Allowing Ourselves to Reimagine Ecologically Responsible Futures for Education Research and Practice Globally: Critiquing the Limitations Imposed by Christian Hegemony

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The field of comparative and international education, from its inception, has centered on Western epistemologies and ontologies, often with the (inaccurate) assumption (implicit or explicit) that this knowledge, history, and set of values are universally applicable (Silova et al., 2017; Sobe, 2017; Takayama, 2018). Even critical perspectives from the field that position Western frameworks as hegemonic and colonialist still feature Western knowledge systems as the primary target of critique, and are often forced to adopt those very (Western) systems as the means by which to leverage that critique (i.e., through Western style academic writing, scholarly journals and conferences, and research and/or other higher education institutions). Indeed, we struggle, as a field, to push beyond the boundaries that Western systems—systems that have been imposed around the world through globalization and Western expansionism—allow us to imagine. Yet, imagining purposes, processes, and futures for our education systems that reject the narrow limitations of modern Western

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frameworks is urgently needed given that our current systems are increasingly unsustainable, both economically and, more importantly, ecologically (Silova et al., 2018; Stein, 2019).

This special issue, *Beyond the Western Horizon in Educational Research: Toward a Deeper Dialogue About Our Interdependent Futures*, is an inspiring example of rigorous (by this I mean deeply thoughtful, critically reflective, and fundamentally transformational) scholarly research and discourse that rejects the simultaneously universalist (i.e., positivist) and dichotomous (i.e., us–them, right–wrong, science–religion) tendencies of the field. Designed as “an experiment” to co-construct future visions for education research and practice that take seriously the realities of the impending climate crisis, editors/organizers Silova, Rappleye, and You bring together a diverse group of scholars to intentionally put into conversation post/decolonialism, ecofeminism, and various philosophical traditions (Western, Japanese, and Chinese). In doing so, and in finding the liminal spaces between and among these frameworks, the contributors to this special issue seek to expand the boundaries of their/our imagination around what education could/should look like if we move beyond human exceptionalism and embrace our relationship with natural and spirit worlds.

This is far more than a curated collection of related academic articles. This is the product of a facilitated face-to-face dialogue that the contributors participated in, where they read each other’s work, discussed questions or ideas that arose in the process, engaged in genuine conversation about the limitations and possibilities of various theoretical projects, and allowed themselves (and their contributions to this special issue) to be changed by the experience. In that way, the process undertaken by the editors and contributors to develop this special issue is itself an example of how to produce scholarly work in a way that embraces the decolonial concept of a pluriverse (where multiple worlds coexist, as opposed to a singular universe), the Indigenous concept of relationality, and the ecofeminist concept of sympoiesis.

A truly refreshing aspect of this special issue is the transparency and relatability with which the authors write. Many of them write openly and honestly about struggling to grapple with or respond to the ideas that came up in their group discussion, and about how their own perspectives were altered by the experience. Takayama (2020) even uses his contribution to challenge his own deeply held convictions and allows himself to venture into a philosophical/spiritual space that was previously “out of the question” (p. 3), ending with an admission of lingering uncertainty. This is extremely valuable for a few reasons: It dismantles the facade that academics (even those considered leaders in their field) are infallible experts who simply disseminate knowledge; it demonstrates that, through critical self-reflection and a willingness to genuinely listen to others, people’s ideas can evolve and new directions in research and pedagogy can be explored; and it exemplifies what strong academic work might look like if we measured it in terms of thoughtfulness and deep listening instead of metrics like significance and generalizability. Writing in this way is a form of activism in itself; more academics should do so.
What stands out most to me in the rich dialogue of this special issue, however, is the way Christian hegemony is directly implicated in many of the primary issues addressed throughout—even if it is not named as such by the authors. For instance, both anthropocentrism and universalism are rooted in the exclusivist tenets of Christianity, where humans are deemed the superior species and only one Truth is acknowledged. Even in their post-Enlightenment “secular” forms, Western norms and values are simply a nontheistic, nondogmatic version of Christianity (Durkheim, 1912/1995; Spickard, 2017), and thus limit ideas about epistemological and ontological possibilities according to that cultural worldview. Moreover, since many social science fields were born out of the Enlightenment movement (including philosophy and comparative education1), core concepts such as reason, knowledge, science, and religion are still largely understood in the way Enlightenment thinkers defined them (Edwards, 2019; Spickard, 2017). So, when we set out to imagine alternatives to modern education (and how education might be used to sensitize us to the climate crisis), as this special issue does, it is only natural that we engage with philosophies, spiritualities, and indeed religions that are non-Christian.

I understand that some (perhaps most?) people avoid using the term “religion” when discussing purposes and processes in (public) education—in part because of the Western convention of separating religion and government; in part because religion “is a fundamentally Eurocentric term” (Josephson, 2012, p. 9); but also in part because discussing “religion” raises fears about potential proselytization of theistic beliefs. These are valuable considerations. However, not using the word religion typically means that Christianity (including its associated culture and philosophy) manages to escape critique. In other words, calling Shinto, Zen, Confucianism, or any other cultural system “spiritualities” or “ontologies” without recognizing them as religions fails to put them into direct conversation with Christianity. So, while we dialogue about our philosophical differences and similarities (and how we can learn from each other to generate new futures for education), Christian hegemony continues to operate unchecked and unbalanced—including within public schools, under the guise of Westernism, modernism, and liberalism (Burke & Segall, 2011; Edwards, 2019).

I do not mean to suggest that Christian culture and philosophy are inherently and entirely bad, and deserve only critique; rather, that its associated worldview is culturally specific and should be recognized as such in order that it not be assumed universal. Likewise, I do mean to suggest that the way we understand religion should align with the more inclusive critical functionalist framework (Clack & Clack, 2008; Edwards, 2018, 2019), where religion is defined by the way it determines cultural norms and values. Doing so, I contend, would enable us to pursue a nonhierarchical discussion about the potential benefits and limitations of all religious/spiritual cultural frameworks in our efforts to imagine more ecologically responsible futures for our education systems. Of course, putting the current dominant religious cultural system on a level playing field with, for
instance, Indigenous religions (e.g., if we assume parity between humans and mountains) may feel like an assault, especially to those individuals and institutions who enjoy the privileges of their dominant status. However, as this special issue aptly highlights, we are at a crisis point with regard to the well-being of our planet, which means we are in desperate need of alternatives to Western/Christian ways of being, knowing, and doing.

As we move forward with the dialogue and the methodology that this special issue introduced (I certainly hope there are more collaborations of this sort in the future by scholars with a wide range of cultural backgrounds and philosophical orientations), we might consider the following questions. How might this discussion change if we frame Westernization as an arm of Christian hegemony? What are the benefits and/or challenges to naming a broader range of epistemological and ontological systems “religions,” thereby putting them in direct conversation with (primarily) Western and Abrahamic cultures that are more widely recognized as religions? Does suggesting that we can use various spiritual/cultural paradigms in/as education violate the convention of separating religion and government? If so, does that put limitations on our aspirations of building an ecologically responsible future for education? Are those limitations necessary? Is the Western convention of separating religion and government only useful when dominant religions are exclusivist? Or, is it perhaps simply a ruse for the continuation of Christian hegemony (disguised as modern Western “secularism”)? To be sure, these are complicated questions that require dialogue and a range of perspectives to even begin to answer. Yet they do not seem to get much consideration within the field at present. Who might be willing to engage in this conversation?

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**Note**

1. Notably, Marc-Antoine Jullien, who is often regarded as the “father” of the field of comparative education, was raised and educated in France, at the height of the Enlightenment period (Gautherin, 1993).

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