

## **Ecological Intersections of Religious Ideology, Agency, and Identity: Voices of Iranian English Language Teachers**

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### **Abstract**

Parallel with the growth of research on the role of religious ideologies in teachers' professional lives, the present study drew on an ecological perspective and explored how religious ideology (i.e., Islamic principles) intersected with Iranian English language teachers' agency and identity. The study was methodologically situated within a narrative inquiry methodology, and data were collected from narrative frames and semi-structured interviews. Data analyses revealed that Islamic principles intersected with teachers' agency and identity in three major ways: Islamic principles as a humiliating cult, agency-demolishing nature of ideology, and resisting Islamic ideologies. The study shows that, on the one hand, ideology can serve as a source of humiliation and harm to teachers' agencies and identities. On the other hand, teachers also influence ideology by not only showing resistance, but practicing certain instructional initiatives that raise students' awareness of the destructive nature of Islamic principles. The study concludes with implications for teachers on how to communalize their agentic initiatives so that they can construct their identities in more constructive ways.

**Keywords:** ecological perspective, ideology, language teacher agency, language teacher identity, religious ideology

Over the past decades, a shift of purpose has occurred in teaching and teacher education toward exploring the role of sociocultural contextualities in language teachers' professional work (De Costa & Norton, 2017). Among such contextualities, ideology and its ramifications have been a persistent concern among researchers vis-à-vis how teachers and their work are influenced by ideological resonances (Kubota, 2023; Liddicoat, 2020). Recently, religious ideology has been acknowledged as a significant component of teachers' professional performances and educational work (Karimpour et al., 2024; Vaccino-Salvadore, 2024). In this regard, Wong and Mahboob (2018) argued that religious ideologies influence the personal understanding and interpersonal performances of teachers, and thus, the role of such ideologies should gain more empirical attention. This point was also highlighted by Her and De Costa (2022) in their case study of how Christianity influenced their participant teacher's feelings and practices.

Considering such a telling effect of religious ideologies, research has recently started to explore the role of religiosity in teachers' professional work, especially their emotion and identity construction (e.g., Her & De Costa, 2022; Karimpour et al., 2024; Vaccino-Salvadore, 2024). Findings from this body of knowledge show how power relations, contextual policies, and discourses play a key role in (re)shaping teachers' professional performances. However, little is known about how such ideologies intersect with teachers' agencies and identities. Agency and identity are interconnected processes that, according to Kayi-Aydar (2019), draw heavily on contextual systems of power and ideological forces. Thus, such processes could also be strongly influenced by religious ideologies, yet what such an influence entails, how agency and identity intersect with them, and how these processes feature in teachers' work are questions open to further scrutiny. The present study aims to unpack these dimensions by drawing on an ecological perspective (van Lier, 2008) and exploring the intersections of religious ideology (here Islamic principles) and Iranian English language teachers' agency and identity construction.

Since an ecological perspective exposes the layers of influence among different ecologies (van Lier, 2010), it would help with exploring teachers' agency and identity in light of religious principles, all of which are, in turn, layered processes (e.g., Karimpour et al., 2024; Kayi-Aydar, 2019; Vaccino-Salvadore, 2024). In particular, recent research from the Iranian context (e.g., Karimpour et al., 2024) has shown that religious principles can substantially feature in teachers' identity construction. Relatedly, considering the interconnections between agency and identity (e.g., Kayi-Aydar, 2019; Miller et al., 2018), exploring how such principles also influence the co-constitutive nature of identity and agency is well-justified. In light of these points, the present study addressed the following question: How do religious principles ecologically intersect with Iranian English language teachers' agency and identity?

### **Religious Ideology and Language Teacher Professionalism**

Broadly speaking, Hall (1996) defined ideology as “the mental frameworks—the languages, the concepts, categories, imagery of thought, and the systems of representation—which different classes and social groups deploy in order to make sense of, figure out, and render intelligible the way society works” (p. 26). Such a definition of ideology situates the concept within its sociocultural-historical context and evinces how certain social groups attempt to promulgate their own preferred ways of thinking. In the context of this study, such ways of thinking feature in the form of Islamic principles imposed on teachers' agency and identity regulations that constrain their effective professional work.

While religious ideologies have existed for thousands of years, their extension to language educational work has only recently gained empirical attention. Previous theoretical (e.g., Wong, 2018; Wong & Canagarajah, 2009; Wong & Mahboob, 2018) and empirical works (e.g., Almayez, 2022; Baurain, 2007; Ding & De Costa, 2018; Her & De Costa, 2022; Karimpour et al., 2024; Varghese & Johnston, 2007) have shown that religious ideologies can shape teachers' professional work through two direct and indirect ways. In their direct form, religious ideologies feature in policies and practices or through institutional participants who define the quality of teachers' work. In their indirect form, such ideologies attach to contextual phenomena and serve as discursive tools shaping teachers' professionalism.

Knowledge from this developing body of work on religious ideologies generally unfolds four strands. First, religious ideologies stem from and inform personal sense-making, interpersonal dialectics, and socio-institutional performances (e.g., Her & De Costa, 2022; Karimpour et al.,

2024). Second, either direct or indirect, religious ideologies serve as governing rules that can substantially influence the range of teachers' professional characteristics, such as agencies, identities, emotions, and efficacy beliefs (e.g., Wong & Mahboob, 2018). Third, due to their entrenched nature, such ideologies are discursive forms of human knowledge that may be resistant to teachers' personal efforts in the way of change (e.g., Baurain, 2007; Vaccino-Salvadore, 2024). Fourth, teachers often face tensions in their personal take on religious ideologies and how external manifestations of ideologies shape classroom and organizational performances (e.g., Almayez, 2022; Ding & De Costa, 2018). In the present study, my adoption of an ecological perspective resonates well with these strands, especially in the context of agency and identity, as I show later.

### **Language Teacher Agency and Identity**

If intentionally and reflectively acting upon the world could be considered as the major dimension of human footing, agency has been characteristic of human beings for thousands of years. In the context of education, agency has found solid grounds in capturing how especially teachers can take the initiative in innovating their professionalism at the levels of practice, interpersonal interactions, and response to policy-related changes and pressures. Relatedly, if identity is a process of restructuring teachers' who-ness and meaning-making, such innovations constitute a key part of identity (re)construction. Similarly, teachers start innovating their practice by drawing on their personal designations, which exposes the nexus between agency and identity. Such perspectives have been extensively highlighted by the agency-identity scholarship (e.g., Buchanan, 2015; Kayi-Aydar, 2015, 2019; Miller et al., 2018; Priestley et al., 2015) in showing how personal understandings of teachers interact with their instructional practices, and this perspective features in the present study as well.

In her discussion of language teacher agency, Kayi-Aydar (2019) brings together three major theoretical strands of agency in social cognitive theory (making things happen by drawing on efficacy potentials), ecological approaches (spatio-temporal engagement), and positioning perspectives (discursive movements in talk and narrative). Tao and Gao (2021) discuss these three perspectives and add one dimension to them, namely, agency as a socio-culturally mediated process in which the mediation between the individual and context is the main focus. These theoretical developments have sparked great interest in researchers to explore how agency relates to emotions (e.g., Benesch, 2018; Miller & Gkonou, 2018), autonomy (Teng, 2019), and identity (Hiver & Whitehead, 2018; Kayi-Aydar, 2015), collectively showing the intersectional and complex nature of agency in light of contextual discourses, professional competencies, and sociocultural particularities. In light of such developments, Miller et al. (2018) inclusively argued that “despite their varied conceptualizations, researchers agree that agency involves doing things in the world” (p. 1).

### **Theoretical Framework: Ecological Perspective**

A central characteristic that sets ecological perspectives apart from other approaches is their configuration of human performance as a network of interconnections (van Lier, 2004). Such a network then opens the space for capturing the complexity of the systems from micro to meso and to macrolevels (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). However, this approach imposes limitations on empirically investigating teaching and learning ecologies. As van Lier (2010, p. 3) argues, an ecological perspective “aims to look at the learning process, the actions and activities of teachers and learners, the multilayered nature of interaction and language use, in all their complexity and as a network of interdependencies among all the elements in the setting,” a

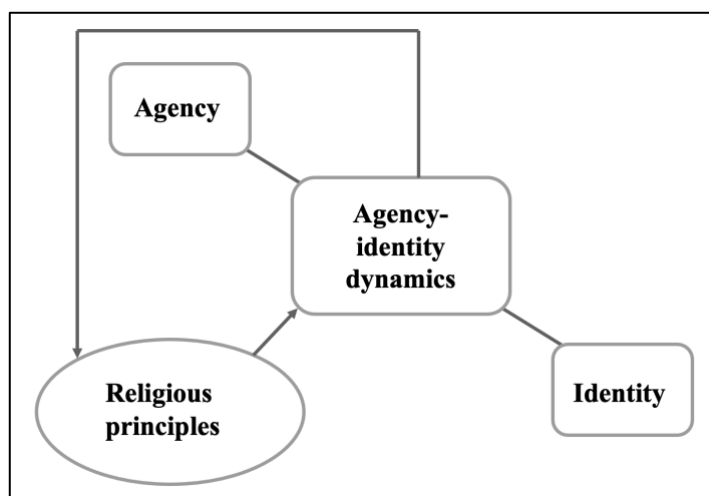
standpoint that, despite its rigor, complicates adequately capturing different ecologies. This limitation has motivated many ecological studies (e.g., Hofstadler et al., 2021; Mercer, 2023; Nazari et al., 2023) to follow a perspective focused on in-class, institutional, and sociocultural ecologies shaping teachers' emotions and identities.

The ecological perspective has also claimed significant insights for agency – beyond Priestley et al.'s (2015) perspective – and identity. For example, van Lier (2004, 2010, respectively) notes that “the self is... an ongoing project of establishing one's place in the world” (p. 115) and that ecological perspectives are “concerned with situated cognition and agency” (p. 383). He further considers agency as a component of ecological perspectives and argues that “[t]here must be room in a learning environment for a variety of expressions of agency to flourish” (p. 5). In the present study, I consider religious ideology as a sociocultural ecology that intersects with teachers' agency and identity, a perspective that is shown in Figure 1.

Besides these theoretical developments, research (e.g., Mercer, 2023; Nazari et al., 2023; Sulis et al., 2023) has adopted an ecological perspective in exploring teachers' emotional dynamics and identity construction. For example, Mercer (2023) explored well-being among eight Maltese teachers, tapping into how different classroom, institutional, and broader educational ecologies shape teachers' professional performances. Mercer found that across each of these ecologies, teachers face facilitators and inhibitors in effectively actualizing their practices and experiencing well-being. Additionally, Sulis et al. (2023) recently discussed how Austrian teachers could use agency for well-being by experiencing four levels of well-being, namely triggers, reflection, affordances, and action. Collectively, this body of knowledge attests to the effectiveness of an ecological perspective in exploring teachers' professional characteristics, featuring in this study in relation to religious ideology, agency, and identity, processes that are inherently complex and multifaceted (e.g., Kayi-Aydar, 2019; Wong & Mahboob, 2018).

### **Theorizing Religious Ideology, Agency, and Identity from an Ecological Lens**

In this study, I do not theorize the contributions of religious ideology to Iranian English language teachers' professionalism as a unidirectional process. Rather, I conceptualize the connection as a dialectical process in terms of how both religious principles feed teachers' agency and identity and how these processes feed back into those religious principles. This perspective is more likely to capture the evolving, scalar, complex, and non-linear nature of an ecological perspective. Such a perspective resonates well with an ecological standpoint since it unpacks the dialectical and multidirectional nature of intersections among phenomena (van Lier, 2004). This conceptualization is shown in Figure 1, which draws on the literature on religious principles and their intersections with teachers' professional performances (e.g., Her & De Costa, 2022; Wong & Mahboob, 2018). This figure shows that (1) religious principles influence teachers' agencies and identities, (2) the nexus between agency and identity produces a dynamic, and (3) the dynamic ecologically contributes to the existing religious principles.



**Figure 1.** The ecology of religious ideology, agency, and identity among language teachers.

## Method

### Context

I ran this study in private language schools in Iran. Private language schools in Iran offer intensive courses in general English as well as IELTS and TOEFL classes. The exclusive feature of these schools, rendering them suitable for exploring religious ideology, is their contextual situatedness in Iran and that these schools work under the supervision of social organizations and the Ministry of Education. That is, while teachers and students in the private sector could experience a more open milieu in terms of their personal outfits, relationships, and textbook selection, they are still observed by the officials in order not to cross the red lines. This situation of low and high freedom could make the private sector a suitable setting for the purpose of this study, which is to see how teachers navigate the intersections of macrolevel ecology and their agency and identity ecologies. Thus, regulations also partly extend to private language schools, including wearing the Hijab, not running co-educational classes, wearing culturally suitable outfits by women, and avoiding the discussion of political issues. It must be mentioned that not all the regulations are religious, yet since religion is inextricably intertwined with political issues in this context, almost everything is colored by religion in Iran. Aware of this context, I asked a friend to collect the data, and then I engaged in its analysis.

### Participants and Positionality

The participants of this study were five teachers who taught at different language schools in northwest Iran. The teachers were selected through convenience sampling by a friend of mine. I first designed the study and asked a friend to collect the data. She collected and transcribed the data and then sent them to me. She was familiar with the teachers, a point that helped her establish a friendly connection with the teachers to express their perceptions about religion. I observed the entire process, and because I was residing in Iran at the time of data collection, I had an emic view of the process. That is, over the years of teaching in Iran, I had been observing how religion affects the teachers' lives, which assisted with better making sense of teachers' statements and synthesizing their perceptions. I should also mention that I obtained my friend's approval to collect the data and give it to me, and there are no conflicts of interest in this regard. Furthermore, the teachers were assured of the anonymity of their identities and statements. To select the teachers, I set the criteria of being experienced in order to unpack how religious

ideology has intersected with their agency and identity over the years and being from different proficiency levels in order to examine how different teachers are influenced by such ideologies. Table 1 shows the teachers' demographic information.

**Table 1. The Teachers' Demographic Information**

Teacher	Age	Gender	Proficiency level of teaching	Experience (years)	Educational background
Neda	25	Female	Elementary	5	ELT
Minoo	26	Female	Intermediate	5	ELT
Sarina	30	Female	Advanced	6	ELT
Nika	34	Female	Advanced	7	ELT
Mahsa	30	Female	Intermediate	5	ELT

### Design and Data Collection

This study is part of a larger project that explored the role of religious ideology in Iranian English language teachers' emotion and identity construction. Since I aimed to explore how the teachers' agency and identity intersected with Islamic principles, I situated the study within a narrative inquiry methodology. Narrative inquiry is a useful methodology to unpack teachers' life stories and their sense-making of those events (Ary et al., 2014; Barkhuizen, 2016). To operationalize the narrative inquiry methodology, I used two research methods, narrative frames and semi-structured interviews. It must be mentioned that the ecological perspective of the study featured the way religious ideology, identity, and agency intersect within the teachers' experiences and current perceptions about their professional work.

Narrative frames are useful tools to dig into teachers' stories and experiences. By their focus on obtaining a concrete experience through guiding teachers in completing a storyline, narrative frames can helpfully inform researchers of how teachers experience a phenomenon and how that phenomenon influences their professional lives (Barkhuizen & Wette, 2008). I operationalized narrative frames in the context of religious ideology and teachers' agency/identity by asking them to (1) share a concrete experience of when their professional lives and performance were substantially influenced by Islamic principles, (2) explain how this experience featured in their job as a teacher, (3) discuss how it influenced their ability to innovate their practice, and (4) unpack how their self-perceptions were influenced by this and similar experiences. The frames (one per teacher, each around 100 words) were completed in Persian (L1) and were then translated into English.

Following the narrative frames, the teachers were interviewed in order to gain a more complete understanding of how religious ideologies intersected with their identity and agency. The semi-structured interviews partly expanded on the narrative frames and went beyond them to gain a better understanding of teachers' professional lives. At this stage, the teachers were asked questions about how religion features in their lives, how Islamic principles interact with institutional contextualities, how religion directly and/or indirectly influences their work, and how the nexus between teachers' professional performances and Islamic principles shapes teachers' personal understandings, interpersonal relationships, and generally their

understanding of themselves as teachers. The interview questions were designed based on the literature on religious ideologies and teacher professionalism (e.g., Her & De Costa, 2022; Wong & Mahboob, 2018) as mixed with the contextual issues that were relevant to the Iranian context. The interviews were run in Persian, lasted, on average, 25 minutes, and were transcribed for further analysis.

## **Data Analysis**

The data (frames and interviews) were analyzed based on the principles of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), which helps researchers inductively analyze qualitative data. I started with developing initial codes by reading the data and color-coding the statements in Microsoft Word. For example, when a teacher referred to resisting certain ideological principles by having close friends, this was coded as “resistance as a site of experiencing collegiality.” This process of coding was done across both datasets in order to come up with a codebook that could be used for developing themes. That is, I first coded the data from the frames, followed by coding the data from the interviews in order to separately code the data and then proceed to develop themes.

Then, I engaged in developing themes. First, I cross-checked the codes in order not to lose the useful data. Then, I developed the themes based on the codes that had a higher frequency and then engaged in finalizing the themes. At this stage, I also engaged in iterative and integrative thematizing of the data in order to obtain a more holistic view of both datasets. It must be mentioned that two colleagues of mine and I had already engaged in coding the data, although I did not run any intercoder analysis procedures; thus, peer discussion and peer analysis had strengthened the analyses, but I engaged in reanalysis of the data to ensure their appropriateness for the purposes of this study, finalizing three themes as Islamic principles as a humiliating cult, agency-demolishing nature of ideology, and resisting Islamic ideologies.

## **Findings**

### **Islamic Principles as a Humiliating Cult**

One of the major dimensions of the teachers’ statements and experiences was the humiliating nature of Islamic principles. The teachers argued that Islamic principles penetrate different dimensions of teachers’ work, operating as a humiliating factor in their self-perceptions as professional teachers.

A notable dimension of teachers’ work in being influenced by Islamic principles was how ideological cults extend to textbooks. For example, Minoo explained the prevalence of Islamic principles in textbooks, which made her feel humiliated:

“I don’t know why these principles should be everywhere. Religion is not supposed to extend everywhere because it has to stay in the mosque. Why education and why language education? This makes me feel that we are bound to such humiliating rules” (Interview).

Sarina shared a similar point regarding how Islamic principles serve as censorship tools, a point that made her feel emotional tensions in effectively delivering the content and exercising agency in instructional terms:

“I find it really degrading to see that even the outfits of people have been censored in the textbooks. I should struggle to explain the issue to the

students because they and I know that something has been deleted from the book. Why should religion be so powerful at all?" (Narrative frame).

Another side of the teachers' humiliation was how Islamic principles created inclusion and exclusion in collegial terms. The teachers noted that such principles create separation among the teachers because they have to select who to associate with and who to exclude. For example, Neda shared a narrative of how her opposition to Islamic rules gradually made her exclude a colleague from her circle of close friends, forcing her to exercise agency in collegial exclusion and influencing their interpersonal, collegial identities:

"It was really disappointing to do so, but I had to end my relationship with one of the co-workers because she was spreading ideas that were totally against my personal beliefs. This was really humiliating for me to do so, just because something external separates us" (Narrative frame).

Mahsa shared a similar concern regarding how Islamic principles exert negative effects on teachers' collegial ties:

"I think that religion is by nature humiliating because it poisons your mind and makes you feel that you are right to do and say everything. In our world of collegiality, this is also the same because teachers can easily exclude their colleagues or include them simply based on their religious beliefs" (Interview).

Thus, religious principles were viewed as creating a sense of humiliation among the teachers and constraining their agencies in instructional terms and interpersonal identities.

### **Agency-Demolishing Nature of Ideology**

The second dimension of the teachers' statements pertained to the negative effects of Islamic principles on their agency. Agency in this regard meant how religious ideologies particularly impede holding co-educational classes deemed necessary for enhancing students' socio-educational literacies.

The first dimension of the teachers' impeded agency pertained to how the dominance of Islamic principles and lack of co-educational classes stopped teachers from adding to students' social literacies. For example, Minoos explained how having mixed-gender classes can facilitate teachers' ability to exercise agency in enhancing students' sex roles:

"In my opinion, it is important for students to know the other gender. When and where should they learn such stuff? But we have to oppress these issues because they are against Islamic principles. This issue challenges our practice because we can't respond well to the students' queries" (Interview).

Mahsa also discussed how co-educational classes could add to students' understanding of different genders in society, yet her agency in discussing such issues was limited by religious principles that negatively shaped teacher-student relationships as well:

"It is really hard to see that we can't bring up issues that are the major part of students' social lives in the class just because of Islamic rules. They should know about their social status and the other genders in society, but we are not



allowed to talk about them. This really challenges my effective teaching” (Narrative frame).

The second dimension of the teachers’ work was related to the agency-impeding nature of ideology in educational terms when considered in the context of instruction. The teachers enumerated a number of benefits of co-educational classes over segregated education, which have been suppressed by ideological resonances. For instance, Neda disclosed how her agency in having co-educational classes has been criticized by the school policymakers:

“I once tried a new technique by inviting some of the female students to the male class, but this issue was really bothering the managers, and they said that someone may see the class and this can have penalties for the institution. The students really enjoyed the class, but these issues are against the regulations, and I feel that religion is demolishing our ability to try such new things” (Interview).

Sarina also mentioned how raising critical issues in the classes can run against Islamic principles, issues that were seen as conducive to students’ advanced learning and influencing her identity as an effective teacher:

“I think that having discussions around useful, gender-based topics is good but these are against Islamic rules. Believe it, students like these issues very much and they continue the discussion well and really learn the content, but we are not allowed to have such discussions that much” (Interview).

Thus, the teachers stated that they could develop effective interpersonal identities with students due to religious pressures that constrained their agency as well.

### **Resisting Islamic Ideologies**

Another dimension of the teachers’ agency and identity construction in relation to Islamic principles was resisting such an ideology. In this regard, the teachers took issues with the constraining and domineering nature of religious principles, which made them show resistance in practical terms.

One dimension of the teachers’ resistance pertained to how they attempted to promote perceptions of criticality among students. The teachers mentioned several examples of how they show agency in resisting Islamic principles by developing students’ awareness of the poisoning nature of such an ideology. For example, Minoo mentioned how she makes students aware of Islamic principles by critically observing their ramifications: “I always try to make the students think about this ideology because it is the best way to tackle perceptions that corrupt the society. This way, I feel composure and that I have done something useful in my life” (Interview). Mahsa also mentioned how such agency helps her claim the identity of a responsible teacher. In the following narrative, she explains how she has attempted to develop students’ awareness, resisting the normative discourses of religion through which she showed agency:

“One of my most-remembered experiences is when I intentionally talked about religion and its effects on our life in our lessons. A student asked me why I fiercely talk about religion and political issues, and I didn’t respond but just said that it is our nature to be so. I think that it is our responsibility to raise learners’ awareness of the true nature of such principles. This way, I

feel that I really am a responsible teacher who does her job effectively”  
(Narrative frame).

The other side of the teachers’ resistance was related to bringing up classroom discussions that aimed to develop students’ criticality. In this sense, the teachers argued that they try to launch discussions that involve talking about sociocultural issues deemed inappropriate at the language institute. For example, Neda shared a narrative of how running a discussion session on women's roles as social activists was welcomed by the students and fulfilled her desires in responding to students’ needs: “Once I ran a discussion on women's roles and the students really enjoyed it and learned many vocabulary items from it. This made me feel that I should raise students’ awareness despite the challenges that I can face” (Narrative frame). Sarina also stated that she attempts to structure speaking activities around social and religious issues so that students become more aware of these ideologies: “I always run such discussions because I think that it is my responsibility as a teacher to do it and make the students aware of the negative effects of such principles on our lives” (Interview).

Thus, despite the pressures of religious ideologies, the teachers attempted to show resistance by exercising agency in practicing critical activities that, in turn, fed back into their identities as responsible teachers.

## **Discussion**

The analysis of data revealed that religious ideology, agency, and identity intersected ecologically in the Iranian English teachers’ professional work. It was found that Islamic principles work as humiliating cults for the teachers’ identities and professional agencies. These findings align with the previous scholarship that has highlighted how religiosity serves as a key dimension of teachers’ professional work (e.g., Wong & Mahboob, 2018), especially how teachers’ identities in collegial terms could be influenced (see Her & De Costa, 2022; Karimpour et al., 2024; Vaccino-Salvadore, 2024). However, the findings contribute novel dimensions to the literature by portraying the humiliation of teachers in two major terms. First, Islamic principles were seen as cults that penetrated textbooks and promoted the principles of the dominant religious groups. While previous scholarship from the Iranian context has noted how such principles shape teachers’ work (e.g., Babaii, 2022), it is novel to see that these principles serve as humiliating tools. Second, Islamic principles were seen as creating disparity among the teachers, thereby negatively influencing their collegial identities. This finding reveals in a sense that personal beliefs, at least in Islamic terms, are not just personal systems of thinking and come to shape collegial ties negatively. In particular, such a negative effect is not limited to collegial relationships but it creates personal humiliation in teachers as well. Thus, Islamic principles could substantially shape the teachers’ agency and identity at the instructional and interpersonal levels, respectively, by imposing on them certain forms of thinking and practicing. Such principles, as shown, often resulted in perceptions of humiliation among the teachers, which subsequently influenced their agencies and identities at intrapersonal-interpersonal levels.

Another dimension of the teachers’ professionalism related to how Islamic principles influence their identities as agentic teachers, especially in relation to gender. Previous research from the Iranian context (e.g., Babaii, 2022) has eloquently shown how gender perceptions negatively influence teacher-student relationships and teachers’ effective instruction. Relatedly, research (e.g., Almayez, 2022; Baurain, 2007; Ding & De Costa, 2018) has reported on how religiosity

could be a site of transformation or suppression. For teachers of this study, religion was a negative factor influencing their agencies, especially in contributing to students' socio-educational literacies. Co-educational classes were considered central to students' growth, which was impeded by Islamic principles, a point that, in turn, constrained the teachers' agency. This finding shows that Islamic principles could exert negative effects on teachers' agencies to positively add to the range of literacies that students should develop. Thus, this finding unpacks the demolishing nature of religiosity in social and educational terms, especially through its unfitting regulations in relation to gender-based issues. In particular, the Islamic principles preempted certain regulations and ways of being and becoming that sanctioned the teachers' effective instructional delivery, shaping their identities as ineffective teachers.

Finally, the teachers also influenced the manifestations of religious ideologies in their setting through the agentic act of resistance. In their discussion of agency, Tao and Gao (2021) discuss the manifestations of agency and argue that "[t]eachers may be obliged to learn and practise according to certain mandates, but they may also autonomously display resistance towards a particular policy" (p. 3), which shows the nexus between agency and resistance. Previous scholarship (e.g., Kayi-Aydar, 2015; Miller et al., 2018) has also underlined the featuring role of resistance in developing teachers' agencies. However, the findings of the present study add to the literature in two major terms. First, the findings show how teachers attempt to transform their resistance into agency at the classroom level in order to respond to students' needs, a finding that actualizes resistance at the service of critical awareness. Second, such resistance of the teachers was in response to religious principles, a finding that has little been reflected in previous studies of this line of inquiry. Nevertheless, both dimensions may need further research in order to substantiate the findings of the studies. This finding further highlights the ecological nature of the three study constructs (i.e., religion, agency, and identity) in that inasmuch as religious principles shape teachers' agencies and identities, teachers also influence those principles at a practical level by resisting them in their behavior and instruction.

Overall, the findings reveal that religious ideology, agency, and identity feature as dialectical and complex processes in teachers' professional work. Although ideology exerts stronger influences on teachers' identities and agencies as arising from its macrostructural reverberations, teachers could also respond or react to such ideologies through exercising agencies that, in turn, feed back into their developing identities. In other words, as long as there is a suppressive ideology, there is also an agentic teacher who resists it. This overall observation complies with the literature on identity and agency (e.g., Kayi-Aydar, 2019; Yazan & Lindahl, 2020) in that teachers practice certain activities and instructional initiatives that verify their personal sense-making processes. Indeed, it is through agency that the connection between identity and practice (identity as practice) becomes strengthened as teachers extend part of their identity to their instructional practices and refract their practices based on their agency-inflected identities.

## **Conclusion**

This study explored the ecology of religious ideology, agency, and identity among Iranian English language teachers. Collectively, the findings indicated that both ideology and teachers influence each other. On the one hand, ideology can serve as a source of humiliation and harm to teachers' agencies and identities. On the other hand, teachers also influence ideology by not only showing resistance but practicing certain instructional initiatives that aim to raise students' awareness of the destructive nature of Islamic principles. These findings contribute novel

findings to the literature on agency, identity, and ideology by showing that inasmuch as ideology can harm teachers, teachers can also efface ideology. This dialectic seems to arise from the point that ideology has moved beyond its limits (i.e., personal boundaries) toward areas that it cannot account for, a point that is transparently accompanied by individuals' resistance once they find their personal values (here agency and identity) questioned by those ideological contextualities.

The findings of the study offer implications for teachers to engage in self-inquiry approaches to make their agentic efforts more communal. If teachers find the role of Islamic principles negative in their work, they can form small communities of practice in which they can find more professional agentic alternatives for practice. As an example, teachers can run discussion topics so that they can jointly move forward in their practices. This way, they can hope for seismic changes in society once their small steps at the classroom level have raised students' awareness of how Islamic principles shape teachers' and students' mindsets. The outcome of such initiatives may be teachers and students who are aware of the positive and negative effects of religious ideologies on their personal sense-making, agencies, and identities.

Future research can effectively address the limitations of the present study. One limitation of the study was its lack of observational protocols in order to observe how teachers show agency in response to religious ideologies. This could be a helpful agenda for future research. Furthermore, only five teachers participated in this study, and further research with a greater number of teachers needs to be done, especially in other EFL/ESL contexts where religious ideologies play a significant role in teachers' agencies and identities. Acknowledging these limitations, I hope that teachers can benefit from the findings of this study in communalizing their agentic efforts in navigating ideological dominance.

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