THE ART OF THE HUSBANDRY OF MEANING: LINGUISTIC RELATIVITY AND THE STUDY OF RELIGION

by

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(Under the Direction of Kenneth Lee Honerkamp)

ABSTRACT

In this thesis I propose a definition of religion that places language at the heart of the religious endeavor. The logic of this definition impells the identification of the art of the husbandry of meaning as a sub-discipline of religion that regulates and standardizes language by way of the Confucian doctrine of the Rectification of Names and the principle of linguistic relativity of modern philosophy of language. Applying these conclusions to religion proper, I consider the activity of the husbandry of meaning undertaken by the Qur'an from various perspectives. Finally, I provide a translation with commentary of a section of the introduction to 'Abd al-Salâm ibn Barrajân's Commentary on the Beautiful Names of God, relating the doctrine and practice of Sufism to the conception of language found in the Qur'an and to the husbandry of meaning. INDEX WORDS: Qur'an, Sufism, Abd al-Salam ibn Barrajan, Religion, Linguistic Relativity, Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis, Rectification of Names

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BA, East Tennessee State University, 2007

A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of The University of Georgia in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

MASTER OF ARTS

ATHENS, GEORGIA

2012

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DEDICATION

﴿بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم﴾

﴿و الصلاة و السلام على رسوله الكريم﴾

إ ددكيت ذس ورق ت مي بلفد ويف ماري, وثوت ووز لوف, بشنس,

أند سبرت ذس برجكت وولد حف بين أنإماجن،بل

for Marie

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I thank God, my parents, my wife Marie, Dr. Honerkamp, Dr. Godlas, Dr. Medine, and the rest of the faculty and staff in the Religion Department and the broader university, and all of my friends in Athens, in particular my friends at the Inter-Faith Cultural Organization, and especially Selcuk and his family, whose hospitality has been invaluable. So many people have provided support to me during this process that I would have difficulty listing them by name, but for all that everyone has done for me during my time at The University of Georgia I am profoundly grateful.

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Introduction

This work is primarily concerned with proposing and defending an adequate definition of religion.[1] In chapter one I outline and support a definition of religion that links religion and language to one another. That is to say, I define the religious act to be to a significant extent also a linguistic act. I then show that this definition corresponds to the common, inductive definition of religion (e. g. including Buddhism while excluding communism). I go on to provide examples that demonstrate the linguistic character of religious acts.

[1] A major, ongoing debate over the definition of religion has persisted for centuries in the disciplines that concern themselves with religion. From the work of Max Mueller, the man often considered the founder of the discipline of religious studies, to that of Rudolph Otto in the early 20th Century, to various deconstructionist, post-modernist thinkers (Giorgio Agamben, whom I cite in this paper, counted in some sense amongst them), numerous and sundry approaches have been taken to the question. The earlier school tended to invoke more-or-less vague conceptions of the numinous or the sacred to establish the proper realm of religion, while later scholars have militated against this tendency, with some even going so far as to deny that there is any such thing as religion to be defined at all. Following a lead from the work of Agamben, which in fact is little more than a hint, I take the indeterminacy of the field as an opportunity for exploration, positing a definition that I hold to be functional and true and arguing for its validity in order to introduce a topic of interest, while remembering that as a word may have many definitions, so likewise may a concept have many dimensions. For a summary of the European discussion of the definition of religion through the 19th Century, see Charles Francis Aiken, "Religion", The Catholic Encyclopedia, Vol. 12, (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1911), 5 Oct. 2012 <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/12738a.htm>, see also Jacques Derrida, *Acts of Religion*, (New York: Routledge, 2002); Giorgio Agamben, *The Sacrament of Language*, trans. Adam Kotsko (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011).

Linking religion and language together in this way raises numerous questions concerning both of these phenomena. In chapter two I discuss historical and logical relationships between religion and language. In the course of this discussion, it becomes clear that religion and language exert mutual governance over one another. First, I refer to the Confucian doctrine of the rectification of names, which describes explicitly the linguistic authority that, I argue, religion holds implicitly whenever sacred texts or rituals are established. I go on to provide historical examples of this authority. In the second section, language likewise is seen to govern religion by reference to the principle of linguistic relativity. This principle, which is evidently of fundamental importance for the interpretation of modern physics, states that language is the origin of our habitual understanding of reality. Given this principle, if religion is to represent reality by means of language, the very grammar of that language must be suited to that representation.

In chapter three, I initiate an investigation into various ways in which the Arabic Qur'an governs and is governed by language. I treat therein of the linguistic hierarchy found in the Qur'an, the religious authority over language assumed in the Islamic religion, the inability for the Qur'an to be satisfactorily translated, and the use of gestural semantics in the Qur'an. All of these are discussed in the context of the characteristic qualities of Arabic.

Given the centrality of the name (*ism*) (clarify) in the Qur'anic discourse, in chapter four I discuss the grammatical force of the name in originating aspects of Islamic belief and practice. By means of a translation of part of the Introduction to the *Sharḥ Asmâ Allâh al-Ḥusnâ* (Commentary on the Beautiful Names of God) of Abd al-Salâm ibn Barrajân of Seville, I demonstrate that the grammatical properties of the name correspond directly with the intepretation of the doctrine of the divine names in Sufism.

This conclusion confirms that the eminent place given to the name in the Qur'anic revelation determines the character of an important section of the Islamic religion by virtue of the principle of linguistic relativity. The husbandry of meaning of the Arabic language is shown, therefore, to occupy a place of great importance as part of the activity of religious scholars. In the conclusion, the importance of language for religion in general is discussed, providing further justification for the adoption of a linguistic definition of religion.

Chapter One

A Linguistic Definition of Religion

In his work *The Sacrament of Language,* Giorgio Agamben notes the mutual bonds between religion and linguistics in a variety of contexts. For instance, citing Georges Dumezil's research on the prehistoric structure of the society of the original speakers of Indo-European, he shows that the priestly caste is defined again and again as a class uniquely preoccupied with language.[2] As another reader of Dumezil says, they "study the holy scriptures and perform the sacrifices" (which are nothing more than ritual prayers), and their function is seen as a defense against the "lie" and against "incorrect sacrifices".[3] Not only is religion in this way regularly seen as a vocation uniquely concerned with language, but for its part the origin of linguistics is often understood to be found in religion as well, even by the most secular scholars. For instance, in his *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language,* V. Voloshinov says "the

[2] Giorgio Agamben, *The Sacrament of Language*, trans. Adam Kotsko (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011), pp. 6-7.

[3] Wouter W. Belier, *Decayed Gods,* (Leiden: Brill, 1991), p. 13.

first philologists were priests…" and goes on explicitly to attribute the first impulse toward the study of language to religious officers.[4]

Among references to this relationship in the field of religion, we find that the traditional derivation of the word *religion* itself references the importance of language for the religious sphere. The derivation considered by many authorities the soundest takes the Latin word meaning "to bind" (*relegere*) as the root of our word, pointing out the centrality of the binding oath, and thus linguistic action, to religious practice.[5] It is this centrality that Agamben takes up in his investigation of the oath, claiming the binding power of language to be the root of religion and law.

In his treatment of the "archaeology of the oath", Agamben begins to undertake a more systematic approach to the question of the nature of this relationship. The intent of his study, however, is predominantly political. Although he makes use of theology extensively, he very rarely seems concerned to give any clarity to questions of the character of religion itself. While on the one hand he dismisses most of the traditional definitions of religion,[6] he makes few positive statements about religion elsewhere beyond the fact that religion originates from the oath along with law and magic. Indeed, in other works such as *The Kingdom and the Glory*

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[4] Vlamdimir N. Voloshinov, *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language,* trans. Ladislav Matejka and I. R. Titunik, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1973), p. 74.
[5] Aiken, "Religion".
[6] Agamben, *Sacrament,* pp. 13-15.

Agamben seems intent to dispell the political by linking it with the already abandoned and dishonored realm of the religious.[7] For those of us more charitably inclined toward traditional forms of religion, then, the conclusions of Agamben's work prove neither adversary nor ally. However, his original insight into the ties binding religion and language to one another may still provide an impulse to the more thorough study of this trenchant question. Could it be that a characterization of this relationship would help clarify the perennial question in our discipline, "what is religion?"

An exploration of the path indicated by Agamben's hint would best be undertaken experimentally. In order to do this, I will provide a hypothetical definition of religion that emphasizes the role of language and then proceed to explore the practical consequences of defining religion in such a way. Here is an example of such a definition: Religion may be defined as the twofold practice of (1) representing reality by means of language and (2) seeking to reflect this representation in the world, and in particular in the human self, to the greatest extent possible. The second element is accomplished in its own right also by means of language to a significant extent, for example through ritual. Each of these aspects should be considered necessary but not sufficient without the other.

[7] Agamben, Giorgio, *The Kingdom and the Glory*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011).

Emphasizing in this way the importance of language in religious thought and activity has a number of benefits. First among them is that the definition includes all phenomena present in the inductive, pre-scientific category "religion while excluding all those that do not. From the simple naming of lists of deities or spirits to complex monotheistic theologies to the negations of Buddhist doctrine, religion universally includes the effort of giving utterance to reality. Yet even the relatively subtle difference between religion and magic is clearly expressed by this definition. For although both use language, they differ precisely in *how* they use it. Magic, instead of seeking faithfully to adhere to its representation of reality, hopes merely to make use of it, thus abandoning the second element of the definition. Any definition of religion that does not emphasize language will be less able effectively to express this difference.

The commonly discussed exception of communism is also easily excluded from the category "religion" by this definition. This is so, as the materialist dialectic of Marxism-Leninism and its successors represents reality through language only to stand in opposition to that reality, seeking to change the real into the ideal that they posit. As will be further alluded to below, even concepts such as "reality" will usually be construed by doctrinaire communists as social constructions that must be considered illegitimate due to their derivation from an

illegitimate economic structure.[8] Since for communists the religious sphere of activity thereby is made conditional upon the political activism necessary to give our conceptions legitimate economic and social grounds, it cannot be said that communists is a religion according to the definition.

It may be objected that despite their necessary rejection of the concept "reality", communists still do engage in the representation of reality, particularly through the discipline of economics. Furthermore, by attaching prescriptive and proscriptive judgments to their economic considerations, it may be said that they fulfill both the first and second terms of our definition. If the prohibition of usury in the Abrahamic scriptures is religious, why is not Marx's denial of the legitimacy of profit?[9] This objection may be answered by saying that although Marxism does represent elements of reality, such as in this proscription, its immediate and severe rejection of numerous fundamental elements of thought renders impossible a general representation of reality. Because of this, most of the activity of communism is undertaken to actualize ideals that do not correspond to any reality, but rather only to the imaginations of Marxists. Communists do not attempt to assert that their ideal state of economic affairs does exist or has ever existed in reality anywhere at any time. They will freely admit that which they seek to achieve exists only in language. As Frederick Engels

[8] Voloshinov, *Philosophy of Language,* p. 18.

[9] Gerard Maarek, *An Introduction to Karl Marx's Das Kapital*, Mansel Evans tr., (New York: Oxford University Press, 1929), p. 85.

wrote, "The first people to set up a society on the basis of community of goods in America, indeed in the whole world, were the so-called Shakers"[10]. The examples of the Shakers and other societies achieving his ideals Engels cites did indeed hold all goods in common, but they were certainly not communist societies as we understand the term.

Turning to our definition, we see that communism fulfills only very partially the first element of the definition, and even less so the second element. Not only does it exclude communism from the category of religion, then, the linguistic definition of religion also manages to express an important characteristic of communism, that of its tendency to usurp the sphere of authority traditionally held by religion.

This definition not only allows us logically to establish the boundaries of the inductive, pre-scientific category of religion, it should allow us to argue convincingly that a given set of actions should or should not be considered religious. Upon confirming the practice as religious, we would then be able to demonstrate precisely why it belongs in the category of religion.

As an example, let us examine the practice of dream interpretation. While dream interpretation claims a place among the canonical practices of most if not all historical

[10] Frederick Engels, *Description of Recently Founded Communist Colonies Still in Existence* http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1844/10/15.htm, (5 September 2012).

religions, in the modern western world a certain stigma of superstition hangs around it due to the cultural dominance of psychiatric scientism, which on a positivist basis generally denies that dreams may refer to any reality beyond the state of the individual soul. Religion, however, has traditionally opposed itself to superstition. Like magic, superstition makes use of a part of religion while ignoring a part. If magic tends to ignore the aspect of religion that realizes linguistic representations through practice, we may place superstition at the opposite pole, saying that superstitions are practices that correspond to no linguistic representation of actuality.

So, in which of these categories does dream interpretation belong? Let us use the example of the dream interpretation performed by Joseph the son of Jacob for the king of Egypt as found in the book of Genesis and Sura Yusuf in the Qur'an, a very well-known story common to all of the Abrahamic traditions.[11] The king of Egypt dreams of seven fat cows, which are swallowed by seven lean ones, and then again dreams of seven heavy stalks of grain, which are swallowed up by seven meager ones. Ultimately, Joseph is called upon to interpret the dream. He does so by saying that the seven fat cows and the seven heavy grains both represent seven years of plenty, while the lean cows and the meager grains represent seven years of famine which will follow the years of plenty, swallowing up all that had been

[11] Genesis 41; Qur'an 12:43-49.

produced in them. He then proposes that the excess produce of the coming years be stored up against the famine to come. The king appoints Joseph head of the royal granaries, and as Joseph carries out his recommendations the events foretold in the dream come to pass.

Now, for faithful adherents of any of the Abrahamic traditions, there is no question that Joseph's act is a religious act. Yet, demonstrating that it fits with the definition of religion given above will allow us better to understand why and how dream interpretation fits into the religious category, and thereby to use it in judging more marginal cases.

First, the king seeks a linguistic representation of the reality of his dream. This is the first religious act of the story. The king recognizes a need for language to be applied to his dream so that its meaning may be established and acted upon. Joseph then provides an explanation, retrieving the meaning from the images. This is akin to the establishment of doctrine. Joseph and the king then establish a response to the meaning in practice, acting in faithfulness to the meaning of the dream as represented in the interpretation. Thus they complete the religious act.

In this example, a linguistic definition of religion allows us to establish and explain the placement of a particular action in the category of religion. Far from being marginal to religious action, dream interpretation is shown to be of the essence of religion. Indeed, it is possible to use dream interpretation as a symbol for religion itself. Figuratively, then, religion

may be defined as the act of interpreting the world as a dream is interpreted. Language is of course clearly implicated in this figure, for if we do not understand what characteristics of language allow it to be used to interpret dreams, our understanding of dream interpretation and therefore also of religion as a whole is impaired.

This implication should not be read as a reduction of either religion to language or language to religion, however. If it may be said that religion is a particular way of using language, it may also be said that language is to a great extent a way of practicing religion. As there is no language in the world that has not been shaped by religious thought and practice, so is it impossible to speak without referencing a religious framework.

Although all disciplines and sciences must obviously make use of language, the bond between religion and language is closer and stronger than that obtaining between language and any other discipline. As mentioned above, language is for religion both its primary tool and its goal- both its means and its end. For once the model of the real constructed with language has been made actual in practice, religion has reached the limit of its application. Once a mirror capable of reflecting the real has been made, it is expected and hoped that the real will reflect itself in it. If it does not, the mirror has likely been poorly built, and the work upon it must be redoubled. Yet the reflection of the real in such a mirror is not of itself a part of any human discipline or science.

In this connection, we may see as another benefit that the linguistic definition expresses something of the paradoxical, *provisional* character of religion. According to the definition, in all religions a three-fold relationship operates between reality, its linguistic representation, and the implementation of that representation. The fact that religious practice by definition must always be mediated by language expresses well the complexity of religious life while demonstrating the impulse toward the organization, professionalization, and ultimate ossification of religious forms- in conjunction with language itself.

On the other hand, this paradox and this provisionality are in themselves only reflections of our attitudes toward the capacity of language to reflect reality. In the context of our discussion, part of the trust essential to religiosity must be trust in the capacity of language to retain meaning over time, and this trust must hold at least to the extent that actions taken in accordance with linguistic representations be harmonious with the reality represented.

The last and perhaps greatest benefit of the linguistic definition of religion to be discussed here presents itself in the guise of a problem. For if we are to have recourse to language as a means of defining religion, it is only proper that we proceed to ask, "What is language?" And in posing this question in the context of the study of religion, we will find ourselves in position to bring to bear the force of all of the great theological traditions of the

world against a problem which lies at the heart of the intellectual and moral malaise and disjuncture of modernity, a malaise that, as Edmund Husserl argued, has stunted the growth of the western scientific tradition and rendered it unfit to bear the fruit of universality.[12]

The characterization of language is the battlefield where the wars between positivism and postmodernism have been fought, with great import for all disciplines, including of course the study of religion. Many of the momentous discoveries of modern science have been interpreted with a naive trust in the objective capabilities of the observer and his language. The tendency to leave unbroached the question, "who is the scientist?" has left neglected the ability to reflect spiritually, ethically, and philosophically upon the conclusions given by science and the changes they worked in the minds and hearts of people. The answer to this question must ultimately rely upon the answer to the question, "what is language?"[13]

It is on this ground that the postmodernists attack positivism, attempting to show that the meaning of language is nothing but an expression of the power of a given society's ruling class, who impose meaning on language for their own benefit. Their medicine, though, is little better than the disease. If on the one hand we have scientistic positivism's uncritical, pre-

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[12] cf. Edmund Husserl, *The Crisis of the European Sciences,* trans. David Carr, (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1970).

[13] Michael Morton, *Herder and the Poetics of Thought*, (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1989), p. 4.

scientific view of meaning, on the other there threatens the incapacity to conceive of meaning at all.[14]

I believe that the linguistic definition of religion opens the way to the solution of this problem. Ramification of the definition will help show that the crisis of modernity has not been brought on by a mere misunderstanding of language, but rather by the abandonment of the perspective that governs language and gives it meaning- the religious perspective. In representation and practice, the two-fold dedication of language to the service of the actual, the religious perspective acknowledges the mutability of meaning, and therefore imposes upon language the rigor and asceticism necessary for it to function in both a rationally coherent and spiritually enlightening way. It is only after these ascetic practices have had their effect that language becomes fit for other duties.

If in order to understand religion we must first understand language, the inquiry we would make into the nature of language must yet differ greatly in its methods and conclusions from linguistics considered as a scientific discipline. Scientific linguistics views language as a phenomenon to be explained, but religion must view language as a material to be shaped. Nor, however, should our inquiry be considered identical to any traditional philosophical discipline, such as rhetoric or poetics, which deals exclusively with the use of language. These look upon

[14] Ibid., p. 5.

language as a tool to be used for some end- they do not seek to uncover what qualities of language allow it to accomplish those ends. Although the theological inquiry into language differs from these other types of linguistics in kind, a certain degree of conceptual and terminological overlap is inevitable, especially at the beginning.

Preoccupied with language though they were, the religious classes of the past had neither the need nor the spirit precisely to define the material with which they worked, just as potters made their pots for millennia without once performing a chemical analysis on their clay. In this age, however, religious scholars who avail themselves of all necessary resources for the understanding of their material, language, will find themselves in the position better to understand their own discipline, and on that firmer foundation to provide solutions to some of the most urgent problems of modernity.

Chapter Two

The Husbandry of Meaning

1. The Rectification of Names

To begin this theological inquiry into the character of language, we must first reiterate that language is for religion both instrument and end. In seeking to actualize a linguistic model of reality in the temporal world, at different times the development or the conservation of that model will be paramount. Both of these, however, imply a certain concern for language that transcends a merely denotative application of it. Religion must be conscious of its responsibility in the formation of language, and of all of the relative harmonies at work between names, expressions, and grammatical structures. If the Real in any sense is to be reflected in the mind of man, the entire web of meaning must be subject to the religious art.

To characterize precisely the features of this art, I would begin by citing from the *Analects of Confucius* the passage on the Rectification of Names.

> Tsze-lu said, "The ruler of Wei has been waiting for you, in order with you to administer the government. What will you consider the first thing to be done?"
>
> The Master replied, "What is necessary is to rectify names... If names be not correct, language is not in accordance with the truth of things. If language be not in accordance with the truth of things, affairs cannot be carried on to success.
>
> When affairs cannot be carried on to success, proprieties and music do not flourish. When proprieties and music do not flourish, punishments will not be properly awarded. When punishments are not properly awarded, the people do not know how to move hand or foot".[15]

Confucius here questions the link between word and thing. He neither asserts that language does nor that it does not refer to things as they are, but rather that language *may* refer to things as they are if proper attention is paid to it. As a corollary to this, a gradation of correspondence to the truth ought to be observable between different languages.

Ware, in the introduction to his translation of the Analects, writes that this passage is most likely a later addition to the work undertaken by the students of Hsün-Tzu, founder of the School of Names (*Ming-Chia*), one of the Hundred Schools of ancient Chinese thought.[16] In the work that carries his name, Hsün-Tzu elaborates upon the topic of the rectification of names at length. Referring to the terminologies established by the ancient dynasties of China, he argues that their standardization of language both allowed for communication between the

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[15]Confucius, *Analects of Confucius,* James R. Ware, trans. (London: Allen and Unwin, 1949).

[16] J. J. L. Duyvendak, "Hsun-Tzu on the Rectification of Names", *T'oung Pao*, Second Series, Vol. 23, No. 4 (October 1924) pp. 221-254.

peoples of the various cultures and traditions of China as well as provided a coherent terminology whose maintenance allowed for systematic thought to be undertaken, especially upon questions of ethics and social comportment.

The list of terms established by the former kings that Hsün-Tzu felt most important to provide primarily concerns the constituent faculties of the human being, including terms translated as "human nature", "sensation", "reflection", "natural" and "artificial, "knowledge", and "wisdom".[17] According to Hsün-Tzu,

> The idea of these kings in regulating the terminology was that, when names had been fixed and so realities were distinguished from one another... and ideas could thus be interchanged, then the people could be conscientiously led on and be unified.
>
> And therefore, to split expressions and arbitrarily to create names, thereby confounding the correct terminology, so that the people become confused and there is much discussion and litigation, was called a great wickedness. That crime was like that of making (false) seals and standards and measures.[18]

In the absence of the establishment of such linguistic authority, the inevitable introduction of variation into the intellectual lexicon because of either ignorance or dishonesty results in the confusion of the meanings of these terms. Rather than having an effective authority to which to resort in disputes over meaning, each person's private definition of a given term becomes of equal value to all others. Thus, argument and litigation

[17] Ibid., pp. 225-226.
[18] Ibid., pp. 226-227.

become common, and unscrupulous people are free to distort the meanings of words to their own advantage.[19]

In the thought of Hsün-Tzu, language neither naturally accords with reality, nor does it change regularly according to mysterious laws. Rather, language is a social construction established by authority according to reason. Reason, although not itself its own authority, is what ties language to empirical and intellectual reality. When thus systematically tuned to reality, language implicitly directs people to thoughts and actions harmonious with the characteristics inherent in human beings, or as Hsün-Tzu says, they are by that "converted to the Way (*dao*)".[20] Conversely, as the definition of terms depends upon their usage, so it is that the dishonest use of language not only harms the individual against whom a given dishonesty is directed, but also rends the very fabric of meaning itself.

Understood in this light, the meaning of the sanctions upon speech, especially religious speech, established by law and custom in all states and cultures is clarified. Just as all peoples set up governments for the enforcement of laws necessary for internal material order, such as defining weights and measures as in Hsün-Tzu's figure, so the analogous establishment of religion is performed in part for the purpose of firmly establishing the meanings of what had been before that establishment traditional and customary language. Because language is a

[19] Ibid., p. 240.
[20] Ibid., p. 240.

communal, not an individual reality, to abandon the religious government of language is to court anarchy in language.

In light of this, the religious texts accepted as authoritative by the various religions of the world may be seen as linguistic constitutions that establish norms of speech for their communities. These norms are consequences of the positive value of the sacred text itself, and secondarily of the judgment of phraseologies as orthodox or heterodox by religious authorities. Although there is certainly still variation to be seen, relatively incontrovertible patterns of speech are established that often persist even in the absence of state enforcement of them.

The constitutional character of sacred texts helps to explain their historical importance for the stabilization and identity-formation of languages. The existence of this phenomenon is common knowledge in the west by virtue of the place of translations of the Bible at the root of both modern English (the King James translation) and modern German (Luther's translation), but it also occurs world-wide in the most varied of contexts, not least in the pivotal impetus toward identification and standardization provided to the Arabic language by the revelation of the Qur'an.

To clarify what is meant here by language formation, I may cite the work of Mikhail Bakhtin, who in his formulation of linguistic relativity asserts the existence in any given

society of numerous languages, each of them shaped by their class of users toward the various ends they find before themselves.[21] While situated within this paradigm as one of many sub-languages, religious language is unique within it by virtue of the fact that scholarly or priestly classes both are concerned almost exclusively with language and often are vested with the authority to enforce certain linguistic usages over others. In such cases, the passive general tendency of classes to produce their own unique, idiosyncratic dialects combines with the active, intentional will to mold language in accordance with reality to produce a class-language that exerts direct and profound influence over the entirety of a given tongue.

As an example of the power of norms so established, consider the following example. In the early 20th Century, the engineers of modern Turkish sought both explicitly to replace "foreign", non-Turkish words with etymologically Turkic words and implicitly to introduce modern European philosophical concepts into the language in exchange for west Asian ones.[22] For the concept translated into English as "nature", Ottoman Turkish used a word borrowed from Arabic, *tabiat*, which derives from a root that generally means "to impress (upon)". Thus in Arabic and Turkish, *matbaa* means "printer's shop" (literally "printing-place"). This contrasts with the English borrowing of "nature" from the Latin word at the root of the usage

[21] Mikhail M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, Michael Holquist and Carl Emerson trans., (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981).
[22] Geoffrey Lewis, *The Turkish Language Reform: A Catastrophic Success,* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

also common to all Romance languages, *natura,* which etymologically signifies "that which is present at birth".

The Turkish linguistic engineers turned to the Turkish verb *doğmak*, which signifies "to be born", constructed from it *doğa,* and with the authority of the official government journals of linguistics introduced it into the language to replace *tabiat* for the concept in English rendered as "nature". In response to this, a critic of the language reform wrote:

> The Western languages have 'nature', which comes from a Latin word meaning birth. According to our belief, however, what is called 'nature' is not born but created, which means that this [word *doğa*] is wrong, conceptually and semantically. We cannot say *doğa*, for *tabiat* was not spontaneously born; it was divinely created.[23]

The writer alludes to the fact that in the Ash'ari school of theology that predominates in Sunni Islam, the accidents of a given thing are created at each moment by God rather than being established in things from the moment of their creation.[24] Not only does *doğa* implicitly refer to a naturalistic order rather than a theological one, it also must be considered incorrect even when situated in the theological doctrines of Ash'arism. This in stark contrast to *tabiat*, which corresponds perfectly with both the general and specific conceptions of Turkish Sunnis. The loyalty of the writer both to the Arabic language itself as the Islamic liturgical language

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[23] Ibid., p. 115.

[24] Harry Austryn Wolfson, *The Philosophy of the Kalam,* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1976), p. 520 *et passim.*

and to the tenants of Ash'arite theology would be compromised by the use of a neologism whose etymological connotation is dissonant with the content of these.

To show the practical effects of the neglect of the practice of the rectification of names for our own language, take the following example. The two important epistemological terms "thought" and "consciousness" may be defined respectively in contemporary English as "intentional mental effort" and "passive general awareness". However, in European languages up to the 19th Century, and so for philosophers such as Descartes and Locke, the meaning of these two terms was the reverse of our usage- "thought" meant "passive general awareness", while "consciousness" meant "intentional mental effort"[25] (a usage still reflected in certain contemporary idioms, like "a conscious effort" and others).

In the absence of either a general policy of linguistic conservation or the specific name-rectification of scholarly discernment, even an expert reader of the works of these thinkers must at best be left befuddled by the discrepancy, and at worst will form false opinions about the content of these thinkers' thoughts or even about reality itself. Considering whatever errors a Descartes or a Locke may make in conceptualizing the relationship between "thought" and "consciousness", it may be hoped that their common sense was sound enough not

[25] Martin L. Manchester, *The Philosophical Foundations of Humboldt's Linguistic Doctrines*, (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1985), p. 42.

completely to reverse the relationship between these faculties of mind. However, again, in the absence of the rectification of names, anyone is doomed to understand them thus. Given the rapid changes imposed upon language at all times by the members of European cultures, we must inevitably encounter this sort of confusion very very often whether consciously or not. This is not to mention the very real danger posed by the active distortion of language that occurs under the auspices of the public relations industry. If, again, the practical definition of a term is reliant upon each use of it, what does, for example, the serial repetition of a phrase like "Love is Coca-Cola" do to the definition of the word *love*?

For those of us who use regularly an apparently unrectified language, the logical force of these examples should be somewhat disturbing. There is an important difference, however, between our discomfort at the possibility of conceptual disorder and that expressed by Hsün-Tzu in his writings. Whereas Hsün-Tzu frets over the social disorder attendant to the neglect of the rectification of names, the tendency in western thought has been to question the capacity of the individual to understand reality when such understanding is reliant in whole or part on a properly ordered system of lexical meaning.

Both the passage in the *Analects* and the chapter in the *Hsün-Tzu* assume that the ancient terminology corresponds to reality well enough that appeal to its authority suffices, thus rendering the breaching of such a question unnecessary. Hsün-Tzu treats interestingly of

numerous related questions such as the relationship between sensation and language, but he does not ask about the relationship between thought and language, nor whether the language of the ancients is perfectly or only satisfactorily correspondent with reality. Although Hsün-Tzu criticizes and complains about distortions of language in his time, the political or social authority over language still in force may have made the problems mentioned seem less urgent than they do to us. In the context of modernity, however, not only do we face the problems of linguistic anarchy for social order, but we first feel compelled to confront the much deeper and more difficult question of which language, if any existing, should have authority, and why?

With this question we move away from the field of the rectification of names and into that of linguistic relativity. I regard these two fields as fundamentally identical at root yet directed towards two different concerns. For this reason, I will proceed to treat of linguistic relativity separately before returning to consider the relationship between the two.

2. Linguistic Relativity

Has a nation ever exchanged its gods (and theirs are not gods at all!)? Yet my people have exchanged their Glory for something without value. "Be aghast at this, you heavens! Shudder in absolute horror!" says the Lord. "For my people have committed two evils: they have abandoned me, the fountain of living water, and dug themselves cisterns, broken cisterns that can hold no water!" -Jeremiah, 2:11-13

The principle of linguistic relativity may be defined as a philosophy of language that holds language and thought to be in a relationship of mutual determination. At least since the time of Plato of Athens, the question of linguistic relativity has been a subject of debate in western philosophy.[26] Although often taking the form of more-or-less vague speculations on the possible correlation between the differences of language and the differences of culture, the foundation of theories of linguistic relativity is the philosophical question of the relationship between language and thought as such. In other words, even in a world where only one language existed, the relativity of language and thought would still be operative.[27]

Unlike the established place held by the doctrine and practice of the rectification of names in China, the idea of linguistic relativity is still a sharply contested issue in western philosophy. Whereas in the classical Chinese case Hsün-Tzu was able to appeal to the ancients for a suitable linguistic model for his rectification program, the debates over linguistic relativity have occurred in an atmosphere of profound epistemological scepticism and indeed has contributed its share to that. Numerous inchoate lines of development in western thought overlap in the arena of this debate, as do (coincidentally or not) some of the ugliest passages of modern history. For these reasons it is impossible to give a complete summary of modern western linguistic relativity theory, and difficult to give a precise one. However, if we are to

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[26] Manchester, *Humboldt's Linguistic Doctrines,* p. 143 *et passim.*

[27] Ibid., p. 144-145.

understand how religion uses language as it does, some understanding of linguistic relativity, I believe, is indispensable.

The great German linguist Wilhelm von Humboldt's formulation of linguistic relativity is among the most general and influential treatments of the matter, so I will provide a brief summary of it in order to give greater specificity to our understanding of the idea. Humboldt regards linguistic relativity as primarily a philosophical problem that is wholly contained within the proper understanding of what is meant by the terms "thought" and "language".[28] Since, for Humboldt, thought and speech are identical, any given language

> "Carries... all the concepts which at that time can be developed in the nation. Each... develops the totality of a world-view in that it contains expression for all representations which the nation makes about the world, and for all the sensation which the world brings forth in it." [29]

Humboldt describes the manner in which this relationship operates by theorizing a logically pre-linguistic general thought (or "consciousness" in the contemporary sense) that consists of a "chaotic flux...of sensations" that is then divided up, or "articulated", into units of

[28] Ibid., p. 147.
[29] Ibid., p. 149.

thought, or "concepts".[30] This sorting out of the perceived and understood world is both accomplished and made permanent by the use of language in accordance with the attendant circumstances of both environment and personal characteristics, the latter in Humboldt's terms the "national character". This permanence allows for the initial intuitions of the period of the formation of a language to be passed on to later generations, influencing their understanding of the world and helping to impress upon them anew the national character. Although this theoretical relationship between language and thought precedes any consideration of the variety of languages, it is evident that languages differ substantially in the particular divisions they impose upon pre-linguistic consciousness, thus necessarily producing variations in thought and culture. In particular, the more complex a concept is, the greater will be the variation between languages in their treatment of it.

Also helpful in clarifying Humboldt's understanding of linguistic relativity is his account of what Manchester calls the "Inflectional Superiority Theory", which is the idea that languages that use inflectional systems of grammar are superior to those that use word order or other methods to convey grammatical relationships.[31] Often dismissed as a manifestation of cultural chauvinism because of the prestige given to Greek and Latin (both inflected languages) in early modern Europe, the valorization of inflection as superior to other forms of

[30] Ibid., p. 153.
[31] Ibid., p. 126.

grammar may in fact be shown to follow from some of Humboldt's assumptions about the relationship between language and thought.[32]

Put simply, Humboldt divides language into two parts- lexicon, or words that convey meaning, and grammar, or means of showing relationship between words that nevertheless possesses no meaning in itself. Because inflection uses meaningless changes in sound to show meaning, and furthermore because inflection is word-interior, meaning and grammar are kept both separate in cognition while in immediate proximity in usage. Because of this, inflected languages purely display the true character of language directly to the mind of the speaker while also allowing for the clearest possible expression of ideas. This argument demonstrates both theoretically and by way of example the sense of Humboldt's linguistic relativity- language, and especially grammar, approximates reality (in this case, that of language itself) to varying degrees.[33] Some grammars do so well, others less well, and their relative ability to do so has direct influence upon the habits of thought of the people who use them.

Humboldt's formulation of linguistic relativity was generally neglected throughout the 19th Century.[34] In the 20th Century, however, numerous students of his work began to pursue

[32] Ibid. p. 126.
[33] Ibid., p. 133-142.
[34] Ibid., p. 146.

studies in the area, ultimately forming a Neo-Humboldtian school of linguistic relativity.[35] Perhaps the most important legacy of this school is the influence it apparently had upon the thinking of Albert Einstein in the development of the principle of physical relativity.[36] Although the character or extent of Einstein's application of Humboldt's ideas to physics is unclear, the event marks the beginning of the long interaction between linguistic relativity and some of the most important advances of modern physics.

Benjamin Lee Whorf, the linguist whose name is most commonly associated in the contemporary American academy with the idea of linguistic relativity, studied physics at Yale in the 1920's, and possessed expertise in the field, writing papers that anticipated major ramifications of the principle of physical relativity.[37] His famous and controversial formulation of the principle of linguistic relativity was undertaken in part in response to Werner Heisenberg's skepticism regarding the correspondence of language with quantum physics. Heisenberg had said that "the problems of language here are really serious. We wish to speak in some way about the structure of atoms.... But we cannot speak of atoms in ordinary language".[38] Immersed as he was in the study of American languages, Whorf's work attempts to begin to overcome some of the limitations that European languages have for describing the

[35] Ibid.
[36] Danny K. H. Alford, "Is Whorf's Relativity Einstein's Relativity?" http://hilgart.org/enformy/dma-rel.htm#N_2_ , accessed 11/2/2012.
[37] Ibid.
[38] Ibid.

new physics by introducing grammatical modes from American languages that are not limited in the same way, and by virtue of that may provide a more accurate way of speaking about physics.[39]

The less-than-ideal appellation "Sapir-Whorf hypothesis" generally used in the American academy to denote the theory of linguistic relativity may be somewhat to blame for the controversies surrounding the idea. At first glance, this name would seem to be taken to refer to speculations on linguistic relativity undertaken by Whorf and subsequently supported by his mentor Edward Sapir.[40] However, this name refers in fact only to an interpretation of Whorf's work that is profoundly unfaithful to his original intent.[41] In his highly influential yet controversial writings on linguistic relativity, Whorf in fact spoke of no hypothesis, but rather of a "principle of linguistic relativity", consciously echoing Einstein's phraseology in his work on the principle of physical relativity.

In one of his more famous arguments compares English grammar with that of Hopi, Whorf discusses the differences in the grammatical treatment of time in the two languages. As part of a broader account, Whorf shows that where English treats units of time, say "day", in a manner analogous to quantities of objects (for example, "10 days" has the same grammatical

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[39] Ibid.

[40] John Lucy, *Language Diversity and Thought*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

[41] Alford, "Is Whorf's Relativity Einstein's Relativity?".

form as "10 plates"), Hopi regularly uses "ordinal" numbers (e. g. "after the 10th day from now" rather than "10 days from now").[42] Whorf argues that these grammatical forms bring about a habitual understanding of each successive day as different from the last by English speakers, but a habitual understanding of each successive day as the return of the same day by Hopi speakers. These understandings are themselves part of broader patterns of grammatical treatments of time that recall Humboldt's idea of worldviews. These patterns ultimately may be shown to underlie differences in cultural practices regarding time.[43] Whorf asserts that in correlation with these patterns, English speakers treat time as a material or a commodity, something that may be saved, used, or wasted, budgeted, programmed, and scheduled according to "equivalent monetary value of time units" such as "rent, interest, (and) insurance". Hopi speakers on the other hand, in Whorf's words "deal with the future…by working within a present situation which is expected to carry impresses, both obvious and occult, forward into the future event of interest" through practices of "inward and outward preparations for future events". Lucy points out that these practices are "activities in the immediate present with presumed future effect" that "are not like our activities of budgeting and scheduling".[44]

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[42] Lucy, *Language Diversity,* p. 51-52.
[43] Ibid., p. 60-61.
[44] Ibid, p. 61.

However interesting and influential, Whorf's body of work on linguistic relativity has significant limitations that have unhappily contributed to a deep misunderstanding of his work across a broad swathe of the linguistics community. His work is characterized by a use of exoticisms and expert knowledge that at times appear to be barely shrouded appeals to his own authority as an anthropologist and linguist that are then deployed in a somewhat aggressive fashion against the prevailing paradigms of his day. Whorf's work at the same time suffers from a lack of systematic exposition and unclear language that, while technically correct, misdirects his readers and critics into unproductive debates over insignificant points of interpretation. For instance, it is famously rumored in connection with the above example that Whorf claimed that the Hopi language does not refer to time, and that therefore the Hopi conception of time must differ from that of the speakers of European languages.[45] He did not mean, however, that the Hopi cannot conceive of past, present, and future, or time in any generalized sense, but rather that Hopi lacks the specific way of speaking about time *as a substance*, as shown above.[46] In spite of this, a good portion of the debate over Whorf's assertion has focused on whether or not Hopi makes use of grammatical tense at all, thus rendering the argument unfit as a primary vehicle for the discussion of linguistic relativity.

[45]Benjamin Lee Whorf, *Language, Thought, and Reality,* John B. Carroll ed., (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1956), p. 57
[46] Ibid., p. 58.

The theosophical tendencies Whorf displays in his later writings on linguistic relativity,[47] while of some interest for a student of theological linguistics, also have given his critics a convenient opening by which to dismiss Whorf as mad.

Despite these controversies, Whorf's thought has seen some interesting development in the field of theoretical physics. The work of David Bohm, a physicist who indirectly contributed to the construction of the atom bomb, attempted to develop a new language specially designed for the discussion of quantum physics along lines inspired by Whorf's ideas. This language, called the "rheomode",[48] emphasized verbal forms against the tendency of European languages heavily to employ categories of nouns. These ideas, found in his book *Wholeness and the Implicate Order*, enjoyed "qualified success"[49] in the physics community.

Late in his career, Bohm organized a symposium that gathered influential physicists together with intellectuals from various North American indigenous groups.[50] Although no representatives from the Hopi tribe itself attended, the participants confirmed that Whorf's characterization of the manner by which the Hopi represent time corresponds to the way that time is represented in their own languages. Very significantly for the study of religion, among

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[47] Ibid., p. 246.

[48] Danny K. H. Alford, "Re: Sapir-Whorf and what to tell students these days", LINGUIST List 6.1149, Tue Aug 22 1995 http://linguistlist.org/issues/6/6-1149.html accessed 11/2/2012.

[49] Ibid.

[50] Ibid.

the conclusions of the conference was the realization that the Indians' way of speaking about the spirit world harmonized profoundly with the physicists' way of speaking about the quantum world.

In recent years empirical studies performed with reference to Whorf's formulation of linguistic relativity have produced results that also are claimed to confirm it in part.[51] According to Alford, many of these studies suffer from the misinterpretation of Whorf's principle as a hypothesis that may be tested empirically. A large number of these studies have investigated the relationship between language and the perception of color. One, for instance, related the perception of color to the development of names for colors in children, attempting to show a link between the particular names given to color by various languages and the way people who speak perceive color.[52] Although these studies have produced interesting, if somewhat peripheral, insights into fields like neuroscience, the misinterpretation of Whorf's thought has ensured that only in extraordinarily narrow fields such as this have his ideas been applied. Furthermore, in these empirical studies the field has shifted subtly, moving from interrogating the relationship obtaining between language and thought to that obtaining between language and perception- crossing back over the boundary between "consciousness"

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[51] Lucy, *Language Diversity,* p. 157-177 *et passim.*

[52] Terry Regier and Paul Kay, "Language, Thought, and Color: Whorf was Half-Right", Trends in Cognitive Science, Volume 13, Issue 10, (October 2009), Pages 439–446.

and "thought" shown above to be compromised in the transition from early-modern to contemporary terminology in European philosophy.

This is another reason that the preoccupation with empirical proof of Whorf's account of linguistic relativity is ultimately unsatisfactory- the simplicity of empirical percepts only allows for a limited range of variation when compared with more abstract concepts. As in Humboldt's formulation, it has been a consistent feature of linguistic relativity theory that abstract concepts ought to be more reliant upon language than material concepts. That partial proof of Whorf's account may be found even for such a relatively simple percept as color is remarkable evidence for the wealth of diversity waiting to be discovered in fields that demand more abstract conceptualization.

The conclusion that areas concerned with greater levels of abstraction from material perception will see greater influence of thought upon language demonstrates the importance of linguistic relativity for religious thought. Religion, more so than perhaps any other discipline, regards the immaterial aspect of reality as it primary field. The fact or degree of materiality of divinity, selfhood, proper action, or other religious concepts is almost irrelevant precisely because in this world these concepts are not encountered by the senses in any other context besides that of dreams or visions. These concepts are, at least for most people, primarily linguistic realities. For this reason, we should expect for these concepts a greater

degree of reliance upon language and concomitantly a greater degree of variation in them across languages.

Since it appears that it is not merely significant lexical items that determine the doctrinal content of a given religion, but also the grammatical system by which it is expressed, it cannot be considered sufficient merely to adopt words from a sacred text into a different language in order to convey the sense it communicates in another tongue. To confirm this idea, it would arguably be sufficient to observe higher levels of continuity in the doctrine and practice of a given religion when expressed in the same language over time in conjunction with higher levels of variation when that same religion is translated into a different language. At any rate, the historical tendency, mentioned above, of religions to conserve archaic languages for the expression of their doctrines rather than adopting the easier route of translation, even translation combined with heavy borrowing from the original, would seem to be circumstantial evidence for the idea.

Whorf provides a relatively precise account of the specific power of language to shape thought. However, the relatively undifferentiated state of Whorf's examples has left many to a certain extent bewildered as to where to begin any continuation of his work. What aspects of language are more determinative, and which less, and what is the relationship between these aspects? Humboldt's work would seem to suggest lexica as a starting point, while Whorf's

emphasizes grammatical forms. However, even this is perhaps too vague. What is required is the construction of a hypothetical hierarchy of linguistic forms that explains the determination of thought by language specific level by specific level, rank by rank.

In order to suggest such an initial point, I shall take an example from the linguistic philosophy of Charles S. Peirce, one of the founders of the science of signs, or semiotics, and also of the school of philosophical Pragmatism (which he later renamed Pragmaticism). Although he tended to be excluded from the American academic community during his lifetime, numerous writings retrieved from his papers have had significant influence in a number of areas of concern to contemporary science and philosophy, including contemporary cognitive linguistics.[53]

Of particular interest to us are passages taken from a series of published articles wherein Peirce criticizes the Cartesian notion of "clear and distinct ideas" that are readily available to human "intuition".[54] Peirce argues that this notion requires the conception of a faculty of cognition (intuition) that has no basis in the available facts, and that Peirce proceeds to show is irrational and incoherent.

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[53] Charles S. Peirce, *Peirce on Signs: Writings on Semiotic,* James Hoopes, ed., (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), p. 1-4.

[54] Ibid., pp. 34-53.

In arguing his case, Peirce gives an account of the development of self-awareness in children. He asserts that children do not possess awareness of self until a relatively late period in their maturation; before developing this awareness, they treat all perception as pure, as though unmediated by a self. The impetus to the development of self-awareness, Peirce says, is the dawning of awareness of one's own ignorance, followed closely by awareness of error.[55]

Since for Peirce selfhood is not properly a faculty of mind, but rather an inference drawn from experience, he insists that the self is "of the nature of a sign".[56] It must therefore be treated as a complex construction of interpretation that must itself be explicated, rendering it impossible that the self be referred to as a ground for metaphysical philosophy, as Cartesian philosophy famously does. Peirce goes on to apply his three-fold theory of signs to the self in pursuit of epistemological clarity. It is the insight itself that is of interest to us, however. If the self is of the nature of a sign, it can be nothing but another concept "articulated" from pre-linguistic consciousness. It follows that, as per Humboldt, the naming and grammar that concern the self must be intricately bound up with its conceptualization.

In numerous ways, the concept of the self is very well suited to be a subject for research into linguistic relativity. It is firstly a concept that forms a bridge between the concrete and the abstract. Following from Peirce's treatment is the fact that the development of self-

[55]Ibid., pp. 44-45.
[56] Ibid., pp. 83-84.

awareness initiates the process of introspection, and so in a sense the self is the first of the abstract concepts. Yet the self is concrete enough to have its own grammatical form, the reflexive, the usage of which varies greatly even amongst "Standard Average European" languages (to use Whorf's phraseology), not even to speak of that to be found in more diverse groupings, such as Semitic or American languages.

To take the self as a subject for investigation into linguistic relativity also would stay true to the Whorfian tradition by virtue of its relevance to theoretical physics. The self is the inductive heart of the deductive edifice of science. If the unwelcome intrusion of the observer into supposedly objective scientific theorizing is one of the defining problems of the new physics, it would seem to follow that consideration of different manners of speaking (and therefore of conceiving) of the self could provide clarification of apparent physical paradoxes in just the way Whorf had hoped his principle of linguistic relativity would do.

Advantageous for this enterprise is the fact that the character of the self has been the subject of a vast amount of religious and theological literature that has remained generally unscrutinized by the scientific community. The examination of these texts' accounts of the self would aid in the problematization of the self in the light of the differing grammatical systems of the languages of world religion. If a sound, systematic correlation could be made between the doctrines of the religions concerning the self and the grammars of these

languages, we would gain evidence for linguistic relativity along with a better understanding of the way in which our language shapes our self-conception. Most importantly in our current context, we would also be in a position to consider the influence of religion upon both lexical and grammatical forms. Although it does not take up this question explicitly, Chapter 3 of this thesis could be considered a preliminary foray into this field. Before moving on, however, I will consider some of the implications of the material covered in this chapter.

3. The Husbandry of Meaning

The inquiry into linguistic relativity in modern philosophy and science is still very much incomplete. Numerous lines of research on the question other than those I have mentioned here are underway in various disciplines. Of importance also is the history of politico-economic linguistic engineering by numerous governments, movements, and classes over the course of the modern period, which is a field worthy of attention in its own right.[57]

As I have argued above, religion and language share numerous, intimate bonds. Because of this, the question of linguistic relativity cannot but involve itself with theology and religious studies on many levels. The discovery of common ground between the conceptions

[57] For a good introduction to this issue, see Ji Fengyuan, *Linguistic Engineering: Language and Politics in Mao's China,* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'I Press, 2004).

of the spirit world of theology and the quantum world of physics through the mediation of linguistics is a particularly consequential development. To reference religion as a primary component both in variations on Humboldt's idea of "national character" and in the maintenance of linguistic norms that sustains elements of that character would also likely be a fruitful line of inquiry. Of course, to question the manner in which more or less unconscious ways of thinking induced by grammatical structures influence or determine particular elements of religious thought and practice would be a logical development of these arguments as well.

We may say by way of summary that the question of the relationship of religion and language has an outward aspect and an inward one. The outward aspect, described by the Confucian doctrine of the rectification of names, is a system of linguistic ethics which seeks to maintain a coherent body of linguistic meaning in the interest of social order and clarity of communication. This aspect explains both the legal authority traditionally held by religion to enforce particular definitions of language to the exclusion of others and the tendency of religious language to conserve its form even in the absence of explicit legal authority. The latter tendency is also relevant to the inner aspect of linguistic relativity, which concerns the power of language to reflect and sustain particular cultural characteristics through both idiosyncratic grammatical and lexical structures.

Due to the instability of the multi-disciplinary debate surrounding linguistic relativity, in particular the skeptical tendency among physicists as to the potential for language to describe the quantum world at all, and due as well to the extraordinary complexity of the implications of this theorized linguistic power, a theory of a divine revelation that shapes language both through certain elements of historical language and through a particular scripture such that language becomes precisely competent grammatically and lexically to reflect reality as it is would seem necessary to maintain the traditional position of religion as arbiter of linguistic meaning. As certain religions, in particular those of the Abrahamic tradition, teach that precisely this sort of revelation has occurred and is maintained in their scriptures and liturgical languages, the claims of religion at least retain the capacity to respond to this challenge to religion's linguistic authority.

As both of these aspects are presented herein as bound up in a single sphere of religious activity, a new name is warranted that encompasses both of these aspects and places them in the religious sphere while distinguishing the question from religion in general. Therefore, we may say that by virtue of its taking up of the question of the relationship between language, truth, the individual, and society, religion has among its constituent and foundational disciplines the art of the husbandry of meaning. By this is signified the practice of seeking out, identifying, capturing, taming, caring for, and deriving benefit from meaning. Language being

the primary vehicle of meaning, the husbandry of meaning appears most clearly as a gradualistic, truth-oriented discipline of language formation, definition, conservation, and application.

If we are to make use of a linguistic definition of religion as I have proposed, the husbandry of meaning must be admitted to be a necessary endeavor for religion. The radical trust all religion places in language to describe reality as it is, accompanied by the high seriousness with which the application of that description to worldly life is invested, extending as it does even to all following generations, requires the strictest attention to language. Although perhaps made explicit only in the Confucian tradition, all attempts to standardize doctrines and scriptures and to render licit or illicit various forms of speaking should be understood to originate at least to some degree from the necessity of the conservation of the meaning of language. But this conservative trait should perhaps not be over-emphasized, for the development of religious language both in response to revelations and changing social conditions represents an important fountain head for new linguistic forms as well.

To reiterate, the governance that religion exerts over language is analogous to the governance a constitution exerts over a state. Adherence to a religion denotes allegiance to a text and a tradition of interpretation that both authoritatively define the words of language and establish the rules and norms of grammar through the medium of the liturgical language.

As religious adherence is generally established by means of oaths, in religiously significant contexts the adherents of a religion are bound to use language in a way that is faithful to the language of the founding texts of the religion. Yet over time, the meanings of oaths are themselves reliant in a real way upon the conservation of the meanings of the words used therein, and therefore significantly upon the religious art of the husbandry of meaning.

Chapter 3

Linguistic Relativity and the Interpretation of the Qur'an

1. *The Qur'an's Conception of Language*

In the previous chapter, we saw that linguistic relativity and the rectification of names reference the same phenomenon from different aspects- while relativity concerns epistemology, name-rectification concerns politics and social ethics. Furthermore, these two fields may be seen to refer to one of the two tiers of the linguistic definition of religion given in chapter one. Assuming the general validity of these two modes of thinking, religion inescapably must engage in meaning-husbandry in order for it to function. Otherwise, the conceptual web of language on the one hand would become so confused as to be unusable, while on the other the requisite realization of religious principles in the world would be impossible because of the unethical use of language. The teachings of the traditional religions of the world have not neglected to consider the central importance of language in human life. It very well may be that the lack of a specific name in most religions for the practice that I have called the husbandry of meaning is due to the fact that that practice lies so close by to the heart of the religious ethos of the Abrahamic religion as to be

nigh-indistinguishable from it. While the practice of the rectification of names is necessary at some level for any communication, the insistence of many religions upon the maintenance of a sacred language displays a concern that the very grammar of revelation be preserved. Although certainly questions of identity and pride may be involved, this phenomenon suggests an acknowledgement of linguistic relativity. The meaning of the sacred texts can only be satisfactorily expressed in the sacred language. Any attempt to translate them vitiates their meaning, and while this may be said for any text, the special character and use of religious texts tends to be regarded satisfactorily accessible only in the original languages. Highly detailed preservation of linguistic form is commonplace in religious contexts. The Hebrew of Judaism, the Sanskrit of Hinduism, the Greek of Homer, the Avestan of Zoroastrianism, and numerous liturgical languages of Christianity (including Elizabethan English) have all been preserved to a greater or lesser extent out of religiously-motivated concern for their conservation.

Islam does not differ from the general model in this respect. Arabic has been the liturgical language of the Muslims since the first revelations of the Qur'an to the Prophet Muhammad, and the text of the Qur'an has been preserved in a form of Arabic that in our time has become somewhat archaic relative to both dialectical and Modern Standard Arabic. In the case of Islam, however, this preservation does not arise solely from the general religious

impulse described above. The Qur'an asserts and establishes the Arabic character of the revelation in numerous contexts,[58] contrasting Arabic with other languages and arguing that the Arabic character of the revelation renders vacuous attempts to claim that someone other than the Prophet had taught the text to him.[59]

In regard to the definition of religion proposed in Chapter One, the Qur'an is something of a transparent sign. That is to say, it is both a representation of reality that may be read and understood and a reality to be represented in interpretation. We may say that the Qur'an uses language primarily to represent reality while secondarily presenting language as ritual discipline instrumental in actualizing that representation. As a manifestation of the word of God, the Qur'an acts both to impart and conserve the meaning of language. As the most important literary foundation of the Arabic language, moreover, the Qur'an is a great force for establishing patterns of thought and action for the speakers of that language. Too, language has a place of importance for the arguments of the Qur'an that may be unmatched relative to any other work. For these reasons, the Qur'an represents an ideal text wherein to explore interactions between religion and language such as those I have discussed in the chapters above. In this chapter, then, I will discuss elements of the Qur'an's conception of language relevant to the husbandry of meaning.

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[58] Qur'an 12:2 *et passim.*

[59] Qur'an 16:103.

The most prominent proof of the Qur'an's divine origin given within the pages of the book is the inimitability of the aestheto-ethical power of its language.[60] This proof is not a mere play to the strength of the Qur'an, however, but rather accords with the general conception of language found throughout the entire work. This conception may be stated in a general way to have numerous elements, three of which are closely related to one another. The first of these three is the *creative principle* of language, which should be familiar to students of the Abrahamic religion generally. That is to say, the means by which God creates the worlds is the word. This principle is most often expressed in the Qur'an by variations on the phrase "when God desires a thing, He merely says to it "Be!", and it is".[61] The second element, following from the first, is the *universality* of language in creation. Created by means of the word, all things in turn possess to some degree the power of speech. Everything, from angels to ants to mountains, from the Earth to the jinn to birds to individual human body parts, is depicted as speaking in the Qur'an. It is in the voice of the very skins of the sinners (who are called elsewhere in the Qur'an "the worst of creation"[62]) that this principle is expressed definitively:

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[60] Qur'an 2:23.

[61] Qur'an 2:117 *et passim.*

[62] Qur'an 98:6.

> And they say unto their skins (*julūd*): why testify ye against us? They say: Allah hath given us speech *Who giveth speech to all things*, and Who created you at the first, and unto Whom ye are returned.[63]

Thus language appears synonymous with creation itself- according to the Qur'an, to be is to be speaking. Too, all things direct their speech back to God in the form of glorification, as stated in the verse "all things that are in the heavens and the earth glorify (*yusabbiḥu)* Him".[64] As for the third element, we may say that if language is both the means of creation and is found universally in creation, it follows that relative linguistic capacity is a *principle of hierarchy* in the universe. This doctrine is expressed most fully in the initial account in the Qur'an of the creation of Adam and his investiture with vice regency over the angels and the rest of creation.

> 30 And when thy Lord said unto the angels: Lo! I am about to place a viceroy in the earth, they said: Wilt thou place therein one who will do harm therein and will shed blood, while we, we hymn Thy praise and sanctify Thee? He said: Surely I know that which ye know not.
>
> 31 And He taught Adam all the names, then showed them to the angels, saying: Inform Me of the names of these, if ye are truthful.

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[63] Qur'an 41:21.

[64] Qur'an 59:24.

> 32 They said: Be glorified! We have no knowledge saving that which Thou hast taught us. Lo! Thou, only Thou, art the Knower, the Wise.
>
> 33 He said: O Adam! Inform them of their names, and when he had informed them of their names, He said: Did I not tell you that I know the secret of the heavens and the earth? And I know that which ye disclose and which ye hide.[65]

We see here that it is the particular knowledge of language taught by God to Adam, the knowledge of the names, which legitimates Adam's divine vice regency *(khilâfa)* over the rest of creation. Because Adam knows the names of which the angels are ignorant, they withdraw their objection to being placed under his authority. This is consonant with the character of their objection, which likewise is phrased in terms of linguistic knowledge. As we saw above, all things have the capacity to glorify God. Here, the angels give a fuller account of their own glorification, saying *"naḥnu nusabbiḥu bi-ḥamdika wa nuqaddisu lak",* literally "we glorify with Your praise and sanctify You". The linguistic abilities of the angels are clearly well above simple glorification, including also praise and sanctification, and they mention this fact in order to obviate the need to establish anyone above themselves.

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[65] Qur'an 2:30-33.

To give a fuller account of the varieties of language that correspond to the hierarchy of the universe, we may say that so far in our discussion four distinct types of language have been mentioned as present in the creation. These are glorification (*tasbîḥ),* praise (*ḥamd),* sanctification (*taqdîs),* and name (*ism).*

As we saw above, all things glorify God. This glorification expresses the impassable gulf separating all creation from God. Related to sensation, glorification may be simply emotive, corresponding to bestial exclamation for instance; yet its all-encompassing character makes it the basis for even the specifically angelic forms of praise. Praise expresses the sensed transcendence of God while specifying in that His providence. Not only does God create in His awesome power as we see in the creation of the heavens and the earth, but also He provides for creation, individuating each thing from all others and providing for all of them. As praise regards the providence of God to His creation, sanctification concerns the character of God as a distinct entity separate from all of creation. It articulates His purity from the nature of created things, such as birth, death, time, limit, and like things, expressing all of these as attributes *(śifât)* of negation.[66]

[66] The Arabic and Semitic etymology of the root *qds points to a sense of purity and cleanliness. Shams al-Din al-Qurtubi, الأسنى في شرح أسماء الله الحسنى (Illuminations by Commentary on the Beautiful Names of God), (Beirut: al-Maktubat al-Asriyya, 1429/2008) p. 211; Jeremy Black et. al eds., *A Concise Dictionary of Akkadian,* (Wiesbaden: Harrasowitz Verlag, 2000).

The character of these three forms of language is relatively straightforward of explanation. In seeking to understand the character of name, therefore, it will be expedient to make use of them. All three are forms of glorification, yet their primary concerns may be divided into two. Glorification regards the transcendence of God without articulation, while sanctification regards His transcendence with articulation. Praise on the other hand regards God by regarding His creation, specifically what He has given to His creation through His providence. Just as simple glorification cannot by itself express with any precision the manner of God's transcendence, however, praise gives only a general sense of the providence of God. Left alone, this structure remains unbalanced. Although the transcendence of God is given both unarticulated and articulated expression, praise's unarticulated expression of the providence of God has no corresponding articulation.

It is here that name is introduced to complete the structure. This may be expressed as an analogy: glorification is to sanctification as praise is to name. For where praise gives an unarticulated expression of the providence of God, name makes distinctions between modes of divine providence. This is clearly evident in even a cursory glance at the list of divine names of Islamic tradition. For instance, names like the all-Merciful (*al-Raḥman),* the most-Merciful *(al-Raḥim),* the Bounteous *(al-Wahhab),* the Provisioner (*al-Razzaq),* the Ennobler *(al-Mu'izz)* and many others articulate the providence of God. Looking more closely, we see that the names of

rigor such as the Debaser *(al-Mudhill),* the Compeller *(al-Jabbâr),* and the Afflicter *(al-Ḍârr)* likewise must be considered articulations of the providence of God. This is proved by reference to the Qur'an in *Surat al-Rahman*, where the punishment of God is named among His favors *(âlâ'):*

> 43 This is hell which the guilty deny.
>
> 44 They go circling round between it and fierce, boiling water.
>
> 45 Which is it, of the favors of your Lord, that ye deny?[67]

and as well to the *hadith* from al-Tirmidhi, "The Fire has a gate which is only entered by the one who will only be healed of his anger by the wrath of Allah".[68]

In its articulation of unarticulated praise, name encompasses the whole of creation preceding it. In the angelic mode, as we saw above, praise recognizes the provision God gives to creation, reflected in the assignment of angels as governors over things great and small. Name articulates this in its application to all created things, distinguishing each thing from all

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[67] Qur'an 55:43-45.

[68] Cited in Muhammad ibn al-Hashim ibn al-Tilmsani, *Commentary on the Chess Game of the Gnostics,* trans. Aisha Bewley, chapter 14 "*Jahannam",* http://bewley.virtualave.net/chess1.html#Hell (5 September 2012).

else. To speak the name of any given thing, therefore, is to praise God in His Providence for singling out that specific thing for His provision. The content of that provision likewise is specified by names that refer to modes of being found imperfectly in creation but attributed in their perfection to God by names such as the Living *(al-Ḥayy),* the Hearing *(al-Samî'),* the Seeing *(al-Baśîr),* the Knowing *(al-'Alîm)*, and others.

Furthermore, in the course of the naming of the creation, each mode of glorification is likewise denominated. Both unarticulated and articulated glorification therefore are expressed as Names of God as well. Thus the attribute (*ṣifah)* of timelessness is expressed as a name, the Eternal (*al-Qayyûm),* while the attribute of indivisibility is expressed as the name the Absolute (*al-Ṣamad).* The encompassing fulfillment[69] of naming is the proper name of God, Allah, which praises God as the individual Being Whose creation and provision results in His being named.

The Qur'an's conception of language provides a neat summation of the basic principles of monotheism. Language is identified at one and the same time with the divine creativity, the universality of creation, and differentiation in creation according to rank. All three of these ideas are fundamental to monotheism, and it is easy to find analogies in other theological discussions. Take for example the discussion of the Nearness of God. Among the names of God is found the Near *(al-Qarîb)*, and the Qur'an mentions repeatedly the nearness of God to His

[69] William C. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge,* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), p. 5 *et passim*

creation. At the same time, however, created things are described as being arranged upon a hierarchy of nearness and distance to God. Just so, both God and creation have language in some sense, yet the creature's relative knowledge or ignorance of language qualifies its possession of it, placing it at a relative distance from God.

The Qur'an does not discuss language solely in a strictly theological context. Numerous passages and verses bear upon language in the context of life on earth and relations between created things. It is important to bear in mind, however, that the discussion of the linguistic hierarchy of the universe above concerned the capacity of language to glorify and praise God, not to describe creation. Although other types of linguistic hierarchy do exist, it is the capacity to name God, for instance, that defines humanity and its place in the hierarchy of the universe, while the capacity to praise and sanctify God defines angels and their place.

This being said, it is clear that in the Qur'an the principle of linguistic hierarchy applies between individuals just as it does between classes of beings. The term "knowledge" *('ilm)*, already used in the passages above, is broadly synonymous with the ability properly to understand and use language. It is important to note in this connection, however, that knowledge only effects this hierarchy through the medium of the actions of individual beings, which element is often named in the Qur'an "God-consciousness" *(taqwâ,* [literally "self-guarding"]). God-consciousness is among the most persistently enjoined and most respected

character traits in the Qur'an. The hierarchy of human individuals in this regard is stated explicitly in the verse "The noblest of you in the sight of God are the most God-conscious".[70] Yet knowledge amounts to a necessary precondition for the related concept of God-fearing as shown by the verse "Only the knowledgeable fear Allah". The Prophet Muhammad is ordered "Say: increase (*zid)* me in knowledge!",[71] while elsewhere it is stated "The best provision (*zād*) is in God-consciousness".[72] On the other hand, knowledge is implicated in hierarchy in the verse, "Above every knower is the Knower",[73] as well as in the account of the coronation of Saul (*Ṭâlût)*[74].

While knowledge of language establishes the hierarchy of the classes of beings of the universe, it is only on the microcosmic, individual scale that the distinction between word and act is stressed. In the account of the coronation of Adam, the link between knowledge and action is merely assumed, while in general the urgent necessity for all mankind of joining the two constitutes a central theme of the Qur'an. The genesis of this discrepancy between word and act may be found in the account of the fall of Adam, and relates to the oath that, although refused by the rest of creation, is taken up by man.

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[70] Qur'an 49:13.
[71] Qur'an 20:114.
[72] Qur'an 2:197.
[73] Qur'an 12:76.
[74] Qur'an 2:247.

In the fallen state, ethics and knowledge are conditional upon each another for their full realization. Since knowledge is synonymous with language, which is itself the principle of the universal hierarchy, ethical deficiency is logically related to linguistic deficiency. Coupled with the principle of historical de-evolution, found for instance in the *hadith* of the Prophet "Every age is worse than that which preceded it",[75] the relationship between ethical and linguistic deficiency indicates an analogous principle of linguistic de-evolution.

The numerous exercises of religious authority over language found in the Qur'an and the *hadith* literature viewed from the perspective of linguistic de-evolution indicate various types of linguistic deficiency. The most important of these is the tendency for words to be separated from their meanings. Several passages of the Qur'an correct or prohibit specific, broadly figurative usages that direct the force of words to ends divergent from their current or legal meaning. In the discussion of the "sonship" of adopted children, for instance, the Qur'an dissuades adopted children from being called "sons" in order to make explicit the permissibility of marriage between the families of the adopting parents and the adopted child that would be impermissible in the case of true "sonship".[76] Likewise, in the same verse the Arabian practice of partial divorce effected by a husband's saying to his wife "you are my

[75] *Sahih al-Bukhari,* Vol. 9, Book 88, No. 188.

[76] 33:4-5.

mother"[77] is sanctioned. The *hadith* that stipulates that marriage, divorce, and taking back a spouse are binding whether there formulas are spoken in earnest or in jest[78] viewed in conjunction with these verses demonstrates further that words in the context of family law have legal force inherent in their very pronouncement. The Prophet himself also exerted authority over language, changing names with pagan overtones to Muslim names and the name of his adopted city to Medina from Yathrib. He likewise used his authority over language to modify the etymological connotations of words, forbidding that wine be called *karam*, a word derived from a verbal root that signifies nobility or generosity.[79]

These examples of the authority religion holds over language brings up another question- if one uses the Arabic established by the Qur'an, modified by the Prophet, and interpreted by the scholars, what may be said to be the origin of language from a theologically Islamic viewpoint? Various schools of thought have attempted to answer this question definitively. The view of the now-dominant school of the Ash'arites has been that language has a divine origin, pointing to numerous verses in the Qur'an such as "(the All-Merciful)... taught man (clear) speech (*bayân).*[80] On the other hand, the once-dominant rationalist school

[77] Ibid.
[78] *Sunan Abu Dawud*, Book 12, No. 2089.
[79] *Sahih Muslim,* Book 27, No. 2247.
[80] Qur'an 55:3.

of the Mu'tazilites taught that language is of human origin,[81] citing the verse "You do not worship besides Him (anything) except names that you have named, you and your fathers".[82] Considering these verses, I believe it is clear that the Qur'an asserts that language has both divine and human origins; that is to say, if one uses a word or phrase that originates in divine revelation, one's language has a divine origin, while if one uses a word or phrase that originates from human convention, one's language has a human origin. The two are not mutually exclusive.

The language of the Qur'an is Arabic, as is mentioned in various places in the book itself. Because of the Qur'an's insistence on Arabic, attitudes toward translation of the book have been cool, especially when compared to other universalistic religions such as Christianity or Buddhism. The historical preservation of the deep grammatical and lexical conservatism of the Arabic language seems sufficient enough reason to adopt a stricter policy toward rendering the Qur'an in other languages. However, in the light of linguistic relativity, the grammatical and conceptual structure of the Qur'an's language and the rhetorical styles employed by the text can only be likewise preserved if the original language is used. In the following sections I shall discuss two themes from the Qur'an that cannot be communicated with the fluency necessary for translation in languages other than Arabic.

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[81] Elizabeth Kay Wright, "Sound and Meaning in Medieval Arabic Linguistic Theory" (PhD diss. Georgetown University, 2000).

[82] Qur'an 12:40.

2. Linguistic Iconicity in Sūrat al-Falaq and Sūrat al-Qadr

In his work *al-Khaṣai'ṣ,* the famed 4th/10th century phonetician Uthman ibn Jinni proposed the use of a method he calls *al-ishtiqaq al-akbar*, or "greater derivational lexicography", to link together the meanings of words that share root consonants.[83] This method is based on the assertion that words sharing all three root consonants, differing only in the ordering of them, will tend to have related meanings. Among the examples he gives is the relationship between the roots *sa-ma-la, sa-la-ma, ma-sa-la, ma-la-sa, la-ma-sa, and la-sa-ma.*[84] These roots tend to share a sense of smoothness. *Samal* is a threadbare garment that has lost its texture. *Salâmah* means safety and well-being, again related to ease and simplicity. *Masl* is a riverbed, obviously a smoothed place. *-Amlas* and *Malsa`* both refer to the quality of smoothness. Ibn Jinni points out that *al-lams,* touch, is only possible if the hand may pass over the touched thing without an obstacle. He finally cites a variant usage of the root *na-ma-sa, la-ma-sa,* meaning a light (or smooth) breeze.[85]

A related phenomenon may be observed in the numerous Arabic roots that modify a pair of consonants that connotes a general meaning with a third that specifies it. The phonological character of this third letter often seems to be closely correspondent to the

[83] Wright, "Sound and Meaning", p. 174.
[84] Ibid.
[85] Wright, "Sound and Meaning", pp. 181-185.

variation in meaning. For instance, take the proposed bi-consonantal root **na-fa,* which may be said to refer to breath in general. Some of the extent realizations of this root include *na-fa-fa-* "to snuff"*, na-fa-tha-*"to blow lightly, spit" *, na-fa-sa,* "to breathe", *na-fa-sha-* "to puff up", *na-fa-ḥa-* "to blow", relating to wind*,* and *na-fa-kha-* "to animate by means of breath", "to inflate", "to blow a trumpet". The stronger the sound of the third consonant, so is the stronger the meaning of the word. This phenomenon also seems to have grammatical force as well- while *na-fa-ḥa-* is transitive, *na-fa-kha-* is doubly transitive, adding to its more forceful connotation.

These examples may all be considered examples of linguistic iconism, which refers broadly to correspondences between form and meaning in language. Despite the apparent existence of many such parallels, the theoretical foundation of iconism has been notoriously hard to establish. Especially in ancient times, iconism was proposed to represent a natural connection between words and referents, provoking sharp opposition from those who believed language to be conventional. The existence of these absolutist positions has been moderated in contemporary times- many linguists hold that language relies both upon conventional and iconic elements. Rather than attempting to establish iconicity as the primary implement for communicating meaning in all language, contemporary scholars have taken the position that language displays gradations of iconicity.[86]

[86] Ludovic de Cuypere, *Limiting the Iconic,* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2008), p. 3.

Two interesting studies of two of the shorter chapters at the end of the Qur'an have been published that relate the developments of contemporary iconicity research to the sacred book of Islam. One, "The Iconic-Cognitive Role of Fricatives and Plosives: A Phono-Semantic Analysis of a Classical Arabic Prayer *al-Falaq*" by Afnan H. Fatani[87], deals with phonaesthetic iconicity, the way in which the sounds of words evoke the qualities of the subject they treat. The other, Michael Sells' "Sound, Spirit, and Gender in Surat al-Qadr"[88], is concerned primarily with the interaction between diagrammatical iconicity, or the way in which the structure of linguistic expressions elucidate the nature of their subject through resemblance, and the consequent adoption of "semantic overtones" by certain recurrent phonetic features. In the following, I will treat some of the more salient sections of the contents of these articles.

In Fatani's paper, emphasis is placed on the use of the latent iconic potential of the Arabic language in the Qur'an, specifically in chapter 113, *al-Falaq* "The Break of Dawn". This chapter, the second-to-last in the Qur'an, is a prayer through which refuge is sought with God from various evils of the world.

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[87] Afnan H. Fatani, "The Iconic-Cognitive Role of Fricatives and Plosives: A Phono-Semantic Analysis of a Classical Arabic Prayer *al-Falaq*", in *Outside-In, Inside-Out: Iconicity in Language 4,* eds. Costantino Maeder, Olga Fischer, and William J. Herlofsky, (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2005) pp. 173-192.

[88] Michael Sells, "Sound, Spirit, and Gender in Surat al-Qadr", *Journal of the American Oriental Society Vol. 111 No. 2* (April-June 1991) pp. 239-259.

Fatani organizes his study around the primitive meaning of the root *fa-la-qa*, to split. The word *falaq* itself usually refers to dawn, but Fatani uses the meaning inherent in the root to organize and interweave the iconic meanings he seeks to uncover. Because of the state of research into iconicity in Arabic, we do not yet have the means to fully bring forth the iconicity of the roots themselves. Fatani begins that process by showing that the internal dynamics of the roots themselves resembles splitting, saying that in the root *fa-la-qa* the *fa* resembles "friction", the *la* resembles "accumulation of matter", and the *qa* resembles "compression and eruption", yet his reliance on this "superordinate" concept of splitting itself prevents him from taking further steps in this direction. As he himself says, the root *fa-la-qa* often calls forth positive connotations of reproduction, growth, and fruition; for this reason, it might make sense to view the cacophony of the *surah* as symbolizing inhibition of *falaq*.

Be that as it may, Fatani undertakes a classification of the consonants in the texts, and finds a predominance of fricatives and plosives that "produces a cacophonous effect... in accord with the turbulent and rough image of 'splitting'.[89] Furthermore, the prominent position of the fricatives *fa, kha, 'ayn,* and *ḥa* and the placement of the plosives *qaf, ba,* and *dal* at the end of each verse reenacts the process of splitting with gathering of force followed by

[89] Fatani, "Iconic Role", p. 187.

explosions of voice. The repeated use of the letter *qaf,* the most forceful Arabic phoneme, in particular tends to evoke this sense.

Fatani goes on to note that this phenomenon lessens somewhat over the course of the chapter, ending with two instances of a root that is considerably less bombastic, *ḥa-sa-da.* It is here that he most clearly enunciates an iconic communication of meaning, stating that the "syntactic parallelism" of the end-rhyming words of the verses of the chapter leads the listener to associate envy with splitting.[90] Such a conclusion fits with my alternate assumption of the place of splitting in the chapter, as well: under his assumption, the heart of the envier splits due to his simultaneous admiration and covetousness, while under mine, the very process of growth and fruition itself may produce that which opposes it, the envier. Either way, we may have gained an inkling into the manner in which iconicity is used as an instrument for the animation of meaning in the Qur'an.

Now let us turn to Michael Sells' paper "Sound, Spirit, and Gender in *Surat al-Qadr". al-Qadr* ("Destiny"), is an explanation of the nature of the Night of Destiny *(laylat al-qadr),* which, according to commentators on the Qur'an, is the night wherein the Qur'an was first revealed to the Prophet Muhammad. Part of Sells' interest in undertaking his study is the untranslatability of the emotional resonance of the Qur'an paired with the simultaneous

[90] ibid. p. 191.

dearth of literary studies of the aural qualities of the Qur'anic recitation. The method he uses derived, he says, from "years of teaching the Qur'an to students not conversant in Arabic"[91]. In particular, he emphasizes the importance of *tajwid,* or the method of artful recitation, in the production of these qualities and resonances, while also proposing to treat of *tawâzun*, or "textual harmonics", and *naẓm*, or voice, in this case the unique Qur'anic voice.

Sells uses techniques from the linguistic region of poetics to perform his exposition. He acknowledges that this could be problematic considering the clear, repeated denial that the Qur'an may be characterized as poetry in the book itself.[92] He justifies this use by citing Roman Jakobson to the effect that "the poetic function of language should by no means be limited to poetry".[93] This is an important point, for while scholars of poetics have made many important contributions to the study of linguistic iconicity, it would be false and discourteous to insinuate that the Qur'an has the same literary status as poetry.

One point that may be made in this regard is that, while the Arabic word *shi'ir* derives from a word that signifies a kind of knowledge, the English word "poetry" derives from a word meaning "to make". The word "poetics" may be then derived in a very broad sense of "the way in which language is aesthetically constructed". This broad meaning is somewhat distant from

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[91] Sells, "Sound, Spirit, and Gender", p. 240 n. 5.
[92] ibid. p. 241.
[93] ibid., cit. Roman Jakobson, "Linguistics and Poetics", in *Style in Language,* ed. Thomas A. Sebeok, (Cambridge MA: MIT Press 1960), pp. 358-359.

the very specific meaning of *shi'ir,* and may be more closely related to *naẓm* and *tawâzun,* mentioned previously.

Sells focuses much of his attention upon the long 'a' sounds that contrast with the closed syllables at the end of each line. The dichotomy between these two parts of the two verses is bridged by single syllables, *hu* in the first verse and *ma* in the second. He shows that the first two verses set up a regular meter with closely consonant sound and rhythm to one another. This meter is subsequently upset, first by the absence of the long 'a' in the third verse, and then its return just before the powerful phrase *war-ruḥu fîhâ* "and the spirit in it" appears in the central place between the two metrical sections in the fourth verse. The fifth verse then returns to a recognizable, though not identical, form of the original metrical pattern.[94]

In what way does this exposition of the structure of this chapter give evidence of the use of iconicity in the Qur'an? To demonstrate that this chapter makes use of diagrammatical iconicity, I cite Sells' linking of the juxtaposition of the verse "the night of determination is better than a thousand months" and the mention of the spirit (*ruḥ*), in the following verse with other verses in the Qur'an that link the spirit to a relativization of time.[95] In particular, we find in the Qur'an chapter 70 verse 4 that "the angels ascend-and the spirit- to him on a day whose

[94] ibid. pp. 247-253.
[95] ibid. p. 254.

extent is fifty thousand years". Sells furthermore cites al-Qurtubi's citation of a tradition that "indicates that the night of *qadr* is equal to all time".[96]

The metrical regularity established at the beginning of the chapter is followed by a powerful displacement of that regularity, which is itself followed by the meter's reconstitution. Sells argues that this metrical structure constitutes an iconic diagram of the activity of the spirit. The resemblance between sign and signified in this case provides important information for our understanding of the meaning of the chapter. This is primarily due to the general difficulty of understanding the character of the spirit, as the following verses indicate:

85 They ask you concerning the spirit.

Say: the spirit is from the command of my Lord,

and no knowledge of it has come to you except a little.[97]

The paucity of human knowledge concerning the spirit leaves those seeking knowledge of it from the Qur'an in a unique position. Because direct questioning and definition cannot operate, one must use the clues given in each mention of the spirit in order to gain a degree of understanding of it. The pairing of semantic elements with formal elements in this chapter

[96] ibid. p 249, op. cit. Muhammad ibn Ahmad al-Qurtubi: Al-Jami' li Ahkam al-Qur'an, vol. 28 (Cairo, 1962), p. 131.
[97] Qur'an 17:85.

constitutes one of these clues. The Qur'an does not state explicitly that the spirit itself has anything to do with this relativization of time, yet the persistent juxtaposition of these two elements combined with the powerful diagrammatical iconicity in this chapter communicates the relationship of the spirit to the relativizing of time in a compelling manner. As the spirit is an important element in Islamic psychology that is furthermore used to characterize Jesus and Gabriel[98], even such a subtle intimation as this may have profound consequences for the Muslim's understanding of reality.

"And what will make known to you what the night of determining is"? The obvious answer is "*salâmun hiya",* "It is peace" in verse 5. Yet the interposition of the description of the descent of the angels and the spirit between the question and that lapidary definition does not merely semantically denote certain aspects of the night, but also impresses the character of the night onto the consciousness of the listener by means of an iconic diagram. This impression, when verbally expressed, is discovered to reflect a concept which is not found explicitly in the text.

[98] ibid. p. 254.

While a thoroughly established theory of iconic signification would have an important place in language in general, the potential of iconism to indicate liminal realities such as this will be ever more greatly felt in texts of greater abstraction- poetry, philosophy, and especially sacred texts. The profusion of available examples in the Qur'an strongly reinforces and clarifies the Qur'an's insistence upon its Arabic character, since the vast majority of these significant ornamentations must ineluctably disappear in translation.

3. *Three Genera of Likeness in the Arabic Root* mīm-thâ-lâm

Mim-tha-lam lies behind words signifying concepts derived from the idea of "likeness" in most if not all of the Semitic languages.[99] Three distinct genera of likeness may be discerned within the broad scope of meaning accorded to the root. These genera are consistently differentiated in the Qur'an despite the very close similarity of the words that signify them.

The senses of Arabic words tend to develop from the concrete to the abstract. The most basic sense of a root is often of a simple action, relation, or concrete thing; these roots are then modified or expanded through the manipulation of vowels and the use of grammatical forms to express highly abstract meanings. Often, it is not hard to see an analogical relationship between the basic meaning and the abstracted meaning, yet in certain

[99] J. D. Cowan, ed. *The Hans Wehr Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic,* (Urbana: Spoken Language Services, 1994).

cases roots may be found that have a highly developed abstract meaning while seeming to lack a definitive concrete sense. Here, the broader Semitic etymology of a root may give important information. If a concrete meaning for the root may be found in another Semitic language, the conceptual web of the Arabic root may be given clearer contours by positing some sort of historically relationship between that sense and the abstract meanings found in the modern tongue.

Conversely, during our research into the Semitic lexicon we may find in another Semitic language analogical extrapolations from the root under investigation that are not found in the Arabic language. Considering the manner in which such a term has been abstracted from the root, we may find that our understanding of the geography of the root's essential, proto-Semitic meaning has been enriched. We would then be provided with the ability to more comprehensively and concisely state the conceptual shape which the root signifies.

Beginning with the realization of the root in Arabic, let us remain confined to those senses which may readily be shown to be related to the idea of "likeness" (there are others which likely have a different etymological background). The three most common nouns that derive from the root are *mithl* (plural *amthâl*), *mithâl* (plural *amthilah* or *muthul*), and *mathal* (plural *amthâl*). Although these words share very similar conceptual space, they are not

identical in meaning. *Mithl,* while like all of these words able to stand for "likeness" in a general sense, is used uniquely for **likeness in kind**. The unique sense of *mithâl* is that of **likeness of form or pattern,** while *mathal* is used for **figurative likeness.**

Turning to the broader Semitic etymology of the root, in very brief research I was able to identify realizations in the sense of "likeness" from the root in Akkadian/Assyrian, Hebrew, Syriac/Aramaic, Old South Arabian, Ge'ez, and Amharic.[100] I will be using here primarily Akkadian words to illustrate my point; the research in all of these languages informed my thoughts on the matter, however.

In the Akkadian realizations of the root we are able to espy concrete meanings which point to firm conceptual bases for two of the senses of the Arabic nouns given above. In Akkadian, a slight phonological variation is found, giving our root the form **ma-sha-la.* Of particular interest is the fact that the one of the best-attested meanings of the root in Akkadian is *mashlu,"*half," and in verbal form *mashâlu*, "to equal."[101] This concrete sense solidifies the sense of the genus of likeness mentioned with the first Arabic noun given above, *mithl.* The two halves of a thing are clearly **essentially similar;** in other words, they possess

[100] Joan Copeland Biella, *Dictionary of Old South Arabic,* (Chico: Scholars Press, 1982); Jeremy Black et al. eds, *A Concise Dictionary of Akkadian,* (Wiesbaden: Harrasowitz Verlag, 2000); John Elwolde, ed., *The Dictionary of Classical Hebrew,* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993); Ignace Gelb et al. eds, *The Assyrian Dictionary*, (Chicago: The Oriental Institute, 1964); Girma Y. Getahun, *Advanced Amharic Lexicon*, (Muenster: LIT Verlag, 2003); Thomas O. Lambdin, *Introduction to Classical Ethiopic (Ge'ez)*, (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1978); J. Payne Smith ed., *A Compendious Syriac Dictionary*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1902).

[101] Black, *Concise Dictionary.*

likeness in kind. Another very interesting concrete meaning found in Akkadian for this root is the word *mushâlu,* "mirror."[102] Another word from the root, *mushshulu*, may mean "made to resemble" as well as also meaning "mirror." Again, the sense of likeness is very easy to derive from these words. A mirror displays **formal likenesses** of things, relating the Akkadian word to the specific meaning of *mithâl.*

The sense of *mathal* presents something of a more complex problem. In both Hebrew and Syriac, the root (*ma-sha-la* in Hebrew, *ma-t(h)a-la* in Syriac) is used to refer to **figurative likeness**, especially figures of speech, and in particular means "parable",[103] a sense somewhat indeterminate with regard to abstraction. I was able to find no word establishing a more concrete sense than this for this meaning, but further research could very well discover one.

Two passages from the Qur'an employ words from *mīm-thâ-lâm* in such a way that, when translated into English, they seem to present a paradox, if not a contradiction. The first reads "...and to Allah belongs the highest similitude, and He is the Mighty, the Wise,"[104] "similitude" translating *mathal.* The second reads "There is nothing like Him, and He is the Hearing, the Seeing,"[105] "like" translating *mithl* in *ka-mithlihi.* Looking at the English translations, a casual reader might think it strange that someone whom nothing is like may

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[102] ibid.
[103] Elwolde, *Dictionary of Classical Hebrew;* Smith, *Compendious Syriac Dictionary.*
[104] Qur'an 16:60.
[105] Qur'an 42:11.

have a similitude, seeing that similitudes only function by means of some likeness. To add to the confusion, although in English we use the Latin word "similitude" to denote the more specialized meaning of figurative likeness as against the Germanic word "like," which is used for simple, essential likeness, a glance at the etymologies of these two words show that they are in fact used in opposite senses from their original meanings. This is so, as "similar" derives from the same Proto-Indo-European root **sem,* meaning "one,"[106] the same root as *homo,* while "like" derives from a word meaning "sharing a similar form or characteristics."[107] These contradictions exist beside the more obviously counterintuitive coincidence of the phrases "there is nothing like Him" and "He is the Hearing, the Seeing" in the second verse given above. Again, to the English reader this may seem to be just some sort of mystification or obfuscation, since obviously someone who hears and sees is like human beings, and indeed all animals, at least in the sense of possessing these sensory apparatus.

In the Arabic, however, there is no contradiction. These two words, *mathal* and *mithl,* which derive from an identical root, and which are even orthographically indistinguishable without vowel markings, clearly signify two distinct modes of likeness which are inherent in the Semitic etymology of the root itself. As mentioned above, *mithl* refers specifically to

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[106] *American Heritage College Dictionary,* 4th Edition, s. v. "*sem".

[107] *Online Etymological Dictionary*, s. v. "like", http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?allowed_in_frame=0&search=like&searchmode=none accessed 11/08/2012.

essential likeness, which we also saw in the Akkadian word for "half," while *mathal* refers specifically to figurative likeness, which we may see in the sense of "parable" or "similitude." The fact that there exists nothing that is *essentially like* Allah does not contradict the fact that Allah has the highest *figurative likeness,* the kind of likening that we see in the names that are shared by Allah and His creation, such as Hearing and Seeing. There is not the slightest contradiction between the verses or within them; to the contrary, they impart instruction with a subtle clarity.

The nuanced convergence and divergence of the senses of the Arabic words derived from *mim-tha-lam* represents a coherent expression of the conceptual structure of the idea of "likeness." This conceptual coherence allows the words of the language to be used unambiguously and with dynamism. Without such a strong foundation, the meanings of the words of a language may come under constant debate and discussion, vitiating the cultural life of the speakers of that language. These three genera of likeness represent, therefore, an ideal product of the art of the husbandry of meaning.

Chapter 4

Religion, Language, and Thought in ʻAbd al-Salām ibn Barrajān's *Sharḥ Asmā' Allāh al-Ḥusnā*

As we saw in the previous chapter, one of the most important elements of language in the Qur'an is the name. There, Adam's being taught "the names, all of them" is directly linked to his rank as God's vice-regent on Earth. Another use of names is more important for the Qur'an considered as a whole, however: the motif of the "Beautiful Names of God" (*Asmā' Allāh al-Ḥusnā*) found throughout the text, coloring and punctuating passages and linking them one to another. These names constitute one of the most easily recognizable texts of Islamic devotion.

There are several sayings of the Prophet Muhammad that concern the Names of God. Among these are sayings that establish the number of names as 99 and proceed to list them. These lists differ slightly as to which specific names are included, but the general trend has been to accept the number 99 as canonical. One of the most important *hadiths* reads in part as follows: "The Prophet (may God bless him and give him peace) said, 'God has 99 Names, 100

less one... Whoever enumerates them (*'iḥṣāhā)* enters paradise".[108] The signal importance of the divine names in the Qur'an coupled with the emphasis upon them in the *hadith* literature has prompted many of the greatest scholars of the Islamic tradition to write commentaries upon them. The general form of these commentaries is a general introduction to the tradition of the names, followed by a list of names with explanations appended to each of them.

The commentary this chapter concerns represents a development in the form of the commentary on the divine names by virtue of its emphasis on both the reflection of the names in the created universe as well as the implementation of the names as instruments of worship. The threefold division of the commentary developed by ibn Barrajân influenced the approach to the divine names of the famous Sufi Muhyī al-Dīn ibn al-'Arabī, who was part of the generation of Spanish Sufis immediately following ibn Barrajân, and through ibn al-'Arabi the entirety of Sufism.

Ibn Barrajân's commentary in general and his threefold approach to the commentaries in particular represent very good material through which to examine the influence of language upon religion. For this reason, I provide below a translation of a few pages from his introduction that regard his method. Following the translation, I shall discuss in more detail the implications of his work for the art of the husbandry of meaning.

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[108] *Sahih Muslim,* Book 35, Nos. 6475-6476.

Herein follows the seven enumerations of the names, and Allah knows what is beyond that:

The first of them: the derivation of its meaning in language.

The second of them: an account of the characteristics shared between them and the discrimination of their senses.

The third of them: an account of their links back to the highest attributes, which are: divinity, unity, life, knowledge, power, will, and sovereignty, and (connecting) to each attribute of them what befits its meaning with regard to the names. Just as unity has related to it the concept of the nullity of relations, and the separation from the gaze, from similarity and sameness and the like of that, (names) such as the Unique, the One, the Distinct, the Absolute, the Odd (in number), and whatever others contain this meaning. And as Life has related to it whatever encompasses its meaning, such as the Living, the Abiding, the Persisting, such that it extends its meaning to encompass most of existence, so that life is through them the fixity of the names.

And thus has Knowledge related to it what has it in its meaning, such as the Knower, the Aware, the Hearing, the Seeing, the Witness, the Clear, and the like of that...

And thus has Power related to it those names which are allied to it in its meaning of action, and of bringing forth existent things from nothingness into being, such as the Powerful, the Strong, the Creator,

the Provisioner, the Eternal, the Originator, the Fashioner, the Establisher and the like of that as far as it extends in its meaning...

And thus has Will related to it those names allied to it in the meaning of willing, such as the Extender, the Constrictor, the Exalter, the Abaser, the Ennobler, the Dishonorer, the Enricher, the Impoverisher, the Giver, the Enlivening, the Killing, the Sender, the Bountiful, and the Beautifying. It extends its meaning unto what is related to Power and Knowledge whether they are connected or separated, as likewise extend the meanings of Power and Knowledge unto it, except that the names of Power are distinguished from the meaning of the names of Desire by a smaller degree... Extends unto it those of the names which concern the meaning of the entire organization and are characterized by Mercy and Bounty, reward and punishment, friendship and independence, and the inflection of action in what is done, and their beginnings and terminations.

And thus has Sovereignty related to it those names allied to it in its meaning, such as the King, the Coercer, the Judge, the Just, the Equitable, the Sender, the Resurrector, the Warner, and what in its meaning is related to Divinity.

Divinity gathers all the names so that from it is what distinguishes each of their characteristics, so that some of them He makes clear while some of them He hides, so reflect on this with your understanding and rest upon it with your reason, may Allah support you. Ask Allah for help and He will help you, and give you a criterion to distinguish between similarity and likeness until the realities of the

Truth are verified by the permission of Allah, your Lord. Most of this is not the knowledge of books but rather the knowledge of the heart. The portion of each affair after this is the provisioning of Allah and the goodness of His aid by the power of His providence and the greatness of His perseverance. And at the time wherein you see the characteristics of those of them that be characterized through that whereby they are characterized, and how each clearly takes it place among the meanings, and how each approaches the like of itself in each direction, and the nearness of the like of it... and how they are confirmed and reinforced, and how they are connected and distinguished, and made manifest and occulted in existence (by) revealed knowledge, then glorify Him Who has no similar and no compare, the One who is named by the names with all goodness and beauty.

There is next connected to this the fourth enumeration, and it is to investigate the meanings of the Names in the world, and their traces within the work of Allah awesome of mention, and to seek out the gnosis of how the work is characterized by each of the Names of Him who is Master of it, and what is extended unto it from them in relation to the like of it. That extends unto the great vastness of creation and the exalted heights of the affair of the Names. The gaze is broken in it as in a stupendous blaze at the expanse of the kingdom and the magnificence of the (celestial) dominion. Aptitude in this affair originates from the Providence, Bountifulness, and Inspiration of the intellect by the succor of Allah, awesome of mention. Allah the Honored said among His sayings, "And in that way We showed Abraham the dominion of the heavens and the earth in order that he might be of the folk of certainty". And he said,

may he have peace, "O my father! There has come to me a portion of knowledge that has come not to you, so follow me, and I will lead you to a straight way"- the straight way whereupon Allah fashioned the heavens and the earth, the way of Islam.

Next, the fifth enumeration, which is the knowledge of the worship which derives from each name and its meaning according to the knowledge of what they establish of acts of worship and obedience upon the path of exhortation and prohibition.

Then, the sixth enumeration, which is the grasping of the soul of the act by which each of the Names is distinguished in that regard, and of their prompting to the path of courtesy according to what is appropriate... This while leaving what transgresses the judgment of command and prohibition or deviates from the Sunnah unto innovation and rather establishing all of that just as Allah established it in His book and the Sunnah of His prophet. Thus he acts upon insight into the affair and is in all of that upon a clear proof from his Lord. These are the degrees of the foremost of the endowment of the Names. If He wills, Allah will grant through this book of ours indications pointing to what we have mentioned and illuminations to guide the seeker unto what follows what we have introduced. So may He exalt you in purity and exclusive devotion, and again in contemplation... upon that. Guidance is from Allah and good assistance, and there is no power except through Allah Exalted and Magnificent, and from Allah is the expansion of the benefit of supplication, so call upon Allah with sincere faith.

Next, the seventh enumeration. The beginning of it is necessity, and the heights of it have no limit whereby it would be obstructed. It is the universal comprehension of the science which comprises the varieties of gnosis, as well as the exalted wellspring of that knowledge and its radiant springing forth from the meanings of the Names of Him who is the All-Knowing, All-Wise Creator, glorified and mighty, exalted in His station. It is the gate to that which is sought through enumeration, which is that portion of gnosis with which Allah endowed His servants, as His word Who is the Truth expresses, "He who determines and guides" and His word "He said, my Lord is He who bestows upon each thing its character, then guides", and upon which subject is that which the prophets expressed by their word, "Can there be a doubt concerning Allah, the Creator of the heavens and the earth? He calls you". And regarding the saying by realization, the knowledge that is sought of His attributes, His Names, His deeds, and His traces is only sought on account of ignorance of Him, and the stirring of doubt, and the weakness of action regarding it. That knowledge which is desired is only learned by means of indication, and is inferred by indications while ignorance prevails regarding it.[109] *And when what is sought is known and what is aimed at is understood and realized, and the arrival of knowledge of it occurs at the first mention, or rather cognizance of it does not require the examination of the Names nor the Attributes nor the Characterizations, or rather (it occurs) at the first instance with apodictic knowledge and detailed awareness without (the act of) recollection or reflection, as says Allah the Mighty and Exalted as a likeness of this gnosis, "Those whom We have given the Book know it as they know their sons".*

For the exalted folk, this undertaking is in stations, and the fearful exhibit a high and exalted fear that wells up due to love. The like of this is exhibited in the station of this gnosis by the folk of love, whenever one of them is raised up to the highest of the stations of love, (such that) love rooted in the station of friendship gushes forth for them. This is the station of the Beloved in its signification, Mighty in His Being, and there occurs to the possessor (of this station) the knowledge that his Lord, great is His Majesty, is his Beloved, and regarding this station one of them has said

"And from you is the beginning of love by might intermixed

With the waters of communion you are its juncture

You are manifest to the one whom you sustain after his negation

And he is without being for that you are he".

This is as He says, glory to Him and to Him praise, "Truly I (do not) approach the heart of a servant that I find occupying it with My remembrance, except that I am his hearing with which he hears, his sight with which he sees, his foot with which he walks, and his hand with which he strikes". The servant is the servant and the Lord is the True Lord without doubt, but the folk of interpretation are

ignorant of this until it overwhelms them in awe. The meaning is only "and Allah speaks the truth and guides to the way", "Allah created Adam on His form".[110]

In this highly allusive yet practically oriented text, ibn Barrajân fashions from the divine names a comprehensive instrument of contemplation. Through sustained activity that is both introspective and ritualistic, the understanding of the signification of the divine names is refined to the point that knowledge of Him who is Named by them may be inferred from any created thing immediately, thus producing sustained, unbroken awareness of the Presence of God.

This work both requires as an antecedent the religious activity of linguistic conservation that I have termed in this work the husbandry of meaning and is as well an instance of it. The Beautiful Names of God, whose language is established and defined through the revelation of the Qur'an and explained and directed in the prophetic traditions, form the basis of the work. The transmission of these involves the clarification of their meanings and the winnowing out of the potential applications of the language through both individual and social reflection and disputation. Although necessarily deeply conservative, this process is also highly creative, inasmuch as each successive generation must relearn and reapply for itself the language of the tradition and its implications and applications. Always attendant

[110] Abd al-Salām ibn Barrajān, شرح اسماء الله الحسنى, (Commentary on the Beautiful Divine Names), (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-'ilmîya, 2010).

upon this creativity is the danger of misunderstanding and concomitant deviation from the meanings of the original language and it is thus the creativity itself that justifies the outwardly conservative stance. Indeed, the progressive deviation from the established meanings of language is, as we saw above, an element of the prophetic teaching. Although an inevitable aspect of tradition and therefore of language itself, any discipline such as that of Sufism must attempt to conserve as far as possible the meanings of its terminology if the original benefits derived from language formation are to be preserved in any sense.

Among these benefits are both the establishment of grammatical norms and the rendering explicit of semantic relationships otherwise left unarticulated. In the case of the Islamic religion, the Qur'an gives pride of place to the grammatical form of the name, as we saw in the previous chapter. This preference lends itself to particular ways of understanding- for instance, it suggests a certain attitude toward the problem of unity and diversity. As discussed by Muhyi al-Din ibn al-'Arabi, the diversity of the names does not compromise the unity of God.[111] At the same time, however, their multiplicity serves as a sort of screen that protects the human being from direct awareness of the Divine Essence. Thus, while the Qur'an encourages reflection upon all things including the names of God, it prohibits as an exception

[111] Ibid., pp. 35-36.

reflection upon the Divine Essence.[112] In the theological context, however, it may be said that we have greater knowledge of the Names of God than we do about His exalted individuality.

Ibn Barrajân makes use of these particular grammatical and semantic qualities in his teachings regarding the pursuit of gnosis. By systematically and diligently enumerating the names according to his method, the student will merge his thought and perception with the form of language expressed in the tradition of the Divine Names. The authority and the spiritual power of this form of language derive from the divine revelation of the particular names and the particular grammatical characteristics of name itself.

Grammatically speaking, while names do not denote any individual in terms of his individuality, they still yet imply the existence of some individual. The grammatical character of name as denotation distinct from individuality thus allows for the possibility of the construction of a model of the creativity of God while leaving His Essence uncharacterized. The first six enumerations are instructions for this work. By firmly establishing the names of God in their own meanings, in their relations to the created world, and in their relations to the self through acts of worship, the entirety of the content of the student's consciousness is ordered upon this model of language.

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[112] Qur'an 3:28; Chittick, *Sufi Path of Knowledge,* p. 63.

For the Sufis, all that may be posited by means of human language is the activity of God. According to ibn al-'Arabi, the names of God revealed in the Qur'an are themselves no exception to this, as they only are comprehensible to human beings by virtue of their denotation of some relationship between God and creation.[113] The legal inaccessibility of the divine Personhood is sufficient proof of this- none of the names refers directly to the Essence of God, but rather refer to God by referring to His actions.[114] It is the ever-progressing realization that the names of the created world denote no individual except God that is the content of the seventh enumeration. As I have mentioned, this mode of thought and awareness is implicit in the grammatical form of the name. The revelation of the character of the name as a form of language in the Qur'an allows the human being to conceive of God in a universal sense while at the same time maintaining His distinct otherness from all of creation. The elevation of the grammatical form of the name must therefore be considered among the most important of the revelations of God in the Islamic religion.

In the Islamic tradition of the Names of God we may see the entirety of the art of the husbandry of meaning at work. The Names of God are first revealed in the Qur'an and established in the work of the scholars of the Islam. As adherence to Islam requires acceptance of the authority of this form of language, the tradition is given a firm foundation in a way

[113] Ibid., p. 35.
[114] Ibid., p. 62.

analogous to Hsün-Tzu's rectification of names. Aside from the obvious effects of the significations of the names themselves, we see in works like the *Sharḥ* of ibn Barrajân that the very structure of the grammar of the revealed texts exerts a strong, determining force over the method of their applications and the content of their conclusions, as is expected from the principle of linguistic relativity. Just as Joseph interpreted Pharoah's dream, so does Sufism interpret the world through the medium of the Word of God.

Conclusion

In this work, I have demonstrated the value of a linguistic definition of religion by linking the mutability of language to a discipline of language conservation, implicit in all religion, that I have termed the husbandry of meaning. This discipline maintains language in two aspects. First, it conserves the grammatically embodied meanings of inspiration and revelation, whose existence is both demanded by linguistic relativity and demonstrated by the untranslatable gestural and conceptual structures of texts such as the Qur'an. Secondly, it maintains strictly the denotative power of the language of the revelation as a kind of linguistic constitution, as exemplified by the Confucian doctrine of the rectification of names and the authority over language claimed by the Qur'an and the Prophet Muhammad.

The implications of the extent of religious governance over language are manifold. Most urgent of them, perhaps, is the contrast visible between the religious attitude toward language and that of the totalitarian and semi-totalitarian political and corporate regimes of modernity. These regimes, whose usurpation of this traditionally religious sphere of authority is well-documented,[115] have sought to manipulate language for short-term political, social, and

[115] cf. Fengyuan, *Linguistic Engineering;* Lewis, *Turkish Language Reform;* E. H. Phillips, *Language Theories of the Early Soviet Period*, (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1986).

economic ends, risking in that the delicate harmony of linguistic meaning conserved over long centuries by the religions of the world.

The conclusions of the thesis likewise underscore the importance of traditional language itself as a vehicle of the religious world-view. For this reason, it should be clear that religions have a strong interest in considering both the general picture of the world communicated by the forms of their traditional languages as well as the effects of linguistic innovation upon them.

As mentioned in chapter one, the material treated in this thesis also has relevance for the linguistic problems of modern science. The importance for science, and especially for physics, of linguistic relativity mentioned in chapter two provides an important bridge between religion and science once the linguistic definition of religion is accepted. David Bohm's work in particular provides an important context for the line of reasoning I have followed in this work. In his book *Wholeness and the Implicate Order*, Bohm argues that the world-view perpetuated by the grammar of our language diverges significantly from the vision of reality given by modern physics.[116] This divergence leads to harmful social and individual fragmentation that he argues is at the root of many of the political and societal difficulties of the modern world. Citing Alfred North Whitehead and Jiddu Krishnamurti among others,

[116] David Bohm, *Wholeness and the Implicate Order*, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981), pp. 2-3.

Bohm calls for a new form of language that reflects the dynamic ground of all things in the unknowable "flux", as demanded by his interpretation of the wavefunction problem of quantum mechanics.[117] Interestingly, although he proposes and develops a new form of language relying on Latin roots, he states as well that the verbal root system of the Semitic languages (discussed in chapter 3 of the thesis) provides a world-view that accords with the conclusions of modern physics.[118]

The elaboration of the world-view fitting for a physically relative world in which all things are interconnected is properly not the domain of physics, but of religion. In fact, by virtue of his attempts to link the linguistic representation of reality of quantum mechanics to proper activity in the world, including systematic "rituals" such as reflection and meditation, Bohm's book fits snugly in the definition of religion I have provided. By viewing work such as his in the context of religion, we will be able to draw numerous, fertile connections between religion and science that would have been impossible before. These contributions to Religion as a discipline beneficial for humanity in general I hope this thesis has provided.

[117] Ibid., p. 11.
[118] Ibid., p. 30.

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