



## *Language Again...the Confusion of Tongues*

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The Qur'ân speaks about 'religion' in the singular. That is one reason why, the word, *dîn*, commonly translated from Arabic into English as 'religion', poses such a phenomenal problem for any competent translator.

Our western notion of 'religion' refers to a systematic and formal system of ideas and associated ritual practices that, in the context of an organized community, are attached to a higher ideal or higher 'being'. Along with others of like mind, by subscribing to a religion an individual expresses fidelity, pious affection, and solidarity toward this higher ideal or being. Such an individual is described as being 'religious'. And, in a world populated by a plethora of 'gods' (or god-impersonations), in our western scheme of things there can be a host of religions, and 'religious persons' come in all shapes, garbs and sizes. The more the merrier. We westerners have never quite lost our penchant for a brawling Greek pantheon. Then again there's our North Woods heritage. We've never quite outgrown our fascination with Valhalla. Gods! ... hey, we like lots of gods, lusty, brawling, violent gods!

The Qur'ânic word, *dîn*, doesn't fit into any of that, especially not those things that connote structure, system, social or political organization, formal doctrine and, least of all, polytheism and all the divine shenanigans that go along with it. Even the pre-Islamic pantheon in Mecca was, by analogy to western types, a staid affair ... very commercially controlled. When the Muslims dismantled it (the last to go was the 'Christian' triad), there was no great identity crisis. I suspect it came almost as a relief for most Arabs. The fact that the sanctuary's central fetish (the Ka'bah with its black stone) was preserved may have had something to do with the smooth transition. In a sense, all that was removed was the element of confusion.

For the Muslim, God's *dîn* is *islâm* (Qur'ân 3:19) and that raises a whole Gordian Knot of questions in itself. Are we talking about an organized religious system or an attitude of *dîn*? Central, of course, and the disappearing thread in the whole thing is: how can the object of religious devotion himself have a religion? And the answer, of course, is that he doesn't ... at least not in our western sense. So when we're dealing with *dîn* we're not really talking about 'religion' at all, are we? So what are we talking about?

In the end, the Arabic word, *dîn*, comes far closer to the western notion of 'faith', but even then it skitters off sideways. Put simply (and perhaps far too simply), *dîn* indicates a dialogue, a mutual posture, between God and human beings — perhaps most

pristinely depicted in the movements and words of Muslim prayer — that, on the one hand, requires submission to God and gratitude for his guidance and discipline, and, on the other hand, presumes upon God’s inexhaustible mercy.

Although the word appears many times in the comparatively short text of the Qur’ân, *dîn* always carries with it the definite article or, in a lesser number of cases, a defining possessive pronoun — *dîn* as you do it, or they do it, or I do it, or we do it, and so on. Furthermore, it has no adjectival form in the Qur’ân at all. And that’s important. There’s just no such thing as being ‘*dîn-ish*’. In the upshot, because there is only One God, there can be only one *dîn*. From their side in the divine-human dialogue, people either practice *dîn* correctly or they don’t. God, for his part, has only to be himself to do his part in *dîn*.

Quite anomalously, in modern times, the word, *dîn*, acquired a plural form. Muslim apologists since the late 19th century, faced with so-called ‘modernity’, coined an elegant-sounding plural — *adyân* — so as to conform to western thought categories. Having done that, they then began using the grammatically permissible adjectival form of the word — *dînî*. That plural and that adjective have since insinuated themselves into Arabic and Muslim daily speech and have helped ease the way into a subtle but actual perceptual shift the consequences of which are only now becoming apparent.

Apart from the distortion of meaning, the shift is toward the western polytheistic construction of reality with all that implies by way of cosmic entropy, ecological irresponsibility, and religious and cultural conflict. This is extremely unfortunate because, through the treacheries of trans-lingual fog, a point of principle has been surrendered (or at least seriously compromised) that ought to have been staunchly defended. It ought to have been staunchly defended because it is pivotal, and not just for the Muslim community but for us all.

Not altogether tangentially, it is worth noting that ‘faith’ in western diction has relatively recently received a plural rendering. Faith points to a person’s drive to believe in something, to accept that thing as self-evident (empirical evidence notwithstanding), to make a binding commitment and to become engaged. It commits a person to a pledge (a ‘troth’), to the observance of trust and to the practice of fidelity. Faith, in other words, inheres in each person, it is part of the psyche’s profile, and is not even necessarily religious. It has to do with a person’s intention to be human and is eminently singular. In composite with other factors, it helps makes each human a human being. Furthermore, as of yet there’s no such thing as ‘faith-ish’, but, as Radar says in M\*A\*S\*H, ‘wait for it!’

Nonetheless we now, quite without a second thought, speak of ‘faiths’ (in the plural). Put simply, this is just bad use (actually abuse) of language. The plural has no actual referent, no marker for meaning. Its coinage simply distorts and trivializes the word itself. Language being the primary burden-bearer for how we actually think, we wind up confused about what we mean by ‘faith’.

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If we seek an Arabic word that might come close to the western notion of 'religion', we may find it in the word, 'ummah. But again it's a slippery number. In the Qur'ân, 'ummah refers to a community — existing either before or after the fact — that attaches itself to a prophet of God who speaks the core message of divine guidance. Thankfully, ummah has an ancient plural — 'umam — that occurs many times in the Qur'ân in a manner consistent with the singular form of the word. 'Ummah' implies the relationship between a mother and a child, a relationship that is shot full of nurture, nourishment, compassion, discipline and love. It is primordial and spiritual. Political repercussions are secondary at best. And yet ... and yet ...

Again, modern commentators, translators and lexicographers have done us no favors. This word is now translated as 'nation' in the western sense — a secular, political and even racial idiom that, in modern times, aping western usage, has gone every which-way but true in Arabic parlance.

What are we left with? It seems to be a ball of trans-lingual fur disgustingly regurgitated by a cosmic cat. The cat doesn't even take a second look at it once it has been expelled. But that doesn't help our cause.

My point here is that we are in an age when language on a global scale is being cut loose from its moorings. On the one hand, that can be exciting and refreshing. It allows space for new thoughts and scope for lateral thinking. God knows, we need that. But on the other hand, what actually seems to be happening is that thought is being crippled through a 'dumbing down' process, and language is being intentionally blurred into fluff and nonsense. After all, we do belong to the 'sound-bite' generation. The media is the medium. Unfortunately, so far as I can see, the 'on the other hand' — the dumbing down effect — is way out in front.

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When discipline in the use of language yields to other and subversive conditions and priorities, meaning drifts into meaninglessness. Armies are good at this, for instance. They do not want soldiers to think or to question orders; all they want from them is execution. Thought 'in the line of fire' can be inconvenient and even fatal. But when the same principles are applied more broadly, the repercussions are potentially horrendous. Not just religion but all culture ... the very warp and weft of human society ... are at stake. Poets, for instance, fall into dishonor. And as for politicians, intelligence (leave aside the notion of moral accountability) is no longer a credential for holding high public office. We fall back into a Babel era, building meaningless towers that Dr. Seuss-wise bizarrely crab up into the heavens to assault God and bring him down to our increasingly mindless level.

Our drift into nonsense seriously complicates the search for ways to bridge basic perceptual divides. For one, it makes inter-faith dialogue more difficult today than it has ever been. Our world sees an ever-increasing tendency to bring at least a facsimile of

religion into the center of political processes, and that exponentially increases complexity. Lacking other checks-and-balances, the emergence of fringe and fanatical Islamist ideology is a case in point.

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Theoretically a disciple of Muhammad ‘Abdo and Hasan al-Bannâ, the leading ideologue of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood movement and the paramount saint of contemporary Islamism, Sayyid Qutub, some years ago and well before his execution for sedition proposed that Christianity and Judaism in the modern world have no connection with the ‘Nasârâ’ and ‘Yahûd’ mentioned in the Qur’ân as ‘People of the Book’. Toward these latter Muslims were absolutely enjoined to practice tolerance.

But those communities, Sayyid Qutub argued, have now vanished. What are left are pagan caricatures, pure and simple, whose adherents may be forced to confess Islam or eliminated. In effect, that placed all Christians in the Muslim world in serious jeopardy. In other words, he condoned jihâd against these and all other ‘pagans’. And this was a significant departure from well-established Islamic practice.

How do we assess the consequences? Well ... in effect, Sayyid Qutub condoned the plural of dîn ... adyân. Quite unthinkingly, what Sayyid Qutub bought and then sold at discount rates was the polytheistic worldview of western culture along with its massive baggage of bigotry and religious violence. And Sayyid Qutub’s ideological descendants — among them ‘Usamâ Bin-Lâdin — are now working his purpose out.

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Perhaps the redeeming grace is the fact that the Qur’ân is still there. Those of us who still read it for meaning and not just for its tympanic elegance — be we Muslim, Christian or Jew — may yet find reassurance in that. Its eminently pristine language must still be dealt with. And Muslims ... at least a thoughtful leaven of Muslims ... are still trying to deal with it. For that, God be praised!

But Christians, on their side, have their apostles of Babel too and in great plenty. People like Pat Robertson, Franklin Graham and Jerry Falwell (with altogether too many clones and disciples) are still ‘on the loose’. Their putative ‘gospel’ is aped throughout the West and even the Far East. Using the media deftly, they have also sent into the Muslim world an army of clandestine operatives who carry their message of schism, hate and bigotry. And, while other Christians search for other avenues of irenic dialogue and reconciliation, these agents of fanaticism work for confrontation and conflict.

The agents of division and conflict are far more active within their communities than beyond them. Muslims and Christians (and Jews too) must recognize that their battle for rationality (nay, for sanity) is internal. And there can be no sanity ... no rationality in relations ... between religious communities until there emerges on both sides a consensus that reconciliation ... that peace ... is what we seek. And a first step is to recover a sense

of discipline in the use of language.

On all sides of the 'great divide' there must emerge those who seek peace, pursue it and speak sense. There must emerge those who pursue dialogue knowing it is both crucial and timely, who know that those who would subvert it are bound to fail and fall into history's waste bin, and who know that something far better lies ahead. Optimists must emerge. We must get past the confusion of tongues. We must work at the meaning of what we say. Easter and Pentecost must overcome Babel.

The Muslim invocation, 'in-shâ' Allâh (if God is willing!), is the only one that fits the circumstances. God knows what's going on; he is, after all is said and done, the source of all wisdom ... he is, in the end, the eternal Optimist, and the coiner of faith's more sublime similes, the structures by which we transpose meaning.

And I greet you from the lands of the morning.