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Book Review of Spirituality and English Language Teaching: Religious Explorations of Teacher Identity, Pedagogy and Context by Mary Shepard Wong & Ahmar Mahboob. Staple Hill, Bristol: Multilingual Matters, 2022

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This edited volume tackles what has been a salient but underexplored topic in TESOL literature: how religious belief influences EFL and ESL teachers, students, and classrooms. The book contains fascinating fuel for conversation, but certainly no consensus about whether these influences are primarily positive or negative. Yet the exploration is valuable precisely because, as Suresh A. Canagarajah points out in the foreword, this complex topic is often ignored; avoiding the issues leaves teachers unprepared to address them. He concludes his foreword with an expression of spiritual striving: “I pray that this book will motivate us to reflect on more effective ways to draw from our religious beliefs for meaningful education, while probing our beliefs in the light of our professional experiences to deepen our spirituality” (p. xix).

In my case, at least, Canagarajah’s prayer was fulfilled – I could not help but consider how my own (Buddhist and Quaker) spiritual practices influenced my teaching, and vice versa. Yet that exploration did not lead me to a comfortable resting place. Some of the data in the book is unsettling, as it reveals curricular biases and teacher practices that are likely to negatively affect students’ experiences. Co-editors Mary Shepard Wong and Ahmar Mahboob point out as much in their introduction, which addresses both overarching concerns and concrete examples – for instance, they highlight from Bal Krishna Sharma’s chapter a British textbook used in Nepal that asks students to discuss whether they prefer ham or steak, which are religiously contraindicated for many students.

The book is divided into three sections that connect religious faith to teacher identity, pedagogical practice, and the language learning context. Each section is followed by a response from another scholar. Wong leads off the section on teacher identity by facing head-on the double-edged nature of religion in the classroom, calling her chapter “The Dangers and Delights of Teacher Spiritual Identity”. She notes that English teaching has been a vehicle for Christian proselytization, and acknowledges the “menace of the overzealous oblivious teacher” (p. 25) of any religion. To balance these dangers, she notes that spiritual

beliefs may make teaching more personally meaningful, and that those beliefs can be a source of strength when facing classroom challenges. She poses scenarios for discussion and questions that teachers might reflect on, including, "How can you get feedback on students' perceptions of the ways in which faith and spirituality are excluded or included in a particular course?" (p. 27). Questions like this hint that there may be teaching contexts in which *excluding* discussions of religion from the classroom may be considered as inappropriate as including them would be elsewhere; we can't necessarily stay 'safe' by making religion 'off-limits' if it is important to students or central to institutional mission.

Continuing this section, Mary Ann Christison shares the relevance of the Buddhist Noble Eightfold Path to her professional decisions. Readers of any belief system might be inspired by her penchant for truthfulness, as in her frank demurral from requests for institutional service: "I have to be honest with you; I don't really want to chair this committee" (p. 37).

In the section's final chapter, Joel Heng Hartse (a Christian) and Saeed Nazari (a Muslim) write a "duo-ethnography" in the form of an interfaith dialogue. As Nazari points out, "from a Bourdieuan perspective, being religious simply means being born in a context and acquiring the thought systems imposed by the field" (pp. 55-56). In contrast, Hartse writes, "because I experience the Christian faith as the anchor of my identity in a world I often view as hostile to a Christian vision of human flourishing, I do weird things like pray for my students before class (sometimes), and I do find the source of many of my values as a teacher in my faith" (p. 54). The contrast between these quotes is striking, as this is not so much a dialogue between faiths as it is between secular-scientific and faith-based approaches to religion. Hartse's sincerity makes clear that many teachers grounded in religion cannot exclude the faithful part of themselves from their teaching lives. But, as Hartse suggests in the way he qualifies his prayers ("weird" and "sometimes"), these influences are not always welcomed: do students *want* to be prayed for by their teacher, and does it matter if they don't?

As Ryuko Kubota explains in her response to this section, neither liberal pluralism nor post-structuralism fully overcomes the problem of teachers imposing their views on students. She concludes that the best we can do is reflect honestly, and I am inclined to agree.

Yet despite attempts at honest reflection, teachers may overlook the double-edged nature of how their religion affects students. This insight is illustrated by Sid Brown's chapter on how her Buddhist beliefs shape her pedagogy. As she explains it, "My students reach outside themselves for solutions all too often. Some of them buy things to be cool. Some go to parties to numb their neurocortexes so they can go to bed with one another. Some students take anti-anxiety drugs and antidepressants or take medicine for their attention deficit disorder" (pp. 80-81). I imagine that many of her students would find her pronouncements condescending and hurtful, especially her presumption that medicines they have been prescribed represent their inability to solve their problems through spiritual reflection. Not only does she seem to hold these deficit views of her students, but she also gives them assignments designed to change their behavior and presumably make it more like hers as a Buddhist, such as asking them to buy nothing for a week.

I am particularly sensitive to the dangers of Brown's line of thinking because I share her Theravada Buddhist beliefs. I admit having had similar thoughts about my students. But reading them in an academic context made clear to me why they are problematic.

The other chapters in the pedagogical practice section are methodologically diverse. While Brown's chapter is a personal reflection, Sharma undertakes a historical investigation to argue that ideas considered "Western" or "modern", such as student-centered, practice-based methods are present in ancient Hindu educational traditions alongside teacher-centered, memorization-based pedagogies. Stephanie Vandruck emails an unknown number of TESOL scholar / educator acquaintances and reproduces quotes from their responses to her questions about religious influences on their teaching. In his response to these three chapters, David I. Smith observes challenges to the construct of the Christian West and non-Christian non-West, noting that the two Western authors are Buddhist or non-religious. That brought up a larger question for me of how much the authors in this volume represent most English teachers from the societies they describe. The book contains plenty of anecdotal evidence, but not many empirical studies that would offer wider insight.

In the third section on how religion influences language-learning contexts, Kassim Shaaban provides a fascinating history of language education in Lebanon that hardly mentions the teaching of English (French and Arabic are dominant). In contrast, the chapter by Deena Boraie, Atta Gebril, and Raafat Gabriel provides what readers may have expected when choosing the volume. Their clear argument, based on interviews with eight English teachers in Egypt, elucidates the stakes of language education in that context: “While the four Muslim teachers indicated that [the spread of English] is a serious threat to both the Arabic language and the national identity, three of the four Christian teachers did not believe so” (p. 169).

In the book’s final chapter, Carolyn Kristjánsson writes about church-sponsored ESL programs in Canada, exploring the tension between churches that offer English classes to gain converts versus to fulfill needs expressed by immigrant communities. Some programs use the Bible to teach English, while others focus on providing the language students would need to assimilate to Canadian culture in their daily lives; but none challenge the idea of “Canadian culture” dominated by white Christian English-speakers.

The underlying tensions among these chapters rise to the surface in Brian Morgan’s response to this section, when he claims that Kristjánsson inappropriately positions Christian ESL programs as a “corrective to the spiritual void of mainstream ESL programming” (p. 201) while maintaining a “deficit orientation” toward students (p. 202). To me, the line between her participants’ views and her own is not entirely clear; she is conscious of the danger of exploitative religious indoctrination, but seems not to acknowledge when her participants engage in such behavior.

I would guess that assembling this edited volume was a difficult task, due to the methodological and ideological heterogeneity of the authors. Yet Wong and Mahboob have done a service by surfacing discussions of religion and offering space for debate. When Mahboob and Eve Courtney confirm in the conclusion that “spiritual and religious beliefs can and do influence ELT practices” (pp. 214-215), and that these influences should be explored more fully, it would be hard to disagree with them. The disagreement would come in how those influences are evaluated.