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Part of **Perspectives: THE ISSUE: Seeing Religion in Language Teaching Contexts and in Language Learning Processes,** Martha Bigelow, *University of Minnesota,* Associate Editor. Participants included: Huamei Han, *Simon Fraser University;* Sharon Avni, *Borough of Manhattan Community College, City University of New York;* Ema Ushioda, *University of Warwick, Centre for Applied Linguistics;* Jason Goulah, *DePaul University;* Loukia K. Sarroub, *University of Nebraska–Lincoln; and* Jill A. Watson, *St. Olaf College*

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 [Huamei] Han makes in her article ["Studying Religion and Language Teaching and Learning: Building a Subfield," *The Modern Language Journal*, 102, 2, (2018), pp 432-445] 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 Yezidis 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 ofmainstream 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 Nespor, Charles Elster, Stanton Wortham, Loukia Sarroub, Bruce Collet, Victoria Purcell– Gates, Mary Juzwik, Marjorie Faulstich Orellana, Lydiah 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 wellrespected 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-betweeness" 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 preservice 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 RichardWhite (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 wellbeing, 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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