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Language and the Formation of Religious Reality

Majed S Allehaibi

Abstract- This paper explores the notion that religious texts and the tradition of religious story telling are the content, form or "the movable feast" by which we form and preserve our culture and group identity, and by which we pass them down to the next generations. All these texts are composed of language that is open for analysis and multiple interpretations. Hence religious beliefs are anchored in language which shapes and reshapes our worldview.

I. Introducation

Paul Tillich saw linguistic symbols as conventional, "they grow out of the individual or collective unconscious" (43). Each linguistic symbol, Tillich notes, "opens up levels of reality which otherwise are closed to us. . . ." (42). about the arbitrariness and conventionality of language, Nietzsche wrote in his essay "On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense":

What is a word? It is the copy in sound of a nerve stimulus … We separate things according to gender, designating the tree as masculine and the plant as feminine. What arbitrary assignments! How far this oversteps the canons of certainty! We speak of a "snake": this designation touches only upon its ability to twist itself and could therefore also fit a worm. What arbitrary differentiations! What one-sided preferences, first for this, then for that property of a thing! … This creator only designates the relations of things to men, and for expressing these relations he lays hold of the boldest metaphors. To begin with, a nerve stimulus is transferred into an image: first metaphor. The image, in turn, is imitated in a sound: second metaphor. (47)

The basic categories of terms in which we see the world come from the human mind. Rather than the world imposing them on us, we impose these forms and categories on the world to make sense of it, and language is an order-imposing phenomenon. It is a form of power that man exercises to control nature. What primarily distinguishes humanity from all other forms of life is this unique linguistic verbal power, such that we can represent the world abstractly in propositional forms and solve problems that are far beyond the range of possibility for the nonlinguistic creature.

Language is the production of sounds by a certain apparatus for the purpose of achieving certain events in the world and adapting to the characteristics of the environment's demands. John Locke's conventionalist theory of language addresses the question: How do words come to have the meaning they have? He says these meanings can only be arrived at by way of certain conventions. It can only be by conventional agreement amongst people that they refer to a chair as a "chair." Similarly, people came to agree that "money" as a word would refer to an object that functions as a medium of exchange, let it be gold coins, silver coins, paper currency, credit cards, or checks. Thus, language then becomes an essentially cultural affair. Not only does one learn Arabic because one is brought up to learn Arabic, but one learns the meaning of terms by the common agreement of those who use these terms.

Languages are traditionally understood to contain two elements: the first is a "denotative" element—that is, the element that represents actual objects in the world, which can ostensibly be defined by pointing at them. So, if one is asked to define a chair, one would give a definition that involves pointing to something, to the object in the category, "chair." The term "chair" is a denotative term, in that the word denotes an actual object in the world. Language also contains a second element—connotative terms, or terms that represent not an object but a meaning. That is to say, if one is asked to show a watch, one would point to an object, but if one is asked to show justice, one would certainly have to engage in certain conducts, a certain performance that matched up not with an object in the external world but with a principle (e.g., No one should be treated merely as a means to an end but always as an end unto himself). Therefore, one would engage in patterns of meaning, and the linguistic elements here would be irreducibly connotative, wrapped up in cultural considerations, the way the world is understood through a particular set of "-isms" during a particular time and cultural history.

What I wish to demonstrate up to this point is that language is a socially constructed phenomenon. It is formed through practices that are sanctioned by the language-using society. Language acquired its reality as a cultural phenomenon through human acceptance or recognition. Furthermore, what goes for language also goes for other social phenomena, such as religion. As Nietzsche says, in "On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense," truth itself is the creation of the human mind,

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created through human experience and living, but we have forgotten that we created it.

For his part, John Searle, in his book *Mind, Language and Society*, says that the human mind acting collectively has a remarkable ability: It can create an objective reality that exists in some sense only because we think or believe it exists, or only because we have a certain attitude towards it. Meanwhile, Ludwig Feuerbach in his "projection theory" of religion, proposes that the concept of God is really a human projection of their essence into heaven. In doing so, human beings alienated themselves from their innermost qualities and created a god out of those qualities. He describes religion as a mistaken belief about reality and symptoms of underlying social and psychological causes. Thus for him, religion is basically an act of human beings projecting into the sky, into this imaginary being (God) who is supposed to be perfect in love, power, righteousness, and justice. All these qualities, Feuerbach thinks, are indeed human qualities, and we took what we hoped to see in a human being and projected it into the sky to console ourselves. That is to say, we do not really have justice on this Earth, but in heaven we will. So, for Feuerbach, we take something that could be a real human attribute and project it upon this alien form, this imaginary being in the sky.

Marx also has a theory of religion that to some extent parallels Feuerbach's theory that religion is a false consciousness. He says that religion is the imaginary realization of human beings; it is the consolation for what the worker has lost. This imaginary realization is needed because human beings possess no true reality. Therefore, they have to have an imagined reality, a consolation such as going to heaven where their humanity is fulfilled or realized in this imagined way. Religion is the hope of restoration of their stolen humanity. It is an expression of suffering: "It is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart in a heartless world, the soul in a soulless condition, it is the opium of the people." It is the way to make their lives bearable. In short, Marx thinks that the religious language discourse is one of lying and propagandizing to impose and maintain social control.

In his "Daybreak," Nietzsche also thinks that religious morality is culturally formed. It started as an individual habit, then as the habit of a tribe, then a custom, and finally, over time, a cultural tradition. It is a set of habits or a set of rituals of which the original cause has been forgotten. In the same way, Searle illustrates, in his *Mind, Language and Society,* how religion is brought about like this with a very useful example: Imagine a community of creatures that builds a wall around an area where they live. The wall's assigned function is to keep intruders out and its own members in, and it functions by virtue of its physical features. It is just too high a wall for anybody to climb over easily. And, Searle adds, suppose the wall gradually decays so there is nothing left but a line of stones. Suppose, however, that the members of the community continue to see the line of stones as the boundary of their community, as the boundary of their little gathering. Suppose they attach a certain notion of duty, or obligation, to this line of stones because they think one is not to cross it, and people outside are not supposed to cross it either. It is just unacceptable to cross that line. In this example, people first assigned a function to an object (the wall), which performs that function solely by virtue of its physical structure. But later, the function is no longer performed by virtue of its physical structure but by way of the collective acceptance or recognition of the line as having a certain status, the status of a boundary. Thanks to that status, it has a certain function, the function of keeping intruders out and the members of the community in.

To return to the main question—what is the role of language in all of this? The answer is that none of it would be possible without language. Language, as mentioned above, is just noises that come out of one's mouth. Words are rather trivial physical events that have this remarkable capacity because we have imposed a function on them. Most religions, if not all, have their sacred texts. They are sacred because they are claimed to be the words of the Divine; thus, we created a sacred language.

For example, Muslims believe that the Quran is the final and complete word of God, revealed to Mohammad as a guide for humankind. For Muslims, Islam can be traced back through the prophets to Abraham and God himself. The Quran embodies that original revelation, and therefore Islam is the oldest, if you will, of the religions. The words of the Quran and the example of the prophet (his sayings, Hadith, and deeds) are preserved in narrative tradition and, which Muslims use as their guide for daily life. They represent the foundation stones not only of the Islamic faith but also of Islamic civilization, discussing as they do the life problems and issues of the Islamic community in addition to outlining religious beliefs and describing religious practices.

The Quran was revealed in Arabic, so Arabic is the sacred language of Islam and translations of the Quran are typically accompanied by an Arabic text. Until recently, translation of the Quran into local languages was forbidden for fear that the original text and meaning would be corrupted. The Quran is full of per formatives, Recanati defines it as, linguistic operations that bring something about, that get something done. The Quranic passages are central to the Muslim prayers, and if a Quranic passage is not recited while praying, the prayer is not performed. Muslims believe that the Quran is a miraculous text. For them, it is the only miracle brought about by the prophet. This is why Muslims believe that reciting specific passages from the Quran repeatedly has the power of blessing, saving, or even curing the

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worshipper from physical or psychological ailments. Reciting specific passages of the Quran over a cup of water or oil would turn it into a medicine. Alternatively, performing a certain kind of praying at a specific time in a specific manner would have the power (by the will of God) to yield rain in time of drought. The words "*besmi Alla Al Rahmani Al Raheem"* ("in the name of Allah the Magnificent the Merciful") is used by Muslims at the beginning of letters, speeches, or lectures. A Muslim would say these words when s/he begins any task. In addition, the Quran has played a major role in the development of Arabic language and literature.

Similarly, Hebrew is considered a sacred language. In the Kabbalah tradition, the Zoharis a profoundly esoteric and sacred book. Jews are not allowed to read and study this text until they are over the age of forty. It teaches that man is separated and alienated from God and that the purpose of the Kabbalah is to return the world as a whole to God; this can be done through *teshubah* (repentance). Kabbalists try to create a kind of critical mass of people who repent so that the whole world can go back to God and the Messiah can come. A branch of the Kabbalah tradition is the contemplation of the Hebrew alphabet and especially the four letters of the unpronounceable name of God. There is a whole mysticism based on the contemplation of that name. It is fascinating in Judaism that one cannot see God, that one cannot even pronounce his name; one can only contemplate the written letters of that name. The Kabbalistic tradition suggests that the structure of the Hebrew alphabet is the key to the structure of creation. Thus, meditation on the Hebrew alphabet, especially the divine name, yields up the secret of the whole of creation. It unveils the meaning of the world; it is a magical way, a mystical way, to reach into the heart of Divinity.

In his *Philosophy of Religion,* John Hick explores quite beautifully the idea that one form of religious discourse is storytelling* . It may be that our storytelling tradition has created our religious reality, just like Searle's example of the wall. Almost all religions are caught up in the notion of the parable, or the creation of myths. They tell stories that have a moral point to help us frame a view of the world. These kinds of stories encourage the formation of a group identity and encourage and solidify group cohesion; they also encourage a group's connection to its traditions and roots. Take, for example, the story of Sara, the wife of Abraham; grown old and childless, she tells Abraham to have a child with Hagar, her servant. So, Abraham and Hagar have a son, Ishmael. Subsequently, to their astonishment, Sara becomes pregnant again and gives birth to Isaac. Because Isaac would be overshadowed by his older brother, Ishmael, Sara persuades Abraham to send Ishmael away with his mother, Hagar, and the pair make their way to Arabia. Now, Jews and Christians trace their genealogy through Sara and Isaac to Abraham, while Muslims trace their genealogy to Abraham through Ishmael and Hagar. This story, therefore, is about heritage and roots and identity. Religious storytelling also has to do with the cultivation of particular kinds of attitudes towards life, people, and nature. The stories also function as a moral framework for specific behaviors, for people's personal and social lives. They channel us in the "right" direction. They are calculated to promote, enrich, and expand moral understanding or an understanding of the nature of our relationships to each other and the world. These stories can also provide us with fortitude in the face of adversity and reassurance when the way is very dark. In short, this kind of religious language or religious discourse constitutes traditions and cultural paradigms.

However, as John Hick argues quite poignantly, this storytelling tradition also leads to the persecution of individuals or societies and the development of a persecuting mentality in which national identity is articulated through punishing, torturing, or executing those who tell different stories. It is the belief that people will receive a kind of common identity through the exemplary punishment, in front of everyone, of those who think the wrong things and tell the wrong stories. Choosing a set of stories or values and dressing them up with a "thus saith the Lord" justification breeds arrogance and intolerance. If people reach the point of thinking that the set of values they and everybody in their society holds dear have behind them the weight of infinite wisdom, they are probably not going to be tolerant of those who do not share or listen to that set of stories, because in their minds these others are against the Almighty. Therefore, telling religious stories not only identifies things that are good and worthwhile for us but also enforces that with authority and power, and that leads to a grave risk of persecution. That, indeed, would be a work of faith, an exercise of piety.

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* John Hick writes: "It is not appropriate to speak of a religion as being true or false, any more than it is to speak of a civilization as being true or false. For the religions, in the sense of distinguishable religiocultural streams within human history, are expressions of the diversity of human types and temperaments and thought forms. The same differences between the eastern and western mentality that are revealed in characteristically different conceptual and linguistic, social, political, and artistic forms presumably also underlie the contrast between eastern and western religion. . . . That the great religious traditions of the world represent different human perceptions of and response to the same infinite divine Reality." (112, 119).

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