

## READING RELIGIOUS PHENOMENON THROUGH SIGN POWER

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### A. Exploring Language, Analyzing Meaning

By considering how complicated the relation between language and religion is, this discussion tries to start with Wittgstein's statement; religious, ethic, and esthetic are connected by transcendental value in a thought that lies outside world entity and hardly can be expressed.<sup>1</sup> All those three aspects cannot be expressed easily by language because they refer to something that exceeds world boundaries and quit of the assumption of how hard to reveal the existence of supernatural aspect through unequal common language.

Islamic culture sets to progress along with the fact of history of human whom God greets them through His language. The way of how God reveals the Holy Book is not a simple matter. It becomes the essence of what it is called by "*wahy*" as God's word and as a divine discourse which Quran is what Prophet Muhammad SAW comprehends and delivers it to his people. "*Wahy*" as God's word is a concept of linguistics. The aspect of how to comprehend and to deliver the form of its religious phenomenon and of its performance can be analyzed through the language. The matter of language from Adam creation itself has become a never ending topic of debate for theologian, philosopher, and linguist.

There is no existence of science without language because it produces meaning, including religious meaning. However, meaning is a significant representation of sign, though a meaning sometimes appears based on vague and crucial notion. Sometimes meaning is viewed as a part of science, not as an element of religion. Science considers that causality influences to characteristic of all things whereas religion considers that the

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<sup>1</sup> Kaelan, *Filsafat Analitis Menurut Ludwig Wittgentein*, Yogyakarta, Paradigma, 2004, p. 108.

thing which affects the characteristic of all things is the highest value.

It can be said that meaning can be found without using religious aspect. But on the broad aspect, especially on the history of 20s century, culture as a meaning system will always connect to religion<sup>2</sup>. However, religion is about meaning, not about causality, and it is looked for by human.

When Quran is transformed or is revealed through Arabian language (*bi lisan 'Arabi mubin*), there is always question about how to comprehend it correctly as a way to get the significant interpretation of verses as the signs. Various ways and methods are developed continuously, started from self reference for scholar of The Salaf to hermeneutic method for modern philosopher. Discourse of Quran is always questioned, but is it right? Of course, because beside of diachronic facts of Quran, it always serves synchronized content that is in line with the importance of guideline for the present of better mankind. When there is always question about Holy Book (Quran), and automatically question always appears for science as well, including language that has more possibility for debate and discussion. As a science, language has not become a final postulate yet as well as Albert Einstein who finally comes up with the theory of relativity and defines that everything is relative. He gets to the point of conclusion that science and religion must complete and energize each other.

From the outside form, religion is reflected through the world of discourse (text) and behaviour. Phenomenally, these become the things that can be read and be meant by human language. Beside as medium to express the existence of God, language exists in every human behaviour in creating communication with Him in various symbols and signs. There are spoken language and body language as the personification of message from heaven. For God's word (*wahy*) along with its conjugation has become technical term in Islamic terminology, especially when it refers to the communication of divine message for the prophets.

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<sup>2</sup> Holmes Roston, *Ilmu dan Agama: Sebuah Survei Kritis*, Yogyakarta: Islamic University Sunan Kalijaga, 2006, page. 34.

In Quran, the use of word “wahy” and its verb conjugation is not confined to the prophets only, but it is also used generally to describe the form of communication between God and His creation, between prophet and his people, and between fellow being. From History of Islamic Thought perspective, the essence matter of “wahy” for either verbal form or idea has become issue that creates a long debate. As a theological mystery, it is hard to comprehend it through human mind because it is a mysterious thing and because God is the speaker and human as is the hearer.

Moreover, God is not spatiotemporal entity, He is pure spirit. God exceeds speed or mass and passes over time. After relativity theory invention, man starts to see at a glance of what is meant by immortality for God before, while for space and time are determined only for the creation that is confined to His word (firman); *kun fayakun* (His command is “Be” and it is).

In theory of relativity, there is nothing can get in the way of signal that is faster than light, indeed is faster than speedy light and the superluminal process is not a physics as what people know it is. There is nothing can prevent the reality of deity that has the comprehensive connection to any kind of way and determine nature as the hologram that stands outside of human mind capacity<sup>3</sup>.

## **B. Language of *Wahy***

There are specific characteristics of the three Semitic religions; Jew, Christianity, and Islam. They are the perspective of historical source, end of life guarantee, and the truth of religious experience of the faithful that lies on the fact that God by Himself who has revealed Him to mankind. In Islam, “wahy” means Allah words (kalam). He reveals it through language; not a mysterious language but a clear and understandable human language<sup>4</sup>.

Semantically *Wahy* has the same meaning with Allah word (kalam). Surely because it is Quran, it uses the word “kalam” on the process of “wahy”. Quran clarifies that it is revealed verbally, although in another way it also emphasizes the

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<sup>3</sup> Holmes Roston, *Ilmu dan Agama: Sebuah Survei Kritis*, Yogyakarta: Universitas Islam Negeri Sunan Kalijaga, 2006, hlm. 95

<sup>4</sup> Toshihiko Izutzu, *Relasi Tuhan dan Manusia, Pendekatan Semantik terhadap al-Qur`an*, translator. Agus Fahri Husein (Yogyakarta: Tiara Wacana, 2003), page. 166

intimate relevancy to Prophet Muhammad saw person, heart, and mind (*al-kalâm bi al-quwwah*). In another word, Allah word (kalam) was born in the heart and mind of Prophet Muhammad saw, then its form possibly refer to him (*al-kalâm bi al-fi'l*). Fazlur Rahman also concludes that Quran is Allah word in a common meaning and it is also defined as Prophet Muhammad word<sup>5</sup>.

It is hard to deal with the conclusion that Allah word (kalam) is mysterious thing and different to human language and behaviour, but because semantically it is word, surely it has all the main characteristics of human words.

Toshihiko Izutsu differs the use of “*wahy*” based on semantics essential into three categories. First, “*wahy*” is the form of communication that has been done by two persons for the real actualization of *wahy*. The process of sending the message from A to B is not a mutual relationship, but it is a unilateral communication. Second, “*wahy*” should not have verbal characteristic and does not always have linguistics characteristic. Third, there are mysterious and personal things between both of the two persons who involved in it<sup>6</sup>.

Human thought reaches the perfection of it through language, and then there are two consequences for it. First, human language manifests the Holy Book<sup>7</sup> or *wahy*. Second, the Holy Book should have special characteristics; absolute for the content and relative for the understanding. This is what is called by absolute linguistics form (*šabât an-naşş*) for the text and relative concept for the understanding.<sup>8</sup>

In the theory of linguistics that is proposed by Sapir Whorf and is supported by Humbolt, it is stated that the relative human language precisely often finds its deep meaning when it is presented through its connection with God, both for motional connection and performative connection. Both those two aspects

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<sup>5</sup> Fazlur Rahmân, *Islam*, translator. Ahsin Muhammad (Bandung: Pustaka Publisher), 1984, page. 32.

<sup>6</sup> Toshihiko Izutsu, *Relasi Tuhan dan Manusia*, page. 173. Look at the explanation of Al-Zarqani in *Al-Burhân fi ‘Ulûm al-Qur`ân*, page. 163. It explains about the meaning of *wahy* as the form of secret and unusual communication between Allah and His people for general people

<sup>7</sup> Allah words for Prophet Muhammad saw as the last prophet

<sup>8</sup> Muhammad Shahrûr, *Al-Kitâb wa al-Qur`ân Qir`ah Mu`âsirah* (Kairo: Sina li an-Nsyar, 1992), page. 46.

have the same strong influence in forming the formula of religious spiritual power that frequently cannot achieve the essence of various actualizations. It happens because the weakness in understanding it through language and the failure in getting the significance toward the signs of God greatness.

There is another factor of failure in experiencing religious message beside the weakness of language itself that cannot get the essential meaning of it; it is external experience that hardly can be explained. If language could express all human experiences through it, then all what Prophet Muhammad saw experienced in heaven (*Sidratul Muntaha*) could be explained through language and some of the secret of heaven would be known. But in fact it does not, heaven and hell only can be generalized through sequence of limited expression.

The basic characteristic and function of proposition are having literal meaning. But, when it has to give the appropriate expression related to the fact of language function itself, it needs metaphor and mysticism. That is why; the existence of God is a mystical fact that has to be expressed although it hardly can be told.<sup>9</sup>

When there is something that cannot be expressed through poetic language, possibly it needs the use of religious language. Religious language talks about itself and does not need any pronoun. It does not take any language theory and explanation. It becomes unexpressed thing even it contains of something that has been uttered. Then it comes up as another way for language that cannot be tied up, but by language itself.<sup>10</sup> To the present time, people have difficulty to translate and find an appropriate shift for the word of "taqwa" or of "nikah" as religious term in another language. Deity meaning may will be easier to be expressed through religious behaviour than verbal language.

As well as language that always exists and participates in wherever people stand and do any activity, religion will always live in every human act although religious concept and religious intensity of someone and another are different. It can be known why atheism, agnosticism, and deism are categorized as religion.

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<sup>9</sup> George Pitcher, *The Philosophy of Wittgenstein*, Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1964, page. 100.

<sup>10</sup> Kaelan, *Filsafat Analitis*, page. 111.

In the tradition of philosophy and anthropology, not all what is called and is categorized as religion has to have a holy book and prophet just like Abrahamic religions.<sup>11</sup>

### **C. Two Languages, One Phenomenon**

When there is someone waves the hand, he/she talks in different level. There is subject intention; a dimension that is completely separated from nerve impulse and empirical muscle movement. One language gives many causes, while another offers many reasons. One language becomes objective explanation, while another comes up as subjective explanation; not only an explanation about personal experience, but also an explanation about an experience to face the world.

Therefore, it needs to reconsider when we discuss about the correlation between language and religion because they are tightly connected. Moreover, all the Holy Books which have been revealed on earth have closely similar feature; hidden messages behind the language. Syrian, Hebrew, and Arabic become the languages that have a strong religious nuance. Language may become a function as a medium of religious discourse that surely may relate to language of any community insofar as it becomes the way to talk and discuss about religious matter (language and religion).

There are two phenomena of language that are pre-eminent in religious discourse.

1. According to Johan Meuleman, language as a form of God's utterance in a Holy Book can be recognized through three aspects. The first aspect, Jews, Christianity, and Islam as religions stand as the sign, precisely the sign of God's Greatness and God's The One. The second aspect, the Holy Books that become the base of most religions stand as a set of sign that indicates particular meaning that needs deep exploration in the process of its interpretation. The third aspect is that the text of Holy Book is a set of sign that delivers God's message (language in religion). As well as the second aspect, here language concerns the

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<sup>11</sup> Komaruddin Hidayat, *Memahami Bahasa Agama: Sebuah Kajian Hermeneutik*, Jakarta: Paramadina Publisher, 1996, page.75.

matter of connection between informant, text, and recipient.

2. Language that touches the symbol of religious behaviour both performative language and creative language is not just an act, but it is a discourse that is implemented along with the act as well as the language of salat (ritual prayers and actions performed five times daily in Islam) and hajj ritual. In various observance of religious duty, people use Liturgy language to deliver particular prayers in "spiritual communication". In another side, there is written text language on the paper that needs exegesis explanation to interpret it by using science methodology, especially language science.

The concept of language plays the main role of concept formation of specific verbal language of Quran. At a glance, the word "*lisān*" with its conjugation form in Quran implies one of possible meanings that Quran is spoken language in its time of revelation. As well as the other languages in the world, Quran language passes verbal period before at last it transforms into written language. The term of "*lisān*" in Quran becomes the most appropriate expression from the space and time perspectives because it was revealed to Arabians who were generally illiterate (*ummîyy*)<sup>12</sup>. In History of Islamic Thought, the idea of the essence of Quran; is revealed in verbal form or in idea that has become one of the matters that causes long controversy. While most of Muslim scholars have a notion that Quran comes up in its articulation and meaning.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> The word of *ummîyy* is unusual word that is used by Arabian in the era of Pre-Islam. It is unknown for its use of word derivation in literary manuscript of Jahiliyah (ignorance). Quran uses the word *ummîyy* not to show the disgrace or language error of Arabian, but it is used to differentiate it from the scribe. Allah words in *allazîna yattabi'ûna ar-rasûl al-ummîyya* and *fa'âminû billâhi wa rasûlîhi an-nabîyy al-ummîyy* is the form of Allah's invitation for the scribe of Israeli to right and clarify the arrival of a messenger who had been referred to in their Book though were not from their offspring. Prophet Muhammad saw was not a scribe and it is a contradiction to the tradition that demands for the specialty of the scribe for the next prophet as well as what had been revealed to them (Israeli) from the previous prophets.

<sup>13</sup> Al-Zarkasyî, *Al-Burhân fî 'Ulûm al-Qur`ân*, Mesir: Isa al-Babi al-Halabi, tt page 229.

Fazlur Rahman clarifies that “another substance” through one way “dictates” Quran with absolute authority. The voice that comes from the clear spoken base of life can not be blamed and importunate for acceptance. It does not only Quran that means “reading text”, but the text of Quran itself at some parts declares that it is revealed not only in the form of “meaning” or ideas but also in verbal form. The term of Quran as “revelation” is “wahy” that closely relates to the meaning of “inspiration” without ignoring the verbal form<sup>14</sup>.

#### **D. Language and the Power of Sign (Semiotics)**

With the existence of mind, culture and language potential, mankind is able to manipulate abstract symbol, to produce tools, to live the culture, and to learn both science and religion. It becomes historical awareness as per-impossible for chimpanzee and comes up as a pure nature, although chimpanzee has similar anatomy of hand and brain with human's.

Semiotics is a science that analyzes the signs in human life. All the things that exists in life is believed as the sign; something that has to have meaning. In this understanding, may all people have the same agreement, but when we have to find the meaning of sign, various issues emerge<sup>15</sup>. In its development, semiotics becomes a set of theory for analyzing human culture, including religion.

In another side, sign and signification plays the main role in understanding religion because the word “verse” (ayah) means sign. Thereby Quran (from “*qara'a*” which means collect as the root) is a set of signs from Allah which human needs to find the meaning and to implement it in Muslim life. In one of Quran verses, it is said “*sanuriyahum ayatina fi al-afaq wa fi anfusihim hatta yatabayyana lahum annahu al-haqq*” which means “We will show you Our signs in firmament and in their soul so it is clear for them that it (Quran that is revealed to Prophet Muhammad saw) is true”. The word of “verse” (ayah) is used for the understanding of bad things in general that is unacceptable for any imlementation

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<sup>14</sup> Fazlur Rahmân, *Islam*, terj. Ahsin Mohammad (Bandung: PustakaPublisher, 1984), page 32.

<sup>15</sup> Benny H. Hoed, *Semiotik dan Dinamikan Sosial Budaya*, Edisi Kedua, Depok: Komunitas Bambu, 2011, page. 3.



such as *inna fi zalika la ayah li man khafa azab an-nar*<sup>16</sup> which in this matter becomes (the punishment from Allah towards deviate Firaun and his people) an example for those who are afraid of Allah's torture. Therefore verse is a small unit and a part of Quran.

The various meanings of the word "verse" (ayah) in Quran have the similarity to the various meanings of sign in Bible and Christian thought. Therefore as well as Bible and Christianity, in principle Quran as the text and Islam as a whole becomes a great source for semiotics analysis<sup>17</sup>. The word *semio*, *sema*, and *semion* have the same philology root with what has been stated in Quran "*sīmā*" which means "sign" as in *sīma hum fi wujūhihim min asar as-sujūd* which means "there is sign in his face for his "*sujud*" (kneeling position and placing the forehead on the floor as a part of prayer in Islam).

When principally Quran becomes a great source for semiotics, it does not mean that it has been explored massively. The modern semiotics analysis has been applied in Christianity science since 1970s<sup>18</sup>. Semiotics analysis of Christianity theology focuses on the text (Bible) and tries to expand the semiotics analysis in various aspects of religious practice, especially in the aspect of liturgy.

Muhammad Arkoun may become the only one Muslim scholar who starts to enrich Islamic studies through semiotics development. Although he always encourages Islamic research to exceed the boundary of study about written texts from classic experts, but he centralizes his concern to various classical text and analyzes it with new method.

The significance of semiotics approach is that it views a text as a whole and as a system of internal connection. This approach opens a possibility to comprehend many aspects from a

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<sup>16</sup>Qur'an, Surah Hud 103.

<sup>17</sup> Johan Henrik Meuleman, 'Sumbangan dan Batas Semiotika Dalam Ilmu Agama' dalam *Membaca Al-Qur'an Bersama Muhammed Arkoun*, Yogyakarta' LKiS, 2012, page. 56.

<sup>18</sup> In the emerging era of 'linguistic theology' Guttgemans established in Germany, 'center pour l'analyse du Discours Religieux' in France, 'Semiotische Analyse door Nederlandse Theologen' in Netherland French and Dutch groups are suspected to have a relation to AJ Greimas and the 'Flow of Paris' in semiotics while Guttemans stands beyond the semiotic analysis in the narrow sense that is influenced by Jackues Lacan for psychoanalysis and 'Jackues Derrida. For grammatology'

text that hardly can be explored based on an analysis that contradicts the separated particular element and stands free from the text. According to Arkoun, another significance of semiotics is that semiotics analysis leads us to analyze the text without any previous particular interpretation or any other pre-suspicion<sup>19</sup>.

### E. Reading Liturgy Language

Religious language in all prayer (*salat*) or *haji* movements does not only focus on spoken performative language along with verse reading of Quran, but it focuses on mental language of body movement that is more expressive for expressing feeling and mind along with act and movement that contain a lot of deeper meaningful sign.

Standing steadily in prayer (*salat*) shows the sign of "one" that represents God as The One as the most essential base of God unity. The position of the head portrays human who has intelligence as a gift that is used to think and to find the meaning of God creation through science for stronger base of God unity. For the composition of *ruku'* (bowing deeply from the waist during prayer ritual) symbolizes the true respect posture of religious tenet that represents equality, harmonism, integration, and combination of mind (*fikr*) element and soul (*zikh*) element. The balanced element of mind (*fikr*) and soul (*zikh*) keeps somebody away from the imbalance of religion and avoids someone from the trap of extremism, exclusiveness, and primordial concept. In life context, when someone has not been able to have this ethic, it indicates that he/she has not been able to appreciate and to respect life. *Sujud*; kneeling position with forehead on the floor as a part of prayer ritual becomes a form of total human defenselessness in front of The Creator where intelligence is placed in low position, even is lower than heart position. Body and all the elements attached to it will return inside of earth, and there is only heart (*nafas*) as an eternal left thing. For forty years, Adam had been performing "*sujud*" when he was expelled from heaven until the angel raised him and taught him how to live and to serve the evanescent life.

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid. page 62 refer to Muhammed Arkoun. 'Lecture de la Fatiha' in *Lecture du Coran*, Paris: Maisonneuve et Larose, 1982.

Hajj journey that starts from “miqat” illustrates human authenticity that comes from Kaaba as the centre of hajj ritual called by *bait al-atiq* “house of indenpence” which is free from any possession and is free from any possesor and oppressor. Kaaba has no direction and its directionless concept hardly can be understand. But in this way, universality and absolutism exist. God words; *wa lillahi al-masyriqu wa al-magribu fa ainama tuwallu wujuhakum fa samma wajah Allah*<sup>20</sup> tell that Hajj ritual becomes a way to commemorate Hajar or move (comes from the root of hijrah) from bad quality to the better one. Tawaf; ceremony of circumambulation of the Ka'abah in Mecca seven times is an example of system based on monotheism idea that touches the particle of human and Allah stands as the centre of existense.

Kaaba is the symbol of immortality that comes up as centripetal one of tasbih act “swim in circle” of millions of people and all His creations indeed. In tawaf act (ceremony of circumambulation of the Ka'abah in Mecca seven times), tasbih (glorify or recite repeated chant as the confession of faith) recitation becomes the prominent element. It is looked like galaxi movement that symbolizes the essence of monotheism; the flow of millions of people circumambulate it in rumble with the spotless white clothes for all. It becomes the immortal movement.

In contrast to *tawaf* (ceremony of circumambulation of the Ka'abah in Mecca seven times), *sa'i* (ceremony of running between the hills of Sofa and Marwa during the hajj) is full of struggle for survival with the spirit of *takbir* (recitation of Allahu Akbar). Hajar is the most beautiful creature of Allah on earth. Inside of her, intellect intelligence, emotional intelligence, spiritual intelligence, and adversity intelligence<sup>21</sup> are collected in one. She is a woman and a mother at once who struggles to provide all what she and her son; Ismail need. She has to survive, she has to stand up, she has to run to find the source of life for pious generation (*zurriyyah tayyibah*) in the future. Do we know, what is the source of life? It is water. Allah says; *Wa ja 'alnâ min al-mâ ĩ kulla syai ĩn hayyi* (and) We create all the living things from water.

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<sup>20</sup> Qur'an Surah al-Baqarah: 115

<sup>21</sup> *Adversity quotion*, is the spirit for survival which is in Stolts theory defined as a special intelligence whose only some people has it

Two third of human body is liquid, two third of earth is also water, and without it, the life on earth will never exist. Arafah becomes the peak of hajj ritual (*al-hajju 'arafah*) because it does not only have time and space dimension, but it also has the dimension of spiritual condition . Someone can not be substituted by another one for it because without seeing Arafah, hajj will not be accepted. Arafah comes from “arafa” and “ma’rifah” as the root which mean know, understand, and science. Then the way of people go down from Kaaba to Arafah symbolizes the phase of human creation. The encounter between Adam and Eve then is followed by knowing and understanding each other. They are created in different sex although they come from the same substance for bearing next generation. It is the first sign of science where the existence of human is as old as the existence of science. The history of human begins from the science and Allah teaches Adam about it by Himself. The journey of people who do hajj from Arafah to Kaaba becomes the journey of people to go back to their origin. People pass over “masy’ar” (a dessert) as a symbol of awariness and “mina” (a place for doing Jumrah “throwing the stone to the pillar as a part of hajj ritual) as a symbol of hope, dream, love, and belief. It symbolizes the journey for going to God; The Creator of Nature

### **E. The Most Beautiful Language**

Al- Jurjani says that the speaker is the one who does know, does understand, and do es comprehend for his own utterance than the other. Jurjani’s statement becomes a part of analogy (*kalam nafsy*) that views Allah as the only One who knows the meaning of His word (*kalam*). Because God stands as the source of the utterance (*kalam*) and He plays the role as Mutakallim (speaker). As mutakallam (hearer) mankind never finds the deepest essence meaning of “*kalam*” because human existence is tied up by its life, including its language. Being in line with the theory of de Saussure, basically individual parole (*kalam*) is the expression of the speaker that exists as the phenomenon of psychological mechanism. Therefore, *mutakallim* interaction with its product and the beauty of language become his own, not the others. It is true when Abu Bakar as-Siddiq recites Quran (early surah Ar-Rum) in front of the unbeliever Quraisy and states that

“it is neither my word (kalam) nor Muhammad’s , but it is Allah’s word (kalam)” Is there any beautiful language than Allah’s? Definitely there is no. Is there any beautiful language than human language for God? If any, it is the language of heart.

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