

5

INTERPRETATION

Hans H. Penner

To experience is to interpret. To misunderstand is to misinterpret. Most disagreements are probably caused by misinterpretations. To interpret is to translate. All of these assertions sound like common sense. What is a valid interpretation? How do we know, if at all, a good translation from a bad one? Is it true that every generation makes its own translations. Do all texts need context for interpretation? If so, what is context? What is text? Are there universal rules of interpretation? What is a symbol? These questions and many more make this topic crucial for the study of religion.

Hermeneutics

Prom Hermes to Ricoeur

For many centuries the term "interpretation" was understood to be synonymous with "hermeneutics." In fact, most entries in dictionaries and encyclopedias of religion refer us to "hermeneutics" when we look up the entry "interpretation" (e.g., V. A. Harvey 1987). Hermeneutics, we discover, was at first used as a technical term in philology, biblical studies, law and theology. It is only since the nineteenth century, however, that the term has become important for theories in cultural studies, religion and literary criticism.

Most stories about "interpretation" begin with the Greeks and the Greek word *hermaios* which refers to the Delphic oracle. Some scholars think-but it is quite doubtful-that the term was derived from Hermes, son of Zeus and Maia. Hermes is the wing-footed messenger of the gods and friend of humans, an interpreter or translator. The significance of hermeneutics as a theory of

interpretation, message or proclamation, a translation or transmission of knowledge from one domain (the gods) to another (humans), is that this theory clearly entails a relation between language and understanding. Thus, language and understanding become essential elements in theories of interpretation. In fact, we might say that any theory of interpretation involves the triad:

interpretation - language - understanding.

The Art of Understanding

Friedrich Schleiermacher (1756-1834), the father of modern theology, was also called "the Kant of Hermeneutics." Given his Kantian roots, Schleiermacher wanted to write a fourth critique, "The Critique of Understanding." This is clear from his lectures on hermeneutics (1819) in which he claimed that at the present time a general theory of understanding simply did not exist (Schleiermacher 1977). Rejecting the speculations and abstractions of metaphysics and ethics as adequate foundations for the study of religion, Schleiermacher sought for a theory of understanding that would unify the various methods for interpreting texts, grammars and rhetoric.

Although Schleiermacher clearly did see the relevance of language in his quest for a unified theory of understanding, he focused on the re-experiencing of the mental processes of the author of a text. He concluded that the tension between the subjective mental processes of authors and the objective context in which they exist can never be resolved. It is this tension between the particular and the universal, the specific and the general, the part and the whole, the individual and history, that became known as "the hermeneutical circle." The act of understanding entails knowledge of the particular, but knowledge of the particular entails knowledge of the universal. In order to understand a text we must understand the concrete, individual mental processes of the author. But, to know the author's mental processes we must also know the historical context of the author. To know one presupposes that we must know the other. This vicious circle is a major problem for many contemporary studies of interpretation.

Schleiermacher is important to the topic of interpretation for three reasons. First, he established the beginnings of a new "science," the "science of understanding." Second, this science is obviously different from the search in the natural sciences for explanations by causal laws. Third, his emphasis on religion as the feeling of absolute dependence (Schleiermacher 1928 [1821-1822]), an experience to be differentiated from physical or moral feelings, marks the beginning of a general study of religion that is not reducible to ethics, aesthetics or natural law.

Lived Experience, Interpretive Understanding and World-View

Wilhelm Dilthey (1833-1911) brings our subject into the modern world (see selected writings in Dilthey 1976). In fact, the terms *Erlebnis*, *Verstehen* and *Weltanschauung* (lived experience, understanding and world-view) are synonymous with Dilthey. Unfortunately, as Ermarth has pointed out, "It must be said that his notion of understanding is, ironically, one of the most misunderstood concepts in the theory of knowledge and science" (1978: 242). Although it is true that Dilthey drew a sharp line between the cultural sciences (*Geisteswissenschaften*) and the natural sciences, Ermarth shows beyond doubt that for Dilthey the theoretical and methodological procedures in both were as rational as can be. Nevertheless, it is ironic that the intellectual history of interpretation should rest on the proper translation and understanding of Dilthey's famous assertion, "*Die Natur erklären wir, das Seelenleben verstehen wir*" (We explain nature, we understand the mind). We will not be able to set the record straight in this essay, but do recommend Ermarth's excellent evaluation of Dilthey's theory of interpretation and historical reason to anyone interested in the *Verstehen* debate.

Dilthey raised the concept of interpretation to a level of general validity. He called the critical theory "hermeneutics," a fundamental science encompassing all modes of interpretation. His theory of interpretation begins with "lived experience." This is the familiar, unreflective, everyday world which involves a tacit knowledge and orientation. We often call this level of interpretation pretheoretical. Ermarth makes the crucial observation that for Dilthey this level of interpretation is anything but "private" or "esoteric," since it is constituted by language, history and community (1978: 248).

The aim of all human sciences is to relive and represent this lived experience on a more conceptual and abstract level. Although he gave many examples of this task—the application of general rules of truth, comparative procedures, the importance of linguistic, logical and symbolic structures in this elementary level of human interpretation—it is clear that throughout his life Dilthey found the notion of "lived experience" very difficult to articulate.

Regardless of the difficulties with Dilthey's view of lived experience and interpretation, it is of profound importance for our critical analysis of interpretation in the history of the study of religion. Dilthey rejected such notions as "pure consciousness," "subjectivity" or a "transcendental ego" as the foundation for a theory of interpretation. As Ermarth (1978: 228) puts it:

To be experiencing is already a kind of proto-interpretation, for we do not exist *de novo* out of our own immediate subjectivity but rather "live through" life in a vast network of accumulated meanings and life-values. In what might seem paradoxical or logically circular move, Dilthey suggests that such a general experience of life is not only the pre-condition

of human understanding, but also its result. Experience of life and understanding are mutually implicated and work together reciprocally to promote ever-higher levels of consciousness.

Once again we find the hermeneutical circle at work here. Dilthey resolves this paradox by grasping both horns of the dilemma. The question of the logical priority of either the historical context or the logical form must be suspended. This basic relation is a reciprocal one: experience and understanding, the temporal and the logical exist in a double relationship. Dilthey seems to resolve the dilemma, says Ermarth, "in terms of the relation of identity-in-difference which permeated German thought ever since Nicholas of Cusa: it is a *Grenzbegriff* (limiting concept] which we must assume but cannot demonstrate conclusively" (1978: 285-286).

The consequences of this theoretical shift remained ambiguous in Dilthey's life. Although he would certainly reject the Nietzschean notion that "language is a lie," the first cause of our alienation from lived experience, Dilthey remained caught betwixt and between the extreme forms of romantic subjectivism and philosophies of radical historicism. Although his theory did produce insights into the importance of language and community, Dilthey remained wary of language throughout his life.

The influence of the romantic presupposition that language betrays experience not only infected Dilthey's thinking but remains a powerful idea in the history of the study of religion into our own time. When all is said and done it is clear that Dilthey thought there was an unbridgeable gap between lived experience and expression. Although it may be impossible to resolve interpretive problems by a transcendental reduction into a pre-linguistic life of pure experience, Dilthey posited "a gap between inner and outer modes of existence and stressed that there were dimensions of inner life which cannot find expression in language ... While expression may be natural, it is partial and wanting in comparison to the ineffable fullness of lived experience" (Ermarth 1978: 281). As Dilthey put it, "in a certain sense all knowledge, like poetry, is only symbolic" (quoted in Ermarth 1978: 251).

Lived Experience, Interpretation and World-View

Dilthey was well aware of one important consequence of his Kantian theory of interpretation: we can no longer speak of knowing things as they are in themselves. The levels of interpretation from lived experience to abstract, formal, logical thought were no longer secured by the existence of a rational, universal subject. Knowledge of a world *an sich* (in itself) became knowledge *Ansicht* (in perspective). The outcome, Dilthey knew, was "the subjectivity of the modern way of looking at things" (Ermarth 1978: 323). Looking at things

Interpretation

from a vantage point, a perspective, is a necessary condition for lived experience. Perspectives are "world-views."

"World-view" is a central concept for most approaches to the study of religion. It is a notion that is seldom defined or described in explicit terms. Here is one of the best descriptions of world-view that I have discovered. According to Ermarth (1978: 326-327), Dilthey thought of world-view as

at one remove from reality-it is not reality itself, but an interpretation of reality. This interpretation is not merely an aggregate of separate experiences but tends toward an integrated whole. The world-view is not given to us like a discrete fact or object in the world; it is a total outlook compounded of experience, reflection, and interpretation. It is not purely theoretical, scientific, or "philosophical" in character; it is not constructed like an argument or hypothesis-though it is not therefore irrational. It contains unconscious attitudes and deep presuppositions, but these are not wholly inaccessible, since lived experience is permeated by incipient elements of silent thought and reflection. The world-view unites different levels of meaning and integrates different aspects of experience.

The world-view is not knowledge, science, or "theory" in the strict sense: it might be called a belief-system. It is not simply the construction of purely rational thought, for, as Dilthey stresses, man does not think, let alone believe, by sole means of theoretical reason. The world-view is not a logical system of judgments but a configuration which integrates cognition, volition, and affection; it is a synthesis of facts, values, and ends. Compounded of both subjective and objective conditions, the world-view arises from the perspective of factual states of affairs but also from the deepest attitudes of personality, which Dilthey sometimes called "moods of life."

World-views are products of history, not just inner life for they reflect the influence of cultural tradition, nationality and epoch. . . . There always remains an elusive and unfathomable personal factor in the formation of any world-view, but no world-view is wholly individual, for it is constituted in relation with other persons and other world-views ... World-views are "creative, formative, and reformative." [Finally], transparent to those who hold them, world-views require great effort "underground" in order to be brought into view. This is the task of the hermeneutic science of world-view-a science extending beyond the conventional bounds of epistemology and even philosophy itself.

Faced with the doctrine of a multiplicity of world-views Dilthey clearly recognized two perplexing problems.

The first problem is known as conceptual or cultural relativism. Briefly, if the theory of world-views is true then truth and the content of truth is relative to a particular world-view. Pressed to its logical conclusion, relativism asserts

that world-views are incommensurable, that is to say, not translatable, since there is no universal truth, or grammar that provides a bridge between them. As Peter Winch (1970) once put it, "what is real and what is unreal shows itself in the sense that a language has." Thus we cannot conclude that the belief system of one religion rather than another is "in accord with reality" or that it is mistaken, because what is or is not in accord with reality is dependent on the sense that the language of that religion has. It is not just opinions, interests, lifestyles or skills that are relative to a culture but fundamental concepts; it is the very propositional attitudes that constitute cognition and culture that are culturally specific. Benjamin Lee Whorf seems to think that people actually live in different worlds (see Carroll 1956: 213). Truth is relative to a world-view. The first problem then is one of translation. It is not religions that are ineffable, inscrutable, incapable of interpretation or translation but languages and cultures themselves. Notice, the logic of relativism does not claim that we have good or bad translations; rather, it claims that translations are impossible because cultures or languages are incommensurable.

The second problem is as devastating as the first. What do we make of relativist propositions as such? What sense does it make to say that "all worldviews are relative to some context," or that "what is real and what is unreal is given in the sense that a language has?" Are these statements also relative to some context or language? If not, are such statements applicable to all worldviews? Are they universal? An affirmative answer to this question seems to entail a contradiction. There seems to be one statement, the statement that relativism is true, that escapes the claims of relativism. We can put this argument in slightly different terms. How could we go about validating the hypothesis that meaning, beliefs, truth, are culturally determined? Is it not the case that the question itself arises out of a specific cultural context, a particular language? In order to answer these questions does not the relativist somehow have to rise above all contexts, including the language in which the hypothesis is stated, to judge whether it is true? Relativism entails its own destruction.

Most scholars, including Dilthey, do not follow the logic of relativism to its absurd end. The slippery slope of relativism is checked by an appeal to "the given." For some scholars this is usually described under the rubric of "phenomenology" where the given of religion is posited as transcendence, the sacred or ultimate reality. What recent introductory or specialized text on religion would disagree with the following interpretive principles?

1. Religious symbols reveal a modality of the real that is not evidenced in immediate, empirical reality.
2. Religious symbols point to something *real*, the sacred, a presystematic ontology.
3. Religious symbols entail a multiplicity of meanings.
4. Religious symbols signify a unity, destiny and integrating function for

Interpretation

human beings. Religious symbols express the contradictory aspects, the *coincidentia oppositorum* of ultimate reality.

5. Religious symbols have the capacity for expressing paradoxical situations or structures of ultimate reality that are otherwise quite inexpressible.

6. Religious symbols bring meaning into human existence. (Eliade 1959a)

Dilthey, of course, would have little to do with Mircea Eliade's romanticism. Nevertheless, fully aware of the profound consequences of the antagonism between the relativism of historical consciousness and the claims of universal world-views Dilthey did yearn for the universal truth that is disclosed in the dialectic relations that hold between the conditioned relations of history (see Ermarth 1978: 337). History and interpretation, for Dilthey, yield a paradoxical double relation of meaning and truth.

Dilthey's problem can be described as follows: How do we explain the claims of universal truth if lived experience, subjectivity or consciousness is constituted by history, language and culture? Moreover, how do we explain the persistent ignorance of human beings with regard to the relative truth value of their religious symbols and world-views?

There is, of course, another, an alternative solution. We can simply deny that religious language or beliefs contain any cognitive or propositional values whatsoever. Interpret religion as expressive of emotions, as similar to poetry or music, or as dramatic, and the problem is solved. As one scholar put it, "if they think deeply about it they will see that their religious beliefs are purely symbolic" (Beattie 1966: 69-70).

Unfortunately, this solution is illusory since we may ask the same question all over again: why do human beings believe that their religious beliefs and symbols are cognitive, that they assert truth values about the world? Marx, Freud, Durkheim and Weber give us various answers based on the premises of functionalism. Although people do believe, albeit falsely, that their world-views are true, the persistence of such beliefs functions to fulfill certain needs that must be satisfied both for the maintenance of the person and society. Religion, according to the functionalists, is what it does. The truth value of religion is in its use. A proper interpretation of religion is thus reduced to the satisfaction of certain needs- semantics is reduced to causality. This solution seems to avoid the pitfalls of interpretive relativism. Unfortunately, it does not escape the devastating critique of functionalism that demonstrates the invalidity of the theory on both logical and semantic grounds (Penner 1989).

Interpretation and Present Meaning

Hans-Georg Gadamer's *Truth and Method* (1989 [1960]) remains the definitive work on interpretation in the post-Dilthey tradition. Thoroughly at home in

this tradition, Gadamer locates his theory in the radical historicism of Martin Heidegger (1889-1976). Gadamer takes Dilthey's contextual hermeneutics to its logical conclusion. If the author and intentionality are irrelevant to the interpretation of a text, then the text itself has an autonomous meaning. But, given the historicity of interpretation, the autonomous meaning of a text is always a "meaning for us." As Hirsch puts it, "reduced to its intelligible significance, the doctrine of the autonomy of a written text is the doctrine of the indeterminacy of textual meaning." "No method can transcend the interpreter's own historicity, and no truth can transcend this central truth" (Hirsch 1967: 249, 245). Interpretation becomes a never ending process or production and the notion of a "true" or final interpretation is simply a misunderstanding of the interpretive process. In brief, there is no fact of the matter.

Gadamer is well aware of the consequences of a theory of interpretation that denies that there are any criteria for deciding whether one interpretation is more valid than another. Hirsch quotes Gadamer: "There is no criterion of validity. Nor does the poet himself possess one . . . rather, each encounter with the work ranks as a new creation. This seems to me an untenable hermeneutic nihilism" (Hirsch 1967: 251). Interpretation is always participation in a present meaning (Gadamer 1989: 370; Hirsch 1967: 252). This is indeed relativism with a vengeance. And, as Hirsch demonstrates, no appeal to relations between past and present will overcome the contradictions inherent in such hypotheses.

Interpretation, Double Meaning and Symbol

Paul Ricoeur begins his long monograph on Freud with the following premise: "language itself is from the outset and for the most part distorted: it means something other than what it says, it has a double meaning, it is equivocal" (Ricoeur 1970: 7). From this basic premise Ricoeur goes on to define interpretation: "to interpret is to understand a double meaning." Hermeneutics is defined as "the theory of the rules that preside over an exegesis-that is, over the interpretation of a particular text, or of a group of signs that may be viewed as a text" (1970: 8). Thus, "double meaning" is the "hermeneutic field," the object of interpretation, and this field is called "symbol" (1970: 7). Moreover, symbols are a group of expressions "that share the peculiarity of designating an indirect meaning in and through a direct meaning and thus call for something like a deciphering, i.e., interpretation, in the precise sense of the word. To mean something other than what is said - this is the symbolic function" (1970: 12).

After a very confusing, if not mistaken, interpretation of Ferdinand de Saussure's concept of sign and signification, Ricoeur states that the difference between a sign and a symbol is that "in a symbol the duality is added to and superimposed up on the duality of sensory sign and signification as a relation of

Interpretation

meaning to meaning, it presupposes signs that already have a primary, literal, manifest meaning. Hence, I deliberately restrict the notion of symbol to double or multiple-meaning expressions whose semantic texture is correlative to the work of interpretation that explicates their second or multiple meanings" (1970: 12-13). "In hermeneutics symbols have their own semantics, they stimulate an intellectual activity of deciphering, of finding a hidden meaning" (1970: 19).

The problem is this: we simply do not have an agreed-upon set of rules that could be called a general theory of hermeneutics. On the contrary, what we find is a situation in which modes of interpretation are in conflict.

Several years later Ricoeur thought that it might be best to take linguistics into account and to trace the history of hermeneutics back through Gadamer, Dilthey and Schleiermacher (Ricoeur 1976, 1981). There is indeed much erudition and insight in these essays along with a great deal of complexity, dialectics, opacity and confusion. Yet, the one thing that remains steadfast and clear is that symbolic interpretation manifests a double meaning: faith versus suspicion, proclamation versus iconoclasm, alienation versus belonging, reader versus interpreter, text versus author, text versus reader, language versus speaking, understanding versus explanation, sign versus icon, theories of logic versus theories of iconicity, hermeneutics versus phenomenology.

For Ricoeur, symbols not only entail a double meaning, but a surplus of meaning. Symbol, like metaphor, "tells us something new about reality." "Symbolic signification, therefore, is so constituted that we can only attain the secondary signification by way of the primary signification, where this primary signification is the sole means of access to the surplus of meaning. The primary signification gives the secondary signification, in effect, as the meaning of meaning" (1976: 52, 55). Symbolic meaning is opaque to linguistic interpretation. Symbolic meaning "resists any linguistic, semantic, or logical transcription" (1976: 57).

Ricoeur's theory of interpretation, especially as it relates to symbolic meaning, ends where Schleiermacher began. "As I said," concludes Ricoeur, "a general hermeneutics does not yet lie within our scope" (1970: 494). We might add, and it never will if, as with Dilthey, Gadamer and Ricoeur, we begin with the ineffable fullness of lived experience, if the symbolic remains opaque to interpretation.

Summary

There are three fundamental assumptions in the history of hermeneutics that remain central to the study of religion.

1. Experience as lived experience (*Erlebnis*) is a unified primary interpretation of life. It is this lived experience that must be grasped by the scholar. For purposes of study we may focus on different modalities of lived experience, such as "poetic" or "estranged" or an experience of "the sacred." Scholars of religion have usually described the experience of the sacred as "a total," "cosmic," "ultimate" or "transcendental" experience. However, the validity of the concept of lived experience as the given and the scholar's interpretation of that experience are left either unresolved or never raised.
2. Lived experience, together with consciousness and interpretation, is thoroughly and radically historical. This thesis leads us into the inescapable problems of relativism. The question of truth is either placed in "brackets" or dissolved into incommensurable truths of different world-views. Eliade, as you may recall, dealt with this problem by calling it a "fall into history," "a second fall" which he thought to be the mark of modernity (Eliade 1954).
3. For better or for worse, interpretive theory since Dilthey views the history of science with suspicion. The debate about whether the study of religion is or is not a "science of religion" is the best evidence for this suspicion. The contemporary emphasis on pluralism, dialogue and discourse, rather than on analysis, comparison, universal rules and unity are some of the products of the suspicion.

There is one question that remains fundamental: how would one go about confirming that the basic premise of what we could call the history of hermeneutics is true? Sellars called this basic premise "the myth of the given" (Sellars 1997).

Interpretation, Language and Belief: Outline for a New Theory

Interpretation: A Radical Proposal

As usual, some of the problems that hermeneutics struggles with are real, and many of the insights are important. However, there may be a way out of the paradoxes and contradictions we encountered.

First of all, let us simply drop the quest for "the given." In other words, let us resist the notion of "lived experience" as the starting point for our theory of interpretation. This is a radical proposal. It entails the conscious removal of all theological and metaphysical traditions that continue to haunt the study of religion; all notions of "the given," the numinous, transcendence, ultimacy, the flux of experience, sensations, the really real and the like need to be set aside.

Let us begin, instead, with the simple assumption that we are all interpreters who have the uncanny ability of making sense out of what others say every day

Interpretation

of our lives. As Davidson says, "without interpretation there would be no such thing as speech, no such thing as communication" (1980: I.1.). He points out that our ability to interpret goes far beyond the important point made by linguists about our "knowing a language." As interpreters we are able to identify many of the beliefs, intentions, desires, fears and hopes of those we interpret. The point here is "that there is no way of understanding the words unless we are correct in much of what we think the speaker thinks and knows." The ability to interpret, therefore, entails a massive agreement between speakers about the world. To disagree, to detect false beliefs, presupposes that agreement. As Davidson points out, "without a fund of agreement, there would be no comprehending the differences—we would not know what we were differing about . . . But of course it would be a mistake to think that because we can be wrong about *anything*, we can be wrong about *everything*" (1980: II.3).

Second, let us make and consistently hold to a distinction between language and speech, meaning and use, competence and performance, semantics and pragmatics as we build a theory of interpretation. There is nothing more confusing in the hermeneutic tradition, and in the study of religion, than the use of these terms in writing about interpretation, semantics and meaning. As Davidson points out, "there is no single relation between what our words mean and what we want to, or do, accomplish by uttering them." As Saussure said, "I speak a language" (1983 [1916]). Thus interpretation entails the principle of the autonomy of meaning.

Here is a simple example. We might think that the sentence, "Alan Turing invented the computer" is meaningful when it is used to inform us that Alan Turing invented the computer. But what if the sentence is used to tell a lie, amuse us, irritate us or to create interest in graduate work? Davidson put it this way: "what we say does not depend on what we want or intend to achieve beyond words, in the saying" (1980: III.8). In fact, we may not know whether a person is joking, quoting a source or asserting something, yet have no doubt at all about what the sentence as uttered means.

Communication thus depends upon interpretation, not on shared speech or *use* of language. Thus Dilthey and his followers are quite correct in asserting that no amount of knowledge about an author's intentions allows us to interpret what the sentences mean. But, the popular saying, "tell me its use and I will tell you its meaning" is, as with most popular sayings, wrong.

Third, our theory of interpretation must be holistic; the parts cannot stand alone. Examples: no language, no belief; no language, no speech; no belief without many other beliefs. To put it in other terms, no theory of interpretation will be successful if we begin block by block or attempt to posit a "given" as the foundation for interpretation (Penner 1994, 1995).

Fourth, to interpret entails that we share a world with others. This is not something we might discover as an empirical fact. Community, social relations, a shared world with others is coeval with interpretation. To interpret is to assign

meanings to the sentences of a speaker; to assign meanings to sentences is to assign truth conditions to what the speaker says. We understand what a speaker says because "means" translates as "believes true." If this were not the case, lying would be impossible. Thus to interpret makes the speaker our "co-believer."

Interpretation Entails Truth Conditions

Whatever the outcome regarding the acquisition of language, we may be certain that,

Before the utterer of sounds can be said to have *said* something [asked a question, asserted something, made a promise] he must intend to achieve his purpose by dint of having caused an interpreter to understand his words. To have this intention, to be a speaker, the utterer must have a complex picture of the thoughts and abilities of his audience, and this he cannot have unless he is himself an interpreter. (Davidson 1980: III.8)

Davidson makes it clear why this must be the case:

An interpreter has the concept of objective truth—the way things really are, in contrast perhaps to how they are believed to be—because in order to interpret, he must know under what conditions a sentence of a speaker is true, and because he must, in arriving at this knowledge, make use of facts about when the speaker holds a sentence true. The interpreter cannot fail, therefore, to recognize that a speaker holds some sentences true that are not, which is to say he attributes a false belief to the speaker. Truth is thus from the start conceived as objective and intersubjective. (1980: III.89)

To put this in other terms, there are two principles at work when I interpret what you say (utter). The first says that we both have an indefinite number of beliefs that we agree upon as true. This principle holds for all speakers and hearers, that is, for all contexts of interpretation, whether it be from English to English, Hindi to English or Japanese to Russian. The second principle tells us that the first principle must hold if I interpret what you say to be false. That is to say, we must first of all be in a linguistic context of massive agreement before we can disagree. Thus to assert that people live in different worlds, or that they hold incommensurable world views, or that something can be true in one culture but false in another, is incomprehensible. This conclusion should not be taken to imply that therefore all cultures or religions are the same. It should be clear that "translatability" or "interpretation" entails different languages, cultures, religions (see Penner 1995).

Interpretation

Interpretation Entails Translatability

This theory of interpretation entails a crucial principle for the study of religion: interpretation is a community project. "My image of myself, like my picture of others and the world, is a joint creation" (Davidson 1980:1.1). Once again, this is in agreement with Dilthey and those who have worked on the concept of "lived experience." The difference, of course, is that the dualism of "subject-object" and the "ineffable" given of experience have been dropped. Moreover, we avoid the pitfalls of relativism because to interpret means to translate. The notion then that someone speaks an uninterpretable language is incomprehensible--language *entails* translatability. Thus, it makes no sense to say, "people live in different worlds" or that language is a world-view, schema, paradigm, episteme, symbolic model or framework for the "given" of experience. In brief, language is not a representation of anything. As Davidson points out, "Nothing, however, no *thing*, makes sentences true: not experience, not surface irritations, not the world, can make a sentence true" (Davidson 1984: 194; Penner 1995).

Interpretation Entails Literal Meaning

Finally, if what we may call a "truth-conditional theory of interpretation" is anywhere near right, then the notions of "hidden meaning," "double meaning," "second meaning," all of which require deciphering language as a code, also become incomprehensible. This strikes at the heart of a long tradition in the study of religion, myth, ritual and belief as symbolic, or, as Ricoeur thinks, as containing a "double meaning." What we must learn to do is ask the following question as we read books and articles on religion: why do scholars of religion assert that religious language contains a hidden or symbolic meaning, or, that the task of interpretation is to equip ourselves with the right translation code?

It is precisely at this crucial pause in our reading that the importance of theory will disclose itself to us. When we raise the question, "what is the right, fitting, adequate translation code?" we are raising the question of theory. As we have noted, some scholars think that the most adequate interpretive code tells us that religion is void of propositional content, that is, religion does not contain truth values; religious language, religious symbolism is neither true or false, containing nothing of cognitive significance. Religion, as they say, is like music (as if music is not cognitive). Or, we often read that religion is symbolic, bearing a special or double meaning that can be deciphered only on its "own plane"; a valid interpretation can be given only by those who are themselves religious or have experienced "the other," "the sacred" or "the numinous." The important point to remember is that such assertions entail an interpretive theory that is founded on "the myth of the given."

The fact that after more than one hundred years we have not reached agreement on just what the code or double meaning is should have alerted us to the possibility that it may well be wrong to approach religion as a schema or framework that symbolizes, represents or transforms some content, *Erlebnis* (lived experience) or "the given."

A truth-conditional theory of semantics leads us to the inevitable conclusion that there is no such thing as symbolic, secondary or double meaning. The quest for such meanings is illusory. We must give up the idea that the semantics of religious language has a content or a meaning other than literal meaning because there simply is none (see Davidson 1984: 245-264, 183-198). There are no exits from the scheme / content theory of interpretation.

What we must grasp, and grasp firmly, is the premise that there is no such thing as "religious language" in need of a special grammar, semantics or code book. We must also hold firm to a second premise, the distinction between the meaning of a sentence and its indefinite uses in a variety of contexts. Saussure was right to argue that we must make a theoretical distinction between language and speech for a development of an adequate theory of interpretation (Saussure 1983 (1916); Penner 1989). This proposal is a wager: a valid general theory of interpretation may yield an adequate theory of religion-I speak (use) a language; I practice a religion.

I am aware that any proposal that stresses theory goes against the stream in the academic study of religion. Nevertheless, it seems clear that to interpret religion or the practice of religion, we need a theory about what religion and ritual are. Given the above proposal, I am suggesting that we follow the success in linguistics and explain ritual, for example, as the "practice," "pragmatics" or "context" of religion, just as we explain how someone is able to "speak" (use) a "language," or how certain "ideolects" (religions) entail the same linguistic system (religion). This theory would make a distinction between the semantics and structure of religion as a cognitive system and the use, context or practice of the system in various societies and cultures. In other words, we would divide the theoretical task into an explanation of the semantics / syntax of religion and an explanation of the pragmatics of religion.

"I practice religion," then, discloses two theoretical tasks that we could call the "semantic task" and the "pragmatic" or "use task." The theory explains religion as constituted by the relation between these two elements. Two things need to be said about this theoretical approach to the interpretation of religion. First, and most obvious, although the two parts of religion can be divided among scholars of religion, they are inseparably linked in the history of religions, just as the division between "language" and "speech" or "competence" and "performance," though separable in theory, are inseparable in the history of languages. Second, and not so obvious, we cannot derive the first element from observing or studying the second. We cannot derive semantics, language, competence from a study of pragmatics, speech,

Interpretation

performance or use; we must first of all know the world before it can become useful to us. The popular notion of "family resemblance" will not do simply because it presupposes what we are in need of: a theory of resemblance that allows us to pick out the families.

My appeal to linguistics is simply founded on the fact that religion is thoroughly based in language, both in beliefs and in practices. If the "myth of the given" is true--and I think it is--then we have no choice but to face and resolve the theoretical task before us. Interpretation demands theory. If the linguistic model is inadequate, then my question is, "with what do we replace it?"

Suggested Readings

Davidson, Donald

1984 "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme" and "What Metaphors Mean," pp. 183-198 and 245-264 in *Inquiries in to Truth and Interpretation*. Oxford: Clarendon.

1989 "The Myth of the Subjective," pp. 159-172 in Michael Krausz (ed.), *Relativism: Interpretation and Confrontation*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press.

Dilthey, Wilhelm

1976 *Selected Writings*, Hans Peter Rickman (ed. and trans.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Ermarth, Michael

1978 *Wilhelm Dilthey: The Critique of Historical Reason*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Gadamer, Hans-Georg

1989 *Truth and Method*, Garret Barden and John Cumming (trans.). New York: Crossroad; original German edn, 1960.

Gumperz, John]. and Stephen C. Levinson, editors

1996 *Rethinking Linguistic Relativity*. Studies in the Social and Cultural Foundations of Language, vol. 17. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Harvey, Van Austin

1987 "Hermeneutics," pp. 279-287 in Mircea Eliade (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, vol. 6. New York: Macmillan.

Hirsch, E. D.

1967 *Validity in Interpretation*. New Haven: Yale University Press. Penner, Hans. H.

1995 "Why Does Semantics Matter to the Study of Religion?" *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 7: 221-249.

Sellars, Wilfrid

1997 *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*, With an Introduction by Richard Rorty and a Study Guide by Robert Brandom. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.