

Anthropology of Religion
Chapter 6 Lecture Notes

Language and Religion

Language and religion are intimately connected. Without language, religion would not be possible

I. Interpretation

Language is used to teach and interpret religious beliefs, many of which are expressed as oral or written texts.

Stories do not interpret themselves.

We humans have to interpret their meaning.

There is no inherent right or wrong interpretation of religious texts; there is only tradition.

The ability to interpret the same texts differently is the basis for new denominations arising even in the same religion.

“And the flood covered the whole land.”

Sharing Interpretations brings unity.

It is the sharing of a traditional set of interpretations that gives a religion unity, but even within a given religion the interpretations may change over time.

Cultural relativistic versus ethnocentric interpretations

Original meanings versus interpretations that are meaningful to later peoples.

Language changes bring religious changes.

Since language itself changes with time, religious understandings may change for purely linguistic reasons.

“Avoid the very appearance of evil.”

II. Diversity Within Religion

Geographical Diversity.

Dutch versus other Catholics

Social Diversity

For example the top versus the bottom of social status and their religion.

Theology School and “Sunday School”

Change over time.

Brigham Young and “modesty”

Southern Baptists and Slavery

III. Attitudes Toward Diversity

Hinduism

Judaism (orthopraxis)

“Two Jews, tree opinions”

Christianity

Heresy and Orthodoxy

IV. Language in Religious Practice

Liturgical Orders

More or less invariant sequences encoded by persons other than the performers.

Restricted versus elaborated codes

Linguistic taboos (“anti-rituals”)

Sanctity as expression of the unspoken order

The sacred as not to be questioned.

V. Language in Ritual

Prayer

Song and chant

Exhortation

Reciting the code (liturgical responses)

Glossolalia

VI. Paradox in Religious Thought

Origin of humans

Anthropomorphic creators

Christianity and the problem of evil

VII. Sacred Texts

Oral texts

Written texts

Sacredness of the texts

Islam and Arabic

Hebrew burial of worn texts

Translating Ancient texts

Canon (which documents are sacred)

Textual basis (which early version)

Interpretation (meaning of the ancient language)

Style (e.g., literal or idiomatic; formal or informal)

VIII. Language and Ideology

Max Mueller

Religion as disease of language

Linguistic Relativity

Creation itself demands a creator

Language change and religious meaning

2 Thessalonians 5:22 “Abstain from the very appearance of evil”