BOOKS I HAVE READ: RELIGIOUS LANGUAGE

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A fascinating book, primarily of interest to linguists.
Category: Observations

It needs saying from the outset that An Introduction to Religious Language: Exploring Theolingustics in Contemporary Contexts is really a book for linguists, though religious people with an interest in language will also find it interesting.

This is a medium format paperback of just over 200 pages, with extensive references, notes and appendices. It will set you back a little over Â£20. It was written as a text for an undergraduate course in religious language, but all of the terms are explained and you don't need to be a specialist to read and profit from it. The classroom genesis of the book is clear from the way that each chapter starts with discussion questions and closes with a clear summary of its content.

The book has ten chapters, which are divided into three broad sections. The first three chapters consider the look at what religious language is and what purposes it serves. The next section looks at the features of religious language, such as archaisms, metaphor and intertextuality. The third section investigates religious language in specific contexts including prayer and at the time of death. The book closes with a short chapter pointing in the direction of further work.

The author has mainly worked in English language contexts where Christianity is the dominant religion and the book's content reflects this. However, examples from other languages and other religious backgrounds are given.

I came at this book with two basic orientations. As someone who has had training in field linguistics and who has worked as a Bible translator, the whole area of language and the Bible fascinates me. From a more passive angle, as someone who consumes a lot of religious language in books and through talks, I am fascinated by the way that Evangelicals use English in ways that seem very strange when compared to the surrounding culture.

This book was much more satisfying in relation to the second of these orientations. The introduction to corpus linguistics in a religious context was fascinating and I enjoyed the exploration of contemporary religious language. I suspect a few preachers would be quite surprised if they were to see the way that their language use changes when they are in formal contexts.

So, who should read this book? There is the issue of the price to be considered, while not unreasonable for an academic textbook, very few people are going to splash out twenty quid on something that is of tangential interest to their main field. That being said, there is material in here that would be very useful to anyone considering cross-cultural ministry or doing studies on

comparative language use. Certainly, my colleagues who work in Bible translation should be aware of this book and there should be a copy in every mission training college library. However, its natural home is in university linguistic departments. It is ultimately a book about language, not one about religion.

As always, a few quotes to give you an idea of the contents:

> *... my aim is to identify first what religion does and then, ultimately, the reasons people use religious language and where and why and how.*
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> *p. 11*

> *Inclusion and exclusion go hand in hand, however. Particularly in times of conflict, religious language may serve to exclude sacred community members who transgress notions of the sacred and harm others. So boundaries can protect and serve. But religious language can also be used to curse others and to commit violence and other forms of oppression.*
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> *p. 34*

> *I hope, that in reading this book, you've begun to reflect on what you hold sacred. Why do you believe what you believe? What is worth defending? What is worth compromising on? What is worth reconsidering? These are important questions that we all benefit from reflecting on and, more importantly, acting on.*
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> *p. 179*