

## **Robert Schreiter: Constructing Local Theologies**

### **Chapter 3. The Study of Culture**

#### **Listening to a Culture**

Who should we listen to since paternalistic cultures dominate the reading even when they have long gone and we are now listening to the remaining natives? How do we listen to the Christ already present? The theologian therefore has to be selective.

1. Listening for the Christ in the culture: ask questions re  
Creation - how does a culture see its organisation and behaviour?  
Redemption - what's wrong and what remedies proposed?  
Community - What quality of life together?
2. How do we read another culture?
3. Can I see my own culture? i.e. will the natives themselves know?  
So we need tools for analysis,
4. How thereafter to communicate the theology of the culture?

#### **Tools for Listening to a Culture**

1. Must be holistic (look at both high and popular culture)  
Sometimes, when specifically looking at religious culture, it is in folk religion or even in 'non-religious' loci that key lies. (cf. Liberation theology, American football stadium, etc)  
Integration.
2. Address questions of identity. What makes us who we are? How do we get that way?  
Group-boundary formation and world-view formation.  
Maintenance.
3. Social change. Must be a pliable science. Aware that stability is not inevitable.  
Transformation.

#### **1. Functionalist Approaches.**

Max Weber, Talcott Parsons, Durkheim. Attends to empirical detail.  
Very Anglo-Saxon though and does not deal well with social change nor symbolic universes

#### **2. Ecological and Materialist approaches.**

Relationship of a society and its physical environment. Roy Rappaport.  
Deal well with social change but lose on expanse and determinism.

#### **3. Structuralist Approaches to Culture**

Claude Levi-Strauss & Jean Piaget

Seeing culture as binary protagonists. Culture throws up ways of dealing with fundamental oppositions in society (nature vs. culture, male vs. female) Uncovering the unconscious structures Ways of resolving and transforming especially using insights of language analysis.

Myth and ritual in culture. Trajectories of change. But the method is complex and perhaps based on hunch!

#### **4. Semiotic Study of Culture**

Sees culture as a vast communications network of signs. The bearer of the message is seen to stand for the message as sign. Seeing language as the sign par excellence.

Signs have syntax or codes by which to operate.

Signs have semantic meaning codes

Signs have pragmatics. Rules that govern the communication.

a. multi-disciplinary approach offers a holism. High and popular culture considered. Not reductionist.

b. Studies the signs and their relationship.

c. Concern for pattern of change. (helpful theologically)

Roland Barthes in France.

Clifford Geertz in USA stressing wealth and randomness of human behaviour. Concern for metaphor in a cultural flow of ideas.

Victor Turner on 'Liminality' - a mediating device between two sign systems.

"The Text" is the basic unit of investigation - a single sign or series bearing a message. Culture is then the sum total of these 'texts' shared by a given people.

Culture is also memory - stored information.

#### **Towards a Semiotic Analysis of Culture.**

##### Description and Perspective in Culture:

'emic' = the view from inside a culture. 'etic' = the view from outside a culture.

cf. Paulo Friere's conscientization programmes.

'Emic' (inside) perspectives usually result in narrative. It affirms realities rather than dissects them.

'Etic' (outside) perspectives use narrative as examples. It looks for explanation. It essentially seeks to translate the sign system of the culture into another sign system of the observing culture. This is in order to manage change or to demarcate identity. But it can be imperialist in intention. Hearer and Listener are in a power relationship.

##### Semiotic Description of Culture Texts:

A textual domain (eg economics) will be sum of many texts. Communal celebrations often use texts of personal and group identity. Art texts can be the most difficult to analyse.

Boundaries are the markers of identity - so territorial African boundaries. Those boundaries are potent because they have not yet been marshalled into signs and symbols. They are in creative space and usually it is the shaman, artist or priest who deals with them. The hero of the tale has to cross boundaries - leaves home, visits the underworld, etc. take away the boundary between people and sanctuary (altar rail) and it goes somewhere else (the Church walls?)

Usually most important *signs* in a culture carry many meanings. *Codes* answer the question: how are things to be done? E.g. How the bread and wine are to be offered.

*Messages* are the basic meanings portrayed. Cultures have more than one message esp. in times of change.

*Metaphors* link signs across boundaries. The whole constellation is the *semiotic domain*.

#### **Social Change in Semiotic Description**

Modern living and technologies speed up change. Also theology is interested in transformation. When basic system of signs remains in control then assimilation can occur of other sign systems or signs. Or there may be conflict of sign systems- Assyria and Egypt; liberation theology.

1. Boundary may be transgressed requiring reorganisation of systems.
2. A sign may reverse its meaning - because most signs are binary by nature. What was good becomes bad.
3. Two irreconcilable signs can be mediated by a third. Common principle of dialectics.
4. Change the metaphors, spatial or temporal.

### **Cultural Analysis and Local Theology**

No culture is this simple nor so static! Yet this concentration on cultural texts can help our understanding. We then select the cultural texts significant for our purposes. Especially liminal texts.