing the signification and epistemological scope of the word. Isomae concludes, however, that the lingering bivalent meaning of *kyō* (teaching, 教) remains today as it appears in the character compounds for *shūkyō* (religion, 宗教), *bukkyō* (Buddhism, 仏教), and *kyōiku* (education/training, 教育).

Ikeda's predecessor in value-creating education, Tsunesaburō Makiguchi, engaged this intersection consciously and explicitly in a 1937 booklet titled *Sōka kyōikuhō no kagakuteki chōshūkyōteki jikken shōmei* (The Scientific and Supra-Religious Empirical Verification of the Methods of

Value-Creating Education; Makiguchi, 1981–1988, Vol. 8, pp. 3–91). Exploring dimensions of *believing* and *knowing* in what Andrew Gebert (personal communication) positions as a “sociology of knowing,” Makiguchi here unsettles the modern Western convention of education and religion as necessarily separate and instead (re)casts them as fluid and mutually inclusive and informing. In so doing, in exploring the mutually informing fluidity of religion and education toward personally and socially value-creative ends, Makiguchi anticipated Ikeda’s approach,<sup>1</sup> and today both men’s perspectives increasingly inform Buddhist philosophy and the fields of education in general, and language education in particular (Goulah, 2013, 2017c).

It is thus here, in such mutually informing fluidity of religion and education toward value-creative ends, where my research may make contributions to the subfield Han champions. Whether exploring intersections of Shintoism, Buddhism, nature, and war with socioeconomically diverse adolescents in a Japanese immersion program abroad (Goulah, 2015), or examining spirituality relative to adolescents’ study of Japanese language, pop culture, and ecology in a poor, working-class public high school (Goulah, 2007a, 2011); whether researching the individual and social impact of compulsory language learning and study abroad for racially and geographically diverse undergraduates who self-identify as Buddhist (Goulah, 2012b); or whether analyzing the implication of former Soviet immigrant English learners’ Baptist and Pentecostal beliefs and practices in their academic and social inclusion and exclusion (Goulah, 2009) and curricular engagement with biospheric science, climate change, and human beings’ capacity to alter life on the planet (Goulah, 2017a), I have found that when spiritual and faith-based beliefs are mined for their most ‘religious’ dimensions they can be significant for language learners to develop, articulate, and enact a fuller scope of identity toward individually meaningful and socially contributive ends. For example, in one study, a young man learning Japanese challenged and transformed his own racist perspectives (Goulah, 2011). In another, by engaging religion and climate science curricularly and sociologically, English-learning religious refugees who initially denied climate change because “it’s not taught in [the] Bible,” developed critical literacies, expressed transformed faith perspectives toward an eco-ethical consciousness, and began taking personally beneficial and socially contributive actions recycling and living more sustainably (Goulah, 2017a). In such senses,

religion and “the religious” can engender truly human education and therefore warrant (continued) consideration in language education and applied linguistics research.

#### RELIGION AS THEORETICAL FOUNDATION IN LANGUAGE EDUCATION

Finally, in light of the posthumanist turn in applied linguistics (Pennycook, 2018) and language education (Goulah, 2012b, 2017a), I conclude by suggesting an addition to Han’s aforementioned list: The emerging research agenda should include religion and religious philosophy as a theoretical framework or foundation. In other words, rather than viewing religion just as an *object* of research, we can also explore its possible role in conceptualizing research and theorizing findings. Here I am thinking specifically about the role religion can play in helping us conceive of language and culture education in necessarily new ways at the dawn of the Anthropocene, or the “age of Man” (Bonneuil & Fressoz, 2015; Goulah, 2017b).

Characterized by increasingly extreme climate volatility; accelerated species and biodiversity loss; resource conflicts; health, food, and energy insecurity; environmental migration and ethnocentrism; global monoculturalism and linguisticicide; and a profound transformation of land use, the Anthropocene collapses “given” distinctions between Human and Nature, and therefore between Nature and Culture, and redefines human beings as a *geological* force shaping Earth’s future and the existential crisis of sustainability. These mutually amplifying predicaments of the Anthropocene are intimately entangled with issues central to language education, including geocultural dynamics of race, class, gender, ethnicity, spirituality, religion, economy, politics, power, geography, militarization, security, technology, and (un)documented transborder flows.

At such a radical turn in the histories of Earth and humanity, we must reckon with our own socio-cultural, sociolinguistic, and socioecological *perspectives, practices, and products* (ACTFL, 2016), as well as those of the Other. The Anthropocene thus compels the field of language education to examine how the world’s developing predicaments and entanglements are implicated in language, culture, and identity, and to reconsider not just what and how we teach in world language, ESL, and bilingual classrooms, but why.

Pennycook (2018) rightly advocates for non-Western means of understanding the implication of these predicaments in applied linguistics. To

date, however, only Western (secular) perspectives have been tapped to explain how new approaches to materialism in the Anthropocene redefine language in alternative spatial and material terms beyond solely cognitive dimensions and human boundaries. The Anthropocene demands that we no longer consider Nature to be 'out there' as an externality, but as constitutive of who we are. In the posthumanist turn, this has significant implications for language.

Here is where Buddhist humanism can be helpful (Goulah, 2012b, 2017a, 2017b). Buddhism has always theorized Nature as constitutive of who we are, and us as constitutive of it. From the Eastern perspective of Buddhism, Nature and humanity (in material and spiritual terms) are always already "two but not two": Your life does not end at your own skin. This philosophical and practical perspective of human-biospheric interdependence manifest at spiritual and material levels offers an expansive framework for understanding, articulating, and creating meaning in the Anthropocene. Exploring this with regard to language education and applied linguistics can open new pathways in our field.

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#### NOTE

<sup>1</sup> Ikeda founded a network of 15 Soka schools and universities in seven countries across Asia and the Americas inspired by Makiguchi's theory of "value-creating," or *sōka*, pedagogy. This pedagogy places genuine happiness as the aim of education; and Makiguchi argued that happiness is cultivated through meaning-making comprised of the cognition of objective reality and the "creation of value" through subjective evaluation and interaction with that reality. "Value" here entails the values of individual economic and material *gain*, or benefit; of social moral *good*; and of aesthetic or sensory *beauty* (Makiguchi, 1981–1988, Vols. 5–6 & 8). Makiguchi argued that as students create such values they increasingly lead personally meaningful and socially contributive lives. Language education is central to the curriculum at the schools Ikeda founded, particularly at Soka University of America, where language learning and study abroad are compulsory. While Buddhist humanism undergirds the founding spirit and principles of these schools, "religious doctrine is not taught, nor is it incorporated into any class" (Ikeda, 1991–2011, Vol. 101, pp. 354–378; cf. Ikeda, 2010b, p. 63).

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## What Is “New” in the Study of Religion and Language Teaching: An Essay From a Middle Ground Point of View

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One of the main arguments Han makes in her article is that “few scholars have studied religion and language teaching and learning in religious or secular institutions” and that a “subfield of religion and language teaching should “(a) focus on but also go beyond pedagogy and language classrooms at places of worship, such as church, synagogue, mosque and temples, or at religious schools, and into the wider religious and secular contexts in general, (b) treat language, religion and economy as intertwining and political, and (c) simultaneously address local and global issues, contexts and processes.” By the end of the article, she advocates for and suggests situating the study of religion and language teaching “in relation to the secular sector and the larger society, bearing in mind that the social processes of the current globalization are unfolding” because the role of religion has largely been ignored in applied linguistics. Because international migration has nearly tripled between 1960 and 2015 (from 77 million people living outside their birth countries worldwide to more than 244 million) and with political turmoil, climate change, and changing notions of hospitality precipitating still more movement and/or displacement, Han’s proposed subfield of research in applied linguistics makes sense, and it is incumbent upon researchers and educators to continue to find ways to better understand how and what people do to navigate ever-shifting and fluid social, religious, cultural, linguistic, economic, institutional, national, legal, and geopolitical boundaries. However, in response to Han’s eloquent call for further study in what she sees as a burgeoning field of study, it is not entirely clear that researchers have not already considered the interplay of religion and language teaching as situated in geopolitical as well as socioeconomic

contexts, and while it is important for educators and researchers alike to better understand how people use language in different and across multiple contexts, including classrooms, it does not necessarily follow that they ultimately see or are aware of the nuances that religious faiths or religious texts and language in the everyday lives of people until people come into contact during such practices. Importantly, one might argue that the growth of secularization in many societies in the world may be a consequence for the need of ‘in-between’ spaces wherein different collectives of people of the world may come into contact productively, even as they simultaneously engage with their own religious, cultural, and linguistic practices.

Earlier in my career, I was drawn to and informed by the work of scholars and linguistic anthropologists who studied empirically the nexus of language, culture, and religion, as well as socioeconomic status, language and gender, education, and achievement. In their own ways, they pointed out how language indexes cultural processes or norms within any given setting. These scholars included Jonathan Boyarin, Brian Street, Lila Abu Lughod, Clifford Geertz, William F. Hanks, Claire Kramsch, Carole Stack, Michaela de Leonardo, Shirley Brice Heath, Terry Eagleton, Michael Silverstein, Benedict Anderson, Claude Lévi Strauss, Hervé Varenne, and Pierre Bourdieu, among many others. These theorists and scholars and their contemporaries argued in favor of studying interaction *in situ* and then figuring out etic and emic relations, or as Geertz is famous for saying, the “webs of significance.” They were also interested in how young people were socialized through language to participate in the institutional, religious, cultural, and educational activities where they lived. A bit later in my

career, my own work (Sarroub, 2001, 2002, 2005) focused on how young people and families, mostly Yemenis and Yemeni Americans, used texts, language, and multiple literacies in and out of school to successfully navigate cultural, religious, gender, and secular expectations. This work was followed by exploring how schools and teachers negotiated the language practices of young people whose religions they did not know or understand such as those of Yazidis and Kurds from Iraq (Sarroub, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010). My thinking was further influenced by P. David Pearson, Jim Gee, Carole Brandt, Susan Florio-Ruane, Luis Moll, Mary Pipher, James Collins, and Robert Robertson as I considered how school language and literacies intersected with young people and their families' knowledge of and about the world in connection to their religious practices, texts, and how print and textual practices influenced how they learned locally and globally. Concepts such as "funds of knowledge," "cultural brokers," "sponsors," "third space," "new literacies," "Discourses/discourses," "imagined communities," are some of the ways in which scholars described the dialogical and socioeconomic relationships that are deployed by people across the spectrum of mainstream and diverse populations on the move or rooted in their home neighborhoods, in religious settings, public schools, and/or refugee camps. Contemporary scholars in education such as Ari Kelman, Patricia Baquedano-López, Ted Hamann, Huamei Han, Tamar El Or, Jenelle Reeves, Martha Bigelow, Jan Nesor, Charles Elster, Stanton Wortham, Loukia Sarroub, Bruce Collet, Victoria Purcell-Gates, Mary Juzwik, Marjorie Faulstich Orellana, Lydia Kiramba, Theresa Catalano, and Kay Haw, among several others, have devoted considerable attention to teaching and learning phenomena as social and linguistic practices in places wherein culture, language teaching, or religion characterize or undergird to one degree or another relational and policy problems that have an impact on the human condition, learning, hospitality, citizenship, and accommodation.

That is to say, Han's call to develop research questions related to a 'new' field of religion and language teaching is not at all new, in the sense that her questions have been addressed with substantive work across various disciplines during the past 50 years. What may be new is that in the 21st century there has been an urgent need to support the huge numbers of displaced individuals, in part due to the late 20th century development of "glocal" market economies as well as an increasing world population growth, and as a result, nonprofit organizations, including churches,

mosques, temples, shrines, and the like are filling that niche as "cultural brokers" and "sponsors" of literacy and language learning, cultural knowledge, economic and health support, as well as religious instruction and socialization. At a time during which a startlingly high number of people very unlike one another with regard to language, culture, and religious practices (e.g., Afghans and Syrians who travel hundreds of kilometers/miles to Germany as displaced people and refugees or Ethiopians and Albanians who show up on the shores of Greek islands) are on the move and are being brought together, it is no wonder that language instruction becomes relevant as a political object of study; after all, it motivates people to join what Gee calls "affinity groups" in which individuals share some things in common, including being newcomers with the same first language, building social networks via others like oneself and with one's sponsors and cultural brokers, and negotiating successfully or unsuccessfully host country immigration and refugee policies that may be culturally alien and inhumane. At stake are the simultaneous processes of cultural and social survival in a geopolitical, religious, and social media milieu that helps structure these processes. Han, like di Leonardo who argued several years ago that studying social variables such as social class and ethnicity in isolation was not a good idea, is right to point out that religion and language teaching must be studied as connected social practices along with other factors and in the contexts in which people embody them. This is very much in line with Street (1995) and Barton and Hamilton's (1998) as well as Elster's (2003) notions of literacy as social practice.

It is no easy task to study or even to be aware of nuanced religious practices in the cultural milieus where they are expected to be part of daily life, such as a church, or as I demonstrated in my own research, the *muhathara* that took place in a well-respected and learned woman's basement where young women would freely ask questions about the *Qur'an* and their Yemeni and American identities (Sarroub, 2002, 2005). The teaching of language in these contexts is bound to histories of immigration and worries of belonging, marriage at a young age and loss of freedom, imagined communities both in the new country and the homeland, appropriate pious performance, as well as appropriate use of linguistic features and word choice in Arabic. In my work, I called such contexts "in-betweenness" by way of characterizing how people negotiate multiple identities simultaneously in relation to those of others (Sarroub, 2002, 2005). Similarly, Peshkin (1986), in his study of

the total world of Christian fundamentalism in the American heartland, devoted much of his book to long interview excerpts as a way to teach his readers that what may have at first appeared to be mainstream ideas during the Reagan era but were, in fact, part of an English Christianese register that constituted a culture that he and his research participants called a “total world” in the Midwest. Ultimately clear to him and to most ethnographers after months and years of ethnographic fieldwork and observation was that interaction in teaching and learning contexts in the school, community, peoples’ homes, and in the church reflected an ideology of nationalism, exclusion, religious superiority, gender hierarchy, and youth conformity that was in many ways at odds with secular society’s aspirations for diversity, critical thinking in schools, and democratic citizenship. Hence, for religion and language teaching to become more consistently an object of study, it seems that, as Bourdieu so deftly argued, researchers and educators must be willing and able “to objectify the objective distance,” while also participating and accommodating the religious practices they study. It is interesting that in a recent study (Riyanti & Sarroub, 2016) that took place in a university English foreign language classroom in Indonesia, the pre-service teachers, during a micro-teaching session, were observed to greet one another in Arabic and use religious expressions in doing so, thus indexing their Muslim identities, and then code switch to English for the lesson they were practicing, and then code switch to Javanese or Malay when making jokes before returning to the Arabic phrases at the end of class. Each language in these classes had a specific role, indexing location (the university classroom), identity (being a Muslim or not), topic (the English lesson and social media), and purpose (piety, solidarity, authority). It became clear to the researchers that understanding what was being accomplished by these college, pre-service teachers as they learned to teach English via their multilingual context would take months, if not years, of study and what was further intriguing as well was the question of how the instruction of English would be carried out in their future places of employment as teachers, including public, secular schools and Islamic schools. Indeed, multilingual settings are potentially the most fruitful sites for innovative research that explores how religion and language teaching might be intertwined both at micro and macro cultural levels because these are the places in which people from different backgrounds come into contact.

For example, Han’s research serves as a reminder that when people come into contact, they often create something new, what historian Richard White (1991/2010) identified as the middle ground, that fosters new ways of communicating and making meaning in new systems of exchange. At the heart of the history he tells of the Great Lakes region (*le pays d’en haut*) between 1615 and 1850, older worlds of the Algonquians and of various Europeans mixed and overlapped to create mutually comprehensible ways of being in spite of linguistic, cultural, and religious differences. Gilmore’s (2016), *Kisisi (our language): The story of Colin and Sadiki* documents the inventiveness of two children’s language usage as they negotiate diverse cultures, a colonial past, and linguistic landscapes because they come into contact, which is yet another example of what happens when people who have little in common culturally or linguistically come into contact. Han’s call for guiding principles, including continued attention to power dynamics, rigorous empirical work, attention to ideological stances, and researcher reflexivity, are salient ones at this juncture in applied linguistics, as they have already offered a way forward in other disciplines and fields of inquiry. Better sociolinguistic research is needed in combination with innovative research methodologies that account for geography and geopolitical relations in order to understand points of contact and how language and literacies, religious, gender, health and well-being, socioeconomic status, and cultural practices can work together to enhance people’s lives and improve the human condition in a sustained way over time. I would also posit that the growing secularization of multiple societies across the world is perhaps a middle ground, a way for people who have no choice but to come together from many different cultures, religions, and linguistic ecologies to create something new so that they may continue to survive and thrive in ‘glocal’ ways within their schools, work places, neighborhoods, places of worship, and homes.

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## Religere Like You Mean It: A Meditation on Han's “Studying Religion and Language Teaching and Learning: Building a Subfield”

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As someone who has been captivated by the intersections of language and spirituality for many years, I applaud the appearance of Han's call for a subfield of applied linguistics that focuses on this area. Both language and religion individually and as concatenated history have played defining roles in human life, shaping the social, political, and ideological realities of the vast majority of people who have ever lived. It is especially crucial, as Han proposes, that studies address the long and heinous tradition of religion, language, and the combination of the two being used to subjugate cultures throughout the world. This history must be excavated and faced, and I am sure that Han's guiding principles would lead to valuable work in the areas of critical historiography, empirical or ethnographical studies, ideological exegeses, or carefully circumspect reflections.

With all that said, however, it is important to recognize that Han's analysis is just that: analytic, residing in the Enlightenment tradition of logocentric academic research in which an expert subject (researcher) undertakes the formal study of an object (language, religion, their interconnection). In addition to Han's proposals, I would suggest, there is at least one other major aspect to consider, and that has to do with the

interrelationship between religion and language in a deeper sense, from the perspective of what these two projects are engaged in, from the inside. From this experiential perspective, one might ask: What are language and religion each about? What are their purposes, what lived experiences do they entail? What meaning do they have for people, how do they transform people? What is their power, what are their limitations? How does thinking about or engaging in one potentially connect a person to the realm of the other? What *are* the realms of language and religion? Thinking about language in these terms is not unknown in language studies. The work of Becker (1989, 2000), Clarke (1976), Ong (1982), and Stevick (1980, 1990) come to mind as writers who have evoked the inner dimensions of language learning—we could expand this list considerably by referencing philology and philosophy of language. Smith and Osborn's (2007) edited volume touches on this area as well. What I would like to signal here is that, like most of these writers, I, too, will take the inside route; rather than talk *about* language learning and religion, this will be a meditation resonating from *within* the powerful lived experience of language learning and religion.

At this point, it is fitting that I make clear my own positionality: I was raised a post-Vatican II Catholic in a mostly Irish neighborhood in 1960s and 70s America, full of the giddy hopefulness of the era. Undoubtedly a cradle Catholic, I ended up to be also, in my young adult years, a very intentional one. Through friendships with people immersed in religious life which led to a practice of daily contemplative prayer and frequent private retreats, my eyes were opened to see beyond the formal practices and institutions, to encounter the theological and especially mystical heart of the Catholic church, which, interestingly, led me to a long and ongoing study of the mystical heart of all wisdom traditions—the common spiritual ground among them. I am also, and have always been, an avid learner and teacher of languages (French, German, others), and I am quite certain this interest in spirituality and language learning is not coincidental, but two faces of the same vocation. Over the years, my scholarly imagination has continued to churn around deep, inner experiences of language learning: how it reshapes identity, as Becker (1989) so eloquently described, or how, like mystical experience, learning languages brings one to the brink of the unspeakable (Watson-Schneegans, 1994). These matters are topical in my work at St. Olaf College, where I prepare students to teach English as an Additional Language and World Languages, and teach courses in Second Language Acquisition and Ethics of Refugee and Immigrant Education. Each class session I teach begins with a few minutes of meditation to clear the mind and heart for the work at hand, a practice my students say they find extremely beneficial.

One more relevant biographical note: I have been guided in my journey by hermeneutics, the ancient art of interpretation whose name is derived from the Greek deity Hermes—god of communication, borders, translation—who was responsible for carrying messages from Mount Olympus to humans on earth and somehow making them relatable. Hermes's job, notably, was not accuracy on the surface, but fidelity to meaning in all its complications, recalling the lesson learned by anyone who has ever tried to translate anything but the simplest utterance: a literal translation is often *not* the truest one. The great philosopher Gadamer (1989) wrote that the “hermeneutical problem is not one of the correct mastery of language, but of the proper understanding of that which takes place through the medium of language” (pp. 346–347). As a language learner, teacher, and spiritual seeker, I found in the hermeneutic orientation a way to talk

not just about the words and formal systems of language, nor only about effective ways to learn and teach (all momentous subjects), but to try to give voice to what language is all about in the first place. In this piece, I would like to organize my thoughts around three themes which focus on the resonances between that which takes place through the medium of language and that which takes place through deep spiritual practice.

*All Knowledge, All Understanding, and All Living and Material Things Are Spiritual, Filled With Mystery, Loving Attraction, and Sacredness*

The first point to consider in terms of spiritual consciousness is that it yields a sense that the world is, in Gerard Manley Hopkins's memorable phrase, “charged with the grandeur of God” (1964, p. 285). From within religious consciousness (as opposed to an objective, nonparticipant position), there is no such thing as historical, social, personal, or material phenomena that are somehow separate from the spiritual, any more than there is a person without physicality or psychology. Scholars of indigenous background like Battiste and Henderson (2000) and Ross (1989) explain that indigenous people consider everything, all matter, all knowledge, infused with, coterminous with, spirituality, which is just exactly what Christian mystics such as Francis of Assisi, Teresa of Avila, Julian of Norwich, Duns Scotus, and Bonaventure also teach. Lately I have been learning from oral educational traditions in the Hmong, Karen, Lakota, Ojibwe, and Somali communities, where it is impossible not to note the same basic orientation that all of human life and, indeed, all the world has a deeply spiritual core identity. The universe itself, says Thomas Berry, “can be understood as the primary revelation of the divine” (2009, p. 67).

In Christian theology, this understanding is expressed by the concept of Incarnation, the materialization of the divine, which is best understood as beginning with the Big Bang around 14 billion years ago, and given a human face in the divine person of Jesus. According to the gospel of John (1:1), the cosmic Christ appeared in the beginning as a word, who only much later became flesh (*verbum caro factum est*), thus announcing the link between language and the sacred as the very foundation of all that was to be. What I want to be very clear about here is that this kind of understanding is not an article of a particular faith, but a way of expressing in poetic, metaphorical terms (rather than analytic, positivistic terms) how things really are.

Like everything else, languages are incarnational—they present meaning in particular form, each language gathering and expressing meanings and values in very culturally specific ways (Scollon & Scollon, 1995), but each with inestimable and uncontainable worth and beauty, and given a human face by each person who uses the language. If “language is the house of being,” as Heidegger (1971, p. 21) suggested, then all the world’s languages are the houses of human being in its manifold manifestations. This point, I would suggest, is thoroughly echoed in every textbook and lesson in which language educators seek to impress upon students that no language or culture is inherently superior to another, but that our task in approaching other languages and those who use them is to decenter ourselves from acculturated ethnocentrism and linguocentrism, in a project oriented toward mutual respect. All of this, in different ways, is a reflection of the sacredness inherent in language, whether we use the term ‘sacredness’ or not. Like spiritual practice, language learning leads naturally toward a greater sense of interconnectedness; to employ religious language here, language is one of the great conduits whereby the divine DNA in all creation expresses its mutual attraction, its longing for belonging.

*Words, Like All Symbols, Evoke Rather Than Simply Constitute*

One of the great commonalities between wisdom traditions is the use of words and symbols to evoke mythopoetically what can never be fully, determinately expressed. A powerful example of this comes from Jewish tradition, where it is forbidden to ever attempt to give God a name; the syllables ‘Yah-Weh’ reflect the intake and outflow of breath, not a name in the strict sense but a lived affirmation of the omnipresence of the divine in all life. Another example is found in the teaching of Sufi Islam where the word ‘Allah,’ understood deeply, is a combination of three parts: Al (the), an additional ‘l’ (the very great), plus an aspirated ‘h’—again here, God is found as and in the breath. Another resonance of this is found in the Te-Tao Ching: “The name that can be named is not the constant name” (1993 version, p. 55).

In the intellectual West, the notion of truths that cannot be fully expressed in language is often associated derogatorily with magical, primitive thinking. As a counter-discourse, the Catholic tradition, especially the Eastern Orthodox church, never lost its appreciation of symbol, as represented in the sacraments, the use of incense and

vestments, the writing of icons, and the particular symbolic words and phrases used for their evocative power. The semiotic emphasis here is significant, as it relates so directly to what we think language, or religion, or any other human endeavor can possibly achieve. Western scholarship proceeds within the legacies of science (strongly influenced by the Protestant tradition), shaping what is considered legitimate discourse in the mainstream academe—critical, objective, expository, logocentric, the kind of discourse in which Han’s proposal is formulated. But this is not the way that language is conceptualized and used from within deep spiritual practice, nor indeed, in some language philosophy: Ortega y Gassét (1959) contends that every utterance is both exuberant (saying more than it intends) and deficient (saying less than it plans). Symbols evoke, often with breathtaking power. At the same time, spiritual consciousness affirms that that they do not constitute a completely sufficient and accurate rendering of that which they evoke—the finger points to the moon, it is not the moon itself.

This sounds like an obvious point, but when it comes to language, especially one’s own language and particularly in the case of monolinguals, the point can be very difficult to grasp. The novelist A.S. Byatt put it this way: “We know that paint is not plum flesh. We do not know with the same certainty that our language does not simply, mimetically coincide with our world” (1985, p. 178). That is because, as Thich Nhat Hahn (1988) teaches, words are already oriented in a certain way even before we use them, and our thinking is conditioned by the affordances of our language: “With words it is especially difficult to escape conceptual categorizations ... Remember the empty bottles? They had definite sizes and shapes before being filled” (p. 49). Let us not fail to note that this lesson, offered not by a language educator but a Buddhist monk, is exactly what a person encounters when sinking deeply into learning other languages—it is then that we truly experience linguistic relativity and, at the same time, the partiality of each individual language’s ability to express ultimate meaning. Where *are* you when you are, as Becker (1989) put it, floating in the abyss between the way languages mean, an experience he described as eroding and reshaping his identity, an experience he sought out for that very reason? As one who has experienced that floating abyss, my understanding is this: You are just there where contemplative prayer takes you, a place beyond the realm of words (Merton, 1969), in a direct experience of the divine, an experience that no vessel can contain.

*Religion Is Oriented Toward Bringing People—The World—Together, and so Is Language Learning*

As the title announces, this commentary intends to draw attention to the original meaning of the word ‘religion,’ which is derived from the Latin *religare*, linking back together, or binding together again. In one way or the other, all good religion shares the same deep purpose of bringing everything in the world into wholesome relationship (although that has certainly *not* been the consequence of all uses people have made of religion), a purpose that is shared by teachers and students of language the world over. In the development of what Franciscan Richard Rohr (2008) calls unitive consciousness, it is not necessary, nor at all desirable, to submerge the differences that mark all individuals and cultures as unique, for, as Certeau (1991) teaches, God is the place where union and differentiation intersect with each other. The mystic Julian of Norwich describes the purpose of contemplative prayer as ‘oneing’—perceiving the already always existing ligature of divine presence that inheres in everything. In Eastern Christian teaching, all the world is moving inexorably toward the possibility of *apokatastasis*, or universal restoration of all with all in the healing presence of divine love. In Lakota, the phrase *metakuye oyasin* is pronounced as an essential truth—We are all related (Ross, 1989).

To connect this to language learning, we might note here that extreme devotion to one’s own particular identity construction—be it personal or cultural—can hinder both spiritual development and language learning. Ego- and ethnocentricity have the effect of keeping one in a container that is ever partial, and ever exclusive of other people, other realities, other wisdom, not to mention one’s own possibility for growth. It is no coincidence that a goal of both sojourner training and contemplative prayer is to relax the boundaries and obsessions of the self in order to receive the Other. Mystical wisdom from all traditions holds that separateness is ultimately an illusion—we are all linked in deep reciprocity—and language learning rests on just that same foundational understanding, holding out a very practical, lived possibility for linking together people who were once separated by language differences. Jewish theologian Emmanuel Lévinas (1987) says that the fact of alterity, the presence of the Other, allows me to be more than I can be—it is up to me whether I will open myself to this possibility that is always available to me as a divine gift, just as it is up to me whether I will engage in the

often risky and anxiety-inducing process of really learning to talk with people in another language.

## CONCLUSION

I imagine that the reader’s reaction to all of this might depend on many things, not least of which is how one defines religion, or which part of religion one takes as central. If you consider the external tenets of faith, articles of belief, ideological stances, or ritualistic practices as constitutive of religion—call it the ‘religion as cultural heritage’ approach, then the research agenda is much as Han describes and engages in. But, to evoke the well-worn iceberg metaphor of culture, I would suggest these may be seen as the tip of the religion iceberg—the minimal visible part—while the infinite base of the iceberg is the experience of unitive consciousness, which resides where prosaic, analytic language cannot directly go, and is the beating heart of religion, the very reason for its existence.

I want to conclude with an affirmation, from both my own personal experience and from my study of countless and varied wisdom traditions (of which only a tiny number have been mentioned here and only barely), that experience of the sacred—in which everything belongs—does not at all depend on formal religion, but it can be reached, sometimes, with the help of religion, and is, in my understanding, the primordial purpose of all good religion. Likewise, experience of the sacred does not require language, and sometimes is hindered by language, but careful use of language can sometimes facilitate it, especially the use of language (prayer, psalm, poetry) in contemplative practice. Learning new languages can and does hold similar possibilities, both in the sense of individual transformation and in the experience of intercultural communication. The two experiences—unitive spiritual consciousness and deep, engaged language learning—are only separable from a certain point of view, one that neither of them can truly adhere to in any ultimate sense. And so, I would suggest, let us certainly pursue this subfield, but let us do it not only from without, but also from within.

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