Language, Presence and Transforming Christianities through the Anthropology and Sociology of Religion : Comment to Jon Bialecki

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FORUM
IS THERE SUCH A THING AS RELIGIOUS LANGUAGE? IS THERE SUCH A THING AS RELIGION?

PROTESTANT LANGUAGE, CHRISTIAN PROBLEMS, AND RELIGIOUS REALISM

• JON BIALECKI •

If there is one thing that can be ticked off as 'accomplished' by the nascent anthropology of Christianity, it is cementing the idea that in multiple and disparate ethnographic locales featuring self-designated Protestant and Post-Protestant Christians, there are often shared and religiously inflected ideas about what constitutes effective and ethical language. In places as physically distant as Zimbabwe, Papua New Guinea, Northern Europe and the United States, ethnographers have found patterns in language use and in speech ethics; again and again, we see that the referential aspects of language are celebrated, and that linguistics agency and responsibility is properly placed directly with the 'sincere' speaker. Riffing off of the wider linguistic-anthropological idea of 'language ideology' (Woolard 1997), this pattern has been referred to as Protestant 'language ideology', or occasionally as Protestant 'semiotic ideology'. (Bielo 2009; Crapanzano 2000; Engelke 2007; Keane 2007; Robbins 2001; Schieffelin 2002, 2007, 2014; Shoaps 2002; Tomlinson 2009). Now, there is certainly more to Protestant language than simply language ideology (see e.g., Handman 2015; Harkness 2013). And ideas quite similar to Protestant language ideology can be found antedating the advent of a self-conscious anthropology of Christianity (Bauman 1983; Stromberg 1993). But with the advent of an anthropology of Christianity (Cannell 2005, 2006; Robbins 2003) the concept of Protestant language ideology has become 'normal science' (Bialecki & Hoenes del Pinal 2011: 582).

Not all discussions of Protestant language have followed this format. Some Pentecostal language ideologies are ethnographically described as not prizing sincerity and reference-based models of semiosis; rather, they are depicted as decidedly eccentric, as in the place of identity and referentiality foregrounding an implicit partible personhood that elides subjective boundaries and laminates the conceptual and the material (Coleman 2006; Tomlinson 2014a: 22–47; Reinhardt 2015). This is a marked break with the standard discussion of Protestant semiotic-linguistic ideology. One explanation for this might be the claim that Protestantism and Pentecostalism are cladistically separate. Here, these would be different aesthetic and evaluative formations that have gone separate ways, and which have therefore developed along different lines (Meyer 2010). But if this is so, how would we account for the fact that much of the original work that established the idea of a protestant language ideology was done with Pentecostals and Charismatic Christian

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groups (Robbins 2004; Shoaps 2002), who presumably are also 'post-protestant'? A similar difficulty arises from the fact that in other Christian traditions, traits similar to Protestant sincerity seem to have a value as an attractor, yet are not reducible to a specific Protestant genealogical history. The contemporary Latter Day Saints, as an example, have adopted a speech ethics very close to the Protestant one, though for reasons to do with the complicated effects of a history of United States Government suppression rather than any direct Protestant influence (Smith 2007). We see that Protestant language ideology is at once insistent, and yet, despite this insistence, neither totalizing nor unique.

Elsewhere (Bialecki 2011), I have suggested that we might understand variance between and within Protestant and Pentecostal language ideologies by viewing these ethics of speech as animated by centripetal and centrifugal forces. In this mode, at times the subject is allowed to cohere and fix agency with the person, while at other times agency is detached from the subject, the boundaries of the person become more permeable, and the material aspects of language come to the fore. What my suggestion didn't account for, though, is why such countervailing forces could exist in the first place. One explanation could be rooted in what Matthew Engelke has called the problem of presence (2007). Writing about the Friday Masowe in Zimbabwe, Engelke noted that the difficulty faced by Christianity is that God is seemingly absent, or at least seemingly absent to those whose senses have not been educated. The challenge is in learning to sift evidence of the divine from quotidian dross. For the Masowe this is done through a very Protestant project of 'purification' of agency as expressed in language, and in a denial of the material aspects of language (see Keane 2007), though in the Masowe case purification was carried on to such an extent that even the Bible itself fell on the side of a fallen materially. At the same time, the Friday Masowe is a religion where the 'I of discourse' (Urban 1989) is destabilized. Friday Masowe congregation services are not headed by their prophet, but rather by the angel that possesses the prophet; and the identity of this angel is itself unstable, as it at times identities itself in an almost typological manner as being instantiations of different Biblical figures. And it is this figure that blesses the various rocks and other very material detritus that the Friday Masowe paradoxically see as delivery vehicles for divine power: charged through an intimate logic of metonymic redistribution rather than a representational logic that jumps over gaps, these stones and pebbles can be both Holy and effective for Friday Masowe Christians in ways that the Bible simply cannot. In short, the Masowe are at once exemplars of Protestant religious language ideologies, and yet also opposed to them.

All of these Masowe solutions can be thought of as responses to the 'problem of presence'. At times, speech is regulated and dematerialized so that a distant God can be reached; at other times matter is divinized, so that God can be contacted metonymically. This suggests that while there are multiple Christian semiotic ideologies, with Protestant semiotic ideology simply being one concretization of it, there is also something that might be called a unified field of Christian language, with Protestant languages of sincerity and Pentecostalized languages of immanentized transcendence just comprising different expressions of an underlying problematic. Going further afield, one could imagine that there might be further concretizations of this underlying problematic, such as Catholic regimes of abstracted and desexualized saints that index an otherworldliness (Mayblin 2014) and orthodox Christian semiotic regimes where icons and apparitions are a part of

a divine economy of image as emanation (Bandak and Boylston 2014: 35–37; Hanganu 2010; Heo 2012; Luehrmann 2010).

The rub is that this brings us up against another bit of anthropological 'normal science'. The normal science in this case is the claim that it is impossible to speak about religion as a universal phenomenon, since it is a historically created category. Both anthropology (Asad 1993; Saler 1987) and other disciplines concerned with religion as a social phenomenon (Masuzawa 2005; Nongbri 2013; Smith 1978, 1998) have produced a great deal of diligent scholarship establishing this intellectual position which has been summarized by Winifred Sullivan (2012) as follows:

> It is a commonplace in the academic study of religion to observe that the word religion is manifestly conditioned by the history of its use and that it is deeply problematic, epistemologically and politically, to generalize across the very wide range of human cultural goings-on that are now included in this capacious term. To speak of religion is to elide and conceal much that is critical to understanding the deeply embedded ways of being often denoted by the short-hand term 'religion(s)'.

However, the logic of some kind of shared generative problematic underlying the different articulations of Christian semiotic ideologies places this nominalist understanding of religion at issue. That is because even as we have different institutions, practices and aesthetics in each mode of Christianity that we discuss, these can all be understood as a *response* to an underlying problem, and hence having a sort of kinship—not *despite* their particularisms, but because their particularisms have a unified genesis. This is not to ignore historical specificity; historical specification, in fact, is understood as the engine of differentiation, as it is the differing circumstances that allow for different realizations of a shared problematic.

Does this mean that despite the refusal to speak of religion as generic or universal, we can speak about generative religious problems in the same way we can speak about Christian problems? At one level, the answer seems to be yes. Webb Keane (1997: 48), for example, has noted that even as it takes different forms, much religious semiosis is shaped by

> [t]he problems of communication between this world and another, or of handling authoritative words derived from distant sources (…) [n]ot only do [these problems] impose special semiotic difficulties on human practitioners, but their language must sometimes contend with the fact that the very presence of the deity, spirits, or ancestors cannot be taken for granted.

In short, similar problems have similar solutions—or rather, have similar classes of solutions. While the particular approach used varies, in general speech events responding to the conceptually challenging nature of these types of entities tend to be 'highly marked and self-conscious uses of linguistic resources' (Keane 1997: 48; see also Lempert 2015). Of course, this overcoding is not particular to religion; ritual is also shot through with a certain recursive 'poetic density' (Stasch 2011), and while there is a certain overlap between religion and the ritual, the two categories are distinguishable, or at the least it is possible to give exemplars that seem to belong to only one or the other of these groups, but not necessarily both. So it would seem that at the level of surface appearance, we must agree that we cannot provide a 'definition' of religion that will encompass all the various instantiations of 'religion.'

But perhaps at the level of the problem as a 'virtual' presence (Deleuze 1994; Bialecki 2012) we can speak of all religion as involving the problem of presence. This reframing allows us to imagine our going beyond the nominalist embargo against religion, and suggesting that when we have folks grappling with the problem of presence, we are dealing with religion (even if they themselves refuse the term, or even if they have no corresponding lexical item; cf. Nongbri 2013). Of course, this is further than our guides are willing to go. Engelke never even hints at this, and Keane blanches at the thought that the very same pressing semiotic difficulty that he identifies could be used to 'substantialize' religion. But we need not be as shy as they are.

And in fact, there are reasons not to be. We focused earlier on how circumstances shape religious expression, but the reverse is true: 'religion' in the generative sense can be a part of multiple other socio-ethical-political assemblages, tweaking the way that they are realized as they focus on their generative problems. And here we see the *utility* of religion. *Because* it references sensually obscured forces that can be realized and articulated in different ways, this allows religion to act as a sort of social flywheel, accelerating, decelerating or torqueing the expression of these other social assemblages.[1]

If we accept all of the previous postulates, could we then have a way of thinking about the *universal* utility of religion, even if we can't think of a single definition or cause? Can we set these two pillars of anthropological normal science against each other, and speak of religion in a way that does not ignore the genealogical and the particular, but is not reducible to it?

NOTE

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[1] In her response to this piece, Minna Opas expresses a concern that modes of religion outside Christianity may have concerns other than those posed by the semiotic and ontological challenges put forward here; she quite rightly worries that this may be an overextension of a category internal to Christianity outside of it. While not taking away from her caution, there is the possibility that multiple problems may be present in various instances of religion (see, e.g., Tomlinson 2014b on problems of temporality). I would also suggest that in any case in question, there might be two entirely different forms of saliency. There would be the saliency that the semiotic problem-of-presence has within a larger religious assemblage, and then also the salience that the religious assemblage has in its work on other assemblages. The use of expressions from a religious assemblage is different from the internal relations that constitute the content of a religious assemblage, and it may be that other problems which are dealt with by material generated from an assemblage organized around problems of presence may be the more overarching issue for any particular group.

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RELIGION, CHRISTIANITY AND THE QUESTION OF GENERATIVE PROBLEMS: COMMENT TO JON BIALECKI

• MINNA OPAS •

In his path-breaking discussion on the Anthropology of Christianity, Joel Robbins (2003) notes that the objective of the—at the time new—field of research, is to study the concerns common to the different context-dependent forms of Christianity. In his intentionally provocative contribution to this Forum, Jon Bialecki takes this point seriously and even takes the task further to include the category of religion at large. He argues, first, that 'there is (…) a unified field of Christian language', at the centre of which lies the problem of presence. Different forms of Christianity and their different 'institutions, practices, and aesthetics can all be understood as a *response* to an underlying problem'. Second, Bialecki extends this logic to concern all religion. He notes that, despite the impossibility or at least refusal to speak of religion as something universal because of its nature as a historically created category, what we can (and perhaps should) do, is to speak about religion in terms of a shared generative problem. Furthermore, he sees all religion as motivated by the same generative problem, the problem of presence. Or as he puts it, 'when we have folks grappling with the problem of presence, we are dealing with religion'.

Now, while I welcome the understanding of the problem of presence as a generative problem motivating Christian religiosity, and I will return to this point below, extending this logic—which bears certain resemblance to the Geertzian idea of religion coming into being when people are faced with fundamental questions of human life—to concern all religion, appears somewhat more problematic. This is because in extending the Christian problem of presence to concern all religion there lurks the by now very familiar danger of viewing all religion through Christian lenses. Talal Asad's (1993) observation that the category of religion itself is a product of Christian thinking is instructive here. Even though a great number of authors (e.g. de Vries 2001; Engelke 2010; Espírito Santo & Blanes 2014; Meyer 2010; Stolow 2005, just to name a few) have noted that questions of mediation, of presence and absence, are common to different forms of religion, and although devotees in many religious traditions demonstratively do grapple with the question of the ontological gap between here and beyond, can we assume that this concerns all religion and that even when it does, it is the *principal* motivating problem organising people's (religious) lives? Furthermore, we could ask, by viewing the problem of presence—even of 'virtual' presence—as central to all religion, are we not once again bringing the transcendent back to the very centre of our definitions of religion?

However, taking a step back could prove useful here. The idea of looking at religion through the notion of the generative problem is, I think, a prolific point of departure for comparative work. Nevertheless, instead of looking at religion only through one specific problem, we could ask, what different kinds of generative problems motivate religious traditions? In fact, Bialecki does put forward this idea too (see also Bialecki 2012). Although viewing the problem of (virtual) presence as something common to all religion, he still asks, in the plural, whether we could 'speak about generative religious problems in the same way we can speak about Christian problems'?

Coming back to the problem of presence within Christianity, I agree with Bialecki that it is possible to view the problem of presence, most explicitly articulated by Engelke (2007), to be central not only to Protestant forms of Christianity—for whom the problem of presence may or may not centre on questions of word and scripture as Bialecki notes—but to Christianity at large. Within Catholicism, statues, for instance, may work as important, but also often highly contested, media of presence (Kaufman 2005; Mitchell 2010, 2015; Orsi 2005). Within Orthodox Christianity, on the other hand, in addition to statues of Saints, God's presence can characteristically be experienced through icons, which, it has to be noted, are not less problematic as media (Hanganu 2010; Luehrmann 2010). In my own work in indigenous Amazonia, in a situation where the inhabitants of a single ethnic community adhere to Catholicism, Evangelicalism or Pentecostalism (or some combination of these), I have found the problem of presence to be played out in a multitude of ways both within denominations and in interaction between them. It has become particularly visible in relation to prayer practices, which cause inter-denominational 'schism' (Handman 2015) owing to differing understandings of the materiality of prayer and words' attachment to the praying subject (cf. Bialecki 2011); to the problematic relation between people's outer appearances, or rather habitus, and inner (sincere/true) Christian condition (cf. Keane 2007); to liturgical praxis; and to the incongruence between people's own experiences of the strength of their faith and the bodily signs such faith should produce. These different expressions of the problem of presence work to demonstrate Bialecki's observation that the responses to this problem have 'a sort of kinship—not *despite* their particularisms, but because their particularisms have a unified genesis'.

Linking Christian semiotics to the problem of presence opens up a variety of questions and possible paths for future study. I shall here briefly raise two of these questions, namely the centrality of materiality for the generation of religion and for directing research away from the search for meaning and representations and the linking of these generative processes to questions of institutionality and power. Firstly, viewing the problem of presence as a generative problem in Christianity can be seen as part of the current attempt in anthropology of Christianity and in human sciences more generally to supersede the hegemony of meaning. As part of this endeavour, scholars have explored the limits of meaning (Engelke & Tomlinson 2006), attempted to find ways to study meaning as something not immaterial, and searched for new questions not guided by the quest for meaning. In particular, much has recently been done in terms of trying to understand the generative power materiality has for religion (Asad 2001: 206; Engelke 2007; Reinhardt 2016). Attention has increasingly been given to language as embodied and sensed instead of denotational (Black 2013; Keane 2005); the materiality of semiotic forms is no longer necessarily understood as reflective of the subject's interiority but rather constitutive of it (Coleman 2000, 2006; Miller 2005; Wilf 2011); and (habitual) bodily movements and kinaesthetics are understood to be productive of religion (Bialecki & Hoenes 2011; de Witte 2011; Hoenes 2011; Meyer 2010; Tomlinson 2014). Such generative material processes are visible across the Christian denominational field. One intriguing example is the case of a Catholic visionary in Malta discussed by Jon Mitchell (2015). For this visionary, who gets and mediates messages from Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception, experiences the physical pain of the crucified Christ, and has stigmata appearing on

his hands, the bodily acts do not just represent or mean, but rather constitute through mimesis. Although the question of meaning is not alien to this case either, the focus on materiality or on the body makes it possible to ask other questions, to approach the constitution of people's religious lives by sidestepping the question of meaning.

Secondly, the recent focus on religious mediation, especially in relation to corporeality, often appears to leave aside the analysis of the effects of the wider social group or community on people's religious experiences. Matthew Engelke (2010; see also Rutherford 2006: 106), for instance, has noted how the attention given to mediums and mediation in relation to the study of religion is prone to eclipse questions of institutional power. However, looking at questions of mediation within the framework of the problem of presence has potentiality to link the questions of mediation to those of institutional power. What media are made important in regard to experiencing the transcendent, how, and by whom? Who controls these media and/or the terms of their proper usage? What are the processes of institutionalising mediating practices like? Jon Mitchell's (2010, 2015) discussion of Catholic visionary practices in Malta serves as a good example here as well. The visions and performances of ecstasy of the Maltese Catholic man began as individual sporadic events but soon developed into precisely scheduled prayer events, which gathered hundreds of participants. Our Lady had announced to the visionary that she would 'appear regularly every Wednesday evening to deliver a new message' and the visionary would feel the pain of the five wounds in his body every Friday (Mitchell 2015: 27). The problem of presence is played out in this case at many different levels and therefore it does not only provide the opportunity to examine the process of institutionalisation of religious mediation and questions of power internal to this process, but also more generally the power struggles between institutions—accusations of blasphemy and questions of nationalism—related to and raised by religious mediation.

Although very brief, these two examples work to demonstrate the potentiality of the focus on the problem of presence as a generative motivating problem to raise questions concerning Christianity, in particular, and religion, more generally. Such focus is definitely something research should keep looking into more closely.

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LANGUAGE, PRESENCE AND TRANSFORMING CHRISTIANITIES THROUGH THE ANTHROPOLOGY AND SOCIOLOGY OF RELIGION: COMMENT TO JON BIALECKI

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The anthropology and sociology of religion make an interesting couple—a couple that could perhaps have even more conversation and family-life than they have today. From the perspective of the academic study of religion (or 'religious studies' as it is often called), which is my home base, anthropology and sociology are often considered two alternative approaches for the empirical study of contemporary religion—approaches to religion as a presence as well as to the presence (or absence) of religion in modernity. Even if they share some classics, Durkheim anyway, these two disciplines are sometimes considered to differ both in their methods (ethnography for anthropology and predominantly quantitative methods for sociology) and their fields and respective theories (non-Western others for anthropology and the religious and secularizing people in the West for sociology). This is, however, changing. There is an increasing interest in the ethnographic approach and methods in the sociology of religion, in particular in the branch or sub-field that is often called 'lived religion' (McGuire 2008; Orsi 2005, 2010). One aim of this approach is to critique the opposition between official/non-official (or popular) religion which has often guided the sociology of religion but which is now increasingly considered as value-laden and biased.[1] Penny Edgell, a North American sociologist of religion, describes lived religion as 'a practical, everyday activity oriented toward interacting with superhuman others (…) drawing on sacred sources of power (…), generating experiences of transcendence and meaning (…), or some combination of these goals…' (Edgell 2012: 253).

When religion for anthropology has increasingly come to include Christianity and when non-Western Christians have brought renewed understandings and practices of Christianity to the West, the fields of these two disciplines become inevitably entangled. Furthermore, 'anthropology at home' implies that the fields of these neighbouring

disciplines often overlap in very concrete ways—so much that I suspect that fruitful, if not always simple, encounters are to be expected to increase in the future. These encounters already happen, for instance, in the working ways of religious studies scholars who explore issues such as religious healing in contemporary Western society, which often in various (albeit sometimes also eclectic) ways draw on both anthropological and sociological scholarship. But how might this overlap and co-operation feed the study of the religious dynamics of presence/absence and its relation to language or, more widely, different semiotic ideologies and practices? I suspect that intensified academic co-operation might help to identify and explore the complexities (which can take the form either of clashes or mutual inspiration) related to the possibilities and conditions of plausibility of divine or sacred presence in various modern contexts. As Nancy Ammerman (2007), another North American sociologist of religion, writes, what is very much characteristic of the modern society, with its more or less 'private' and 'public' spheres and their increasing overlaps, is that instead of either/or, there is often a very complex co-existence of absence and presence of religion—and this is true both for issues related to identity and to sacred powers. Certainly these complexities will further intensify with immigration and social diversity (for the changing religious scene in Finland, see Nynäs et al. 2015).

As is well known, language is only one technique of presence which, nevertheless, has been given a privileged role particularly in Protestant forms of Christianity and its missionary work globally. Language can mean many different things, and there are several interesting dynamics related to it. The ideology of sincerity, so important in many Protestant versions (if not to equal degrees), and the social, political and psychological implications that it carries, has called for much well deserved attention in anthropology recently, as Bialecki writes. The Protestant emphasis on language which antedates other created things in the world, and which embodies creating and all-penetrating power, may become packed with credibility in certain modern contexts such as, notably, Charismatic Christianity and related social worlds. Since in Charismatic contexts the word is often enacted in highly sensuous forms, this of course complicates the Weberian disenchantment model, so important for secularization theories in sociology, which suggests that when Protestant forms of Christianity after the Reformation gradually replaced other semiotic mediators and techniques of presence with the word only, this was the beginning of a process whereby sacred power and presence would gradually fade away from the immanent and material planes of life. This process has been described as entailing the secularization of the materiality of the human body which became less and less capable of carrying or channelling sacred power, as Philip Mellor and Chris Shilling so well demonstrate in *Re-forming the Body* (1997). Robert Orsi (2005: 12) has written that modern bodies have been concretely guided and disciplined so that they would not sense what he calls 'religious presence' but, on the contrary, that they would be oriented towards learning the absence (see also Asad 1993). The story, of course, is not this simple. There are many ways in which either the religious or secularized word (for instance, through politics or commerce) even today executes extreme power or charm—extending to many forms of magic and enchantment which play with (the desire of) presence and authenticity (e.g. Meyer & Pels 2003; Bennett 2001).

Nevertheless, there is also evidence, in such culturally Protestant and relatively secular societies as Finland at least, that many people feel that the Christian word has gradually

become a dead letter—in the sense that it doesn't carry divine power in a way that would affect and touch people's lives, bodies and souls. This may to some extent be related to what the sociologist Grace Davie (2007) has called 'vicarious religion', that is, religion and its word-oriented rituals enacted by one person for the rest of the community. Although each Protestant subject is understood to have her own relation to the word of God, it is the minister who has been given the official role of the *ritual master of the word*, leaving the more ordinary members of the congregation merely the position of obedient *recipients of the world*. (In Finnish the word 'obedient' derives from the word 'hear' and 'hearer'.) Yet this posited role of obedient recipient of the word may feel too passive and, also, too collectivistic for many people in a culture and society in which individual action and initiative is otherwise emphasized and encouraged. Thus, to cut a long story short, in a society such as Finland, people who do not simply discard religion and turn to secular sources of inspiration, power and consolation, may be attracted by either Charismatic forms of Christianity or so called 'alternative' religions. The first option powerfully reanimates the word whereas the second, with its many versions ranging from New Age to paganism and Eastern religions, provides either alternatives or supplements to the word (such as imagery meditations, very tangible healing techniques, card-readings, sensorial everyday rituals, channelling supporting energies, etc.) for mediating and creating presence and effect in the midst of the secular everyday life (see Utriainen et al. 2015).

Put simply, whereas anthropologists of Christianity have been witnessing the global growth of the power of the word and the ways it is changing previously more materially-oriented techniques of sacred presence and mediation, sociologists have been investigating processes of change and decline of the power of the Christian word and the ways in which Christianity and other religions (and their ways of mediation) interact in diversifying modern societies. Their shared sphere, from this very quickly and roughly sketched perspective, would be the changes of function, style and intensity of the power of the word as one technique of divine presence. Sometimes, word is the (magical) mediator, whereas at other times it may lose this capacity altogether in the rise of other mediators. However, under some conditions word and language may become flesh again. Within some traditional yet liberal Christian contexts there may appear something that we could perhaps call the crisis of divine presence, when the default semiotic form has lost much of its power. This crisis can open the way to revivalist and charismatic movements—the latter gaining in popularity all over the world, including Finland, in the native populations of different generations and social groups as well as among increasing numbers of immigrants. Word may become re-animated to the extent that it ends up being the most privileged or, indeed, the only power source and channel. In other contexts word is not so much privileged but, instead, it becomes but one among many possible channels, gaining or losing in power in the course of their dynamic interaction.

One concrete empirical example of the latter possibility can be taken from contemporary engagement with angels which has become popular in many Western countries today, including Finland. Since angel practices and beliefs emerge in the interplay between Christianity and new spirituality, word and other techniques of presence can in various complex and intriguing ways complement and re-frame one another (see e.g. Utriainen 2013, forthcoming). What seems to be one key change that results from these kinds of practices is that word in the sense of dogma (word as carrying truth and as managed

and legitimized by tradition and institution) loses authority. Nevertheless, words and speech as carriers of the 'authentic' inner life experiences of individuals and their relations to alterity are very much valued, and in this capacity language actively interacts in the semiotic network. I feel that subtle and dynamic issues related to the changing ways of mediating and making present the sacred would certainly merit from the joining of hands of the anthropology of Christianity, the sociology of religion and religious studies.

NOTE

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[1] Whereas mostly sociologists opt for 'lived religion', some folklore and religious scholars prefer the notion 'vernacular religion' (Primiano 1995; Bowman & Valk 2012; Siikala 2012). In choosing the latter they emphasize that the notion 'vernacular' does not hide important but often neglected differences of social class. Some scholars in the so called 'material religion' approach also favour 'vernacular religion' (see, e.g., Whitehead 2014). For an interesting discussion of the different notions see in particular Robert Orsi's preface to the second edition of his *The Madonna of the 115th Street* (2002). See also Primiano (1995) for discussion on what kind of bias may be inherent in the distinction 'official vs. popular religion'.

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