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# Spiritual and religious meaning making in language and literacy studies: Global perspectives on teaching, learning, curriculum and policy

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## Abstract

**Purpose**—In an editorial introduction essay for the special issue on Religion, Literacies, and English Education in Global Dialogue < <https://www.emerald.com/insight/publication/issn/1175-8708/vol/21/iss/3> >, the editors frame papers in the special issue in dialogue with previous scholarly literature around three central lines of inquiry: How do children, youth and families navigate relationships among religion, spirituality, language and literacy? What challenges are faced by language and literacy teachers and teacher educators around the globe who seek to respond to diverse religious and spiritual perspectives in their work? And what opportunities do

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teachers seize or create toward this end? How are developments of language and literacy theory, policy, curriculum and ritual entangled with race and religion?

**Design/methodology/approach**—Taking an essayist, humanistic approach, this paper summarizes, interprets and comments on previous scholarly works to frame the articles published in the special issue “Religion, Literacies, and English Education in Global Dialogue” in relation to the field and in relation to one another.

**Findings**—Denise Dávila, Matthew Deroo and Ilhan Mohamud reveal the relationships young people and families forge and navigate among spiritual literacies and literatures, digital technologies and ethnic identities. Heidi Hadley, Jennifer Wargo and Erin McNeill illuminate how teachers’ vocations, as well as their pedagogical goals and curricular artifacts, can become deeply entangled with religious and spiritual sensemaking. Kasun Gajasinghe and Priyanka Jayakodi expand perspectives on both the ritualization and racialization of religion through nationalist policies surrounding national anthem performances in Sri Lanka. Anne Whitney and Suresh Canagarajah discuss how spiritual commitments, communities and experiences interact with their scholarly trajectories.

**Research limitations/implications**—The essay concludes with a discussion of scholarly capacity building that may be needed for conducting research on religion and spirituality in relation to languages, literacies and English education on a global scale.

**Practical implications**—The second section of the essay discusses challenges faced by language and literacy teachers and teacher educators around the globe who seek to integrate diverse religious and spiritual perspectives into their work. It foregrounds how many teachers and teacher educators work within contexts where ethnoreligious nationalism is on the rise. It highlights the need for language and literacy educators to develop curiosity and basic knowledge about diverse religions. Further it calls for teacher educators to engage with teacher candidates’ religious identities and sense-making.

**Social implications**—Because it considers religious and spiritual sense-making in relation to language and literacy education, the social implications of this work are significant and wide-reaching. For examples, the paper questions the conceit of secularism within education, pushing readers to consider their own spiritual and religious identifications and influences when they work across religious differences.

**Originality/value**—This paper identifies, interprets and assesses current threads of work on religious and spiritual sense-making within scholarship on languages, literacies and English education.

**Keywords:** Migration, Social justice, English language arts, English teaching

This collection of manuscripts came together as the devastating Russian assault on Ukraine began to unfold. In dialogue with this special issue, we observed a diversity of religious perspectives being advanced to make sense of these events.

In week three of the conflict, mayor Vitali Klitschko of Kyiv pleaded with international religious leaders to take a collective, compassionate stand in solidarity to denounce violence and promote peace. Klitschko argued that the war in Ukraine “touches the heart of all the inhabitants of our planet who love justice and values of goodness regardless of their region or religion” (Wooden, 2022).

In Russia, the Orthodox Church signaled its support for the military’s assault on Ukraine, indicating that Russian forces have God’s blessing and that larger metaphysical forces beyond the fighting are at play in the conflict. While Vladimir Putin has also invoked the spiritual imagery of his Eastern Orthodox Christianity to advance an imperialist vision for Russia, Ukraine itself has long been one key site wherein tensions within Orthodox Christianity have unfolded.

Pope Francis, arguably the most influential Christian leader of the West, urged peace, denouncing religious justification for the violence as a profanation of God’s name.

In a vein not unusual among Christian nationalists in the USA (Burke *et al.*, 2022 in review; Whitehead and Perry, 2020), televangelist Pat Robertson averred that God is compelling Russian forces to march toward Israel, where an end-times battle will wage as prophesied in the biblical book of Ezekiel.

Other commentators observed hypocrisy. While the plight of Ukrainian refugees (the majority of whom are Christian) has received widespread sympathy and support in the West, Syrian, Afghan and other Muslim refugees fleeing similar humanitarian crises have experienced less compassion; indeed, they have suffered inhospitable and dehumanizing receptions from many European and US leaders.

Thus does the war in Ukraine illustrate the diverse ways people(s) around the world endow conceptions of goodness, justice and the moral order with religious significance to make meaning of—or, like Putin, to exercise power within—their changing worlds. While sometimes spurring compassion and open-heartedness, religious interpretation can also demarcate or fortify boundaries, resulting in the “othering” of ethnic and religious groups with devastating consequences

for individuals and cultures. Such processes are semiotic as well: they involve mobilizing and attaching values to and through different forms of language and literacy, alongside other signs and sign systems (e.g. icons, embodiments, rituals, plants).

This special issue seeks to offer global perspectives on the relationships among spiritual and religious meaning making, on the one hand, and language and literacy teaching, learning, curriculum and policy on the other hand. Featuring and juxtaposing diverse voices of scholars, politicians, evangelists, teachers, parents, children and youth, the papers advance scholarly and pedagogical dialogues around three central questions:

*RQ1.* How do children, youth and families navigate relationships among religion, spirituality, language and literacy?

*RQ2.* What challenges face language and literacy teachers and teacher educators around the globe who seek to respond to diverse religious and spiritual perspectives in their work? And what opportunities do teachers seize or create toward this end?

*RQ3.* How are developments of language and literacy theory, policy, curriculum and ritual entangled with race and religion?

### **Children, youth and families navigating relationships among religion, spirituality, languages and literacies**

In educational settings around the globe, students grapple with tensions that arise, as they navigate languages and literacies in relation to academic, spiritual and sociopolitical life worlds and histories in which they find themselves entangled. Students belonging to religious groups minoritized in particular locales (or more globally) often face intense challenges to their sense of being and belonging when they attend school. For example, Jewish school children around the globe are experiencing rising antisemitic violence, intimidation and hostility in schools (for US data, see The Anti-Defamation League Audit of Antisemitic Incidents, 2019), to the point where international teacher training programs are being developed to address it (UNESCO and OSCE-ODIHR, 2020). In the Karnataka state of India, a country where Hindu nationalism is on the rise, Muslim school girls have been banned from

wearing head scarves in schools, a policy affirmed in March 2022 with the state's top court ruling that the hijab is inessential to Muslim religious practice. Indeed, Islamophobia has been judged such a global crisis that, in March 2022, the United Nations General Assembly unanimously approved a resolution proclaiming March 15 as International Day to Combat Islamophobia—a consensus that non-Muslim ethnoreligious nationalists around the globe are already protesting. Mir and Sarroub (2019) documented the pervasive growth of Islamophobia in schools and US higher education, highlighting through an analysis of news media and case studies the destruction of learning opportunities and civic engagement because of national-level anti-Muslim sentiment and rhetoric, including violence and ongoing marginalization of Muslim youth.

Young people who belong to diverse religious communities often shift between the subjective experience of being “majority” or “minority” depending upon their locations—their homes, their place of worship, their public schools, workplaces and other different geographical locations they traverse. A growing body of research on religious literacies documents how young people experience both joys and struggles, as they navigate religious being and belonging in relation to the academic, literate, spiritual and sociopolitical dimensions of their lives. For decades, language and literacy scholarship has studied how diverse religious communities shape literacy socialization, practice and learning (Baquedano-López, 2008; Boyarin, 1993; Han, 2018; Heath, 1983; Peshkin, 1986; Smitherman, 1977; Street, 1984).

A more recent wave of work has concerned itself with how religion shapes youths' literate trajectories and experiences in US classrooms and schools. Sarroub (2005), for example, studied the literacies practices of young Muslim women navigating life as Yemeni Americans while simultaneously adhering to Yemeni cultural and geopolitical expectations locally and transnationally in Yemen. While at school, the young women were part of an ethnic enclave of other Yemeni American Muslims, and they became part of a post-9/11 US society wherein Islamophobia grew. Relatedly, and in connection to young people's literate trajectories within their religious identities, Sarroub (2007) examined in depth a Yezidi young man's (Hayder) home and school life. Hayder had arrived in the USA as a refugee with the second wave of Iraqi refugees following the Second Gulf War. The study explored how

teachers misunderstood him as Muslim and student, in turn, activating religious and cultural biases that hampered his language learning.

Other work focuses on religious meaning making in diverse Christian youths' reading, writing and speaking development. Weyand and Juzwik (2020) followed evangelical Christian high school senior Jeremy on a curricular walkabout, a community-immersed learning experience he chose to take with an itinerant evangelist traveling to different universities in the Southeastern USA. Jeremy reported the experience not only as deepening his faith but also as developing his rhetorical dexterity in communicating with others through speaking and writing about his faith. Rackley (2014) identified how religio-cultural contexts informed the way two groups of religious youth constructed meaning of sacred texts. Methodist youth grounded their religious literacy work in a culture of interpretation in which active intellectual and verbal engagement was central. Latter-day Saint youth privileged a culture of listening that valued extracting specific lessons from scripture and memorizing selected passages. As an examination of religion as social and cultural practice, this research shows how, for religious young people, meaning-making work is situated within the contexts and cultures of their lives. Relatedly, Rackley examined motivations for religious literacy, proposing a framework of motivated religious literacies (Rackley, 2016) and identifying characteristics of religio-social learning spaces that encouraged young people to engage with sacred texts (Rackley, 2021).

A recent and growing body of work examines literacies and literacy learning in relation to global migration and the experiences of transnationals belonging to different religious groups. Language and literacy scholars are devoting increased attention to religion and spirituality as significant forces in the lives, literacies and learning of transnational youth, those who maintain connections across two or more countries (Skerrett, 2015). Skerrett (2020) documented how Annemarie, a Guyanese-born young woman of Indian descent whose family had immigrated to the Caribbean Island, Sint Maarten, undertook a complex literacy learning process to grapple with her family's inter-religious heritage and to discern her "one true faith"—a kind of "coming of age" process of claiming one's religious faith for herself. Skerrett (2014) further examined how one US teacher, Mrs Campbell, empowered transnational students in her classroom to mobilize their

religious experiences, literacies and bodies of knowledge as resources for their academic reading and writing. Other research has focused on coalitional literacies in immigrant-focused religious communities: language and literacy practices for building bridges and solidarity across religious, ethnic, language and immigration status differences to forge alliances and strategic coalitions with one another (Campano *et al.*, 2016). Collectively, this research demonstrates the power of religious communities as sponsors of literacy across time and space.

The first two articles in this issue move forward scholarship on the relationships young people and families forge and navigate among spiritual literacies and literatures, digital technologies and ethnic identities. In the first article of this special issue, “Somos fieles creyentes’: Children’s construction of spiritual and literate identities at home” Denise Dávila presents an analysis of video recordings from a virtual bilingual literacy program for families of preschoolers during COVID-19. The recordings feature the Rosario family: Mamá, Angelina (age 4), Benicia (age 6) and Celerina (age 8). In the videos, the Rosarios construct their spiritual identities as devotees of la Virgen de Guadalupe, the Catholic patron saint of Mexico and the Americas. Dávila reports that in the context of a larger study, the objective of this inquiry project was to examine what happens when a virtual early literacy program includes materials that acknowledge a family’s cultural/spiritual practices, funds of knowledge and funds of identity. Expanding upon Baquedano-López (1997) work, this article illustrates how in a secular early literacy program the Rosario family constructed their spiritual, ethnic and communicative/literate identities by showing the physical artifacts of their spiritual/ethnic identities, describing their devotional and spiritual practices, retelling Guadalupe’s legend in their own words and explicitly expanding the children’s vocabulary.

The second article, “‘I would rather be informed than misinformed’: Critical conversations supporting transnational religious identity across time and space,” draws on theories of digital religion and counter storytelling. Matthew Deroo and Ilhan Mohamud coconstruct a narrative account of Mohamud’s social media engagement during the end of high school and the beginning of college. Their article takes readers into Mohamud’s social media experiences to examine her developing identity as a transnational immigrant woman of faith, how she spoke against Islamophobic discourses and her emerging



confidence about her place in the world. At the intersection of literacy, religion and counter storytelling, this article raises important questions about the transformative role of social media in (marginalized) young people's lives and the nature of religious young people's identity formation and development. This work helps sensitize English and literacy educators to the complex negotiations and meaning-making processes today's youth engage in as part of their everyday experiences in the world.

### **Language and literacy teaching and teacher education**

Language and literacy educators, for their part, face challenging realities in connecting or integrating religious and spiritual considerations with language and literacy curriculum, teaching and learning: the example of Mrs Campbell, mentioned above, seems all too rare in the scholarly literature. One challenge is simply putting religion and spirituality "on the table" in the preparation of teachers (Marcus *et al.*, 2019), at least within public schools and universities, where it is often ignored or skimmed over in courses and curriculum focused around either justice and equity on the one hand, or language and literacy content on the other. In comparison with religiously attuned language and literacy studies focused on young people, families and communities, scholarship on teaching and particularly language and literacy teacher education remains emergent. Even more scarce is such work that attunes as well to impacts of global migrations on language and literacy teaching and teacher education (e.g. in the spirit of Skerrett, 2014) or to various religious and spiritual forces shaping the experiences and learning of teachers and teacher candidates outside the USA.

Hadley and Fassbender (2020) moved the field in that direction, in their interview study with teacher candidates experiencing conflict between a program of "social justice-oriented teacher education" in a public university secondary English education program (particularly around supporting LGBTQ students in K-12 classrooms) and their "personal religious beliefs" as evangelical Christians in the Southeastern USA (p. 38). Framed and analyzed through philosophical recognition theory, the internal and interpersonal conflicts experienced by these teacher candidates included feeling (or trying to be) invisible

because of their Christian identities, a sense of being misrecognized by LGBTQ-supporting peers in the cohort and internal conflicts about their ethical responsibilities as teachers. We agree with the authors' assessment that "teacher education needs to grapple more substantially with the identities and perspectives of religious teachers" (p. 48), including teachers who identify in ways other than Christian and teachers who work in locales around the world.

Another issue revolves around language and literacy educators' basic knowledge about diverse religions. Hartwick's (2015) more general work on Wisconsin public school teachers' beliefs about God provides some useful baseline information about teachers' own religiosity. Additionally, a literature in religious studies scholarship has emerged around the idea of "religious literacy" (Prothero, 2008), and in dialogue with this work, Moore (2007) explored how secondary education can address the problem of "religious illiteracy" through an approach situating the study of religion in cultural studies. Within language and literacy scholarship, however, very little is known about literacy teachers' knowledge about religions beyond their own, much less about potential impacts of this knowledge on teaching work. Sarroub (2007) made an ethnographic contribution to this latter question in her interpretation of teachers' misunderstanding of Hayder, a Yezidi Kurd. Sarroub (2007) showed how Hayder's teachers' limited knowledge of the diverse ethnic and religious populations in Iraq who were displaced or fled because of discrimination and ethnic cleansing had an impact on their judgments of him and his participation in class. Dávila (2015) provided some further insight into the potential impacts of teachers' religious knowledge in her report on the hesitancy of Midwestern teacher candidates in a predominantly White Protestant Christian locale to be confident about the prospect of engaging the cultural worlds, stories and experiences of Mexican American Catholicism in their future classrooms. This hesitation was evidenced in the teacher candidates' survey responses surrounding their study of a children's book, Garza's (2000) *En Mi Familia*, as part of their literacy teacher preparation program.

Making the issue and impact of teachers' religious literacy even more urgent is the question—also little-studied within language and literacy scholarship—of how rising ethnoreligious nationalisms may be impacting language and literacy education around the globe. In

the USA, teachers and teacher educators are confronting a well-organized Christian nationalist movement directed at public school policies, curriculum and instruction (Burke *et al.*, 2022 in review). Across the USA, Christian nationalists have successfully advanced legislation on various statewide policies, such as laws allowing the posting of the Ten Commandments (a text included in the narration of the Hebrew Torah that outlines a moral law to guide the Jewish people, given by Yahweh to Moses atop Mt. Sinai) or allowing “In God we Trust” banners to be posted in public schools (Stewart, 2019). More recent initiatives have included bans on instruction or curriculum informed by critical race theory or use of specific books that do not align with Christian nationalist ideologies [e.g. in one recent example in Tennessee, of Art Spiegelman’s (1996) *Maus*]. Around the world, teachers and teacher educators are similarly struggling with the rise of ethnonationalist movements. In our previously mentioned example from the Karnataka state of India, for example, Muslim women teachers as well as schoolgirls have been banned from wearing head scarves in public schools, potentially interfering with some women’s livelihoods. In the Canadian province of Quebec, recently passed Bill 21 has banned many civil servants in positions of authority from wearing any religious symbols at work, leading to dismissals and sending a signal that teachers from minoritized religious communities were unwelcome in provincial schools.

While Gajasinghe and Jayakodi tackle this issue at the policy level in the context of Sri Lanka (this issue), Canagarajah (in Whitney and Canagarajah, this issue) explains how his own evangelical Christian spirituality—which, interestingly, took root in his homeland, Sri Lanka, presumably against the backdrop of Sinhala Buddhist nationalism described by Gajasinghe and Jayakodi—has shaped his teaching and research concerns with ethics, politics and justice (cf. Canagarajah, 1999). Indeed, Canagarajah confesses eagerness to share and discuss his own version of Christianity at the present moment in the USA, precisely because of the rise of Christian nationalism described above.

Given the general scarcity of religiously attuned language and literacy scholarship addressing teaching and teacher education, and especially works that are global in their reach, it is noteworthy that three of the papers in this special issue center on the potential role of religion and spirituality in the lives, motivations or instructional

practices of English language arts teachers as well as in English Language Arts (ELA) curriculum and instruction. While two papers focus on ways different kinds of Christian identification can shape or drive English language and literature teaching practices, a third offers an account of how a teacher and students engaged and learned together from classroom-based inquiries involving religious artifacts and spiritual funds of knowledge. These papers illuminate how teachers' vocations, as well as their pedagogical goals and curricular artifacts, can become deeply entangled with religious and spiritual sense-making.

In the third paper, "Oh, God: Evangelical teachers, textual interpretations, and ELA classrooms," Heidi Hadley examines how two ELA educators in the USA navigate their identifications as both Christians and teachers. Alexis claims an evangelical identity, one that she began questioning in college when introduced to feminist discourse that challenged her religious beliefs. Meiyong is also evangelical, but unlike Alexis, she routinely creates opportunities to evangelize her students by sharing personal religious experiences in class. Through analyses of critical conversations about their work teaching *The Crucible*, Hadley invites us to consider Alexis and Meiyong's religious and teacher identities in tension across their practice. Hadley shows how their religious beliefs and identities influenced their selection and use of literary analysis frameworks, their ways of directing students' attention toward authorial intent and eternal truth, and their own wrestling with their identities when deciding how to respond to student questions. Hadley frames these experiences as "moments of hesitation" that can occur when religious and teacher identities encounter each other in ways that expose teachers to ethical conundrums that do not have clear points of resolution.

Jennifer Wargo, for her part, sounds a note of caution about the ethics of integrating one's own Christian evangelistic mission with English language teaching in an intimate insider/ outsider account of her life experiences as English teacher and fundamentalist Christian member of a little-known sect called "the Way" by insiders and "two-by-twos" by outsiders. The sect's "workers" engage in "global ministry" through travel around the world, with English teaching serving as a vital tool for evangelism. In "English Teaching as an Evangelical Tool for Two-by-Two Missionaries," Wargo raises numerous concerns about evangelistic religious communities functioning as *hidden*

sponsors of language and literacy teaching and learning. For example, English teaching for workers in this group often served as gateway for the long-term project of assimilating students (of English and later, of the Way) into the (Western) sociocultural norms of the sect, from selecting Biblical “English” names for students to wearing a particular conservative style of skirt to abandoning ancestral traditions like Lunar New Year. Wargo worries about a long-lasting power imbalance in which the worker/teacher continues to power over the convert/student, even long after the English teacher/student relationship formally ends. This story also testifies to a high level of social control wielded by the group, with respect to her reading and writing practices: Wargo recounts, for example, being forbidden to learn or study about her religion by any way other than reading the King James Version of the Bible. The narrative also shares how local people sometimes put themselves at great risk to accommodate the western customs of the secretive sect and its workers/teachers.

While applied linguists, anthropologists and English education scholars have long studied the colonial, missionizing forces shaping English language education as a global enterprise, this paper moves these conversations forward in sharing specifically about insider experiences within a global religious group largely unknown to the field of English language education or to the general global public. While this may be a small sect, Wargo’s experiences raise many questions for ELA educators to consider about imperialistic tendencies when religious evangelism gets woven together with language and literacy teaching.

In the fifth article, “Exploring global religious traditions through artifactual literacy projects,” secondary teacher Erin McNeill welcomes us into her own classroom to see how taking a “funds of knowledge” approach influenced her instruction and the lives of her emergent bilingual students (similarly to the early literacy program discussed by Dávila). Exploring and providing opportunities for students’ linguistic and religious heritage to become valuable resources in their own explorations of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, McNeill offers a sensitive and vulnerable profile of religious identity in the ELA classroom: for her pupils, Chet from Southeast Asian and Ali whose parents immigrated from South America but also for herself as she worked through her own grief. Drawing from Pahl and Rowsell’s conception of “artifactual

literacies,” McNeill demonstrates how small moments and small objects can carry with them enormous implications and learning opportunities when students’ religious experience is welcomed.

### **Entanglements of race, religion and language/literacy policies, curriculum and rituals**

Another vein of conceptual, genealogical and historical work, especially prominent within curriculum studies, explores how even schools that purport to be “secular” in democratic nations still embody legacies of religious supremacy in their rituals, routines, languages, curriculum and cultural practices. Consider, for example, the historical development of the calendar in US public schools to align with Christian holidays such as Christmas and Easter, normalized to the point now where many do not notice the religious privilege exerted through this calendar and the ways it may marginalize devout religious persons with observances on dates considered “school days” within this calendar (Burke and Segall, 2019). Jacqueline Woodson’s (2014) memoir, *Brown Girl Dreaming*, includes a passage in which the young school-aged Jacqueline and two other classmates must leave their New York Public School classroom during their classmates’ recitation of the pledge of Allegiance to the US flag, which was prohibited by their Jehovah’s Witness religion. Woodson poetically evoked the pledge recitation as a daily ritual of exclusion from a *religio*-nationalist collective [as signaled by the inclusion of the “Under God” clause in the 1950s] to which the young Black protagonist longs to belong (pp. 162–163).

Examining the US context more broadly, Joshi (2020) argues that attention to *Christian* privilege can, and needs to, further nuance the existing critical attention to *White racial* privilege in ethnic studies and social justice scholarship. Questions of how religion comes to be racialized and race spiritualized, as Emerson *et al.* (2015) put it, are growing areas of inquiry in some corners of the social sciences and humanities (Asad *et al.*, 2020; Dillard, 2007); however, this area has received relatively little attention in language and literacy studies. Kirkland (2013) and Johnson (2020) have imaginatively foregrounded the interrelationships between Blackness and Spirituality in their research and pedagogies

focused on Black men in the USA, carrying forward legacies of Smitherman (1977). Others draw attention to ritual aspects of youths' interactional negotiations of racial and religious identifications in classrooms. LeBlanc (2017a, 2017b), for example, examined classroom and church talk amongst Catholic and non-Catholic immigrant and African American students in an urban Catholic school in Philadelphia to explore the interactional production of racial and religious identity.

Expanding perspectives on both the ritualization and racialization of religion through nationalist policies, the sixth article of this issue explores the central role of national anthem performances in creating (and contesting) hegemonic understandings of religion, language and racial identity. In "Examining Relationships between Religious and Linguistic Nationalism in a recent Controversy Surrounding the Sri Lankan National Anthem," Kasun Gajasinghe and Priyanka Jayakodi conceptually explore the entanglements of language policy, nationalism and religion in the ritual singing of the national anthem in Sri Lanka. Anchored in the complex history of Sinhala-Buddhist and Tamil tensions, this argument first demonstrates the role of the anthem in maintaining religious hegemony in the postcolonial state, and further offers it as a site of struggle against ethno-religious nationalism. Given the prominence of the anthem in national imaginaries, Gajasinghe and Jayakodi argue that these sorts of rituals are simultaneously an outworking of predominant language and religious ideologies—"nationhood, language rights, belongingness tied to ethno-religious discourse"—and an opportunity for disrupting linguistic injustice through its rethinking and renewal.

Similar inquiry is being turned on scholars and scholarship as well. For example, edited volumes have included ritual Autobiography statements that situate contributing authors' scholarship in relation to religious and spiritual dimensions (where relevant) of their life stories (Juzwik *et al.*, 2020; Wong and Canagarajah, 2011). Other work traces the spiritual and religious roots of influential literacy theorists. Barros (2020), for example, illuminates the spiritual roots and meanings of Freire's work on literacy—including the popular notion of "conscientização" so often translated by North American scholars as "critical consciousness." In Barros's situated interpretation of its socioreligious emergence, "*conscientização* implies an act of faith, Christians' responsibility to ethically care for Creation in all of its forms" (161). He

notes that critical literacy scholars tend to overlook the term's "connotation of 'embodied compassion,' which discloses a theological orientation toward viewing consciousness as an expression of divine being-ness [. . .]" (161). He elaborates how:

At its core, *Conscientização*, as Freire theorized it, involves the practice of suspending judgment within pedagogical relationships, an educator's de-identification with the mind—understood as the ego—as a precondition for the care of an Other and this Other's literacy development beyond the conventional decoding of texts (161).

Emerging in this account is a religious/spiritual way of being and interacting with others to guide literacy pedagogy, yet too often these spiritual roots come to be scrubbed away from the discourses of language and literacy scholarship.

Anne Whitney and Suresh Canagarajah continue this ongoing discussion around the often-invisible spiritual roots shaping academic scholarship in the final piece of the special issue, "Breaking Spiritual Silences as Literacy Education Scholars: A Conversation." Offering personal and vulnerable accounts of faith that undergird their recent scholarship, Whitney and Canagarajah admit to having participated in life-long silences about research connections to their religious or spiritual identities as professors. Each examines a pivotal career moment wherein an inward lens into the self via painful or life changing circumstances revealed deep-seated faith beliefs that are at odds with academia and academic norms in public universities. Importantly, their identification as spiritual and faith-based scholars in public institutions is borne out in their recent publications that highlight the evolution of beliefs that have surfaced more explicitly as their language and literacy scholarship has grown and matured. Their dialogue considers examining research questions from the perspectives of new, public religious identities that have emerged as post-secular scholarly identities, what Canagarajah calls "anomalous embodiment." As alluded to in this paper, this move seems, in part, to be motivated by the ways religious sense-making figures into wider geopolitics. It also seems congruent with Brubaker's (2015) observation that public religion has increased over time, and perhaps this sociological factor also helps contextualize public expressions of personal faith and spiritual belonging in academic scholarship.



## Conclusion

The work in this issue leads us to further ponder: What if scholars were to question the *conceit* of secularism within language and literacy scholarship? What if scholars were to consider their own spiritual and religious identifications and influences as researchers when they work across religious differences? What if scholars were to consider how emic knowledge combines with embodied habits and routines to both provoke misunderstanding and facilitate entry (LeBlanc, 2019)? Such a re-orientation might involve asking questions like those posed by Nadia Fadil about the anthropology of religion (Asad *et al.*, 2020):

What would anthropology look like [. . .] if the ethics and limits of participant observation would be informed by a concern with ‘sinfulness’ as much as by a concern with the relationship of trust established with one’s research participants? And what would it mean to write an ethnography from the viewpoint of a conceptual realm that takes divination as an organic starting point and the absence thereof as in need of translation? (14)

Such re-orientation seems to further suggest a need for educational scholars wishing to conduct globally engaged research on religion and literacies—across geographical, nationstate and other boundaries—to expand their research repertoires.

Such expansion might include re-framing religious languages and texts, alongside “qualitative” or “quantitative” methods, as critical and necessary resources for language and literacy researchers interested in religion and spirituality on a global scale. Fluency in the languages of global people’s diverse spiritual practices and texts—including, for example, Spanish, Arabic, Sinhala, Korean and Chinese languages referenced in this issue—may be increasingly necessary. Just as intimate knowledge of Portuguese language was necessary for Barros’ inquiry into Freire’s socioreligious roots, so too was D\_avila’s Spanish language fluency critical for her inquiry into the Rosario sisters’ intertwined ethnic and spiritual construal of belief in the Virgin of Guadalupe. And for Gajasinghe and Jayakodi, interpreting and understanding the nationalist anthem ritual in Sri Lanka required knowledge of Sinhala language. Further, in-depth study of a wider range of religious

texts and religious communities' textual practices may be needed to continue advancing understandings of spiritual and religious interpretations at play in language and literacy education from a global perspective. While studies of Biblicist practices have informed language and literacy scholarship (Juzwik, 2014; Perez, 2020; Rackley, 2014), continuing attention to religious texts and textual practices beyond the Christian Bible are needed.

Such learning could help build capacity for realizing Han's (2018) vision of an educational subfield devoted to further in-depth study of diverse religious traditions and language use of students and teachers around the globe. What emerges is the felt need for a kind of religious literacy course of study *for language and literacy scholars*: not only does such a course involve curiosity and subsequent learning about unfamiliar religious traditions and theologies but also—as Whitney and Canagarajah note—it involves coming to know how religious and spiritual forces have shaped our own received ontological and epistemological imaginaries as scholars. An intellectual and spiritual ethos of humility, a capacity to be present with our limits and indeed our mortality, may prove to be the most essential resource for such religiously attuned inquiry and affinity. This virtue has, in fact, been enacted by the voices speaking in this issue as well as by reviewers. Their generosity, curiosity and wisdom nurtured these manuscripts toward publication.

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