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# Scholars as Spiritual Beings: Five Trajectories of Scholarship and Spirituality

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**Abstract:** This article reflects on the bi-directional, reflexive work of scholarship and spirituality. It begins with the author's positionality as a Christian language educator who has researched spiritually in her field of Teaching English as a Second Language (TESOL). A brief introduction

of seminal works in faith and scholarship is provided, followed by a discussion of how scholarship within one faith tradition might be applied to others. The concept of scholars as spiritual beings is raised with a reflection on the limits of categorizing acts as either sacred or secular, and how this polarity hinders deeper, more meaningful ways to engage in scholarship when even the mundane is seen as spiritual and so called 'spiritual' acts are reconsidered as potentially empty ritual. Five trajectories of spiritual scholarship are described with examples for each trajectory from the author's work: 1. Vertical: enlarging our understanding of God; 2. Outward: revealing an understanding of nature and the universe; 3. Horizontal: improving our spiritual service to others; 4. Inward: deepening our spiritual identity; 5. Multidimensional: providing a spiritual understanding through difficult life events and finding meaning and interconnectedness to God, self & others. Reflection on the legitimacy of scholarship and spirituality concludes the article.

**Keywords:** spirituality, religion, TESOL, scholarship, faith integration

## Introduction

Post-positivism compels us to examine our positionality in our scholarship, to question the possibility of a value-free objective research stance, and to acknowledge that what we study does not happen in a vacuum. Who we are, our ethnic, gendered, social, geographic, racial identities, histories, and spiritual affinities inform both researchers and participants, including what we see and how we interpret our observations. In post-positivist qualitative research and scholarship, we seek to offset the Anglophone Eurocentric center, to find other ways of knowing and understanding. We also seek to be open to how our research impacts our identity including our spirituality, and the bi-directional (spirituality impacting scholarship and scholarship impacting spirituality) reflexive work of the scholar as a spiritual being.

## My Journey, Identity and Positionality

In the field of language education, in which I will speak from, the contextualized critical approach of post-positivism has allowed for an exploration of teachers' spiritual identities and a consideration of the role of religion in language learning and teaching. For me, this exploration resulted in three co-edited volumes spanning ten years. The first, Wong & Canagarajah (2009) brought together 30 contributors, half of whom were Christian and the other half claiming other spiritual identities or that of atheist. We set up chapters in a dialogue format, with authors reading and writing to one another, raising and responding to ethical dilemmas such dealing with the imposition of teachers' religious beliefs on students, and the other extreme, the ethics of a total ban of all spiritual discussions in the classroom. The next volume, Wong, Kristjánsson, & Dörnyei (2013) focused on empirical studies of Christianity and English Language Teaching (ELT), with many chapters focusing on the significant role that faith has on motivation in language learning and teaching. The final volume, Wong & Mahboob (2018) brought together authors from multiple faith traditions, Buddhist, Hindi, Muslim, Christian, and others, to learn from one another of how one's spirituality shapes identity and pedagogy, and how it is informed by the context in which we teach.

These three edited volumes are a discipline specific exploration of three aspects of faith and teaching: controversies and dilemmas of Christian faith and ELT (Wong & Canagarajah, 2009); selected research of Christian faith and ELT (Wong et al., 2013); and insights from teachers from different religious faiths on the role of spirituality and ELT (Wong & Mahboob, 2018). There are thousands of other discipline specific publications on the ways spirituality (especially Christianity) impacts various fields of study<sup>1</sup> including health care, literature, art, music, as well as publications that take an interdisciplinary

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<sup>1</sup> For example, over 9,000 articles dealing with faith and learning were found in Christian peer-reviewed journals since 1970 in a study conducted at Calvin College as cited in Bleistein et al. (2013).

approach, such as the focus of how spirituality impacts scholarship (Jacobsen & Jacobsen, 2004)<sup>2</sup>.

Here I will acknowledge my positionality as it impacts my scholarship. In Wong & Canagarajah (2009) we asked all contributors in the volume to provide a spiritual identity statement. My statement was the following:

I believe that one cannot teach people language without touching the spiritual, as humans are spiritual beings, and the ability to create languages is a marvelous gift of God to be explored, enjoyed, and valued. Although I believe that God is truth, I realize that my perception of truth is tainted by my human condition and sin, and so I am open to learning how my understanding of God is incomplete or incorrect. I acknowledge and am deeply saddened by the way institutional religion has used its power to oppress those whom God created and for whom Christ died. I claim both titles, Christian and critical English language educator, and find it hard to be the former without the latter (Wong & Canagarajah, 2009, p. xvi).

This still rings true for me now 15 years later. Since that time, I have published on religion and ELT with not only Christian scholars, but also with scholars from other faith backgrounds. I have seen how insights on faith and practice from the point of view of one religion can extend and apply to other religions, deepening and extending our understandings as we learn from one another. To my surprise, I have been invited to give the keynote at Muslim Universities on faith integration and review dissertations on Islam and ELT. The learning has been mutual (my learning from them and their learning from me) and bi-directional (impacting my scholarship *and* my faith journey). This process of people of deep faith (i.e., those whose spiritual identities are vital to them and their practice) being able to learn from one another and being impacted spiritually by their scholarship, is somewhat remarkable given the conflicts that historically and in present times have been fueled by religious differences

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<sup>2</sup> See Bleistein et al. (2013) for a working bibliography of works on religious faith and several subtopics.

as well as the tendency in many fields to not regard spirituality as a bona fide focus of academic research.

## The Literature on Spirituality and Scholarship

Some seminal works within Christian discussions of faith and scholarship are Marsden's (1997) *The Outrageous Idea of Christian Scholarship*, Noll's (1994) *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* and *Christ and the Life of the Mind* (2011), Wolterstorff's (1999) *Can Scholarship and Christian Beliefs mix?* and *Educating for Life: Reflections on Christian Teaching and Learning* (2002). There are also publications that consider the bi-directional, reflexive nature of spirituality and scholarship, that is, how our scholarship informs our spiritual identities and faith (see, for example, *I Still Believe* Byron & Lohr, 2015).

What was harder to find were abundant works on the ways religions other than Christianity impact scholarship, especially those published in English. When I was invited to speak at the conference at an Islamic university in Indonesia on faith and teaching, I could not find as many works on Islam and teaching as I did on Christianity and teaching<sup>3</sup>. While I found it a worthwhile experience to consider how the literature on Christianity and scholarship could be applied to a Muslim audience, I lamented the scarcity of works I could find on spirituality and scholarship from other faith traditions. I do not believe that the image of God resides only in fellow Christian believers. Much can be learned from those of different faiths, especially as that is the very place to find new perspectives and fresh insights that one may be missing.

We have learned much in the past two decades with an opening of the academy to a plurality of voices, acknowledging and welcoming situated and particular perspectives (black history, feminist perspectives, queer theory, etc.). We have dismissed the possibility of a "generic" perspective, which assumes we can be stripped of our uniqueness, our identities and biases when

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<sup>3</sup> I hope readers will let me know of works I missed that may only be available in Arabic.

we pass under the archway of academic halls, as if entering as a naked human being from nowhere, cloaked in a magical white coat of science that grants total objectivity. This “generic” human, that of the dominant European white male, served as the norm for 300 years; however, we now acknowledge that we come to learning having a particular perspective, which is just one among many. Our discussion of faith and scholarship needs that same openness and plurality, acknowledging the dominance of one faith perspective in the literature (i.e., Christianity) on this topic, and the benefit all will have when we learn with and from others.

As an example of extrapolating from the literature on Christianity and Scholarship to other religions, let me take a quote from Wolterstorff (1999) and ask readers from faith traditions other than Christianity how they would respond to this. The original quote is this:

⋮ The general goal of the Christian in the practice of science and in  
 ⋮ the conversation of learning is not difference but fidelity: not scholarship  
 ⋮ different from all non-Christians, but scholarship faithful to Scripture, to  
 ⋮ God and Jesus Christ, to her fellow human beings and to the earth (p. 48).  
 ⋮

How might scholars with faith traditions other than Christianity respond to the following reworded version of Wolterstorff’s statement?

⋮ The general goal of people of faith in the practice of science and in  
 ⋮ the conversation of learning is not difference, but fidelity: not scholarship  
 ⋮ different from all non-believers of one’s faith, but scholarship faithful to  
 ⋮ the sacred texts, to the object of worship, to fellow human beings and to  
 ⋮ the earth (changes in italics).  
 ⋮

It might have a bigger impact when specific terms are inserted to replace the generic, i.e., replace “our faith” with “Islam” and replace “object of our worship” with “Allah” etc. This allows us to learn from one another, while staying true to our own faith beliefs.

Something to keep in mind in this discussion is that while we seek to learn how faith informs our scholarship, we also should consider a more intentional, reflexive account of how our research impacts our spirituality. The former asks: How does my spirituality impact my scholarship? While the focus on the impact of scholarship on spirituality asks, In what ways does my scholarship enlarge my understanding of the object of my faith (God, Allah, etc.), give me insights into the sacred texts I read, and advance my spiritual formation and service to others?

## Scholars as Spiritual Beings

Smith (2008) argues that when educators view learners as spiritual beings, the whole process of teaching changes. He contends that the boundaries we create between the sacred and secular, or the spiritual and mundane, do more to constrain us than help us. Spirituality, like the 2022 movie title says, is *Everything Everywhere All at Once*. Inserting “sacred” activities into teaching, such as devotional readings at the beginning of class and a prayer at the end of class, can be superficial and leave some students feeling like consumers of religion and teachers feeling like they are shoehorning religion into a class where it may not fit. Contrast the daily classroom prayer to seemingly secular acts, such as interactions with students, which could take on a spiritual dimension when students are viewed and treated as spiritual beings in the image of God. Viewing students as spiritual beings erases the line between what is sacred (prayer, Bible reading) from secular (taking attendance, answering students’ questions) and seeks to find the spiritual in everything, even the mundane. It turns this on its head, viewing “secular” acts as having the potential for being sacred, and “sacred” performances as having the potential for being empty rituals.

The act of selecting class materials, for example, if viewed in a way that treats students as spiritual beings, would reveal the null curriculum (i.e., what is not being taught, and excluded) in our textbooks and curriculum. Smith contends that educators are lulled into viewing students in reductive ways, as consumers, and that textbooks facilitate this. Smith (2008) states:

By and large, the people depicted do not suffer, do not die, do not face difficult moral choices, do not mourn or lament, do not experience or protest injustice, do not pray or worship, do not believe anything particularly significant, do not sacrifice, do not hope or doubt. They represent a consumer culture to which we have become all too inured, and from which many central human experiences have been quietly marginalized in such a way that to introduce, say, the language of prayer feels awkward and clumsy, like bringing in a character who does not fit the genre of the story one is telling, like having Little Red Riding Hood suddenly appear on the bridge of the Starship Enterprise (p. 39).

Smith (2008) provides ways that he has addressed this by including additional materials and activities, such as stories about the lives of real people who have suffered and sought to find meaning in their lives, with photos of these people and class discussions of applications to the students' lives. He uses language lessons as ways to give students tools to engage with these deep and transformative topics. Smith (2008) states viewing students as spiritual beings "means combining the processes of language learning with matters such as ethics, hospitality, failure, the nature of the good life, questions of value and the source of hope, responses to human need, cross-generational interaction" (p. 46).

Just as Smith (2008) asks "How would I teach differently if I believed that my students were spiritual beings?" (p. 41), as scholars we can ask, how would I engage in research/scholarship differently by intentionally viewing my participants/readers/those who might benefit from my scholarship as spiritual beings?

In a previous article (Wong, 2014), I asked, what would qualify research as faith-informed? Research is defined as systematic inquiry which aims to enhance the understanding of that which is being studied and includes the identification of a question, the collection and analysis of data, and the dissemination of the findings. Research for scholars who view others as spiritual beings could be distinctive in the following ways: in the identification of a question (faith informs the 'what', the topic or subject under inquiry even when it is not about



faith), the collection and analysis of data (faith affects the 'how', the way we research, including ethical precautions, the lenses that are used in analysis, and the integrity of data collection, recording, and reporting), the dissemination of the findings (faith informs the 'who', in terms of the consideration of who the study benefits and who has access), and the wider implications and purposes of the research (faith informs the 'so what', the practical implications the research may have). I am not implying that religious researchers have a corner on ethical practices by any means, only that one's faith identity, if salient, could have a potential impact on ethical decisions.

Research from a religious/spiritual perspective could be defined as research in which the majority of the decisions are made with the intentional application of one's understanding of sacred texts and the object of one's worship (God's/Allah's/Buddha's/ Cosmos) and the calling on one's life. While the researcher may not have been mindful or intentional in aligning every research decision with their spiritual beliefs, the strength of the connection at each phase of the research process, is an indicator of the extent scholars view themselves as spiritual beings and their research as spiritual in nature (adapted from Wong, 2014, pp.11-12).

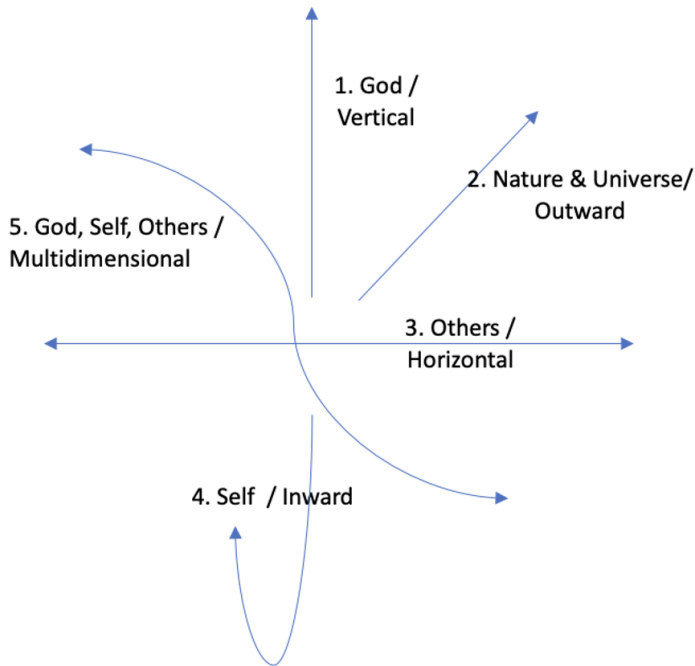
## Five Trajectories of Spirituality and Scholarship

In reflecting on the themes in the call for proposals for this special topic issue, I see (at least) five foci/trajectories that spirituality and scholarship can take. Scholarship and spiritual practice can interact by trajectories that are:

- 1) Vertical: enlarging our understanding of God
- 2) Outward: revealing an understanding of nature and the cosmos/universe
- 3) Horizontal: improving our spiritual service to others
- 4) Inward: deepening our spiritual identity
- 5) Multidimensional: providing a spiritual understanding through difficult life events and finding meaning and interconnectedness with God, self & others.

This is represented below in Figure 1. Five Foci/Trajectories of the Intersections of Spirituality and Scholarship. I will discuss each trajectory with some examples of research with that focus, and conclude with some suggestions for further exploration and research. Note that these categories often overlap, and studies often have multiple trajectories or two or more of the five foci, but overall studies tend to have a predominant focus and direction.

**Figure 1. Five Foci/Trajectories of the Intersections of Spirituality and Scholarship**



*Scholarly Enquiry on and as Spiritual Practice (focus: God; trajectory: vertical)*

This type of scholarly enquiry focuses on God and spiritual practices. Spiritual practices can include among other things, prayer, meditation, mindfulness, pilgrimage/hajj, fasting, singing/chanting, reading/studying/memorizing sacred texts, almsgiving, corporate worship/fellowship, yoga, bowing/kneeling/prostrating, dancing/twirling, evangelism/missions, and sacrificial

service to others. The field of theology specializes in the study of God, religious beliefs and spiritual practices, but scholars in many fields have researched this trajectory, for example, the impact of prayer on patients' wellbeing and healing in nursing.

In the field of ELT, an example from my students is a study in an Action Research course conducted during the Covid lockdown. Students conducted a study of the spiritual practices they and others used to cope with the isolation and depression they were experiencing and the perceived impact their spiritual practices had on their faith formation and relationship with God during this time<sup>4</sup>. They surveyed each other and read about spiritual practices Christians use when faced with isolation and depression, and reflected and wrote about the impact these practices had on themselves. While this might also be classified as Self/inward (number 4 in Figure 1), the focus on specific spiritual practices and on one's understanding of God in times of crisis places this along the vertical trajectory.

*Scholarly Enquiry to understand the Natural world (focus: natural world; trajectory: outward)*

Studies that focus on spirituality and the natural world are found in the sciences, for example, studies that seek to understand how the universe started and the evolution of homo sapiens, and the apparent evidence of a creator based on the complexity of nature. A plethora of studies, books, and societies on faith and science can be found with just a cursory search. One can also find scholarship on spirituality and the natural world in my field of language education that dates back to the 17-century scholar, John Amos Comenius (1728) in his work *Orbis Pictus*.

Questions about language, the natural world, and religion arise from the fields of Literature, Theology, and Sociolinguists. These questions might include: How do creation stories in different religions describe the use of language (God spoke

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<sup>4</sup> This Action Research was not published beyond the class presentations in the course.

the world into existence, for example)? How do sacred texts refer to languages, their purpose, and how one communicates with God? How is language diversity a blessing or a curse, and what does it teach us about who we are and our place in the cosmos? In the afterlife of various religions, what languages do we imagine will be spoken and heard? Perhaps not just the 7,000 that we have today, but the millions that have existed and will be created throughout all of time. Will we all be able to understand them or even speak them?

These questions cannot be researched on this side of heaven, or Valhalla, or whatever one calls one's afterlife, but imagining them helps us comprehend the complexity of the human condition and one's spirituality, and the ability to create and use languages. In my Sociolinguistics course, we watch clips from the 2016 film *Arrival*, in which a linguist communicates with alien lifeforms to consider the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, and ponder how language can impact not only our conception of our physical and social reality, but also time itself. I am not aware of studies that have explored these aspects of spirituality, nature, and language, but science fiction allows us to imagine them.

*Scholarly Enquiry as Spiritual Service (focus: others; trajectory: horizontal)*

The horizontal trajectory of scholarly enquiry as spiritual service is not difficult to find and describe, especially in the fields of education and health. Those serving in schools and hospitals as missionaries speak of their spiritual calling to go and live in other countries as an act of service to others to live out their faith (Wong, 2016). In "Called to Teach: The Impact of Faith on Professional Identity Formation of Three Western English Teachers in China" (Wong, 2013) I researched how faith informed the pedagogy and professional identity formation of three Christian English teachers in a longitudinal study that spanned ten years. Findings demonstrated that faith informed the teachers' reasons to enter the field as expressed in their "calling to teach"; their commitment to teach well and what they focused on in teaching; and how they responded to critical incidents. For these teachers, the construct of religious identity (in this case their Christian identity) and the construct of pedagogy were interrelated.

There are many other studies and examples of how faith impacts service to others. Through interdisciplinary conferences on faith and the academy I have been involved in, I was amazed at how those in many disciplines regard their scholarship and practice as service unto God. Examples include artists' beautiful visual expressions of the spiritual, musicians' original scores that transports us to God, historians, who bring to light the untold stories of the oppressed and their faith journeys, coaches whose faith motivates teams to glorify God, counselors who draw upon sacred texts and spiritual practices to heal those who encountered trauma, and the list goes on.

*Scholarly Enquiry as Identity Quest (focus: self; trajectory: inward)*

Scholarly inquiry into one's own spiritual identity, takes an inward trajectory by definition, as it is intentionally bi-directional, seeking to understand the process of spiritual formation with the goal of deepening one's spiritual connection to God.

A personal example is a chapter by Wu & Wong (2013) called "Forever changed": Emerging TESOL educators' global Learning and spiritual formation on a study abroad trip in Myanmar. In this chapter, my co-author and I examined student journal entries and found overlap in gains of intercultural sensitivity and growth in spiritual formation. Examples in education of exploring one's inner life of spirituality are Parker Palmer's influential works, *The Courage to Teach* (1997) and *An Active Life* (1999), among many others. These are written from a Quaker's perspective, yet in a way that is welcoming to those of all faiths, free of faith-specific jargon, which make them applicable to those in all disciplines. Other examples in education are the numerous studies of the use of mindfulness and meditation, which is considered a Buddhist spiritual practice. See for example, *A Buddhist in the Classroom* by Sid Brown (2008).

*Scholarly Enquiry as the Search for Meaning of Life Events (Focus: God, Self & Others: trajectory multidimensional)*

The last trajectory, which I call multidimensional, has a large literature base as thousands of authors have written about their personal traumatic life

experiences and how their faith has helped them make sense of and come to terms with these events. This trajectory typically includes deep reflection upon impactful life events, and seeks an understanding of how the events impact their relationships to others, self, and God. Analysis of reflective accounts such as diaries and books written during war, captivity, and other tragic events include the many works from and about the holocaust. Analysis of *The Hiding Place* by Corrie Ten Boom (2006), is an example. Although this scholarship is often personal, with the authors reflecting on their own lives, other scholars can also follow this trajectory to research databases of others.

This includes databases of missionaries, who were often meticulous about writing about and reflecting on their work in letters and reports which were often kept by their sending agencies and loved ones. In some cases, these documents were later made available by archivists in special collections of universities. This makes them available for analysis by scholars, seeking insights into how missionaries came to terms with their spirituality and traumatic life experiences. For example, I had the opportunity to examine the personal correspondence of a missionary educator in China, Luella Miner. I read boxes of letters spanning almost five decades found in the archives of special collections at Harvard and Yale. I wrote a summary of my findings in the article, *The Legacy of Luella Miner* (Wong, 2016), documenting how Luella made sense of political and social events that shaped and changed China while she was there from 1887 to 1935. This type of archival research provides a wealth of opportunities to research the impact of faith in understanding key events in history.

For examples of research and spiritual research paradigms from Confucian, Daoist, Hindu and other perspectives that focus on this and other trajectories, see Lin, Oxford, and Culham's edited volume (2016).

## Final Thoughts on the Legitimacy of Spirituality and Scholarship

Scholarship in each of these five trajectories can be transformational and valuable, but needs to be rigorous and follow the standards of academic research

to be accepted in the academy. This call to rigor was noted from scholars in an edited volume on English Language Teaching (ELT) research and Christianity. The invited scholars who wrote response chapters in the Wong, Kristjánsson, and Dörnyei (2013) volume offered suggestions for those doing research on faith and English teaching. Kubanyiova (2013) encouraged researchers of faith and teaching to maintain the same level of rigor expected of research in any area, namely to construct rich portraits of teachers, generate thick descriptions of practice, and include examinations of power and bias. Smith (2013) urged researchers to engage in a deeper exploration of the relationship of faith and teaching, one that is more complex, rich, and expanded. Smith also suggested the application of coordinated attention to beliefs, practices, institutional dynamics, and divergent interpretations in various contexts. Ushioda (2013) recommended researchers use qualitative and exploratory research approaches for this type of inquiry but also acknowledge the researchers' voice in the co-constructed context and co-text of the interview data in analysis.

The introduction of this article mentioned the desire to offset the Anglophone Eurocentric center, to find other ways of knowing and understanding. Making space for scholarship that focuses on the spiritual is one way to do this. As I have stated elsewhere, "one might make the claim that we are in fact imposing our Western views by *not* allowing space for discussions of spirituality in scholarship" (Wong, 2009, p. 94). Or as it is more deftly stated by Newbiggin (1989) "The sharp line which modern Western culture has drawn between religious affairs and secular affairs is itself one of the most significant peculiarities of our culture and would be incomprehensible to the vast majority of people who have not been brought into contact with this culture" (p. 133). Thus, we may be promoting the Western dichotomy of secular and sacred by ignoring the spiritual dimensions of ourselves and our scholarship and the spiritual practices embedded in all cultures. Since culture is shaped in profound ways by religious beliefs and practices, it seems odd that discussion of spiritual aspects of our lives and our teaching is not more prevalent in scholarship.

For some, the consideration of spirituality in scholarship may seem odd or feel uncomfortable at first, given the past few centuries of Anglo-centric epistemological perspective of positivism. However, religion and the academy actually have a long

history, as many if not most academic institutions were founded with strong ties to religion, be they Monastic schools in Burma founded by Buddhist Monks, the first colleges in China started by Christian missionaries, Ivy league colleges in the US with Christian foundations, and Islamic Madrasas and universities in the middle east. Many have argued that these strong religious ties to colleges and universities carry the potential to impede scholarly inquiry by reinforcing dogmatic views, or restricting academic freedom such as in the case of Galileo who was sentenced to formal imprisonment by the church in Rome for stating the earth moves around the sun. Yet arguments can also be made that the human desire to search for a force or being who created and sustains our life, world and universe has also been one of the strongest motivators for scholarly inquiry, and that the view of trying to secularize education is actually a world-view of its own (Taylor, 2007).

So why, then, has spirituality and scholarship been kept apart? Canagarajah (2018) states the following:

Though spiritual beliefs and experiences have always influenced teaching and scholarship, the modern educational system had not given us a space to talk about them. Education as it was conceived in the western European enlightenment tradition assumed that religion constituted a form of harmful bias, blind adherence to tradition, and unexamined knowledge that needed to be kept out of teaching and scholarship. However, recent philosophical changes suggest the significance of religion and spirituality in education (p. xvii).

The significance of spiritual beliefs in education, and in society as a whole, is important to note, with great potential for research, examining how religion and spirituality impact our identities, knowledge, beliefs, behaviors, and practices.

## Conclusion

It is hoped that the discussion of the five trajectories of scholarship and spirituality and the related studies discussed here will inspire future research



and scholarship in these areas. Readers are encouraged to consider the many ways in which scholarly enquiry relates to spirituality be it as: 1. spiritual practice (God/vertical); 2. understanding of the universe (the natural World/outward); 3. spiritual service (others/horizontal); 4. identity quest (self/inward); 5. a search for meaning of life events (God, Self & Others: Multidimensional). These five forms of spiritual scholarship have their own focus (on God, Nature, Others, Self, the Cosmos,) and trajectory (vertical, outward, horizontal, inward, and interconnected). It is argued that bi-directional reflexive work of scholars reflecting on the spiritual aspects of themselves and their work has the potential to be transformative, impacting both research and the researcher.

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