Islam and Christianity

One Divine and Human Language or Many Human Languages

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Introduction

[1] Islam and Christianity have much in common, but also some differences and the more obvious may be somewhat superficial. Besides, who would be foolish enough to dare speaking of Islam and Christianity as if there were only one Islam and one Christianity? Even official adherence to a specific branch of Islam or Christianity does not necessarily guarantee unity of views. Often there is a gap between official tenets or attitudes and popular views and sensibilities. Still worse, my field is medieval philosophy rather than theology or religious studies. My only excuse is that I am also a believer, fascinated by the theme of language in general, the peculiarities of the various idioms and the impact these peculiarities have on our thinking. Anyone ever involved in translating or interpreting will know that there is no smooth transition from one language to another.

[2] Despite all my "caveats," I am now embarking with fear and trembling in tackling a not so obvious difference between Islam and Christianity, i.e., their attitude to language and how it leads both traditions to face some common questions. As philosophers dream of avoiding ambiguity, when the context is not clear, I shall use the term "language" to refer to the general human ability to express oneself in articulated speech and the term "idiom" to refer to one of the particular languages used by a group of human beings. Both Islam and

Christianity think that language is specifically human, in that it not only distinguishes human beings from animals but also explains how God communicates with human beings. Yet, Islam rests on a text, which is God's very own Word, and emphasizes the importance of one idiom, Arabic, which is both divine and human. It is the language of the Qur'an, considered uncreated, inimitable, and the seal of prophecy. So Islam generally gives a special status to this one idiom, Arabic, an important factor of unity for the universal community of believers. On the other hand, Christianity, based on the person of Christ and not so much on a text, has scriptures in two idioms Hebrew and Greek, none of them that of Christ. It should not privilege any language and thereby emphasizes its universal appeal for speakers of any and every idiom.

[3] After fleshing out this contrast, I shall move to an important perennial philosophical question, which arises from facing this difference, i.e., that of the origin of language and idioms. Greek philosophers, such as Plato in the *Cratylus*, tried to determine whether language is by nature (*physis*) or convention (*nomos*). On the other hand, Christians and Muslims wondered which idiom God spoke with Adam in the garden of Eden and how language as well as idioms came about. As the Hebrew Scriptures tell us that God asked Adam to name the animals, the elaboration of language seems to be a human invention. Yet, originally all human beings spoke one and the same language and the famous tower of Babel, construed as the origin of the "confusio linguarum" and of the diversity of idioms, is seen as a punishment, though not a direct punishment for original sin. On the other hand, the Qur'an tells us that God taught "all the names" to Adam. Notice that both religious traditions focus on *names*. So fairly early Muslim grammarians and commentators of the Qur'an or reporters of *hadîth* formulated this issue in terms of revelation (*tawqîf*), rather than nature, or convention (*istilâh*), i.e., human institution, and generally inclined to the view that it was by revelation (Loucel; see in particular 1964: 253-54 where he explains that *tawqîf* is the term preferred by the grammarians, which at times they use by itself and at times with *wahy* or *'ilhâm*). They wondered whether Adam learned a single language from God, or all of the languages, or simply the ability to constitute language. On the other hand, despite the "confusion linguarum," the dream of a perfect language, so well articulated by Umberto Eco, has haunted Western philosophers and cultures.

[4] Finally, I shall consider how one of the most famous "Islamic" or "Arabic" philosophers, al-Fârâbî, who lived from 870 to 950 and who was not a native Arabic speaker, elaborated a view of the origin of both language and idioms as well as of religion that can only be understood in the context of the Islamic debate and Greek philosophical influences. Al-Fârâbî's way of handling the problem may explain why philosophy in the Greek mode remained on the margins of Islam, but also why Islamic culture wondered about the origin of language.

Language in Islam and Christianity

[5] Islam rests on the Qur'an, a text revealed to Muhammad, who recites and proclaims it, but a text provided by God. The early Islamic community debated whether the *Qurân* is "uncreated", i.e., the word of God as God says it eternally. The Mu'tazilites, who defended the creation of the Qur'an, influenced the Caliph al-Ma'mûn, who in 833 began the *mihna*, i.e., the imposition of the view that the Qur'an is created. After 15 years of violent

controversy, the Caliph al-Mutawakkil ended the *mihna*, which in the long term led to the demise of the Mu'tazilites as an important intellectual and religious movement. From then on the Qur'an is generally revered as "uncreated." This explains why normally one should not translate the Qur'an, except to gain converts, or directly touch copies of it.

[6] The Qur'an itself repeatedly emphasizes that it is in Arabic, "in plain Arabic language" (26:195). "Surely We have made it an Arabic Qur'an that you may understand" (43:3). "And thus We revealed to Thee an Arabic Qur'an" (42:7), etc. Not only is the Qur'an in clear Arabic, but several times it challenges unbelievers to provide verses or chapters like it (2:23; 10:38; and 11:130). These challenges led to the theological affirmation of the inimitability of the Qur'an, which thereby becomes its own validation. Soon this inimitability was construed as covering not only the content but also the style, i.e., the beauty and purity of its Arabic (see Ahmed).

[7] The required five daily prayers include recitation of verses of the Qur'an and so Arabic at least officially is the only liturgical language. Pious Muslims, who are not Arabic speakers, are encouraged to learn Arabic. Al-Shâfi'î, founder of one of the Islamic schools of Law, even makes it an obligation for every Muslim to learn as much Arabic as possible for it is the most perfect language and, therefore, the language of revelation. For a long time in Arabic speaking countries children would go to the *kuttâb* to learn to read using the Book or *kitâb* par excellence, i.e., the Qur'an, as a primer.

[8] Arabic's privileged status tends to unify linguistically the Islamic community and explains why Arabic speakers are so proud of their language. Earlier revelations were in various languages adapted to various nations but the ultimate and perfect revelation is universal and in Arabic, often construed as the perfect divine and human language.[1]

[9] On the other hand, Christianity never privileged a particular idiom. Christianity is not focused on a text but on a person, Christ, who is both divine and human. Yet, curiously enough Christians never tried to recover the "ipsissima verba," the very words of Christ. Christian scriptures are in two languages, Hebrew and Greek, neither of them Christ's mother tongue. The Evangelists do not claim to be writing under God's dictation, so to speak, and do not refer to Greek as a privileged language. They write under God's inspiration but in their own words. At the passion, Matthew and Mark indicate that Christ quoted from Psalm 22, "Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?" (in an Aramaic version!) and immediately give a Greek translation, "My God, my God, why have you deserted me?" (Matt 27:46; Mark 15:34). Yet, Luke and John in the parallel passages do not even quote this text, in the original language or in Greek translation. Such discrepancies between the gospels are often unacceptable to Muslims, as they do not fit their conception of revelation, as God's very own words. Therefore, some Muslim theologians use them to argue that Christians and

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[1] Ibn Khaldûn (1332-1406) claims that religion is to existence and power as form is to matter and that form is prior to matter. This explains why in all parts of the Dâr al-Islâm Arabic is spoken. With the weakening of the Islamic empire other idioms have crept back and where Arabic is still spoken, it has lost its purity (IV, 22). At the beginning of VI, 44, which speaks of the sciences concerning the Arabic language, Ibn Khaldûn insists that knowledge of Arabic lexicography, grammar, syntax and style, as well as literature, is indispensable for any scholar in religious matter. In the following section, 45, he states that "all languages are habits, as crafts are" (1967: 294-95, 433, and 438-39).

Jews tampered with the very text of their own scriptures (see al-Djuwainî). This is the accusation of *tahrîf al-lafẓ.*

[10] Very early Christians developed liturgies in various languages: Greek, Syriac, Coptic, Latin, etc. The gospels were translated and the translations were widely used. The validation of Christian revelation is not the stylistic beauty of its scriptures but the resurrection of Christ, who is both human and divine. Christ is the universal savior: His person is the focus and not his very words.

[11] Pentecost is obviously presented as the reversal of the Babelian confusion of languages, but does not abolish the diversity of idioms. Acts of the Apostles tells us that each one was hearing the apostles in his own native language (2:5-11).

[12] Living in Islamic lands and part of the culture, Medieval Eastern Christians often presented telling views. At some stage they even began to use Arabic in theological treatises intended for their own communities, as does Yahya ibn 'Adî (893-974), a layman and famous disciple of the Muslim philosopher al-Fârâbî. Intellectual life required Arabic, and Syriac in some cases was relegated to liturgical purposes or home life. Such Christians were very aware of the importance of Arabic for Muslims. Paul of Antioch, Melkite bishop of Saida, now in modern Lebanon, was active some time between 1140-1180, while the area was under Crusader rule. In his brief "A Letter to a Muslim," Paul does not attack Islam or deny Muhammad's prophethood or the revealed nature of the Qurân. As Fr. Thomas F. Michel puts it: Paul "reinterprets [these] in the light of Christian faith. He accepts Muhammad as a prophet sent to the pagan Arabs of his time, who brought to those Arabs a revealed Book in their own language and established for them a religion far superior to the pagan religion of Arabia which they had been following." Whether Paul sees this revelation to pagan Arabs as a "preparatio fidei" that later on should be outgrown, so to speak, and lead to Christianity is not clear to me. Notice that Paul focuses on the fact that this revelation is in Arabic, as the Qur'an itself highlights, but then denies its universal validity in limiting it to pagan Arabic speakers, and, therefore, renders it irrelevant to Christians.

[13] In the thirteenth century, one of the first Western missionaries in Islamic lands, the Catalan Dominican Raymond Marti, author of the *Pugio fidei* or *Dagger of Faith*, a polemical work against Islam, learned Arabic. He was well trained in the language and the culture. Professor Adnan A. Husain discovered Raymond Marti's attempt to face the Qur'anic challenge to produce verses as beautiful as those of the Qur'an. Raymond penned some Arabic lines imitating Qur'anic verses to rival it. Needless to say, his Arabic, though fairly good, has not the poetic or rhetorical power of the Qur'an, but the attempt itself is telling.

The Question of the Origin of Language and of the Diversity of Idioms in Islam and Christianity

[14] In *Genesis* 2, we are told that

> The Lord God said: "it is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a suitable partner for him." So the Lord God formed out of the ground various wild animals and various birds of the air, and he brought them to the man to see what he would call them; whatever the man called each of them would be its name. The man gave names to all the cattle, all the birds of the

air, and all the wild animals; but none proved to be the suitable partner for
the man (18-20).

[15] Obviously Adam institutes the names, which are not taught to him by God, but one may wonder whether this institution is purely conventional and, so to speak, arbitrary, or whether in this preternatural stage Adam gives names that truly express the essences of things that somehow had been revealed to him by God. If such is the case, then the language of Eden is a perfect language, i.e., a language in which each name refers to one and only one essence and expresses it. It is noteworthy that the giving of names precedes the creation of woman and, therefore, does not require some kind of agreement between Adam and Eve. Such perfect language would have universal appeal and many philosophers tried either to determine which it was or even to reinvent it or a similar one, as Leibniz tried.

[16] The dispersion of language into various idioms would, therefore, undermine its validity to help us acquire knowledge and be seen as a punishment. But nothing is simple and, though the power of the Babelian story hides it, *Genesis* presents two very different accounts of the multiplication of idioms. One finds the first one in chapter 10, which details the descendants of Noah's sons and the origin of the nations. After listing the descendants of Japheth, a good son, it says: "Here are the descendants of Japheth, and from them sprang the maritime nations, in their respective lands – each with its own language." In the list of Ham's descendants – and Ham is Noah's bad son – one finds Nimrod, whom tradition will link to the construction of the tower of Babel, but it also simply ends with, "These are the descendants of Ham, according to their clans and languages." The same refrain appears at the end of the list of Shem's descendants. No distinction is made between good and bad son and the multiplication of languages seems such a natural phenomenon arising from geographical dispersion that the text does not bother giving any explanation for it. There is no hint this is a punishment.[2]

[17] The second account, the famous story of the tower of Babel, follows immediately and begins with "The whole world spoke the same language, using the same words" (11:1). The construction begins in order to avoid geographical dispersion:

> The Lord came down to see the city and the tower that the men had built. Then the Lord said: "If now, while they are one people, all speaking the same language, they have started to do this, nothing will later stop them from doing whatever they presume to do. Let us then go down and there confuse their language, so that one will not understand what another says." That is why it is called Babel, because there the Lord confused the speech of all the world. It was from that place that he scattered them all over the earth. (11:5-9)

The multiplication of idioms is now deemed a punishment that causes the very geographical dispersion human beings had tried to avoid. This explanation is the reverse of the previous account in which geographical dispersion gives rise to the diversity of idioms. Pentecost does

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[2] This account often is forgotten. For instance, in the Catholic Church the readings for weekday masses of the sixth week of ordinary time in year I skip this account and directly go from Genesis 9:1-13 to the story of the tower of Babel.

not return to the primal state of a single common language, but reinstates the possibility of communication despite the multiplicity of idioms.

[18] Let us now briefly examine how Dante (1265-1321), so well aware of the theological and philosophical disputes of his time, handles the question of Adam's language. In his *De vulgari eloquentia*, written between 1303-05, Dante contrasts the vernacular idioms, which are many but natural and so primary, with Latin, which, though universal, is only secondary because it is "artificial," as it is no longer a living language. He aims at creating an illustrious vernacular that would exhibit the affinity between words, concepts, and things. In Eden thanks to a "certa forma locutionis" that God created with his soul, Adam spoke Hebrew and his very first word was "El," the original Hebrew word for God (34-52). Whether this "certa forma locutionis" is really Hebrew understood as a particular idiom or a universal grammar or matrix of all natural languages is a disputed question, but Dante indicates that the "forma locutionis" includes "the words used for things," "the construction of words," and "the arrangement of the construction,"[3] i.e., a fully developed idiom and not simply "names." Following Corti, Eco inclines to see it as the matrix of all natural languages (34-52). Ruedi Imbach, a scholar in medieval philosophy, inclines to see it as Hebrew (197-214). In this text Dante claims that this unique language remained unchanged up to the time of the tower of Babel. The diversity of idioms arose from each group of craftsmen developing its own idiom. "Only among those who were engaged in a particular activity did their language remain unchanged; so, for instance, there was one for all the architects, one for all the carriers of stones, one for all the stone-breakers," etc.

[19] Yet, later on in the twenty-sixth canto of the *Divine Comedy's Paradise* where Dante meets Adam, one observes some changes. First Adam explains to Dante that the idiom he spoke disappeared *before* the construction of the tower of Babel. Second, this idiom was not Hebrew but some kind of proto-Hebrew in which the word for God was "I" rather than "El." Third, the "forma locutionis" that was created at the same time as Adam's soul is simply replaced by a natural ability for speech on the basis of which people develop idioms.[4] Adam grounds linguistic evolution in the instability and temporality inherent to human beings:

> Before I descended to the anguish of Hell the Supreme Good from whom comes the joy that swathes me was named *I* on earth; and later He was called *El*: and that must needs be, for the usage of mortal is as a leaf on a branch, which goes away and another comes (133-38).[5]

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[3] I, vi, 4: "Dico autem 'formam' et quantum ad rerum vocabula et quantum ad vocabulorum constructionem et quantum ad constructionis prolationem."

[4] Opera naturale è ch'uom favella; /ma così o così, natura lascia/ poi fare a voi secondo che v'abbella (130-32). See Thomas Aquinas, *S.T.*, IaIIae, q. 85, a. 1, ad 3: "Significare conceptus suos est homini naturale; sed determinatio signorum est secundum humanum placitum" (It is natural for human beings to express their concepts, but the use of specific signs is up to human good pleasure).

[5] Pria ch'i' scendessi all'infernale ambascia/ *I* s'appellava in terra il sommo bene,/ onde vien letizia che mi fascia;/ *El* si chiamò poi: e ciò convene,/ ché l'uso d'i mortali è come fronda/ in ramo, che sen va e altra vene.

[20] Dante's vacillations reflect the diversity of positions taken by theologians and philosophers who tried to understand the scriptural texts as well as to give an account of their experience of language and idioms. Notice that Dante does not hesitate to construct an illustrious vernacular as substitute to "heavenly" Hebrew. God may have given to Adam the matrix of all languages or simply an ability to speak, but it is up to human beings to invent the best possible language as craftsmen create their own technical language for their trade. Though the Islamic tradition privileges Arabic and tends to emphasize the revealed character of language, it too exhibits vacillations and addresses the coinage of "technical" terms.

[21] On the Islamic side the difficulty is to explain what is meant by "God taught all the names to Adam." Let us first look at grammarians whose studies of lexicography and syntax were very sophisticated. According to Loucel, the first one to reflect on the origin of language is Ibn Fâris, who died in 999 or 1004 (1963: 255-62). If God taught all the words to Adam, such language should be perfect. No single word would have more than one meaning and no single thing could be referred to by more than one word. Yet, al-Fâris knows that, for instance, Arabic counts no less than three words to refer to a sword. So is Arabic perfect? Though he seems to be aware that God could have simply endowed Adam with the power of instituting language, symbolized by God's gift of "names," al-Fâris staunchly defends *tawfîq* or revelation. He tries to explain some linguistic evolution in claiming that God revealed to Adam only the names he needed to know and later on revealed more to each successive prophet in order to complete this teaching of language with Muhammad to whom he gave the prefect language of the Qur'an. He also asserts that God taught Adam all the scripts, but that after the flood some got lost and only Ishmâʾîl retained the Arabic script. Al-Fâris, of course, adopts the standard argument against convention. In order to establish a convention, one needs to talk and, if language is created by convention, we run in a chicken and egg situation.

[22] Al-Djinnî, who died in 1002, seems to assume that the debate is an "either-or" situation. After rehearsing arguments on both sides, he simply declares himself baffled. He raises the question of why the Qur'an specifies "names." Do "names" here mean the whole of language or simply "nouns," one of the three basic grammatical categories, in contradistinction to verbs and particles (in Arabic *'ism* is both "a name" and the technical grammatical term for "noun"). If we adopt revelation, then how do we explain that craftsmen "name" their tools and coin technical vocabulary? Recall that Dante too was struck by the development of technical language for crafts. How do we explain too that Arabic has homonyms, synonyms, and worse of all *addâd*, i.e., words that signify one thing AND its contrary. Besides, how could God teach language to Adam as God has no sensory organs to point to the thing named? But, if we adopt convention, then language would be very unstable and could be transformed at any moment and for a whim. He seems to favor the view that in the garden Adam used Arabic, but once on earth he spoke Syriac as also did Abraham. Yet, Ishmâʾîl somehow returned to Arabic (Loucel 1963: 262-81).

[23] Ibn Hazm of Cordoba (993-1064) adopts a more sophisticated position. What God taught to Adam is the principle or root of language that led to a unique perfect language, most free of ambiguities. For each "thing" or "aspect of thing" there was only one term and each term referred only to one "thing" or "aspect of thing." Such a language allowed for the knowledge of the quiddities or essences of things. Yet, God's gift does not preclude that

later on people instituted various idioms. Aware that Syriac, Arabic, and Hebrew are related, Ibn Hazm inclines to the view that somehow the primal unique language was the mother of these three idioms considered as modifications arising from geographical dispersion. He thinks that Abraham spoke Syriac, Isaac Hebrew, and Ishmâ'îl, of course, Arabic (Arnaldez: 37-47). Notice that Ibn Hazm has abandoned the "either-or" theme and adopts a mix of revelation and convention, revelation giving a sort of matrix from which secondary modifications may arise.

[24] In his study of Adamic legends in Qur'anic commentaries and *hadîth* literature, Kister lists various positions. Al-Mas'ûdi (d. 956) thinks that in paradise Adam spoke Arabic but after his disobedience and expulsion he switched to Syriac. Some Qur'anic commentators are more cautious in their interpretation of "God taught Adam the names, all of them." Some think God taught the names of the various creatures, others all the languages, so Adam could talk with each of his sons in a special language, and even one of them, sure that God taught Adam everything, specifies that it includes the grammar of Sîbawayh (died ca. 796), an enormous book. Many traditions claim that in the garden Adam spoke Arabic but some assert that, after Adam left the garden, he used Syriac, and others that, though Adam and his progeny spoke Arabic, in a later period Arabic degenerated into Syriac.

[25] Recently Carter argued that technical terms, be they used by craftsmen or grammarians, often are metaphors or considered as proper names derived from common nouns. If one posits that what God taught Adam by means of revelation is simply common nouns – and in Arabic the same term *'ism* means "name" as well as "noun," a grammatical category of second imposition – then space is left for human institution of technical terms that will be accepted by convention. Carter claims that most Muslims acknowledge the discontinuity between the Arabic spoken by Adam in heaven and whatever language he later spoke while on earth. Islamic revelation restores the language to its purity, but at the Prophet's death this language returns to its earthly status. Technical coinages are signs of this slippage from heavenly to earthly (I think Carter somewhat oversimplifies the sophistication and variety of positions of Medieval Islamic texts).

[26] If Loucel is right to claim that grammarians began to focus on the origin of language around 380/990 (1963: 208), one may well wonder whether the philosopher al-Fârâbî, 870-950, who presented sophisticated views on the issue, was much read. This is particularly striking as al-Fârâbî handles points raised by the grammarians, scholars in "hadîth," and "mutakallimûn" or theologians.

Al-Fârâbî's Explanation of the Origin of Language and Idioms

[27] Al-Fârâbî states that language, along with natural make-up and character, is one of the three distinguishing features between nations. It involves convention and "nature." Notice that under Greek influence al-Fârâbî typically substitutes "nature" for revelation. In the *Political Regime*, he gives pride of place to convention as "language" is "conventional but has some basis in natural things," and specifies that by "language" (*lisân*) he means the "idiom" (*lughat*) used by people to express themselves (1964: 70; translation in Lerner and Mahdi: 32). "*Lisân*", a Qur'anic term, which is ambiguous since it designates both the organ of speech and taste, as well as articulated speech, is equated in its second meaning with a synonym,

"*lughat*," a very classical but non-Qur'anic word. (Whether the passage from a Qur'anic term to a non-Qur'anic term is significant remains to be determined.)

[28] In order to determine more precisely what al-Fârâbî means by affirming that language is conventional but has some basis in natural things, we need to look at the second part of his *Book of Letters* in which he offers his explanation of the origin of language and idioms (1969; translation in Khalidi; see also the study by Langhade). If language is essentially conventional, then al-Fârâbî needs to deal with the traditional theological argument that a convention already presupposes the existence of language. Al-Fârâbî indicates that first human beings use ostension:

> If a human being needs to acquaint another with what is in his mind or his intention, he will first point to indicate what he wants . . . ; later on he will use sound. The first sounds are calls, for that is how one who is being made to understand realizes that he is intended to the exclusion of others. This takes place when one restricts oneself to point at perceptibles. . . Each specific thing signified is given some specific sound, which is not used for anything else . . . (1969: sec. 116).

The first basic sounds are the phonemes, which al-Fârâbî calls letters of the alphabet. As in each nation people have a slightly different make up, the organs necessary for speech will differ somewhat too. As one always selects what one finds naturally easier, each nation will develop different basic sounds as some are easier for a nation than for another. This, claims al-Fârâbî, "is the first reason for the variations of languages among the nations" (1969: sec. 118). As the basic sounds are limited in number, one needs to combine some of them to refer to more sensibles. From the particular sensibles one will move to the matching intelligibles or universals (1969: sec. 119).

[29] To the impossible pre-linguistic convention by speech, al-Fârâbî substitutes a convention based not only on ostension but also on imitation:

> This is how the letters of that nation and the utterances (*'alfâz*) arising from those letters first originate. . . It so happens that one of them uses a sound or utterance to indicate something when addressing someone else and the hearer memorizes it. Then the hearer uses the same utterance when addressing the first inventor of that utterance. In this case, the first hearer will have followed the example [of the inventor] . . . in such a way that they will have agreed upon that utterance and acted in concert. They then use it to address others until it spreads through a certain group (1969: sec. 120).

Later on a "language (*lisân*) giver" will put some order among utterances and invent new ones for that which was still nameless. At this stage the giving of utterances limits itself to the things necessary for survival (1969: sec. 120). Such utterances are given according to a certain order. After the most basic,

> They invent utterances for what they have cognized from experience step by step, then utterances for what they have cognized from experience common to all of them, then utterances for those things that pertain to each practical art, including tools . . . (1969: sec. 121).

[30] Interested in a perfect match between things, concepts, and words, al-Fârâbî asserts that, as there is a distinction between substance and accidents in things, there is a similar distinction in meanings and, therefore, in utterances. "Among utterances there are fixed letters and letters that act as though they were changing accidents occurring in the same utterance, with each changing letter corresponding to a changing accident" (1969: sec. 123).[6] Al-Fârâbî here makes good use of a feature of Arabic. Words in dictionaries are classified around roots. The root is the equivalent of the substance and the addition of specific prefixes, suffixes, and infixes, plus changes in vocalization add shades of meaning to the root and give rise to derived words. To give an example, *fataha* means to "open." The fixed pattern for instrumental words requires the addition of the prefix *mi-* and some changes in vocalization. We then get the word *miftâh*, "instrument to open" or "key." The fixed pattern of the sixth verbal form indicates that an action is mutual. *Kataba* means "to write," but add the prefixe *ta-* and lengthen the first vowel and you get *takâtaba*, "to correspond, to exchange letters." Add the locative prefix *ma-* to the root and you get *maktab*, "a place where one writes," i.e., "an office."

[31] Pursuing the story of the development of language, al-Fârâbî then explains how homonyms, synonyms, and metaphors arise and with them rhetoric and poetry. In order to reduce this multiplication of utterances as well as the multiplication of meanings of one and the same utterance to manageable proportions, the best poems, stories, etc., will be selected and an oral tradition established. Younger generations are made to memorize such poems and stories and so learn correct usage, but there comes a time at which this oral tradition is so vast that no one can learn it by heart and so people invent writing – we are far from God teaching Adam all the scripts. Lexicography follows and to maintain the purity of the language lexicographers, go and study the way people living in the wilderness or at the center of the nation speak. Such people, having little contact with other nations and idioms, best maintain the original language in its purity.

[32] Up to now al-Fârâbî, as a true philosopher, has been speaking universally about language and, therefore, about any and every idiom, but he finds it useful to back up his theory about the necessity of maintaining the purity of the idiom and the manner to do so in referring to the work of the grammarians of Kûfah and Basrah, who went to study the language of the Bedouins. Grammarians are "craftsmen" of the proper usage of an idiom, who discover and codify the rules good speakers follow. The linguistic arts then appear and require the invention of technical words. To words of first imposition referring directly to things in this world, grammarians will add words of second imposition referring to words and not directly to things. A name (*'ism* in Arabic), for example "dog," refers to the dogs of this world, but a noun (also *'ism* in Arabic) refers to words. The *word* "dog" is a noun, as member of a certain grammatical category, but no dog chasing a car is a "noun." Recall Dante's and Muslim grammarians' remarks about the invention of technical terms. Aware that such terms may be either coinages or metaphors derived form words of first imposition, as in the case of *'ism* as name and noun, al-Fârâbî recommends, when possible, to prefer

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[6] Khalidi (9) finds this confusing and Langhade, who notices the parallelism between words, concepts, and things, warns us not to give a semantic value to each letter of a word. I follow Gandia's interpretation that this passage refers to the derivation of various words form one and the same root (see Al-Fârâbî 2004: 70).

metaphors to coinages. From linguistic and practical arts, human beings will move to mathematics, the logical arts posterior to rhetoric and poetry, i.e., dialectic and demonstration, and finally to philosophy proper.

[33] Al-Fârâbî's description of the origin of language and for each nation of the various steps of elaboration of a correct idiom is certainly sophisticated and explains how from the slight natural physical differences in speech organs among the various nations immediately arises the diversity of idioms. Convention then leads to the creation of idioms. For him the diversity of idioms, of which he is so aware, does not raise questions and he assumes that good communication between various idioms is possible. Greek philosophy is alive and well in Arabic and we do not need to return to a study of the texts in the original language. Besides, there is no primal language and God has absolutely no role in the origin of language. We are very far from the religious approach of Muslims and Christians. This is not surprising because religion for al-Fârâbî, any religion, is only a watered down and low popular form of philosophy in both its concepts and arguments. Philosophical concepts are too remote from experience to be intelligible to ordinary people and, therefore, religions offer symbols and images of such concepts. Demonstrative syllogisms, the hallmark of philosophers, also are too complicated for John and Jane Smith and so religions provide simple but effective rhetorical and poetic arguments. Such extreme views lead al-Fârâbî to two radical claims: 1. religion is posterior in time to philosophy, and 2. at one and the same time there can be a plurality of true religions as symbols are culturally determined. Knowing al-Fârâbî's poor view of religion, we can now understand why he presents a theory of the origin of language and idioms that bypasses any divine origin and any reason to give a privileged status to Arabic, as the language of the Qur'an. But is this theory of the origin of language and idioms philosophically compelling? Al-Fârâbî always emphasizes the superiority of philosophy in taunting its demonstrative arguments. Yet, his presentation of the origin of language and idioms does not rest on demonstrative arguments. It is fairly coherent and clever, but makes many assertions, while sadly neglecting to offer evidence or arguments in their defense. Its interest lies in showing that some philosophical questions lurk behind the religious views and that philosophers and religious thinkers can deepen their reflections in examining each other's positions. Al-Fârâbî's theory is rather reductionist, though obviously elaborated and offered to be a suitable alternative to the positions defended by various Muslim intellectuals, and the same, *mutatis mutandis*, could be said about Christian intellectuals.

Conclusion

[34] Though their attitudes to language and the diversity of idioms differ, Christian and Muslim intellectuals cannot help raising some of the same philosophical questions while pondering what their scriptures say about language and idioms. This is not surprising as both communities of faith construe language not only as what distinguishes human beings from the other animals, but also as a means chosen by God to reveal himself.

[35] If Christianity wishes to remain true to itself, it must be careful not to wed itself, or to appear to wed itself, to any specific idiom and, therefore, to any particular culture. Yet, such diversity is a challenge. How then do we ensure unity and universality in diversity without falling into some kind of chaos or a nebulous and formless common ground of beliefs and

attitudes? On the other hand, there is always the temptation to ensure unity in privileging a culture, as at times the Latin Church does, or in allying or seeming to ally itself to some political or economic power. Islam, on the other hand, attempts to ensure unity in privileging one idiom Arabic and in emphasizing the *sharî'a*, which is all encompassing. Yet, such attempt does not prevent divisions among Muslims, as Muhammad himself had predicted. It may also give rise to conflicts with religious minorities in Islamic lands and with secular powers in areas where Muslims are in the minority. Understanding somewhat better our different attitudes to language and knowing more about the various interpretations given to the relevant scriptural passages may give us a greater awareness of the complexity of the issues and deeper respect for each other.

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