My principle contribution to the Cognitive Science of Religion has been an ethnography of an interpretive tradition, How the Bible Works, in which I developed a cognitively informed model of evangelical Christians' use of the Bible. As extraordinary and fascinating as the Biblicist tradition is, I have always wanted to explore interpretive traditions more broadly, in terms of cognitive theory. So I am seizing my chance. This is the first installment of a series of posts on a cognitive approach to interpretive traditions.

I grew up in a fundamentalist Christian environment. The church my family attended, Calvary Bible Church in Kalamazoo, Michigan, was formed in 1929 as part of the initial wave of fundamentalist churches. One of the things that defines Christian fundamentalists is their belief that the Bible is the word of God, that it is a verbal revelation (not merely a verbal rendition of a revelation) from God, and as such is completely true and authoritative. A considerable amount of intellectual effort in my youth was spent working out the implications of this doctrine, and, ironically, it was ultimately my search for a consistent interpretation of it that drove me from fundamentalism. Anyway, by the time I got around to deciding on a topic for my doctoral thesis, it had become clear to me that neither fundamentalists nor the scholars who studied them really understood what was happening when fundamentalists and evangelicals interacted with the Bible and with each other around the Bible. I knew I didn't understand it either, so I decided to take a crack at the problem.

Calvary Bible Church, today.

The model I ended up with was quite different from anything that had been proposed before. I tried to approach the tradition empirically and to use the tools of cultural anthropology on the one hand and the cognitive sciences on the other to try to sort out what I was seeing. I ended up working out, at least in outline, what I think is the architecture of interpretive traditions generally. In this post I want to outline the notion of an interpretive tradition, and in future posts I will examine some of the elements of interpretive traditions.

Interpretive traditions consist, of course, of human interactions. We usually think of traditions in terms of what is communicated in those interactions: so we might identify a pottery tradition in terms of a particular pottery style. I think this can be a bit misleading, because it invites us to overlook the actual processes of interaction in which the pottery style is communicated from one person to another. In the case of interpretive traditions, though, I would suggest that we will not understand them at all until we pay attention to their constituent interactions. A key element in interpretive traditions is the elision of actual interaction with the text.

The study of interpretation or hermeneutics is laden with terminological confusions, so let me try to be clear about terms.

By tradition I mean any representation (broadly understood) that is passed on from one person to another as the result of communication. A particular communication event typically involves the intersection of many traditions: for example, the telling of a joke involves the establishment/reinforcement of traditions of grammar, prosody, gestures, and speech registers along with social roles described in the joke, its other contextual assumptions, and finally the joke itself, some parts of which are transmitted as ideas and others of which (ideally, the punch line) are transmitted as particular words. It is not clear what is the best way to individuate traditions: in general I will assume that two traditions are distinct if they have different socio-cognitive dynamics or if they have little semantic resemblance between their contents. I know that this is not very satisfactory, but I lack a better solution at present.

Let us call the text or other object to be interpreted the interpretand. In the case of Biblical interpretation, the interpretand is the Bible. It must be emphasized that interpretand is merely a classification based on what informants say, not an ethnographic description: Christians say they are interpreting the Bible, so the Bible is the interpretand, whether or not they are actually interpreting it.

I will reserve the term interpretation for representations-mental or public, implicit or explicit-about the source's contents. An interpretation has the form "[Interpretand] says/implies/teaches X." Again, I must emphasize that this is a classification, not an ethnographic description. If a group of Christians says the Bible prohibits euthanasia, then "The Bible prohibits euthanasia" is an interpretation, regardless of whether the Bible actually prohibits euthanasia.

The term hermeneutic I will reserve for the process of forming an interpretation from interacting with the interpretand. Typically we will not know what hermeneutic people are using, even if they think they have told us. There are often hermeneutic traditions that people claim to be following when they read the Bible, Qur'an, or whatever, and people in these traditions sometimes believe that they are following the hermeneutic tradition. It is elementary to show that the hermeneutic tradition underdetermines actual practice and, in all such cases I have examined to date, it is easy to find interpretations that cannot have been produced by the hermeneutic described in the hermeneutic tradition. Hermeneutic traditions are normative, and must not be taken as descriptions of actual practice.

It must be stressed that not all traditions that have to do with the interpretand are interpretive traditions. To take the case of the Bible, this interpretand is surrounded by a number of different kinds of interacting traditions:

Textual traditions. These traditions are concerned with the transmission of the texts of the Bible. They have sometimes been influenced by interpretive traditions, but on the whole have shown considerable autonomy (Metzger & Ehrman, 2005). Magical traditions. Bible texts have often been used as amulets, charms, and so forth. These traditions are often little influenced by interpretive traditions. See my article ["The Bible in British folklore"](...) (2006) for a survey of such traditions in the British Isles from the sixteenth to the twentieth centuries. Performance traditions. Presentation traditions concern how the Bible should be read. In the church I studied, the formal Bible reading in the service was often preceded by "Hear the word of the Lord" and followed by "This is the word of the Lord," to which the congregation would reply "Amen." Performance traditions sometimes help establish the assumptions that ground interpretive traditions. Presentation traditions. There have long been traditions for how the Bible is presented on papyrus, parchment, and paper. The have included the codex form, conventions of spacing, the use of the nomina sacra (contractions of specific significant names or words), page layout, binding materials, and the inclusion of maps and other study aids (Gutjahr, 1999; Hurtado, 2006). Presentation traditions have, of course, varied considerably with time, technology, and economic conditions. These have sometimes influenced and

been influenced by interpretive traditions. Gifting traditions. There are institution-specific traditions of gifting Bibles to people at particular life transitions, such as confirmation or graduation. Interpretive traditions. In the case of the Bible, there have been a number of different interpretive traditions existing alongside each other in particular communities. Some traditions involve stories, such as the story of Adam and Eve, or Noah's ark, or Jesus' crucifixion; others are theological, such as notions of the Trinity or the immorality of slavery; and others are mantic, such as Bible dipping: opening the Bible and putting your finger on a verse at random, to see what God wants to say to you in your particular circumstances. These traditions have often been surprisingly independent of one another, though there is cross-fertilization.

This list is, I am sure, not complete, but hopefully it gives an idea of the variety of traditions that surround one interpretand, the Bible, and will help us avoid the mistake of thinking that all traditions concerned with a particular interpretand must be interpretive traditions. These other traditions are often very important in setting the ground for interpretive traditions.

Tune in next month for a discussion of how an interpretand might be defined within a tradition. It's more interesting than you might expect.

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