

Religious traditions offer both a linguistic origin of life itself and a divine origin of human language. For instance, in the biblical story of Genesis, the creation myth of both Christianity and Judaism, “God said ‘Let there be light,’ and there was light” (Genesis 1:3). It’s language that brings life to the heavens and earth. Then, on the sixth day of creation, God made Adam and Eve and bestowed upon them the power of speech. In a later passage, the Tower of Babel incident causes God to split the single human language into many different languages. According to this tradition, divine events caused the origin and development of all human languages.

Religious speech comes in many forms and is used in many different circumstances. Of course, religious speech is connected with the five functions of faith-based belief systems that were explored at the beginning of this chapter. Much religious speech is ritualistic, such as daily or weekly meetings at a temple or mosque. Some is spontaneous, such as a blessing or curse uttered in the course of everyday conversation. Some may be private, such as the meetings between

a Zen Buddhist practitioner and their *sensei*. What seem to be most important are the context of the utterance and the intent of the speaker. As long as these two conditions are right, the actual content of religious speech often is not as important.

For individuals, communication with supernatural beings and forces takes a wide variety of forms. It may be done aloud, such as chanting or spell casting, or silently, as in meditation or prayer. Spirits may speak through an individual when called upon, in a practice called channeling, giving a medium the power to speak sacred words.

Individuals may also use words or sounds known as mantras to reach a state of unity with the divine. One of the most widely practiced is the Sanskrit mantra “Om mani padme hum.” This mantra is chanted in the Mahayana Buddhist tradition in Tibet, as well as anywhere else this tradition has taken root. While the individual sounds have meaning, an important part of the chanting of a mantra is the resonance of the sacred sounds themselves.