

A Hermeneutic Model of Sacred Literature and Everyday Revelation

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The type of literature I want to evaluate is different from what we expect traditionally. For the most part, the readers of these texts consider them “sacred”: whether revealed through divine means, or supernaturally inspired, this sort of literature for the devotee is different than reading Shakespeare or Dante. The reader approaches the reading of these texts with solemn behavior (even by means of ablutions), knowing that it has a teaching that neither other book nor any other teacher may impart, expecting it to actually “change their lives.” For this reason its interpretation is of vital importance, often considered a matter of (eternal?) life and death – especially for misinterpreters.

It seems reasonable to deduce that the devoted readers of these sacred literatures, those people that consider them “authentically sacred,” not only behaviorally approach the writings in a different manner, but also apply a cognitive process of semantic interpretation which differs from the pleasurable reading of a “secular” novel. This type of reading is laden with emotional response from the devotee-reader. These questions arise: How is it that such sacred literature should have such a lasting impact on the life of the devoted readers whereas other types of literature do not? Is there a linguistic mediation of the mystical experience, that is, does the language with which the Divinity is presented in the literature necessarily contribute, even subconsciously, to the way the devotee thinks and reasons about the Divinity and religion? Or could there be empirical evidence that proves that different people (of different cultures and religious sets) may refer contingently to the same referent having different senses for the experience? More broadly: how is language involved in mystical experiences?

I suggest that cognitive linguistics, and notions such as embodiment and conceptual metaphor, may help in determining the role of language and its relationship with thought in general and religious thought in particular. With the help of the other cognitive sciences, such as neuroscience, it may ultimately be possible to shed more light on concepts such as person, consciousness, and what Westerners know as “soul,” without losing the fundamental notions of the religious sets that are taken into consideration. In my opinion it is the ritualistic aspect of the reading activity, the conceptual integration made between the text and the reader’s personal life, and various neurological and emotional processes that make sacred literature so meaningful for the devotee.

Divine Authorship, Divine Language

The lay reader's approach to the Qur'an, the Bible or the Shruti is entirely different to the devotee's. I will constrain my object of study to being less general, considering here the texts of the Semitic and the Indian phylogenetic religious systems. These may be considered the two major streams of religious thought (cfr. Zaehner, Parrinder). Even a brief survey of the traits that distinguished sacred literature from secular literature, not only puts the typology into perspective, but is paramount in discriminating the cognitive activity (e. g. on-line interpretation, embodied self-awareness) of the reader of the books of the living from the books of life. What makes the canonical literature so "meaningful" to the reader is the emotional content tied to the authority of the text and its meaning. Authorship of these holy texts is considered divine, whether written by hand of God, communicated under dictation or holy inspiration. In any case, the written word is the word of God formalizing His will.

God: Created in Man's Image

God has been thought of not only in human scale, but using human-like qualities. God was created in man's image, and it is an anthropological universal that supernatural beings are considered to have a mind, placing man much closer to the Divine than to the animal on the Great Chain of Beings (Boyer, 2001).

The relationship with this Divine Person is necessarily analogous to the relationships humans live among each other: parent/child, husband/wife, lord/servant, doctor/patient, teacher student, friend/friend. These relationships converge towards the relationship of Divinity/devotee influencing also the way the devotee sees his or her God.

The relationship is cultivated by means of prayers, rituals, and the reading of the Scriptures. Through the divine literature, God has revealed Himself. The reader considers himself as the ultimate audience of the Holy Word, and what was a book now becomes a letter. This "epistolary" reading, as I call it, of the sacred literatures is hardly ever present in other literary readings. Even in the case of an author who may directly address the reader, the reader comprehends that it is all simply a rhetoric device. What is praised as the Eternal Book has a transcendent Being as its author, and what is read is like it were written at that very instant for the reader-devotee. Everything is pertinent, every word and comma (even any silence) has a meaning: it is up to the reader to understand.

Neurotheology

The devout spend quite considerably more time in reading and interpreting the sacred literature than what is dedicated to a secular piece of narrative. I believe that during the reading of such an important text for a reader, the reader uses a strategy of delayed categorization. Although the normal reader may delay categorization for fractions of seconds, enough to assess the situation presented, the religiously inclined will further retard his process of categorization, rendering the text more flexible and adapted to his personal-life situations.

Empirical data from “neurotheology” (D’Aquili and Newberg, 1999; cfr. also Damasio, 1994) show that during meditation, and perhaps during on-line prayerful reading, the prefrontal cortex is more active than ordinarily. This is the cerebral area associated with attention, and it also plays a role in generating intention and mediating emotion. It is involved in the structuring of conceptual framework because of its synapses with the verbal-conceptual association area in the inferior parietal lobe, assisting the formation of abstract concepts and putting them into words. The limbic system, associated with complex aspects of emotions has been elevated to the status of “transmitter to God” because of its role during ritual activities, justifying the sense of awe and perhaps also motivating, among others, the “embodied” metaphor of God as a Beloved. Erotic imagery is, in fact, often used within religious systems to describe what it considers Sublime, notwithstanding the profession of such rigorous laws and the infliction of such harsh punishments.