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# Introduction: The Meeting of Gender, Language and Religion

*Allyson Jule*

Understanding the role of religions in the world is not at all a matter of reading about exotic people and places or coming to some conclusions regarding versions of truth as expressed in various communities. In today's global pluralism, almost any faith can be found anywhere, both as a presence and as an option of faith. Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam (religions originating in the East) are found all over the West, and the various representations of the West's Judaism and Christianity are now well established throughout the world. A glance at any newspaper or any TV newscast reminds us of how current events are embedded in religious communities and how expressions of religion deeply affect the concepts of diversity and globalization – or our resistance to such concepts. No comprehension of world affairs or the larger human condition is possible today without some understanding of the role of religion and how religion influences human behaviour. Most of us in the course of our lives will come into contact with people from a wide range of religious experiences, while at the same time our own religious experiences will influence others and our views of the world and the people who surround us. This book searches for a range of language experiences within religious communities beginning with a recognition of liturgy on to the working out of individual identity within religious groups. The rhetoric, the method of meditation and religious education differ from group to group but, regardless of these differences, people are influenced by the ways their culture attempts to affirm human life and attempts to transcend it. The practices of religion (such as worship, rites of passage, forms of devotion, group activities) constitute religious expression and such religious expressions are woven into the cultures in which we live and into the way we live within them.

One of the ways in which religion today is in a state of flux and transition involves gender roles, particularly the role of women and the

growing, shifting awareness of femininity and masculinity. Issues such as veiled Islamic women or female ordination in Christianity are two examples of both religion and culture grappling with gender roles. Because of common patriarchal roots in the world religions, women's roles have historically been very limited while men's roles have often been more developed or highly specific. I hope that, through survey books such as this one, perceptions or assumptions can be deeply explored, allowing for fresh perspectives on the role religion plays in society.

In reflecting on the position of religion and religious communities alongside the current context of language and gender research, the contributors in this collection offer us a variety of views and experiences – each entering the discussion at various points of interest and expertise. The book explores the ways we live with religion as a cultural discourse and how gender, language and religion intersect in various yet shared ways around the world. How language and gender are made meaningful, how gender is interpreted and lived inside religious communities, and how religion and gender impact on identity are all themes explored here.

In keeping with the local nature of each chapter, attempts have not been made to make the book more consistent concerning terms or their spellings (example: Koran or Qu'ran). This is to allow each author to represent the ideas from within certain groups. It is also not the primary goal here to review the criticisms of the larger debates in language and gender research and scholarship; such discussions are well articulated elsewhere. Instead, I wish to bring focus to religion within sociolinguistic study, something not yet adequately grappled with inside sociolinguistics. I believe the variety of scholarship in this collection creates a vibrant offering to the field. It appears religion sits well in the fields of sociology, anthropology and theology, but it is almost unexplored within linguistic research. As such, this collection specifically explores the three themes of gender, language and religion simultaneously, allowing for a larger reflection on how these elements work alongside each other in both complementary and contradictory ways.

## **Why the connection**

The history of religious traditions often seems divorced from the more private and lived experience of faith. The spiritual quest is often an interior, personal journey while religion seems preoccupied with liturgy and doctrine. However, religions have a life outside theology and, as such, can be a lens through which to understand something of society and how it is we live, and live together, in certain ways.

Religious people themselves have a varied reputation. For some, religion is perhaps an admirable organizer of life and how to live it. For others, it is seen and dismissed as something imaginative or unnecessary. Regardless of one's own religious views or one's personal sense of faith, religion has been a force in the world – offering solace and peace of mind to a few, charging some with grand or charitable acts, and influencing others to violence or cruelty. Religious groups may fight between and among themselves over versions of truth and tradition, and religious leaders of all faiths are sometimes consumed by worldly ambition or human frailty. However, each religion articulates the universal quest to find something sacred amidst the secular. In the West, there has been an attempt to separate religion from politics – liberating religion from the corruption of politics or liberating politics from the corruption of religion. However, religious people around the world sometimes believe they have a duty to bring their ideals to bear on society or they are goaded to interact with society in an attempt to save it in some way because of the power religion has had in their own lives. As a result, religion becomes personal and a way to self-definition. And because we live together in groups, we are influenced by the religious views of those around us, in the midst of our own personal views or regardless of them.

Religious life seeks transcendence from the mundane and yet, as this book suggests, it is the seemingly mundane day-to-day living that also creates religion, creates religious communities, and creates religious identities. That religion is so intricately connected with culture or ethnicity is inescapable. There are converts who challenge this fact but, more often than not, one's religion and one's religious views grow out of one's culture of origin. We are religious creatures because we are compelled to find meaning in our lives. In doing so, we emerge with our own particular realities and seek out meaning for them in something larger, each in our own place and each inside our own frames of reference.

## **Gender, language patterns and religious thought**

The four chapters in Part I introduce the reader to some foundational issues, including the authoritative language of religion and ways the holy texts have been understood or misunderstood concerning gender. Münevver Tekcan's chapter sets the stage by providing an overview of many of the world's religions – Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, as well as Ancient Greek and Roman mythologies – and exploring the view of gender and the divine, each within each. Tekcan also discusses the particular cultural influences within each expression,

suggesting that the various interpretations of 'God' have been influenced by the various interpretations of ourselves. Francis Britto's chapter, 'The Gender of God: Judeo-Christian Feminist Debates' offers an overview and critique of how God has been understood as male in Judaism and Christianity. His work explores the particular issues of concern within Christianity and the implications of seeing God as male or female. Both of these chapters explore the traditions of religion and how a language for gender has been understood and influential. These first two chapters set up a starting point to our sociolinguistic look at religion language and gender.

The next two chapters reflect on the ways language is used alongside religion – more specifically, how language patterns reveal religious influences. Samira Farwaneh's work looks at the asymmetries of sexist language in Arabic and how modern media have influenced such patterns within Islam. Timothy Jay's work looks at how cursing, specifically 'Oh my God', is now part of women's speech patterns in the United States, more so than it is among men. Both Farwaneh and Jay give some reflection on how language use is connected with religious views and how language serves as part of an assertion of power and identity within them.

## **Gender and language use in religious communities**

The chapters of Part II all examine gender and language inside religious groups or communities. Each brings sociolinguistic research to bear on the larger discussion of gender, language and religion. The chapters each explore various ways devout behaviour is gendered and how language provides some evidence that it is so. The first of the chapters is Chao-Chih Liao's work on women and men in Taiwan and how it is that Christianity and Buddhism attract followers because of the languages used – English as a way to both education and conversion. Hannes Kniffka explores how women in Saudi Arabia interact through Letters to the (male) Editor to articulate their religious experiences, and how the male editor constructs them as women in print. Sage Graham's work on women in an Episcopal church in the United States explores how their on-line discussions reveal and restrict their roles in church life. My own research inside an evangelical college in Canada explores how morality is gendered so that both men and women are rehearsed and rewarded into specific ways of being understood as moral: men as public speakers and women as polite audience members. Annabelle Mooney's work explores life inside 'The Children of God' cult-like community and how group membership is negotiated and explained from the inside.

All the chapters in Part II seem to agree that, regardless of the interpretations of theology or sacred texts explored earlier in Part I, many religious groups are in tension and in negotiation regarding gender and gender roles. There appears to be a metanarrative at work which serves to essentialize gender so that women are designated as devout and loyal, as seen in Liao's work in Taiwan and Graham's work in the American on-line parish; as quiet, as discussed in my own work inside a Canadian theology college; and as frustrated within religious groups, as expressed to some extent in Kniffka's exploration of Saudi women's letters to the editor and Mooney's work on the American group, 'The Children of God'.

### **Gender and language use in religious identity**

Part III is a collection of chapters, each exploring the role of religion in creating and influencing individual identity. Amy Peeble's innovative work on an ex-gay 'therapy' group in Texas sheds light on how gender roles and sexuality roles are understood and then prescribed to community members. Fazila Bhimji looks at young Muslim women in Britain and how they negotiate themselves between and within multiple identities; Shartriya Collier looks at Senegalese Muslim women working in the United States; Debra Cohen and Nancy Berkowitz explore young Jewish teenagers, both male and female, learning Hebrew; and, finally, Kalyani Shabadi completes the collection with her look at Hindu women in India and how it is that they identify themselves as both Hindu and female.

### **This book**

Religions share the ideas of icons, symbols, sacrifice, behaviour, attitudes and quest as part of a meaningful life. However, how we each explore and how we each relate to religion is infinitely individual, shifting from various places and times, and most times significantly embedded in culture and in communities.

In part then, this volume is an attempt to turn some attention within linguistics to the impact of religion as well as to perhaps turn some attention within religious studies to the impact of language use. In either case, gender is seen as a significant variable influencing both and, in turn, as being influenced by both. In all this, a new way of viewing linguistics is the point. Religious life and the assumptions around it and in relation to it are constructed in various ways and therefore need continual and ever-new ways of understanding. There is more or less

general agreement among the contributors of this volume that gender, language and religion cannot be discussed separately. Because of the enormous influences of all three on all three, they can and must be discussed and explored together.

We live in a world where religion plays an enormous role in influencing a wide range of spheres, including community life. The various religions used for discussion here allow for an exploration of the various ways religion is interpreted and experienced through gender and through language use. The fact remains that social science must take into account the effects *of* language and the effects *on* language. In particular, one cannot understand sociolinguistics without some reflection on variables which affect language. Gender and religion are two; there are clearly other variables. Nevertheless, this collection provides some reflection on the effect these two enigmatic variables have on language use and the complex relationship gender and language have with religion.

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