Chapter 1
What Exactly Is a Sacred Language?

The Buddha spoke Pali. Tattooed on the body, the truth inherent in the Pali script can shield one from knives and bullets.

Listening to the Arabic-language Qur’an, one hears the very words of Allah.

The Devil loathes the Church Slavonic language.

The cosmos was created through the Hebrew alphabet. The twenty-two letters continue to pulsate with divine light and energy.

Divine Providence chose the Roman Empire – and with it, the Latin language – to spread the Gospel.

Coptic dates back to the time of the pharaohs. Jesus himself learned the language during his childhood sojourn in Egypt.

Sanskrit is the most logical language. The “language of the gods” is the perfect instrument for computer programming.

Sacred languages are like, but also unlike, everyday vernacular languages. Although both types of language have nouns, verbs, adjectives, and all the other ingredients needed to express thought, they differ in a number of crucial ways.

First, sacred languages are mythologized, being connected to divine personages and events. According to the Theravada Buddhist tradition, the Buddha spoke Pali. Russian Orthodox devotees say that the Church Slavonic language was inspired by the Holy Spirit – hence the Devil fears it.
In Hindu discourse Sanskrit is often called the language of the gods, while the image of Yahweh creating the universe through the Hebrew alphabet is a familiar one in Jewish mysticism. A number of sacred languages are associated with divine revelation as embodied in canonical texts: the Torah, the Qur’an, the Vedas, the Tipitika. The supreme value of the message rubs off on the medium, such that the language becomes endowed with its own sanctity. In some traditions, the very alphabet in which the language is written is credited with miraculous powers. Thus, unlike their more earthly counterparts, sacred languages are those that appear to be endowed with a kind of halo, a supernatural aura, a higher calling. They are said to play a role in the drama of salvation history.

Second, sacred languages are not used for ordinary communication – to chat around the dinner table, tease in the schoolyard, give orders in the factory, or bicker in the market. Some people, especially clerics, are in fact able to converse in languages like Latin, Sanskrit, or Ge’ez (e.g., Endangered Language Alliance Toronto 2013). In general, though, sacred languages are reserved for special religious practices involving a predetermined content: chanting a mantra, performing a ritual, reciting a passage from scripture, wearing a protective amulet. These practices and paraphernalia are usually found in specially consecrated places, including mosques, churches, synagogues, and temples – these are the “natural habitats” of sacred languages.

This fact that sacred languages are not typically used for everyday conversation leads to another key difference between them and vernacular tongues: namely, the matter of comprehension. We assume that language is about interpersonal communication and conveying ideas to one another. However, religious practitioners may have memorized entire books in their sacred language, yet be unable to explain a single sentence. Indeed, it sometimes seems that, for believers, the lack of understandability heightens the mystery and allure of these ancient tongues. A different mode of literacy is at work here. Instead of intelligibility, sacred languages are often prized for other values which they are said to embody, such as antiquity, beauty, purity, solemnity, or magical efficacy. Indeed, it is often the idea of the sacred language, the symbolism as opposed to some specific content, that is determinative. Referring to the Catholic Mass, the scholar of comparative religion Wendy Doniger writes:

if Latin is no longer a useful form of communication for most congregations, it still has the function of communion. That is, the Mass, in contrast with the sermon (which communicates, or at least tries to communicate,
to convey new thoughts or information), has the function of communion; people participate in it not to learn something new but to relive, together, the words that they already know, words about themselves as a community (communion). Where communication is effective, communion is evocative. Where communication seeks to influence the future, communion draws upon the past. (2007)

Relying on a sacred medium like Latin or Hebrew often means valuing the symbolic and the spiritually evocative – the “look and feel” of the language – over the more directly informational side of things.

Third, sacred languages are not mother tongues. Although there are occasional reports of a child being raised to speak a sacred language (e.g., Kiraz 2007, xxvii), these are rare cases indeed. As a general rule, children do not grow up speaking Pali or Coptic around the house with their relatives. (The monumental exception of Hebrew will be discussed in Chapter 5.) These are secondary, bookish languages added on to one’s linguistic toolkit later in life. (In the nomenclature of sociolinguistics, they are categorized as L2 as opposed to L1.) If anything, they might be considered “father tongues,” since they are often (though not always or necessarily) associated with male clerics such as Christian priests and Buddhist monks. Sacred languages are usually not transmitted organically within the family, but through a kind of artificial dissemination involving monasteries, seminaries, yeshivas, pathshalas, and similar institutions. Spanish, Korean, Evenki, and other mother tongues could survive from generation to generation without schools if they had to; that is not the case with sacred languages.

Fourth, sacred languages seem to have the remarkable ability to connect believers scattered to the four corners of the earth. For centuries Latin linked Roman Catholics across oceans and continents. Many Jews would say that it is Hebrew that unites “an English speaking teacher in New York, a Russian speaking scientist in Moscow, an Amharic speaking farmer in Ethiopia, and a Yiddish speaking Hasidic rabbi in Israel” (Avni 2011, 55). The rich sonorities of the Church Slavonic language can be experienced in onion-domed sanctuaries from Russia to California. Sacred languages wield an impressive symbolic power. Indeed, the identification between the language and the religious community may be so close and intense that the script comes to function as a kind of logo that “brands” the faith for both insiders and outsiders.

Yet, although sacred languages contribute in powerful ways to religious solidarity, at the same time, they also have their detractors. The tension
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between communion and communication can become a flashpoint, sometimes leading to bitter polemics that divide a community, as has happened in Judaism over the question of Hebrew, Zoroastrianism over Avestan, and – perhaps most famously – Catholicism over Latin. Of course, passionate debates have from time to time engulfed French and Irish and Tamil and many other vernaculars. But because the stakes are so high with sacred languages, being connected not only to communal identity but soteriology (a program of salvation), such disputes can become quite polarizing, with charges of heresy and sacrilege hurled about. In sum, though they can contribute to social chemistry, sacred languages can also be combustible, sparking conflicts or even schisms among believers.

Sacred languages, then, do not differ in formal ways from other languages: they consist of words, sentences, and so on. Instead, they differ in their overall social meaning and location, being fixed, mythicized, textual languages, used for a range of projects and practices, transmitted institutionally, and cherished – but also at times contested – by certain religious communities.

Sacred Choices

Religion involves the culturally patterned interaction between a social group and its postulated superhuman powers (cf. Spiro 1966). A religious topography therefore involves actual places, such as churches, shrines, mosques, and synagogues with street addresses, but also encompasses imagined realms – heaven, hell, paradise, nirvana, the etheric plane, and so forth. This unseen spiritual dimension may be imagined as above and beyond our earthly concerns and conceptions, or considered to be within the material world, inspiriting people, places, plants, and animals. It may be visualized as populated by superhuman agents: deities, spirits, ghosts, angels, demons, jinn, bodhisattvas, ascended masters. Alternatively, it may be conceived in terms of impersonal forces: karma, universal consciousness, the Source. Whether transcendent, immanent, personal, or impersonal (or some combination thereof), the superhuman order is thought to frame human life. Religious believers talk and act as if it really exists: “a religious world is one where gods function as environmental realities” (Paden 2013, 94). The religious premise is that it is both possible and desirable for people to interact with the superhuman dimension in order to overcome human limitations.
Religious systems offer “big” rewards (paradise, heaven, nirvana) as well as “small” ones (freedom from harm, personal wellbeing, success in romance or commerce). Since the spiritual realm is invisible, it must be represented by stories, symbols, icons, dances, fragrances, and other tangible means. Practitioners relate to the supposed divine realm through such practices as praying, chanting the name of a god, offering sacrifices, performing a ritual dance, following an ethical code, fasting, or going on pilgrimage. In those religious traditions that have them – not all do – sacred languages are considered a prestigious linguistic resource for both revealing and reaching the superhuman realm.

All religions teach that certain times, places, actions, and objects (and not others) constitute the ways and means of interacting with the imagined spiritual zone:

Almost the first thing which the student – or indeed the casual observer – of religious affairs notices, is that “believers” subject the times and places, the objects and personalities of the waking world to a definite scale of values. A house may be full of books; but one book is somehow different from all the others, being both handled and read in a special way. A village is full of buildings; but before entering one of them people make special preparations, while once inside, their normal behavior changes…. The days of the week are differently treated; on Fridays for some, Saturdays for others and Sundays for a third group…. (Sharpe 1983, 49)

While every religious system necessarily requires the use of language, some religions honor one language as the premier (perhaps the only) vehicle for communicating with and about the divine, a language that supersedes all others on the linguistic scale of values. As it turns out, sacred languages usually go with sacred books, buildings, and days of the week; they are parallel and intersecting religious phenomena. Thus, Muslims pray in Classical Arabic, which is linked to the Qur’an, to mosques, and to the fivefold daily prayer, especially the Friday noontime gathering. Similarly, the nexus of synagogue, Sabbath, Torah, and Hebrew is central to the religious experience of many Jews.

Of course, needless to say, if a religion has a sacred language, that does not mean its practitioners only use or speak the sacred language – far from it. Just as gold is too soft on its own and has to be hardened by the addition of alloying elements like copper, nickel, or palladium, sacred languages are always mixed with everyday spoken vernaculars, such as Burmese, Tigre, Serbian, French, or Urdu. If we could
somehow calculate a word-count for all the books and speeches and utterances produced within a religion, the results would be overwhelmingly in the vernacular. The importance of sacred language tends to be more qualitative than quantitative. For example, if one attends a Latin Mass in an Anglophone country, the foyer will be full of English-language materials (bulletins, periodicals, etc.); people will greet each other and catch up on the week’s events in English; there will be bilingual Latin–English missals available to help churchgoers follow along (though some bring their own); during the ritual itself, people will whisper to each other, or hush their children, in English; and afterwards, the priest will chat with parishioners in English. Similar scenarios take place mutatis mutandis with Pali, Hebrew, Coptic, and Avestan. Vernaculars always set the stage for sacred languages, which come on like divas after all the work has been done.

The category of sacred language should be distinguished from the much broader category of religious language, which would include a whole range of genres and occurrences, including hymns, oracles, euphemisms, incantations, sermons, channeling, and speaking in tongues (Sawyer and Simpson 2001). It should also be differentiated from the narrower category of liturgical language. It is true that sacred languages like Latin and Coptic are used for liturgies, but in some cases mother tongues are as well. Since the reforms of Vatican II, for example, English, Polish, Vietnamese, and many other languages have been authorized for use in the Catholic Mass. Various Christian communities rooted in the Middle East (Orthodox, Coptic, Melchite, Maronite, etc.) use Arabic in their worship services, but do not treat the language as divine, the way that Muslims do. Sacred languages thus overlap with, but are a distinct phenomenon compared to, religious language on one side and liturgical language on the other.

Sociolinguists often speak of varieties because it helps sidestep the intractable problem of differentiating a language from a dialect. Sacred languages are “named varieties”: Latin, Sanskrit, Hebrew, and so on. Now, some sociolinguists assert that the whole notion of languages as discrete, bounded entities (“Russian,” “French,” etc.) is illusory (Jørgensen et al. 2011). Languages, they contend, are less like self-contained canisters than hazy clouds, nebulously blending into one another: it is hard to tell where one stops and another starts. Be that as it may, sacred languages are perceived and treated by religious adherents as separate, self-standing languages and not just a fancier or more archaic
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version of their everyday spoken dialect. For example, some Anglophone Christians recite this version of the so-called Our Father or Lord’s Prayer:

    Our Father which art in heaven,
          Hallowed be thy name.
          Thy kingdom come.
          Thy will be done in earth, 
              as it is in heaven.
    Give us this day our daily bread.
    And forgive us our trespasses, 
          as we forgive those
          who trespass against us.
    And lead us not into temptation, 
          but deliver us from evil:
    For thine is the kingdom, 
          and the power, and the glory, 
              forever and ever.
    Amen.

Several archaic features impart an elevated ambiance to this text, but we would not say that it represents a sacred language per se, since it is still recognizably English. The words which art, thy, and thine do not constitute a separate, nameable language. Now, it is not always easy to know where to draw the line between religious language and a sacred language. After all, many forms of religious language display a desire for mystery and transcendence – elevating above ordinary speech by means of stylized diction or esoteric terms. But a good rule of thumb is this: to count as a sacred language, it must (among other things) be named, perceived, and taught as such. Believers usually recognize that Latin is related to Italian, Sanskrit to Hindi, and Church Slavonic to Russian, but they nonetheless discuss and teach Latin, Sanskrit, and Church Slavonic as independent fully fledged languages. There are no seminary or Sunday school courses devoted to “English with a Few Archaic Features.” Thus, this version of the Lord’s Prayer is a specimen of religious language, not a sacred language.

Although sacred languages are sometimes said to be dead, it is more accurate and helpful to think of them as fixed or conserved. According to the sociolinguist Joshua Fishman, “Languages of direct sanctity live on in their holy texts and, as such, are not subject to the winds of change and of influence (or interference) from other languages in the way that spoken languages are” (2006, 257–258). Their overall grammatical structure was
codified hundreds or even thousands of years ago and has changed very little since then, though new words and even entire texts continue to be produced (Leonhardt 2013). James Sawyer’s summary of how this fixing/conserving comes about is worth quoting:

Respect for the original sources, especially when these are believed to have been composed by a much revered prophet or teacher, if not by the actual deity himself or herself, is a major factor in many cases…. Religious conservatism is another important factor related to this concern for getting back to the original. A fierce reluctance to accept innovation is common to many religious groups, despite pressures from many directions to evolve or move with the times. It is partly due to a desire to maintain continuity with the past, or even, somehow, an attempt to bring the past into the present during the experience of worship…. There is also the fact that language often has a dynamic of its own: words, phrases, even sounds hallowed by centuries of use in the highly charged context of religious ritual, can have a hold on worshippers which makes it difficult for them even to contemplate changes in language. (Sawyer 1999, 25–26)

(By the way, we should not necessarily think of sacred languages as spoken vernaculars that became frozen or fossilized over time as a result of piety. This notion does not fit all cases. For example, though its originators drew upon different Slavic varieties spoken in the ninth century, Church Slavonic was from the start a kind of virtual language found only in sacred books.)

Thus, the languages discussed in this book are best considered fixed, not dead. There is a real difference between the cases of (for example) Sanskrit and Sumerian, or Ecclesiastical Latin and Etruscan. No community uses Sumerian or Etruscan any more; those languages are museum artifacts, housed under glass and studied by a small circle of linguists, archaeologists, and numismatists (cf. Hagège 2009). But some Hindus still read, write, compose, and even converse or broadcast the news in Sanskrit. Every year the Catholic Church mints new Latin words and publishes original Latin texts. Coptic Orthodox Christians continue to offer hymns in Coptic, a language that can be traced back some five millennia, while Zoroastrians maintain Avestan, another language of great antiquity. Unlike Etruscan or Sumerian, the sacred languages treated here still occupy niches in the world’s religious and cultural landscape (Haarmann 2002, 9).

Sacred languages are sometimes referred to as classical languages, which is reasonable, insofar as they are old and venerable and recognized as culturally influential. However, a classical language often provides a literary model to be emulated, which is only really the case now with Classical
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Arabic. American Catholics do not strive to speak in an obviously Latinate way; Thai Buddhists do not usually labor to compose an email in Pali-esque prose. Moreover, the designation “classical” evokes images of leather-bound tomes perused in ivy-clad towers; it fails to capture the mythical, magical, mystical properties usually ascribed to sacred languages. The term religious classical seems like a good compromise, though it has not caught on beyond the field of sociolinguistics (e.g., Fishman 2006). The best label, though not perfect, is sacred.

Who Says It’s a Sacred Language?

The term sacred language is open to misunderstanding. Believers and scholars, committed insiders and observing comparativists, may refer to this or that language as sacred, but they usually mean different things by it. Religious adherents typically claim that their language – Avestan or Classical Arabic or Church Slavonic – is sacred in an ontological sense: it truly emanates from or connects with the unseen spiritual order in a way that is unlike other languages. For their part, scholarly outsiders would say that there is no inherently sacred language; it is believers who construe this or that language as sacred. In other words, sacred language is a social as opposed to a metaphysical fact (Williams 2008, 126). Whatever one makes of different theological claims about Hebrew, Sanskrit, and so on, what can be said, and empirically verified, is that certain religious communities have in the past and still do treat certain languages as sacrosanct, just as they mark off and solemnize certain books, places, or days of the week as special, inviolate, and holy. A conspectual frame of reference reinforces this point. As Paden says, “One person’s ‘holiest day of the year’ is just another working day for someone else…. Who among the Irish think that the Ganges River is holy?” (1994, x). Our starting point in this journey, then, is that sacredness is in the eye of the believer.

Sacred is the past participle of the Middle English verb sacren (from the Latin sacrare), meaning to consecrate. The word has a transitive, behavioral sense to it: something has been consecrated (Paden 1999, 95n6). Sacred languages, then, are those that have been designated by religious communities for sacred purposes. They have been elevated above ordinary vernaculars through myths, ritual practices, and dedicated institutions. We could say – and perhaps should say, for the sake of correctness and clarity – that these are sacralized or sanctified or consecrated languages. (For stylistic variety we will use all of these terms in addition to sacred.) Approaching things in this way, utilizing verbal forms, enables us to grasp
the fact that sacredness is in part an observable social process, a process, moreover, that can be disrupted or reversed.

Sacrality works in circular fashion. Consider gold. The gleaming yellow metal has long inspired fascination and mythmaking. Humans have extolled it above other, lowlier metals, like nickel and chrome. It is reserved for extraordinary objects or occasions. As it turns out, gold is widely used in religious cultus, as in the strips of gold leaf applied to Buddha statues in Thailand or the gilded cupolas of an Orthodox church. Such ritualistic uses further enhance the prestige of gold … which in turn makes gold suitable for ritualistic use. And so on, in iterative fashion. However, this recurring loop can be short-circuited. When an 18-karat toilet was installed in the Guggenheim Museum in Manhattan, this was clearly a provocative artistic statement, meant to upend the feelings, ideas, and behaviors customarily associated with the precious metal (see, e.g., *New York Times*, April 19, 2016). Of course, it will probably take much more than that to disabuse people of their emotional attachment to gold, but the stunt reveals that there is in fact a spell (a kind of social spell) to be broken.

Sacred languages may be thought of as semiotic gold. Within their communities, they are endowed with a mystical allure and are drawn upon for a wide range of religious practices, places, and paraphernalia. They are studied with reverence and care and are defended from threats of blasphemy or sacrilege. For example, some Church Slavonic teaching manuals refuse to use the grammatical charts, tables, and diagrams one normally finds in a Western language textbook – the idea being that such things desacralize the holy living word (e.g., Goriacheva et al. 2013). One index of this special treatment is the fact that sacred languages are often expressed through cantillation (chanting or solemn reading) and calligraphy (beautiful writing), two forms of symbolic heightening that ordinary vernaculars may not be deemed worthy of. Using sacred languages for rituals, scriptures, chants, and inscriptions further emphasizes their sacredness. This is the hidden circuitry of religion: sacred languages are sacred, in part at least, because they are handled sacredly (*sancta sancte*). But this seemingly closed system can also be short-circuited, either from within the community (as happened to Latin at Vatican II) or from without (as happened to Church Slavonic during the Soviet era). In these cases, the supposed sacredness of the language was questioned or violently debunked.

One wrinkle is the fact that adherents themselves, especially Christians, are not always of one mind about the sacred nature of a particular language. Christianity is not really a “religion of the book” in the same sense as
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Judaism or Islam. It does not have one sacred language comparable to Hebrew or Arabic. Indeed, some Christians believe that the notion of a sacred language is inimical to pure Christianity, insisting that Jesus addressed his followers in colloquial terms, that the experience of Pentecost (described in the Acts of the Apostles) validated the world’s Babel of tongues, that the Church has always engaged in translation projects, and so on. Indeed, many would agree with the following distinction:

Islam rests on a text, which is God’s very own Word, and emphasizes the importance of one idiom, Arabic, which is both divine and human. It is the language of the Qur’an, considered uncreated, inimitable, and the seal of prophecy…. On the other hand, Christianity, based on the person of Christ and not so much on a text, has scriptures in two idioms Hebrew and Greek, none of them that of Christ. It should not privilege any language and thereby emphasizes its universal appeal for speakers of any and every idiom. (Druart 2007, 2)

The key word in the above quotation is “should”: the author may wish that Christianity should not privilege any language, but the fact of the matter is, over the course of its history, different Christian communities have indeed exalted – in varying ways and to varying degrees – certain languages closely affiliated with their own ecclesiastical traditions, including Latin, Church Slavonic, Coptic, and Ge’ez (Tornow 2009, 69–70), though all have also been challenged at times. What this exaltation entails, we will see in the course of this book. But, again, these are observable social and historical facts, and so, for a study such as this, which is concerned with observables (as opposed to metaphysics), it suffices.

Historical Relics?

Sacred languages are important filaments in world history. Hundreds or even thousands of years old, they link generations of believers across time and provide a vital connection to the religion’s origins. Missionaries and migrants have disseminated sacred languages like Arabic, Pali, and Church Slavonic across oceans and continents, profoundly shaping the linguasphere, the network of languages that encircles the earth. Vast repositories of human wisdom are safeguarded in ancient tongues like Pali and Ge’ez. These rich and intricate languages have helped thinkers plumb the depths of the human condition. In the premodern era, sacred languages such as
Sanskrit and Latin were used not only in the religious sphere, but became influential vehicles of literature and learning, used for poetry, philosophy, law, medicine, astronomy, and mathematics. They continue to provide intellectual infrastructure for different world religions. The vocabulary of Jewish life, for example – Adonai, Elohim, Torah, Kaddish, Kosher, Mitsvah, Shalom, Tallit, Minyan – remains indebted to the “holy tongue” of Hebrew (Green 1999). Sacred languages have long functioned as lexifiers, furnishing the lexical building blocks for modern-day vernaculars. The national languages of South and Southeast Asia are studded with Sanskrit and Pali words, while elements of Church Slavonic enhance Russian, Bulgarian, and Serbian, and Ge’ez is a resource for scientific terminology in contemporary Amharic. (It should be noted that the opposite can also be observed: that is, regional languages can influence sacred ones.) Some governments and political parties have supported sacred languages, hoping to benefit from their symbolic cachet, while poets, composers, and typographers have drawn upon the visual and sonic properties of sacred languages for their respective creations.

But that is not the whole story. Cultivating a sacred language over against workaday vernaculars has profound linguistic, religious, and social consequences, not all of which may be judged positively. For one thing, while sacred languages can indeed foster trans-regional ties among believers, they may do so at the expense of local languages. Sacred languages have an imperialist track record (Williams 2008). For example, when Buddhist monks backed the use of Pali, this hindered the development of a native Sinhala literature in Sri Lanka (Deegalle 2006). Maintaining a sacred language has often been elitist and exclusionary, an instrument of obfuscation separating the literate from the illiterate. One critic claims that Sanskrit represents “institutional violence and the preservation of hierarchy” within Indian society (Sawhney 2009, 5). A well-known philologist contends that the adherence to Church Slavonic, while leading to beautiful expressions in liturgy and literature, isolated premodern Russia and led to its intellectual impoverishment (Thomson 1999). It has been suggested that the supreme sanctity bestowed upon Classical Arabic in the Muslim world has slowed the introduction of printing, mass education, democracy, and other attributes of modernity (Diner 2009). The artist and critic John Berger once said, “Mystifications protect power. Mysteries protect the sacred” (1991, 218). It would appear that sacred languages have done both.

Whatever we make of such sweeping historical judgments, has not the march of progress done away with all of that anyway? Are not sacred languages relics of the past? Are we not all basically Protestants now? The
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sociologist Bryan S. Turner (2011) suggests that the world is on the cusp of a new era in human history, moving from the age of revelation to the age of information. In the premodern epoch, the ineffable message of divine revelation was encoded in a language known only to clerical elites (rabbis, monks, priests, mullahs) who maintained a privileged position as guardians and interpreters. A wide gulf separated the clergy from the laity, the learned from the unlearned. But in the modern era, which is characterized by democracy and widespread literacy – and the near universal access to information via the Internet – the old arrangement is no longer tenable:

In a democratic environment, the very idea that some truths are ineffable contradicts the ethos of modern society in which everybody claims a right to understand. Democracy tends to promote plain speech. The elite’s control of ineffable knowledge is compromised and the whole idea of hierarchically organised wisdom evaporates. (195)

Clerical groups no longer have a monopoly on knowledge. The pyramidal arrangement, with a small coterie of religious intellectuals in a commanding position atop the masses, has given way to a broad-based marketplace of ideas. As Turner sees it, sacred languages cannot survive in this new topography. The replacement of Latin by vernaculars in the Catholic Church is a case in point.

While it is true that Latin, Pali, Church Slavonic, and the others do not occupy the place they did in the premodern world, they are still part of the daily life of millions of Muslims, Jews, Hindus, Zoroastrians, Christians, and Buddhists. The following table shows some of the major world religions, their estimated number of members, and their associated sacred language.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Religion</th>
<th>Number of members</th>
<th>Sacred language</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Islam</td>
<td>1.6 billion</td>
<td>Classical Arabic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roman Catholic Christianity</td>
<td>1.1 billion</td>
<td>Latin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hinduism</td>
<td>1 billion</td>
<td>Sanskrit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Russian Orthodox Christianity</td>
<td>165 million</td>
<td>Church Slavonic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theravada Buddhism</td>
<td>140 million</td>
<td>Pali</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theravada Buddhism</td>
<td>40 million</td>
<td>Ge’ez</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Judaism</td>
<td>14 million</td>
<td>Hebrew</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coptic Orthodox Christianity</td>
<td>12 million</td>
<td>Coptic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zoroastrianism</td>
<td>200,000</td>
<td>Avestan</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Of course, by no means do all adherents know their tradition’s sacred language. Nonetheless, even if just 1 percent is involved, that still comes out to be millions of people who are influenced in some measure, directly or indirectly, by these sacralized varieties. The case of Latin being displaced within Roman Catholic Christianity is certainly noteworthy, but not necessarily representative of the overall situation.

There is no doubt that Sanskrit, Church Slavonic, Latin, and other sacred languages have been buffeted by the forces of modernity. For one thing, they have been eclipsed by the rise of national varieties such as French, Hindi, Serbian, and Indonesian: these are now the languages of literature and learning – and, often, liturgy too, for that matter. Sanctified languages have also been affected by the creep of secularization – that is, the retreat of religion from science, art, law, medicine, education, and other domains. Their real estate, so to speak, has shrunk considerably. But secularization is not happening evenly and ineluctably across the planet; in fact, a number of conflicting trends are observable. Sacred languages, suggests Fishman, “do not come and go the way quotidian vernaculars do. They wax and wane and have a seemingly phoenix-like capacity to arise again out of their own ashes” (2006, 258). History is full of surprising twists and turns, and some recent developments suggest that ancient sacred languages may be shifting with the times. These trends include religious revivals, neotraditionalist movements, technological innovations, and globalizing spiritualities. Let us briefly consider an example for each development.

Religious revivals

Church Slavonic, the consecrated language of the Russian Orthodox Church and other Eastern Christian communities, has made a noteworthy comeback after decades of Communism. Soviet ideology was hostile to religion and had no use for a language like Church Slavonic. But then the USSR fell apart in 1991 and people became interested in the hitherto forbidden fruit of religion. Many new churches and monasteries have been constructed. Since Church Slavonic is the solemn liturgical language of the Russian Orthodox Church, this religious revival has entailed a linguistic revitalization as well, a fact well illustrated by the profusion of new akathists being composed. An akathist is a hymn composed to honor a saint or martyr. Since the demise of the USSR, the canonization of the so-called “new martyrs” – those faithful Christians who perished under
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the Bolsheviks – has been a remarkable affair. Between 1721 and 1896, the Russian Orthodox Church only canonized (i.e., elevated to sainthood) five individuals. But over a thousand new saints have been recognized since the year 2000. This means new liturgical services and hymns written in Church Slavonic by clergy and laity alike (Semenkov 2009). In fact, the number of akathists written since 1990 is comparable to the past three centuries combined (Liudogovskii 2004, 56). In sum, the language of Church Slavonic has been given a new vitality. (See Figure 1.1.)

Neotraditionalist movements

It should come as no surprise that believers on the conservative end of the ideological spectrum typically favor maintaining their sacred language. Often thousands of years old, linking generations of believers, safely preserving the deposit of faith and integral to ritual performance, sacred languages seem to be the very embodiment of religious tradition. Neotraditionalists (preferable to the overused term, fundamentalists) delib-
erately attempt to reassert the religious tradition over against what they see as harmful modern innovations. They look back to a supposed golden age for solace and inspiration. It is noteworthy how often a sacred language seems to symbolize that age. For example, there are neotraditionalist groups in India that claim Sanskrit used to be the lingua franca (common language) of all Indians and not just an elite priestly idiom. Seeking to promote Sanskrit as a spoken language, they offer immersion camps and other educational programs designed to teach people how to say things like

- Hello! How are you?
- Where do you work?
- I was merely joking, friend.
- When will this bus leave?
- The examination has been postponed.
- Next month we will buy a washing machine.

This is a grassroots effort by Hindu neotraditionalists who hope to expand knowledge of Sanskrit from home to village to nation. Restoring the former glory of Sanskrit is seen as the pathway to a successful future for India.

*Technological innovations*

Sacred languages, which are thousands of years old, are being given a boost by mobile computer and communication technologies. Projection screens are now used in some churches and synagogues, providing real-time vernacular translations of, say, Coptic or Hebrew prayers being said during the worship service. This is one technique for balancing the imperatives of communion and communication – a way for the group to have its linguistic cake and eat it too, as it were. Other platforms provide novel ways of disseminating ancient languages. For example, Benedict XVI was the first pontiff to use Twitter, which includes a Latin version among the various other languages. The practice continued under Pope Francis and grew into something of a sensation:

*Ubi quaestus deficientia, ibi dignitatis humanae negligentia.*

*In sacramento Eucharistiae reperimus Deum se donantem.*

Where there is no work, there is no dignity.

In the Sacrament of the Eucharist we find God who gives himself.

(Pope Francis 2015a, 2015b)
The current Latin Twitter account (Papa Franciscus@Pontifx_In) has over seven hundred thousand followers. Though it is hard to know what effect this is having on the vitality of Latin within Catholicism – the English-language feed has more than ten million followers – it does at least seem to suggest that devotees might utilize new technologies to preserve and promulgate their sacred languages.

Globalizing spiritualities

Along with the more high-profile religious revivals and neotraditionalist movements, another, subtler trend is observable: namely, the growth of spiritualities that draw upon the global religious market in a do-it-yourself, mix-and-match kind of way. People are increasingly charting their own religious trajectory, often with the help of the Internet. These are fluid spiritualities that operate outside the walls of established religions, and tend to be highly individualistic, commercialized, and therapeutic in character (Turner 2011). The popularity of Kabbalah, a tradition of Jewish mystical thought and practice, is a good example of this. The celebrity-friendly Kabbalah Centre (often labeled a “cult” by its detractors) has retrieved this aspect of Jewish heritage and championed it in new, populist forms. The organization promotes the idea that the Hebrew alphabet is the hidden code or DNA of the cosmos, so that tapping into that alphabetic power can generate real benefits in one’s personal and professional life. The group’s online store sells a number of products (books, CDs, posters, etc.) related to Hebrew letters and the deity’s names, which the customer need not be able to read to benefit from:

In The 72 Names of God, you’ll find a remedy for just about every challenge that’s likely to come up in the course of a lifetime. Simply by properly meditating on the appropriate Name, you will be able to:

* Bring more money into your life whenever you need it.
* Ignite sexual energy and passion unlike anything you’ve experienced before.
* Eliminate guilt forever and undo the damage it has caused you.
* Recharge physical energy and heal illnesses – your own, and others’.
* Radiate beauty to everyone who sees you.
* Stop attracting the wrong people into your life.
* Meet your true soul mate.

And so much more!

(Kabbalah Centre 2016)
This Kabbalistic “spiritual technology” is marketed to seekers who may or may not be Jewish. Busy professionals living in a fast-paced, globalized world can tap into the alleged spiritual power of the Hebrew alphabet without actually learning how to read it (Altglas 2014).

What the future holds for the world’s sacred languages is, of course, impossible to divine. Who would have predicted that, starting in the nineteenth century, the “holy tongue” of Hebrew would be transformed into a full-fledged spoken language, known now as Modern Hebrew or Israeli? Or that, roughly a century later, the seemingly impregnable position of Latin across the Catholic world would crumble? In any event, this book is not an exercise in futurology; rather, it offers a comparative account of some of the beliefs, practices, teaching methods, social groups, and ideological debates pertaining to the world’s major sacred languages in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

References


What Exactly Is a Sacred Language?


Green, Arthur. 1999. These are the Words: A Vocabulary of Jewish Spiritual Life. Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing.


What Exactly Is a Sacred Language?


Further Reading

Austin, Peter K., ed. 2008. *One Thousand Languages: Living, Endangered, and Lost.* Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press. A user-friendly overview of the world’s languages, with plentiful maps and illustrations; however, extinct languages like Etruscan are lumped together with fixed ones such as Latin and Sanskrit.