
UNIT 1 RELIGIOUS LANGUAGE-I

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1.0 OBJECTIVES

The main object of this unit is to get an overall view of religious language – its meaning, its problems and ways in which language has been regarded as the manifestation of the sacred.

We will be dealing with:

- Language as sacred substance
- Analysis in the social context
- Language and its sacred functions
- Language and the worship

1.1 INTRODUCTION

Language, as a fundamental form of human expression is a central element in every religious tradition. Traditional terms used to describe the forms of religious language – such as prayer, praise, petition, thanks, confession and exhortation. The key to the modern understanding of language is to see it as an integrated system of components that are concerned with form and purpose, as well as with meaning.

When future philosophers assess last century’s major philosophical emphasis, it surely will be claimed as the century of the linguistic turn. Where as other eras have been dominated by interest in metaphysical speculation, the nature of reason or major philosophical – political ideologies, a preoccupation with language has emerged again and again in the 20th century. Religion has always had a concern for language that has out stripped that of philosophical tradition, due in large part to the common conviction that the primary subject of religious language is a mystery that is expressed only with difficulty. It is the sense of the mystery and that which surrounds religious utterance, the fact that if we look at how people use the word ‘God’ we find poetry, metaphor, paradox, ambiguity, incoherence

and silence. All say that they do not know how to use the words properly. But if we reject religious utterances, on whatever grounds, we must reject a great deal else besides, much of humour, satire, poetry and emotional expression. From the centre of language, we progress, through increasing ambiguity to the edges of language, which mark between sense and nonsense, between sayable and unsayable.

Literature, humour and religion are the three main areas that explore language's edges, and the fact of such explorations reflects a basic human need to express more than our ordinary, rule-allowed-behaviour allows, and to be opaque and inexact upon occasion. The wider the spectrum of language a man employs, the richer the world in which he finds himself.

God is religion's peculiar way of marking the boundary of language- it is an utterance when one wants desperately to say the most. The ultimate verification of the language of faith lies in the continuing process of meditation on the part of the user which produces an increasing realization of adequacy of the language claims to be his own experience.

An explanation of religious language really depends upon how we define religion and language. In general there are three basic approaches to the study of religious language.

- 1) First approach assumes that religion refers to some transcendent reality, usually called sacred, or all encompassing question in life, such as meaning of life and death, good and evil and suffering.
- 2) Second approach views religion as basically expression of emotions. With both of these approaches, religious language is not to be taken literally but is to be seen as symbols that stand for emotions that are non-cognitive.
- 3) The third approach denies that there is anything special about religious language. This theory is known as semantic theory, draws on Logical Positivism and claims that the meaning of religious language should be explained as a part of ordinary language in which meaning is determined by the truth conditions entailed by all languages.

Spoken language manifests itself in the speech act, a type of purposeful human activity that can be analyzed in terms of its intended effect within a social context. A speech act involves:

- 1) a language in which to embody a message
- 2) a speaker to send the message
- 3) a hearer to receive it
- 4) a medium by which it is transmitted
- 5) a context to which it makes reference.

Sacred language can be examined in terms of how it gives distinctive treatment, in turn, to each of these elements of speech act situation. Then we will see how these components are combined to achieve the various goals of sacred speech acts.

1.2 LANGUAGE AND CREATION

The texts of ancient Sumer provide the first example of the commonly found Near Eastern doctrine of the creative power of the divine word. The major deities of the Sumerian pantheon first plan, creation by thinking, then utter the command and pronounce the name, and the object comes into being. In the first book of Bible, namely Genesis, God brings order out of chaos by simply speaking “Let there be light” and by naming “God called the light Day, and the Darkness he called Night”. Adam’s giving of names to the plants and animals in the second chapter of Genesis confirms mere physical existence with linguistic existence.

Vedas contain the most developed speculations about the cosmic role of language. Several of the Vedic texts record the story of a primordial contest between speech and mind to see which is the most fundamental and essential force. While mind always wins, there is still the acknowledgement that speech is a basic cosmic force. One Vedic god, Prajapathi, as the god of creation, speaks the primal syllables ‘bhur, bhuvah, svar’ to create the earth, atmosphere, and heaven. He is said to give order to the world through name and form, which are elsewhere called his manifest aspects. These two terms ‘nama-rupa’ are key elements in much of later Hindu Philosophy, standing for the two basic dimensions of reality. The single most important term from this earliest stratum of Indian thought on language is ‘vac’ meaning speech. It has been personified as an independent deity, the goddess who is prajapati’s wife and who is, in some places, given the role of the true active agent in creating or becoming the Universe.

In the West, a comparable idea has been expressed in the doctrine of the ‘logos’. It was developed through a combination of Platonic, Aristotelian, and Stoic ideas. Logos was viewed as the rational principle that pervaded and gave order to the nature. It was demiurge that mediated between the created cosmos and the transcendent god, in whose mind existed the eternal forms. This idea was taken over by Hellenistic Judaism, especially in the writings of Philo Judaeus, where ‘logos’ was identified with biblical ‘Word of God’. It then influenced Christianity from second century onwards and started referring Jesus Christ as the Logos. The Christian view of the logos seems to stress its quality as language, word, and message, rather than as mere thought. Besides the world ordering function, there is the idea that the logos is a principle of salvation as well, delivering the message that shows the way to return to the condition of the original cosmic purity. Such conception of the double movement of creative language is found within the Indian Tantric system also.

The Supreme deity of Hindu Tantrism, Siva is pure consciousness and thus silent. But in his first manifestation he unites with his consort, Vac (speech) who is also termed Siva’s ‘sakti (power), the female agency through which the process of creation will proceed. Creation begins with a subtle vibration that develops into the ‘mothers of the letters’ of the Sanskrit alphabet, then into the words of speech, and finally into the referents of those words, namely the concrete objects of the world. Certain monosyllabic vocables, called ‘biju mantras’ (mantras are syllables, words or whole sentences that serve as both liturgical utterances and meditational devices), are regarded as the primordial forms of this linguistic evolution and therefore, as sonic manifestations of basic cosmic powers; Literally ‘seeds’ of the fundamental constituents of the universe. For example, ‘yam’ is

equivalent to wind, ram’ to fire. Importantly , the Tantric adept who masters the use of ‘mantras ‘ is felt to know how to control the process of cosmic evolution, and to able to reverse that process to take himself back to the condition of primordial unity and silence that constitutes the goal of Tantric practice

The same could be seen in Qabbalah, the medieval tradition of Jewish mysticism. The main idea was that God himself was totally transcendent, but flowing froth from him were his manifest and knowable aspects. Parallel to the emanation doctrine, there existed the conception of creation as the unfolding of the divine language. Instead of realms of light, there issued forth a succession of divine names and letters, namely, the 22 consonants of the Hebrew alphabet. As in Tantrism such a belief led to tradition of word –magic. The initiate into the practice of Qabbalah was supposedly capable of repeating acts of cosmic creation through proper combination of the Hebrew letters.

Check Your Progress I

Note: a) Use the space provided for your answer
b) Check your answers with those provided at the end of the unit

1) What are the traditional terms to describe the forms of religious language?

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2) Which are the basic approaches to the study of Religious language?

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1.3 RELIGIOUS LANGUAGE AS SACRED SUBSTANCE

One of the most important aspects of the modern understanding of language is the realization that meaning rests on the conventional relationship between the signified and signifier. The latter- a word- is comprised of both form and substance. Form is the phonological and grammatical rules of proper formation and substance is its sounds, if a spoken word. The meaning of a word. However, is not inherent in either its form or substance. In pre -modern attitudes toward language, such distinctions were not usually made. In particular, to regard some linguistic manifestation as sacred did not imply that it was exclusively, or even primarily, the meaning that was taken to be holy. More often it was the exact form or even

the veritable substance in which it was expressed that was felt to be the locus of the sacrality. This is seen most clearly in the reluctance or refusal to allow translation of certain religious expressions into equivalent statements. Religious traditions have often held the position that synonymy does not preserve sacrality.

The Dogon people of Africa believe that the speech used by the priest during ritual action contains a life force, or 'nyama' that is conveyed by his breath and becomes mixed with the life force of the invoked gods and the sacrificial offerings that are to be redistributed for the benefit of the all people. The nyama is given to the priest by a snake deity who appears at night and licks his body, thereby conveying the moisture of the word – the same creative power used by God at the beginning of the world to fertilize the cosmic egg. The Chamula, a Maya community of Mexico, have a similar notion of the useful power inherent in the substance of sacred speech used in ritual, believing that this more formal and redundant language contains a 'heat' that is consumed by the gods along with other offered substances.

1.4 RELIGIOUS OR SACRED LANGUAGES

Many of the world religions have developed the idea that an entire language, usually other than the vernacular, is sacred. Such languages are often reserved for liturgical or for other functions conveying sacred power, such as healing or magic. A sacred language usually begins as a vernacular through which a revelation is believed to have been received. This can lead to the belief that the language is particularly suited for revelation. They consider that it is superior to other languages and inherently sacred. The typical example we can find in Sanskrit, the language of the Vedas. Sanskrit literally means 'perfected' or 'refined' (samskrta). In Islam, the Arabic wording of the Quran is regarded as essential to its holiness, as it is repeated in the many passage of the book itself "we have sent it down as an Arabic Quran". This has sometimes led to the inference that translations of the Quran are not themselves sacred scriptures, but more like mere commentaries. Such belief in the sacrality of what originally was a vernacular seem to be special cases of the widespread idea that one's people and culture are the best, superior to others by virtue of a special closeness to the gods. The Chamula people of Mexico say that the Sun deity gave them the best of all the languages of mankind; thus they call it 'true language.'

The Chamula people distinguish three different forms of their own language, the most important of which is 'ancient words' those which were given to their ancestors during the first stages of world creation. These are the formal phrases used in ritual. This example will illustrates a general principle. Many traditional peoples, as well as high cultures, recite sacred doctrines and rituals in an archaic form of speech that is only barely comprehensible to contemporary speakers. But the language is regarded as sacred, not primarily because it is different from the vernacular, but because it contains the doctrines of revered figures from the past, such as gods, prophets, or ancestors. The desire to express the unchanging, eternal validity of some scripture or liturgy by not allowing any change over time in its language will necessarily result in the language becoming largely unintelligible to those without special training. Such is the case for many of the prayers that are spoken by the priests in Shinto shrines, having been preserved in their original classical Japanese of the tenth century. The further passage of time

can yield a fully distinct, now 'sacred' language, as the offspring vernaculars develop into independent forms. Such was the case for Sanskrit in relation to its vernacular offshoots, the Prakrits, as well as for Latin in relation to the Roman languages.

After Scripture, Cult is the place we find the sacred language. Here the preservation of archaic forms of language is a part of the general conservation of liturgical practice. The inclusion in the Latin celebration of Holy Eucharist of such ancient and foreign sounding elements as the Hebrew and Aramaic formulas 'Halleluja', 'Amen', and 'Maranatha'. The Greek prayer 'Kyrie eleison' added an element of mystery and a sense of connectedness to a religiously significant past, which even the Latin phraseology would eventually come to represent.

Whenever language has become mere form to the common person, having lost the ability to convey any message beyond its symbolic representation of a particular manifestation of sacrality, there will be a reaction by those who see a need for a scripture or liturgy that can once again speak and teach. Many religious movements have begun on this note, railing against frozen formalism and demanding and usually producing vernacular expressions of their religious feeling. Buddhism began in this manner, as did many bhakti movements in medieval India. The latter stressed the vernacular compositions- devotional poetry- that often became the foundation for the flowering of literature in the regional language. In the West, Martin Luther's insistence on hearing, understanding, and responding to the divine word led to the Protestant use of vernaculars and to the elevation of liturgical practices, such as the sermon, that stressed not just presentation of the scriptural forms but interpretation of the scriptural message.

Set of Sacred Words

There may not be an entire language as sacred for all the religions, most consider some special subset of speech as an embodiment of the sacred. The mere uttering or hearing of words from this set, which usually takes the form of a collection of sacred scriptures, will be believed efficacious, whether or not the meaning is understood. This emphasis on formulaic, as opposed to spontaneous, language brings with it a stress on techniques of preservation and precise recitation of the given texts, rather than on methods for inspiration and creation of new expressions. The sacred words of scripture are a divine gift to man, which relieve him of the burden of inventing his own, merely human, response to the sacred.

Within the set of Holy Scriptures, a single passage may stand out as the holiest of all, and therefore the most efficacious. Hinduism recognizes the mystic syllable 'OM' as the essence of all the Vedas, and the hymn known as the Gayathri (Rigveda3.62.10), has achieved a place of preeminence among all mantras. The smallest unit of sacred language is the single word, and there have been many candidates for the one that should be regarded as the holiest. However, the most widely recognized sacred word is the name of a god. This stems from a common association of the name of someone with that person's soul. Utterance of the name was felt to give power over the being. So the name of God in various religions has alternately been taboo – to be avoided because likely to incite the awesome power of the deity – and a focal point of prayer, meditation, or magic. The Igbo tribe of Africa tries to avoid using the names of gods they consider particularly capricious, employing instead such circumlocutions as "The One Whose Name Is Not Spoken". On the other hand, for Sufis, the mystics of Islam,

the intense repetition of the divine name over and over again in the practice of 'dhikr' is regarded as one of the most effective means of achieving the highest state of pure, undivided consciousness of God.

The Speaker

The characteristics possessed by the speaker have often been regarded as significant factors contributing to, or detracting from, the sacred impact of the words uttered. The greatest impact comes when the speaker is regarded, in effect, as being a god. Very dramatic are those cases where a god is believed to talk directly and immediately through a person in the present tense as in the case of Oracles. Here we have been speaking in tongues, or acting as a medium, oracle, or prophet.

For human persons, their status will affect the sacrality attributed to their words. Particular status may even be a necessary precondition for the use of sacred words. Priests for example, may have exclusive rights to the use of liturgical utterances. In vedic religion, only the three upper classes were allowed to perform rites with Vedic mantras. High status will enhance the effectiveness of one's speech.

All religions have struggled with the problem of keeping their tradition of rites and prayers from becoming an empty formalism. They insisted that a certain quality of heart or mind accompany the recitation of the sacred formulas. This usually involves a greater attention to the meaning of the language and requires a different attitude on the part of the speaker than does mere exactness in the repetition of the forms. In Vedic India, where precise articulation of mantras become an essential ingredient of an effective ritual, there also developed an idea that priest who had the esoteric knowledge of the symbolic import of the ritual, and who silently rehearsed that knowledge during the performance, had the most effective ritual of all.

The Hearer

There is a great difference in perspective on the issue of the sacrality of language between the speaker and the hearer or audience. The characterization of a sacred language as unintelligible and valued only for its form, as discussed above, would apply, then, only to the untutored audience, and not to the priestly speaker who had been taught that language.

Sometimes the priests will be ignorant of the meaning of the words he uses, as in the case today, for example, among the many of the Hindu Brahmins who use Sanskrit recitations in their rituals, or the Buddhist monks who chant the Pali scriptures.

In many applications of sacred language, the intended hearer is a god. However, unlike the addressee, in ordinary conversational situations, the addressed gods seldom speak back. Many times it is a monologue or in a ritual there may be multiple speakers, but seldom are they responding to or addressing one another.

The Medium

The spoken word uses the medium of sound for its transmission. This gives it qualities that make it quite distinct from the written word, conveyed through the medium of print. Many scholars understand and emphasize the numerous

differences between oral cultures and literate cultures. One key difference is that preliterate people regard the speaking of an utterance as an act of manifestation of power. The word is viewed as an active force that is immediately involved in shaping the world. In contrast, the written word comes to stand for lifeless abstraction from the world.

The medium of sound has a number of flexible qualities that can be manipulated to express nuances of power and sacrality in ways that go beyond the meaning of words. These range from variation in tone and speed to the use of sound patterns such as rhythm and rhyme. The simplest of these vocal but nonverbal or paralinguistic features is variation in loudness. In the high cult of Vedic India, three variations were used for the mantras. 1) aloud, for the priest who recited the hymns of praise; 2) muttered, for the priest who performed most of the physical handiwork; 3) silent, for the priest who sat and watched for errors in the performance. The loud recitations were further divided into high, medium, and low tones, with the louder portions also spoken at a faster pace. The instructions for the traditional Tridentine Mass of Catholicism also called for three different tones, from loud to inaudible.

While heightened sacrality, as in a liturgical climax, is sometimes marked by the loudest dynamic, often it is just the opposite. Silent speech or pure silence have often been regarded as the highest forms of religious expression. Thus, many times in the history of Mass, the climate hallowing and offering of the sacraments has been recited inaudibly, or so softly that only those immediately around the celebrant can hear. In Indian Tantra an explicit doctrine developed according to which “prayer without sound is recommended as the most excellent of all”. Among the Zuni of North America, a person’s most prized prayers are said only ‘with the Heart’.

The Context

Full understanding of any speech act requires knowledge of the context it occurs. Language regarded as sacred quite often has its context a ritual setting. In that case, the intended effects of the speech acts are largely confined to the domain of the ritual. Some rituals do, of course, intend their effects to carry over into the non ritual environment as for example, when the priest says “I now pronounce you man and wife”. Sacred Language may also find expression in settings other than ritual, in the case of spontaneous prayers or the occasional use of magic spells.

The relationship between the ritual language and its context is much different from that between ordinary language and its context. Since ritual language is, for the most part, the repetition of a fixed text, it precedes and, in effect, creates, its context rather than reflecting and representing in speech a context regarded as prior and already defined. Therefore much ritual language is directed toward defining the characteristics of the participants and the nature of the ritual situation. The rich symbolism of both object and action that marks off ritual behaviour from ordinary behaviour will add yet another distinctive trait to ritual language. Its message is often paralleled in the symbolic systems of those other media – the visual and tactile properties of the physical objects, the kinesthetic sensibilities of gesture and movement – which then serve to reinforce, enhance, or even complete the verbal meaning. For example, as the Dinka priest recites an invocation over the animal victim during a sacrifice, he accompanies each phrase

with a thrust of his sacred spear to ensure that his words ‘hit the mark’ and weaken the beast for the final physical act of killing.

During the reciting of the consecration in the Mass the priest breaks bread and offers the cup of wine to reenact the Last Supper and thus, give parallel reinforcement to the words that make reference to the same event.

1.5 LANGUAGE IN SACRED FUNCTIONS

The several speech act components just surveyed, from language itself to the context in which it is spoken, combine to achieve the final product of the sacred utterance. We can consider the effect in two ways- 1) transforming some object or state of affairs and 2) worshiping spiritual beings.

Language and Transformation

There is a significant difference between sacred language uttered within the context of a ritual and that spoken outside of such a setting. A ritual is a self-contained and idealized situation in which the participants and objects momentarily take on changed identities in order to play out sacred roles. The words are chief instruments by which these transformations take place. There are three elements in it, namely, the human participants, the ritual objects and the ritual goals.

The Human Participants

The Human persons need to express their pious qualifications for undertaking the ritual. First person indicative utterances are most frequently used to accomplish this task. In Christianity, for example, the proper identity of a repentant sinner and believer in the correct doctrine becomes manifest through the recitation of the confession,” I confess to almighty God .. that I have sinned “ and “I believe in one God..”

Some ritual traditions involve transforming the human into a divine being, in many cases by using language that states an identity between parts of their bodies. This is a common theme in Navajo healing rites. One prayer for example, describes the deeds of two Holy people at the time of creation, and then continues: “With their feet I shall walk about;...with their torso I shall walk about. ”The priest in a Vedic ritual must also establish his partial identity with gods, using such mantras as “ I pick you (grass bundle) up with the arms of Indra.”

The Ritual Objects

The trans mundane character of the ritual objects is, in a parallel fashion, often conferred or made explicit by indicative phrases. Most of the implements at a vedic sacrifice are addressed by the priest with second person utterances, such as this one to a wooden sword: “You are the right arm of Indra.” The words spoken over the sacraments of the Christian Eucharist “This is my body” also typify utterances of this category, whose function could appropriately be labeled consecration.

The Ritual Goals

Once the ritual setting has been transformed into an assemblage of divine or cosmic personages and forces, the transforming language of the liturgy will be

directed to the task of promoting those powers to bring about some desired end. At the simplest level, there are the wishes that the ritual will produce a positive result. This may be in the first person as in the case of the patron of a Vedic sacrifice “By the sacrifice of gods for Agni may I be food eating”. When one utters a wish that some negative condition may come about for another, it is a curse.

One may also direct the ritual objects to bring about a goal, as when the Vedic priest calls on the firmly fixed baking tile: “You are firm. Make the earth firm. Make life firm. Make the offspring firm”. There are some transformations that are supposed to carry over into, or take place in, non ritual settings. Marriage pronouncement is one such instance. These verbally accomplished acts bring about a change in their status.

1.6 LANGUAGE AND WORSHIP

The most prominent sacred task to which language is put is the worship of the gods. The transformation of the ritual setting is usually an activity preparatory to the climatic offering of praise. The service of god always demands a complex verbal etiquette. Interaction with god cannot be matter of simple manipulation; instead, every act must be cushioned with words of explanation and concern. Furthermore, the intangible nature of god demands a linguistic means to make their presence take on a more concrete reality.

Most of the religious traditions have decided that worship of the gods must follow a particular form. In Judaism there is the principle enunciated by rabbis: “A man should always utter the praises of God before he offers his petitions”. Most of the fundamental themes of worship will be found within the structure of invocation, praise, offering, and petition.

Invocation

Logically the first topic of any service of worship, securing the god’s presence at the rite – usually with second person imperatives requesting them to come – will form an elaborate early portion of many liturgies. Hindu tantric ritual uses an invocation to bring about the presence of the god in the concrete image that is the focus of worship “O lord who protects the world, graciously be present in this Lingam until the end of worship”.

Praise

Essentially to praise means to pronounce publicly and thereby acknowledge recognition of a god’s praiseworthy characteristics. If these involve deeds accomplished in the past that were for the benefit, one expresses thanksgiving. There is always the hope, and probably expectation, that mentioning such deeds of benevolence will prompt the deity to act again on the celebrant’s behalf. Certainly uttering praise is intended to make the god favorably disposed, or even to fill the god with renewed energy.

The simplest way to give linguistic expression to praise is to say “I praise” as in the Christian Gloria “ We praise thee, we bless thee, we adore thee, we glorify thee..”

Offering

The high point of many worship services is the act of offering some gift to the invoked and praised gods. Words are necessary accompaniments to the physical act to define it as an act of offering, motivated by the appropriate intention on the part of the worshiper. There must also be statements expressing the proper concern for the god’s feelings. Again the simplest way to establish an act as one of offering is to say “I offer”. Almost always there will be a request that god accept the offerings. Hindu worship includes such phrasing as “What has been given with complete devotion ... do accept these out of compassion for me”

Petition

Logically the final act of worship , petition is in many cases the motive force behind the entire service. There are religious traditions,that downplay this goal as in Islam. In Judaism and Christianity there is a clear mention of petitions. In the standard weekday service of rabbinic Judaism, the central element, the Amidah, contains a set of 12 supplications, the ‘tefillot’ accompanied by praise.

The term prayer, though often used in the widest sense to refer to almost any form of language used in dealing with gods, might best be restricted to this function of petition.

Check Your Progress II

Note: a) Use the space provided for your answer

 b) Check your answers with those provided at the end of the unit

1) What are the most fundamental themes of worship expressed by the religious language?

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1.7 LET US SUM UP

All religions have their own language to speak about the Ultimate, to express the feeling of sacred, awe and holiness. Word has a power of creation and is a sacred substance. Religious language is spoken in the atmosphere of speaker, hearer, medium and a context.

It has a power of transformation and the participants can experience it in the ritual objects and goals. Religious language is used as means of worship in invocation, praise, offering and petition.

1.8 KEY WORDS

Language : Language is a particular kind of system for encoding and decoding information.

Religion	: Religion is a set of beliefs concerning the cause, nature and purpose of the universe, especially when considered as the creation of a supernatural agency or agencies usually involving devotional and ritual observances, and often containing a moral code governing the conduct of human affairs.
Substance	: Substance is a concept of object, or thing when this is contrasted with properties or events. It is something that stands under or grounds the things.
Cult	: Cult is a system of ritual practices.
Sacred words	: They are a way for believers to align themselves more closely with the gods they worship.
Transformation	: Transformation means, a spiritual transformation which refers to a fundamental change in the place of the sacred or character of the sacred in the life of the individual.

1.9 FURTHER READINGS AND REFERENCES

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1.10 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Answers to Check Your Progress I

- 1) Traditional terms to describe the forms of religious language are- prayer, praise, petition, thanks, confession and exhortation.
- 2) First approach assumes that religion refers to transcendental reality; second views religion as an expression of emotions and third approach denies that there is anything special about religious language.

Answers to Check Your Progress II

- 1) The fundamental themes of worship are invocation, praise, offering and petition