

Enculturation and the language of religious conversion

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Salvatore Cucchiari (1988) writes about Pentecostals in Sicily and he claims that as the individual's retrospective interpretation of his or her conversion experience develops, a complex dialectic unfolds between personal history and the mythic idiom of conversion. For Cucchiari, the mythic idiom represents the religious language through which converts reorganize their biographies and symbolically validate their new religious and social identities. My ethnographic research (2004-2006) gathers evidence among Mormon and Protestant converts in Russia to demonstrate that observable linguistic trends, such as retrospective declarations of divine attribution in aspects of the individual's pre-conversion life, are relatable to a process of emotional and social transformations on the part of the convert. To this end, shifts in religious semantics and metaphor, as part of what Cucchiari calls the 'mythic idiom', are substantiated by ethnographic examinations of converts' emotional and social behaviour. The paper reviews my ethnographic findings and documents the observed relationships between emotion and religious language. I offer a hypothesis, tentatively called the 'processual enculturation hypothesis', which suggests that a process akin to Edelman's (1987, 1993, 2004) 'theory of neuronal group selection' may be operating and ultimately influencing the linguistic and behavioural decisions of the converts. The paper then formulates this hypothesis into a plausible model of individual enculturation. Within the model, culture is seen as a mechanism that values and signifies categorical associations. Culture, in this sense, is a point in time in the process of enculturation. Thus enculturation is a process which modifies the significance of cognitive associations and, as neurological research suggests (Libet, 2004; Chun Siong Soon, Marcel Brass, Hans-Jochen Heinze & John-Dylan Haynes, 2008) makes some of these modifications outside of the individual's reflective consciousness.

This paper draws upon the contributions of linguistic and cognitive studies, particularly as concerned with meaning and metaphor, to demonstrate potential inter-disciplinary continuity in investigating one of the key aspects of human experience -- the process of enculturation.

Bibliography

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