Review

Spirituality and English language teaching: Religious explorations of teacher identity, pedagogy and context (a review)

Original work by Mary Shephard Wong and Ahmar Mahboob (Eds.) published by Multilingual Matters 2018
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A valuable addition to teacher training literature, *Spirituality and English Language Teaching* contains useful background and information for all language teachers, not just English teachers. But what is spirituality and what is religion and how do they apply to teaching and learning languages? Mary Shephard Wong answers the first question by comparing a variety of definitions and concludes that spirituality describes the concept transcendence of the self, '*the eternal human yearning to be connected with something larger than our own ego',* and religion describes a set of practices and beliefs that seek to express spirituality. What has this got to do with teaching?

According to the foreword by Suresh Canagarajah, spiritual and religious belief is a core feature of teacher identity. It means, as we saw in Alan Maley's article on Dr N. S. Prabhu entitled *The teacher's sense of plausibility* in TLC Vol 2 Issue 1, that language concepts and teaching methods may be mediated by teacher's beliefs as well as their language, and these may influence their pedagogic approach. In his opinion, the chapters in the book will encourage a more reflective, analytical and conscious awareness of how to draw on religion in teaching.

The book aims to address five core questions. How do language teachers view themselves and how they are viewed by others? What common values and practice do teachers from different religious backgrounds share and what can they learn from each other? How does faith inform their pedagogy

and their interaction with students? What is the role of religion, faith and belief systems in teaching and learning? And how do teachers' religious convictions influence their language policies? Theoretically, the book addresses important areas in teacher development, identity (religious, cultural and sense of self) and teacher cognition (awareness of one's own beliefs and values and how they influence teaching practice).

The book itself contains three parts, each with chapters written by different experts from around the world, representing all major religions and culminating in an afterword by Professor Henry Widdowson. The first part discusses Religious Faith and Teacher Identity, the second, Religious Faith and Pedagogical Practice, and the third, Religious Faith and the Language Learning Context. There are fourteen chapters in all plus the afterword. An interesting part of the book at the end of each section is entitled *Response,* in which an additional contributor pulls the different chapters in the section together and adds additional views and comments.

In Part 1 of the book discussing religious faith and teacher identity Mary Shephard Wong addresses what might be appropriate and inappropriate when discussing issues of faith and professional practice. She identifies the dangers and advantages of faith informed pedagogy and introduces questions teachers need to ask themselves where

ethical and moral choices might be applied in language education. MaryAnn Christison applies her Buddhist principles to language programme administration and offers an example of how faith, particularly in her case, Buddhism, can inform practice both in educational leadership and in day-to-day teaching. An interesting dialogue between Joel Heng Hartse (Christian) and Saeed Nazari (Muslim) explores interfaith dialogue in language learning, describing a two-year project to do precisely that. What they found was not so much a set of common values as a deeper understanding of their own faiths through the process of exchanging information. In her Response chapter, Ryuko Kubota addresses two key questions. If you use faith-based teaching are you imposing your faith on others and if others disagree with your views, how do you handle it?

Part 2 of the book focuses more on classroom practice and is addressed from Buddhist, Hindu, Christian and non-religious perspectives. Bal Krishna Sharma discusses the embarrassing silence in class in Nepal when he introduced an activity from a British textbook asking students to prepare a dialogue about whether they preferred ham or steak. He explains the importance of taking into account students' cultural, religious and spiritual traditions. He also found that Hindu Vedic traditional teaching and pedagogical practices advocated learner autonomy, debate and discussion – all modern teaching values. He

writes, '*Understanding Hinduism can help English teachers address some critical issues, such as respect for students as individuals and members of a particular culture or community, peace and social harmony, human relationship with nature and an awareness of environmental crisis'*.

Stephanie Vandrick did a survey of her peers regarding the influence of religious and spiritual beliefs on teachers and teaching. What she found was that not one but many religions may influence teachers and that teachers' views are not static but can change over time. She comes to three conclusions. Teachers may be influenced by religion without subscribing to a particular faith, they may be spiritual without necessarily being religious and they can be ethical without being religious. In his *Response* at the end of Part 2 David Smith notes the common features in all the essays both in terms of teacher identity and classroom practice. Spiritual belief affects the teacher's sense of self, ethical commitment and philosophy of life regarding education and worldview. It also influences personal interaction in the classroom and pedagogical practice. He concludes, '*The essays and this book as a whole are part of a welcome recovery of an honest naming of the faiths, practices and commitments, including 'religious' ones, that inform both scholarly and pedagogical practices'*.

Part 3 addresses the importance of the educational language learning context, taking examples from Lebanon, Egypt and Canada. In a very interesting paper, Kassim Shaaban discusses the role of religion in the formation of Lebanese national identity. He shows how different groups in Lebanon view language choice, language learning and language use as a way of helping them define their particular identity. In Lebanon particularly, although Arabic is the mother tongue, learning one or more foreign languages helps define local group identity. He writes, '*What unites the Lebanese linguistically is not the Arabic language but rather multilingualism whose base is Arabic and at least one foreign language, a multilingualism motivated by political and economic interests'*.

Deena Boraie, Ata Gebril and Rafaat Gabriel explore Egyptian teachers' attitudes towards teaching Arabic and English. They interviewed four Muslim teachers and four Christian teachers. All recognised a clear relationship between faith and language instruction but had differing views regarding the influence of English. The Muslim teachers saw the spread of English as a threat to national identity unlike the Christian teachers. Examining church-sponsored teaching of English programmes in Canada, Carolyn Kristjansson found a clear socio-cultural link between the relations between the stakeholders (teachers, learners, administrators) and classroom practice.

So, what are the answers to the five questions the

editors pose at the beginning of the book? At one level, they are fairly obvious. Teachers like to align their teaching to their spiritual identity. Spiritual and religious identity are closely aligned with culture. It is important to recognise the importance of spirituality and religious belief in the classroom and the cultural background of students and not to hide differences. In this light, discussion of religion and values can be useful in helping the teacher connect with the lives, cultures and identities of students.

Many teachers will identify with Professor Henry Widdowson's '*admittedly agnostic point of view*' as he stresses the importance of humanistic and ethical values in teaching. In his afterword Henry Widdowson compares the way teachers' beliefs influence their work just as much as their background and teacher training influence how they react to new methodological approaches. He recognises that although many studies have focused on language background, linguistic and pedagogic training and background culture and experience, the influence of religion has not been fully explored. In terms of teacher cognition, previous studies focus how theories inform

teaching experience and classroom practice. As such it is a branch of applied linguistics. The influence of religious belief on practice might be described as 'applied religious belief'.

For Widdowson, any teaching inspired by religious belief must take local factors into account and must also show respect for cultural diversity and respect for individual identity. All teachers will identify with the key ethical qualities advocated by Henry Widdowson. He stresses the importance of teachers resisting dogmatism and accommodating to other ways of thinking and believing. Doing this, he believes, will encourage the humanistic principles of tolerance and willingness to understand and respect otherness rather than trying to convert people.

Overall, *Spirituality and English Language Teaching* is an excellent contribution to an area of language teaching of importance worldwide but still rather poorly represented in theoretical studies. By including case studies and viewpoints from different religious and cultural backgrounds, it offers lessons applicable to all languages and not just the teaching of English.