

## SACRED TEXTS, SECULAR MIND

### KUTSAL METİNLER, SEKÜLER ZİHİN

Ernest Wolf-Gazo\*

**Abstract:**

The idea of the paper is: how does the dialectic work out, if a secular mind reads, what is considered sacred texts? The paper holds that there is a special dynamics at work that can't simply be put in categories such as "sacred" or "profane".

**Keywords:** philosophy, hermeneutics, philosophy of religion, sacred texts.

**Öz:**

Makalenin ana konusu şudur: Şayet seküler bir zihin kutsal metinler olarak kabul edilenleri okursa, diyalektik nasıl çalışır? Yazı, "kutsal" veya "din dışı" gibi kategorilere basitçe konamayacak özel dinamiklerin iş başında olduğunu savunuyor.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Felsefe, yorumlama disiplini, din felsefesi, kutsal metinler

## 1. INTRODUCTION

This lecture focuses on a specific question: what happens when a secular mind reads a sacred text? Of course, in order to come to terms with such a question we have to be precise in our definitions involved. We must, first of all, know what we are talking about and what are references are. In addition, we have to be sure that we are dealing in modern times since, no doubt, in pre-modern times, or pre-literary times, the distinction between what is considered sacred, or holy, and, what is considered secular, or worldly, was not known. At this point we are already into a subtle discourse of the topic at hand. However, in the same way we are born into a community or society that has existed before our birth, as individuals, the sacred and the secular, had either existed in our respective society, or it did not. That depends, of course, in which century we have been born. However, the fundamental difference between what belongs to Deity and what belongs to Caesar has been a fundamental theological doctrine in Christianity. In addition, all societies, products of cultural activity over the century of their development towards a specific identity had differentiated between what is holy and what is worldly.

Let us take the understanding of "Definition" as understood by the *Oxford English Dictionary* of 1483: simply, it tells the reader "the setting of bounds; limitation (rare)".<sup>1</sup> Thus, this definition of what a definition is and supposed to do, is to the point: setting the boundaries and limit the specific area that a definition targets. Thus, in our case it is: a sacred text is considered something special, it is considered holy and divinely inspired, or, in some cases, revealed as the word of Deity. For example, in various religions, or belief systems, sacred texts

---

\* Prof. Department of Philosophy, at American University of Qahira

exhibit themselves in languages that are considered sacred, such as Arab for the Qur'an, or Sanskrit for the Vedas, or the hieroglyphs for the Book of the Dead. In the western context, Greek and Latin are not considered sacred or holy languages, but the Bible is considered as sacred scripture to the believers.

When we come to the secular, or the worldly, we find another problem. That is to say, where are the limitations and setting of bounds of the worldly? Who decides to plant the border post of where does the secular start, where does the sacred begin? Or, in another way, is there a beginning and end of the sacred and the secular? Clearly, by definition, the secular only makes sense in terms of the sacred, but is that also true on the contrary? Apparently, we are accustomed to think of sacred and secular as twin concepts that are inevitable interrelated. This, of course, is a very specific modern problem. The secular is understood, in modern terms, as something worldly, or, "this worldliness". Daily activities that require basic necessities to live are considered secular activities. Or, in modern times, we speak of "weekend" that is understood in sacred terms as "holy days". The days of prayer for those who believe in the sacredness of one's ancestors traditions, rituals, prayers; for others, it's a short trip into the mountains, or to the beaches, to relax from the stressful days during the week. Of course, at this point we have gone beyond the "limitation" of our definitions. However, and that is the point, definition, like individuals only makes sense if they are grasped in the context of the cultural framework in which they are used. In that sense our guiding principle is still: what happens to a sacred text read by a secular mind. Of course, in to come to terms with such a situation we need to add many more components that support a proper definition. A definition also needs legitimacy. And the legitimacy of a definition can only be had in its proper and relevant cultural context.

For our purpose we need to expand our understanding of sacred and secular. The more restricted definition of sacred is usually determined in terms of the religious, exemplified by the Torah, the Bible, the Qur'an, for many. Of course, there are other sacred texts that are understood and "felt" to be religious by nature: the Avesta of Zoroastrianism, the Vedas of Hinduism, or the Sutras of Buddhism. We want to expand the limits of the definition of "sacred" and "secular" in the sense that it might make it possible, in our age of globalization and digital age, to understand the interaction of a variety of religious texts in cyberspace. We can't escape cyberspace in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and must make amends to come to terms with this communication revolution. The meeting between the sacred and the secular in cyberspace is all encompassing; there is no escape, we must tackle this encounter, or, at times, confrontation, and at times, invitation.

Dealing with time, the calendar, which classifies and divides our timing into various time zones that everyone who takes and airplane knows about. From the perspective of the air traveler time is secular, the time zones are translated into A.M. and P.M. and we speak of real time, or virtual time. Yet, ironically, and this is a reason we are submitted an expanded definition of the sacred and the secular: our calendars are defined by sacred events, determined in historical time,

such as Christmas and Easter for Christians, the Chinese New Year, and, of course, Ramadan for Muslims. Yet, many use the airplane for travelling that in the days of old, they would use the camel and the famous Caravanserais, the ancient Hotels that welcomed the pilgrims en route to Mecca. The same can be said of Christian pilgrimages to Rome or Jerusalem known to the European tourist as "the holy land". As you know see in due time the facts on the ground and historical developments force us to revise the 1493 Oxford Dictionary understanding of definition. We are forced to expand that definition into a more applicable tool to come to terms with the digital age. Of course, all of us are struggling to come to terms with this new age and that is the reason why we must re-think inherited definitions and definitions that seems, at once, highly restricted for the cyberspace age.

Again, how does a secular mind, operating in cyberspace, or dealing with the sacred, specifically texts, come to terms with this phenomenon, called the sacred? Lastly, we want to show that this is not a one-way street leading to a dead end. On the contrary, we will show that a reversal also can take place: that the secular mind, engages in a dialectic process with the sacred in that the secular mind begins to realize that the identity of the secular status is dependent on the status of the sacred. This involves some socio-historical digressions, from time to time, in order to underscore that definitions and the understanding thereof, don't simply happen in an empty space. Definitions are, in fact, results of historical constellations at specific time frameworks that our history books classify as Classic, Medieval, and Modern. The ensuing problem: what happens after the Modern is a problem of classification and historical formations. Of course, we all know that some made it somewhat easy for themselves and simply added a prefix to Modern and come up with post-modern. The problem is not solved: what happens after the post-modern? Thus these historical intricate problems can't be solved at this time, since we are in the stream of a new communication century. How that century will turn out, no one knows. And, no one wants to take a guess. So, what happens to our definitions in the age of cyberspace? What is sacred and what is secular in cyberspace? Specifically, when a sacred text is encountered by a mind that understands itself as secular?

## **2. TRANSVALUATION OF DEFINITIONS IN THE SCIENTIFIC REVOLUTION AND THE AGE OF CYBERSPACE**

The definitional problems that we encounter in cyberspace have a history that reaches into the initial times we classify as Modern, or the Scientific Revolution. We would like to think that it is was Dutch philosopher Spinoza who was one of the first moderns who felt the crises of definitions: of God, of Nature, of Humankind. He uses he geometrical method, as it was called then, and provides us with a geometry of metaphysics in a way that wants to convince us that it is possible to "proof" via the geometrical method, that the definitions of God, Nature, and Humankind can be reduced to a single definition of it all: the love of God. The controversy that he initiated in Amsterdam was, at one point, violent. He was expelled from the Jewish community and was happy he found a nice small house in the charming village of Rijnsburg.

Any visitor can see that Spinoza must have felt isolated trying to make a living with optical lens grinding and spent the rest of the time with his books. Needless to say, Spinoza is an example of definitions having consequences. At times deadly, or, at least, banishment from the community is the result. In Spinoza we find a fascinating struggle between someone who applies a secular method, the geometrical, in order to solve a sacred order. Chances are he did not see himself that way and simply tried to point out that the order of nature and the order of the mind is identical in the definition of his God. The chaotic consequences he did not understand: why did his community turn their back on him? The lover of God, as he understood himself.<sup>1</sup>

Generally speaking, Spinoza pinpointed the specific problem of his age: how can use the new tools and instruments produced by the geometrical method (or scientific method) in order to redefine sacred ground and text? We see the whole problem of the new age, called the Scientific Revolution, in the letters and works of Isaac Newton, or Robert Boyle, or Henry Oldenburg, secretary of the Royal Society in London, and many members of the London scientific community.<sup>2</sup>

The scientific communities in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century in London, Amsterdam, or Paris, had an acute problem: How do you integrate the new scientific discoveries and technologies into the interpretation of nature as retaining divinity? In short, considering the scientific and economic revolutions in Western Europe, how can the traditional understanding of Deity be preserved? The Western scientific revolution was not simply about science replacing witchcraft, demons, underwater creatures, dragons, or myths, it was also about definitions. The exchange of letters between Newton and his colleague and friend Bishop Richard Bentley, Master of Trinity College, Cambridge University is a case in point. The Bishop inquires in the relevant letters many times as to what kind of system Newton is presenting in his *Principia*. He asks simply questions: if Newton proposes a mechanical universe what happens to miracles and revelation? In fact, how does Newton see his Deity (he called Pantokrator) within that system? Needless to say, Newton finds that it is not easy to satisfy the Bishops curiosity and questions. Not only Newton, but many of his scientific colleagues of the Royal Society struggled with definitions as to what is sacred and what is science. The specific problem was: how can a scientifically trained mind come to terms with sacred nature. And they did think of nature, or the universe, of being sacred, but how do their scientific results agree with this sacredness of the cosmos? The Deists, as history calls them, integrated the sacred into their secular projects by defining the newly conceived nature as being the equivalent of creation by a Creator in terms of the Book of Nature.

Needless to say, the metaphor of the "Book of Nature" was an attempt at redefining the notion of Deity, Nature, and Humankind. Scientific activities produces secular minds that have their roots in sacred scripture. The secular mind is born without knowing it. The ruse called

---

<sup>1</sup> Cf. T.S. Eliot, *Notes towards Definition of Culture*. London: Faber and Faber 1957, p. 3.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Spinoz, *Ethica* (Latin/German). Tr. By Jakob Stern. Stuttgart: Reclam 1977.

"Book of Nature" was nothing else than an embarrassment as to Bentley's simply questions that aimed at wanting to know how they stand to Deity. Of course, political matters were at stake too, but the specific problems became acute: Newton's gravitation could not simply be explained by miracles. The famous apple falling from the trees was for the uneducated. Everyone understood apples falling from trees: no, it was not a hidden force, or the like, but called "gravitational pull". Of course, when Bishop Bentley asked Newton what gravitation was, Newton had no answer, simply, "I know not what". He, Newton, only deals with matters moving in space and time and not in writing up a dictionary and definitions. Ironically, due to Newton's brilliant experimental work in the laboratory and theoretical calculations he put sacred texts under pressure. How could the new universe be explained as a sacred text, analogous to the Bible, in terms of definitions that derive from scientific experiments? Definitional adjustment had to take place. As was pointed out in the introduction the limits of definitions we find in alchemical texts could no longer provide satisfying answers to the emerging secular mind. The following paragraph from Newton's *Optics* will give you an idea how the "Book of Nature" was constructed in the framework of a mechanical natural philosophy trying to save the sacred understanding of a created world:

"All these things being considered, it seems probable to me that God in the beginning formed matter in solid, massy, hard, impenetrable, movable particles, of such sizes and figures, and with such other properties and in such proportion to space as most conduced to the end for which he formed them; and that these primitive particles being solids are incomparably harder than any porous bodies compounded of them, even so very hard as never to weak or break in pieces, no ordinary power being able to divide what God himself made one on the first creation."<sup>3</sup>

Newton makes it clear that the only thing the laws of nature do is to describe the phenomena as it appears to us: matter in space and time. The causes of the laws of nature he doesn't want to speculate about, they are unknown. Here we see the secular mind in crisis and contradiction. The Book of Nature was to provide the gap for explanation and definition as to the act of creation by the Pantokrator and the mechanical system that operates in the universe in terms of gravitation and push and pull. Perhaps, a last example will highlight our dilemma of the confrontation between the sacred text that is supposed to stand for the Book of Nature and the insights as to how things operate in that book. In the *Principia* Newton's pointed out one time that the common people (he calls them the vulgar one's according to the English usage at the time) follow the cycles of nature according to what they perceive as the seasons of the years, winter, spring, summer, fall. However, the educated, the enlightened, calculate with the tools of mathematics and laboratory instruments the rhythm and cycles of nature. This solve a problem for the time being: calculation and laboratory work doesn't interfere with sacred definitions as

---

<sup>3</sup> See Isaac Newton, *Newton's Philosophy of Nature*. Ed. By H.S. Thayer. New York: Hafner Publishing Company 1965, p. 6 ff., Frank Manuel, *The Religion of Newton*. Oxford University Press 1974, and Larry Stewart, "Seeing through the Scholium: Religion and Reading Newton in the Eighteenth Century", in: *History of Science* xxxiv (1996).

long as the results satisfy the secular mind. Of course, Newton and his colleagues were lucky to be living in London and not in Padua, or Florence, at the time.<sup>4</sup>

We could have used the example of the German mathematician and philosopher Leibniz. In Leibniz, a contemporary of Spinoza and Newton, we find a subtle attempt to save definitions of sacred texts, including the Book of Nature, in terms of a Theodicy and an imagined universal calculator. The story is well known, but for the sake of brevity we can state that the digital age with its astonishing communication possibilities would not be a shock to Leibniz. We can state that our digital age is a dream Leibniz had, many centuries ago, come true in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

There is no doubt that in cyberspace we encounter a problem of limitation. What is the status of sacred texts in cyberspace? What sort of definitions are valid, or who defines the limits of a definition for cyberspace? No doubt, in the long run, we must come to terms, as the science people in the scientific revolution did, with the many sacred texts, many different definitions, varies kinds of human characters, who encounter cyberspace from their specific vantage point. We should not forget that the screen of a laptop, like the screen of an old fashion television, is an extension of our eyes. That is exactly what television means, looking afar. Of course, it is fantastic to see a football game somewhere in a stadium, anywhere in the world, while sitting thousands of miles on a comfortable chair, or couch, enjoy the modern gladiators. However, what is the relation between the television and our mind? It seems that the laptop screen doesn't necessarily extend and expand our mind. In fact, at times we get the impression that the mind that sits at the laptop or television screen is being feed reinforced prejudice and ignorance learned in childhood. That is to say, the digital age, fantastic in terms of communication possibility, also makes it possible, for many, to reinforce the long held believes, that may turn out to be lethal when enacted in real time.<sup>5</sup>

Yet, the possibility of encounter between varies cultural believes and communities that hold them has expanded enormously and is to be welcomed. However, this new world-wide communication possibility has its downside: conscious misguidance and purposeful misleading those who are too closely aligned with the screen, as in Plato's Cave, are brainwashed into believing in false idols and equations in forms of public relations promoted that promise modern happiness. In previous ages this was known as salvation and spelt outside in sacred terms in sacred texts that the devotees and true believers would retain sustenance from a harsh life spent in daily routine of battling hunger, disease, and early death.

---

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Newton, *Philosophy of Nature*, pp. 175-176.

<sup>5</sup> See Hans Blumenberg, *Die Legitimität der Neuzeit*. Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp 3. Auflage, 1985; Rainer Specht, *Innovation und Folgelast: Beispiele aus der neueren Philosophie- und Wissenschaftsgeschichte*. Stuttgart: fromann-holzboog 1972; Juergen Goldstein, *Nominalismus und Moderne: Zur Konstitution neuzeitlicher Subjektivität bei Hans Blumenberg und Wilhelm von Ockham*. Freiburg: Alber Verlag 1998; and Louis Dupre, *Passage to Modernity: An Essay in the Hermeneutics of Nature and Culture*. Yale University Press 1993.

The modern secular mind deals with death and basics of human life as virtual reality on the screen. In fact, the difference between the sacred and the secular is unknown to many. Virtual reality in the form of the cinema, Facebook, YouTube, digital photography, instant communication via webcam, constructs a world identical to cyberspace designated the new reality. In fact, the old distinction between first-hand experience and second-hand experience seems, somehow, old fashioned. We doubt seriously that any young adult, born and grown up with the founding and development of the internet, has any feeling of a distinction between primary experience and mediated experience. In fact, the young generation that grew up with the internet are not conscious of that subtle distinction between virtual and empirical reality. In short, there seems to be a sense of confusion, not only about the status of experience, of what kind of experience the person experiences, and the differentiation between what is sacred and secular, at least in cyberspace. Cyberspace and internet don't produce values, they simply act as mediators of communication, without being conscious what is being mediated.

In short, there is an analogous historical situation between the scientific revolution of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century and our new 21<sup>st</sup> century: basic presupposition must be cast aside and replacements for those presuppositions, or, call them paradigms, are not in sight. Yet, at the same time, the human character has not changed in its basic constitution and psychological make-up. That is the reason why we still entertain books called "classics", that provide us with fundamental insights that have not vanished in our lives. <sup>7</sup> In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century the German philosopher Nietzsche spoke of the trans-valuation of values; in the same tone, can we make the case that a trans-valuation of definitions is taking place in terms of our understanding of sacred texts. In fact, the emerging secular mind was only possible as a contrast to the sacred text by defining itself and its situation in a different light than the sacred would allow. There seems to be no doubt that the advent of modernity somehow, is connected to this emergence of a secularism that enveloped not only the mind, but also entire communities and societies. The so-called social media makes it possible for people to assemble virtual associations that come and go, at a push of a button. These social media associations are formed in cyberspace and entertain no value system, except, the political tools of Machiavelli and the up-dated-technology of stealth. Yes, the old-fashioned electronic mail is a very useful way of transporting a message to friends and foes, alike, but experience of human behavior tells us, as any technological revolution has shown, that the beast in humans is alive and well.

### **3. PRAYER AND RITUALS**

Prayer and rituals are intimately connected. In different communities and societies the form of prayer takes on a ritual that reinforces the form of prayer. We are not dealing with an intellectual activity, but a sort of "looking into the inside" to see if our soul feels right. In that sense the soul operates like an internal compass of the soul that tells us if the orientation of our prayers fulfilled. Normally, prayer is learned in the family by imitation. A young child that doesn't experience prayer in the family will probably not pray as an adult.

Prayer is a sacred activity in the sense that the human makes an attempt at transcendence. The direction of prayer, in some religions, is toward a sacred place, or at a specific location that is considered sacred. Like church, mosque, or temple, or cemetery. To pray at the graveside of one's ancestor is a sacred act. This sacred act has the function of connecting to the souls of the ancestors. It signals, although the ancestor maybe physically dead, the soul of the ancestor is still alive, at least in the memory of those who pray. Of course, there is the prayer as communal ritual. Whether in the mosque, or in a monastery, the ritualistic prayer has the function to strengthen the feeling of togetherness and support a sense of loyalty to the group in question. The communal prayer is always an act for the insider. For it is precisely for that reason, an insider activity, that reinforces the identity of the group. At that point the sacred bond between all the members in question and the ancestors, or a divine transcendence, is of utmost importance. An outsider can't simply join like applying and buy a membership card. A prayer community is not an assemblage of country club people who form an association. Generally speaking, if the prayer is at the center of activity of a group, the direction, again is inside with the presupposition that the transcendence is open to hear the prayer. A call to prayer, as in the tradition of the Muslim community, is not simply a call to prayer, but it is also a reminder of the obligation each member of the Muslim community has (part of the Umma) to fulfill daily prayer according to prescription and obligation.

Prayer has also a strong sociological bonding between those who exercise praying. It is not simply the form of the prayer, it is also the formulations, and the ritualistic utterances, that are usually learned in childhood that are repeated rhythmically. This repetition, by those engaging in prayer, is not simply a meditation in the modern sense, but a reminder of belonging to a specific group and a reminder of the innocent days of childhood. It is not accident that often prayer is compared to cleansing the body and the soul. This is one of the functions in the Roman Catholic Church, confession, that the believer has the opportunity to cleanse himself/herself of sins partaken. Sins are a reminder that we have a body that is born and must die. Thus, confession is a ritual that prepares for the last journey, when the soul escapes the body toward the higher ground, called paradise. It is an imagery that many religions reinforce for their members.

Prayer is not only simply to pray by folding the hand, and arms, or kneeling, in a specific bodily state. Often, prayer is accompanied by song and dance, as we see in the Mevlana rituals among the Dervishes in Konya. Specific kind of movement are not simply a matter of achieving a trance, but have symbolic meaning to those who are engaged in the ritualistic prayer and to those who have an understanding of the symbolic act. Likewise, in Christian monasticism, the Gregorian chants, are ways of prayer by way of song. Needless to say, the aesthetic appeal in the case of the dancing Dervishes and the rhythmic chanting of prayer reflects the beautiful image of the soul. No doubt, these kinds of prayers are sacred in nature and promote a sociology of worship among the true believers. It exists to strengthen the belief of the true believer and



speaks to the soul not exclusively as a mechanical repetition of formulae, but an emotional appeal to the heart. It is not an accident that in many culture, especially in the sacred sphere, the heart is as important as the soul and understood as the true expression of love for the transcendence and for the fellow believer.

Let us take the case of Saint Augustine. Augustine's Confession is a masterpiece of intellectual and emotional appeal to pray. It turned out to be a paradigm for many generations, throughout the centuries. We find a man, formally a sinner, who discovers his true self in an intense self-examination. It is as though he plays his own doctor of his soul, purifying his body of all sins in order to ready himself for transcendent communication. No doubt, the Confessions of Augustine are a masterpiece of sacred text. Not sacred in the sense that they are the words of a Deity, or divine revelation, but sacred in the sense of preparing a platform to communicate with transcendence, with emotion and spirit. In Book One of the Confessions we exemplify the following passage:

"So, then, I should be null and void and could not exist at all, if you, my God, were not in me. Or is it rather that I should not exist, unless I existed in you? For all things find in you their origin, their impulse, the center of their being. This, Lord, is the true answer to my question. But if I exist in you, how can I call you upon you to come to me? And where would you come from? For you, my God, have said that you fill heaven and earth, but I cannot go beyond the bounds of heaven and earth so that you may leave them to come to me."<sup>6</sup>

Augustine is reaching to achieve a communicative platform toward transcendence. He knows his shortcomings and knows his boundaries, like a definition, and he asks his God to expand to include Augustine in his realm. He feels that he is limited and along with that goes his limitation to be able to reach his God. Thus, he asks that God should not exclude him from his Grace and existence. No doubt, a secular mind can follow Augustine, but only to a certain extend. The secular mind understands the language of Augustine, but sees the limitation in the language and definition only; for Augustine he is not language bound, simply, he is handicapped, since his prayer in language is the only way he is capable to being able to communicate with transcendence. That is exactly why he understands Aristotle's distinction between humankind and the animal. Humankind has the gift of prayer that the animal doesn't have. The animal exist in nature only and is not able to transcend beyond its animal nature.

However, we have an interesting situation in terms of sacred activity and secular assessment of the world. While Augustine believes that humankind can transcend the animal nature, Aristotle grants humankind a mind, brain power, but not the possibility of transcendence. In the prayer situation Aristotle is the classic secular mind. In the introduction to his *Logic on Interpretation*, in which he clarifies his propositional logic he suddenly injects a comment about

---

<sup>6</sup> See Jim Macnamara, *The 21<sup>st</sup> Century Media Revolution*. New York/Bern: Peter Lang 2014.

the nature of prayers. Yet, before we grasp the shocking assessment of prayer it is important to understand Aristotle's logic of truth value. A child utters simply noises, until it grows and learns to imitate specific sounds from the parents. As the child grows into a little boy or girl it starts to form utterances that seem to sound like short sentences. Thus, in a continues state of development the child turns into a young boy and girl and starts imitating short sentences formed from the vocal imitation he or she hears and adapts, accordingly. At one point the boy or girl is able to construct a simple, but complete sentence, like, "John is my father", or, "Mary is my mother". With that simple sentence, according to Aristotle's truth value theory, we are able to ask, is it true or false? That is the moment which gives us the notion what is true or false, depending on the linguistic construct of a proposition. Animal are not capable of such a propositional construction, they make noises and grunts and what not, and communicate, but animals do not use language. For Aristotle it is the language use of the human animal (the animal rationale) that distinguishes himself/herself from the animal proper. Based upon this background, suddenly, Aristotle interjects and asks, what kind of proposition is prayer?<sup>7</sup>

Aristotle concludes that prayer, of any sort, does not qualify as a sentence or proposition, and therefore has no truth value. This is an example of a secular mind at work. The contrast to Augustine, who was also a master of rhetoric and linguistic, could not be stronger. Prayer for Aristotle is an exercise, more like meditation, to come down the nerves and reduce blood pressure or tension. It has no transcendence value, as we would put it. For Augustine the truth value of a sentence is useful too, he taught Aristotelian logic to his students, but language is not the ultimate measure to the portal of transcendence. It is the sacred sphere that is missing in Aristotle and that is the reason why Ibn Rushd has such a difficult time to convince his fellow Muslims that Aristotelian thinking is in concert with Islamic premises. This is a somewhat difficult subject matter, but in terms of prayer, perhaps worth to pursue for its own sake.

Again, prayer and ritual are complementary activities. A secular mind can partake in a ritual of all sorts: in Nazi Germany young people, in the Hitler youth were involved in daily rituals to reinforce the basics of National Socialism. Even the oath German soldiers took in the name Hitler, personally, involved a structured ritual that appeared like a sacred communal oath taking ritual. Of course, this was orchestrated in a religious like performance, more like a classical Greek tragedy, many young educated Germans knew from their classical Gymnasium. But, in fact, the direction for the oath was not transcendence but to the Fuehrer himself. It was an act of self-fulfilling prophecy that involved systematic ritual, but not prayer, of a secular mind that provoked the devil himself. The devil accepted the challenge, accordingly.

---

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Saint Augustine, *Confessions*. Tr. By R.S. Pine-Coffin. New York: Penguin Classics 1961, p. 23.

#### **4. READING AND THE ART OF RECITATION**

Reading is a formal process, according to rules of grammar and sentence structure, known as semantics and syntax. Reading, in world history, has always been associated with an elite, usually a priestly elite. Ancient Egypt is the classical example: the Egyptian priests were renowned, Herodotus and Plato mentioned them in their writing with great respect, for their reading skill as well as their medical knowledge. In fact, the Mummy became an icon of highest level of medical knowledge. Likewise, the hieroglyphs were considered, in the European Renaissance, as some sort of mystical language carrying hidden sacred messages, but only priests and those associated with the sacred, such as the temple wardens or the scribes associated with the Book of the Dead, or inscription in tombs, were considered having privileged access to the sanctuary of the respective temple, guarding the sacred space. Needless to say, the ordinary people in world history, did not have access to reading, especially scrolls, or books. This was the special sphere, usually associated with sacred text, especially in Antiquity, of the scribe, the priest, or leaders of religious communities.

In the classification of centuries and periods of world history we usually deal with pre-literate periods, and periods, considered civilizations, that were based on book learning and reading. Again, aside from scribes and priests, even the nobility, kings and queens, were often illiterate, since it was the warrior cast. It is well known that the famous European emperor Charlemagne could not read or write, and had his scribe at court, Einhard, translate and read to him. In fact, however, Charlemagne understood the value and significance of being able to read that he instructed Einhard to teach his daughter to read and write. This was unusual: as was the fact that the English Queen Elizabeth I, highly unusual for her position, was knowledgeable of classical Greek and Latin and French. However, the ordinary people of most societies, including Europe until the 18<sup>th</sup> century, were illiterates. Books were expensive and usually, until the 18<sup>th</sup> century, written in Latin, the official language of the Roman Catholic Church. At Church, until the 1960s, those attending Mass at any Church of Roman Catholicism, was read in Latin, that most of those attended did not understand. Many simply reiterated and imitated the voice of the priest conducted the Mass.

Reading and writing, it was recognized in the European period known as early modern history, was discovered as a powerful political tool, especially by the revolting rebel against Rome, Martin Luther. In fact, aside the theological differences with Rome, Luther's translation of the Bible into German was a historical act of the first order, not only for the German speaking people. Moreover, with his translation Luther delivered the German speaking people a new tool of modernity: Luther translation was not simply a translation from the Latin, but an innovative linguistic achievement that formatted the modern version of German for modern times. Again, it was not surprise that the moveable printing method and printing press invented by Johannes Gutenberg at Mainz, was immediately understood as something revolutionary. Suddenly, reading materials could be reproduced mechanically and did not necessarily employ many

scribes to copy the Bible. With the advent of Gutenberg's printing press, medieval times in Europe were over. The Bible no longer commanded monopoly, as well as the scribes and the priests, but printing technology and a new consciousness among the city people, especially the social class of the Buerger turned into a reading class and books became products to be consumed. By the time the famous book fairs in Leipzig and Frankfurt were established in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, a new social class established itself in German speaking society: the educated middle class (Bildungsbuergertum). Leipzig and Frankfurt were such city in which a university and a business class lived in cohesion and realized that real Kapital means also a reading public and knowledge producing citizens. The idea of knowledge is power was born and with it the notion that books and reading are powerful cultural tools for anyone to possess. Of course, it took time, especially women were barred, very often from books and reading, except the daughter of the enlightened powerful. In the Berlin Salon's around 1800, during the period in which German classical culture under the leadership of Goethe and Schiller, as well as romanticism, under the leadership of Novalis and the Schlegel brothers developed, educated women emerged from a salon and urban culture. Ladies such as Henriette Herz, daughter of Dr. Marcus Herz, intimate friend and medical advisor of Kant, entertained her salon that included the Humboldt brothers, the Schlegel brothers, as well as the theologian Plato translator Friedrich Schleiermacher. The spell on ignorance of reading and writing as well as books was broken; the Bible was still considered a sacred text, but a sacred text among many secular readers. It is no surprise that classical German idealism as well as the powerful ideological forces unleashing romanticism developed in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century in Berlin. It took two more generation to produce a Karl Marx and the 1848 revolutions in Europe. Needless to say, Marx's *Das Kapital* turned into a similar "sacred text" analogous to the Bible, not only to people who called themselves socialist or communist, but also to the proletariat and working class of the emerging industrial revolution. As is well known, most working-class peoples of Europe, until the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century could not read nor write. This affected especially women of the working class. In the 18<sup>th</sup> Century along with the emerging upper middle class, that we find portrait by the novels of Jane Austen, the reading lady emerged and along with it a new consciousness of women. With the rise of the novel, analogously arose a new secular knowledge class, not simply the urban middle class, but particularly the female reading clientele as well as the female writer. These social, political, and economic developments in early modern European history spelt out the emerging secular mind. This secular mind was urban in character and enlightened as well as promoting ideals of individual freedom.<sup>8</sup>

Of course, these developments were promoted by preliminary ideological (secular programs), such as D'Alembert Preliminary Discourse to the Encyclopedia as well as Diderot's Encyclopedia of 1751, whose ambitious project to present an all-round survey of knowledge in secular terms in order to function as competition to the sacred program of the Church. The struggle between the secular and the sacred, in Europe of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, was in full swing.

---

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Aristotle, *The Philosophy of Aristotle*. Ed. By Renford Bambrough. New York: Mentor 1963, p. 149; also see the original *Peri Hermeneias (De Interpretatione)* ed. By Immanuel Bekker 1831 Edition, Berlin Prussian Academy, 16b, pp. 27-34.

The outcome was the French Revolution and thereby changed world history in such a way that we still feel the ideas of the Enlightenment operating in the early 21<sup>st</sup> Century. We don't need to mention the details of the birth of the Turkish Republic in the early 1920s and to what extent the ideas of 1789 had in Anatolia. In addition, Napoleon's expedition to Egypt in the summer of 1798 had a revolutionary impact not only on the ruling class of the Mamluk's, but also on the Egyptian population. The Egyptian Shaikh Abd al-Rahman al-Jabarti provided a chronicle of the French occupation of Egypt. Al-Jabarti understood immediately the intention of Napoleon and writes, in a subtle and cynical way of the French propaganda in the form of the sacred with secular intend. Al-Jabarti was very much aware that Napoleon was a subtle public relations leader on behalf of the ideas of the French Enlightenment. We can witness, in Al-Jabarti's Chronicle how the secular and the sacred are involved in a struggle for life and death, and that this struggle in a different form has been rekindled in the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> century between the West and the Middle East.<sup>9</sup>

At this point we must not neglect the Egyptian population. What happened to the people of Egypt, or for that matter, what happened to the Arab speaking peoples as the West entered modern times not only with the tools of technology, such as the railroad, the telegraph, but also with literacy. The literacy of Europe's population was the single most revolutionary attempt as the trans-valuation of the sacred. Along with literacy went public and formal education of the toiling masses. Needless to say, the contemporary communication revolution is only an outgrowth of this historical literacy process that start about two-hundred years ago.

Again, what happened to the peoples of the Arabic societies in the meantime? Aside the urban centers such as Cairo, Baghdad, Beirut, or Damascus, the rural population was illiterate. Arab speaking peoples' tradition and history was steeped in a tribal structure cemented on "asabeya", as Ibn Khaldun, noted many centuries ago in his famous *Muqaddimah*.<sup>10</sup> Book learning and reading and writing was, again, a matter of the privileged such as medical doctors, judges, scribes. However, the paradox appears? The book, the Holy Qur'an, is the center of everyone in Arab speaking lands, and beyond. How do we reconcile that a sacred book in Arabic constitutes the center of a people identity and cultural make-up, yet, even in modern times, the majority of the population, especially women in Egypt, are illiterate? Of course, at this juncture of our lecture we can't go into historical details of all the elements and components that resulted in such a dire cultural result. However, we must remind ourselves that the basis of a tribal society with all its sub-structures is multifarious and organized in a more subtle set of sociology than

---

<sup>9</sup> See Ruediger Safranski, *Romantik: Eine deutsche Affaere*. Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer 2007; Moses Mendelsohn, *Phaedon or on The Immortality of the Soul*. Tr. By Patricia Noble. New Yorl: Peter Lang Verlag 2007; Isaiah Berlin, *The Roots of Romanticism*. Princeton University Press 2001; Caroline Schlegel-Schelling, *Die Kunst zu Leben*. Ed. By Sigrid Damm. Frankfurt a.M.: Insel 2005; Rahel Varnhagen, *Briefe und Aufzeichnungen*. Ed. By D. Baetz. Frankfurt a.M.: Insel 1986; and Theodore Ziolkowski, *Berlin: Aufstieg einer Kulturmetropole um 1810*. Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta 2002.

<sup>10</sup> See Al-Jabarti, *Chronicle of the French Occupation 1789* (Napoleon in Egypt). Tr. By S. Moreh and introduced by Robert L. Tignor. Princeton: Markus Wiener Publishers, 2006 (Expanded edition in honor of Al-Jabarti's 250<sup>th</sup> birthday); also see Rifa'a Rafi' al-Tahtawi, *An Imam in Paris: An Account of a Stay in France by an Egyptian Cleric (1826-1831)*. Translated and Introduced by Daniel L. Newman. London: Saqi 2011.

meets the eyes. This lecturer can only speak of his over twenty years of residence in Cairo to be able to make the important points of reference. The secret lies in the fact that tribal societies are based upon oral transmission of habits, rituals, in form of stories told in the oasis, or in the café, prior to the advent of television. There are still cafes in Cairo that specialize in story telling events to recall the good old days of pre-television times where the sociology of "asabeya" was more immediate and more intense. This, according to those who are of an age that they can remember and tell to the younger generation. The only Arabic speaking Nobel Literature recipient Naguib Mahfouz gives us in his famous Cairo Trilogy a colorful panorama of a kind of tribal structured society that is in the transitional period, between the First and the Second World War, from an oral to a literate society, at least in such an intense habituated city like Cairo. The ordinary people with the onslaught of television were able to partake of Mahfouz's panoramic urban scape by following the various stories in black and white serials over the decades. It is no surprise and accident that even in his advanced age an attempt was made on his life by an illiterate.<sup>11</sup>

Be that as it may, let us concentrate on an essential and decisive aspect of Arabic culture, especially on the illiterates' relationship to the written revelation in Arabic in the form of the Holy Qur'an. How does an illiterate overcome the form in text of the Qur'an? We must recall that many Arabic speaker grew up, and still do in many parts of the Middle East, in a tribal structured society. In this type of society and community the oral tradition, the repetitions, the rhythms of poetic diction, the reiterations, the vocal imitations, and the memorizations are the most important audio process that are exercised ritualistically, either in everyday life, or on festive days. The more festive the days, the closer to the traditions of the tribal community and the closer to the sacred. Birth, marriage, death, are such events: fundamental for every Muslim to participate in public and in community. These events are not, as happens in Western societies, a private affair in which condolences are restricted to immediate family members. However, the most fundamental access to the revealed message of the Holy Qur'an, especially for the illiterate is recitation of the verses of the Holy Text. The Arab speaker is used to the rhythmic modulation of the recitation and, along with it, recalling the verses since childhood. It is, to use Plato's language a recollection of the sacred that the illiterate is able to recall the sacred presence to his heart and mind. In that sense the recitation of the Qur'an is a sacred art. For the illiterate the audible and the vocal is the basic way of communication. The act of reading is not a fundamental way of communication. As happens in western society, since the 18<sup>th</sup> century, to read a book in a room engaged in intense concentration following, line by line, from left to right, an order to juxtaposed letters and sentences, according to specific rules of grammar and syntax, demands high concentration and discipline. In addition, the reader, very often insists to be along by himself/her herself, exercising silence, isolated from the immediate social environment. Needless to say, people who can't afford more than two rooms simply can't provide a "private" sphere for reading. Another point, in tribal society there is no such demarcation between the

---

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History*. Translated from the Arabic by Franz Rosenthal. Princeton University Press 1970.

private and public. That is to say, family matters, although, depending on the sensitive issues involved, may be dealt in intense exchange of conversation between adults, but, sooner or later, the whole family will partake in the issue at hand, whether personal or not. In that sense, prayer is not a private matter, but a sacred family activity, either conducted anywhere, but usually in community at a Mosque, at least for the male members of the community. The female members of the community may have separate spaces for conducting prayers. Of course, the separation is based upon old tribal traditions.<sup>12</sup>

For the Muslim the Qur'an is the word of God as it was revealed in Arabic. Revelation is the absolute, it is the absolute center that provides unity and reality to the community of believers (the Umma). Thus, recitation of the verses of the Qur'an is the ultimate mode of communication between the believer and God, illiterate or not. A secular mind, especially formed in a western cultural framework, will approach the Qur'an more as he/or she would approach the Bible. In book method, reading line by line, trying to make sense of the words, sentences, and verses. By reading the verses of the Qur'an in a "book method" the secular mind misses the essential aesthetic and vocal quality of the messages in verse recited in a specific modulation that the native believer recognizes since childhood. Hearing the recitation of verses of the Qur'an, specifically during the Holy month of Ramadan is the penultimate for any Muslim. This is the reason why radio, television, or the muezzin at a nearby mosque can be heard by any believer at the prescribe time for any praying Muslim. Thus, the art of recitation, over many centuries and produced professional reciters who claim high status recognition in the community of believers. Delivering the message of the Qur'an in the form of recitation demands schooling and skill and a lot of exercise and practice. Of course, one of the reasons why recitation is more powerful than mere reading of the verses in text form is the emotional appeal. For prayer is not simply reading the sacred message, but feeling, inwardly, the message as it vibrates through the organs of the body and joins and formats the soul in a pure state. Again, the secular practice to read a text, even if it's considered a sacred text, in isolation, in privacy, is a serious misunderstanding of the message. It is the vocal delivery in form of recitation and the reception of the message in form of the audible that expresses the authentic participation in the sacred act of prayer. The meaning does not lie in the textual meaning, but in the recited modulation as a sacred phenomenon. A secular mind who studies the recitation of the verses of the Qur'an is engaged in ethnomusicology. That may yield interesting academic results and may enhance the cultural ramification of a specific kind of recitation of different school of reciters, but it does not make a difference to the believer whose soul recollects the sweet memories of childhood when he or she grew up in a family atmosphere that considered prayer as part of family life, and not something extraordinary, outside daily life. The recitation of the revelation of the message appeals, first of all to the heart, then to the intellect, secondarily. Authenticity in the process of receiving the sacred message manifests itself primarily in the immediate emotional impact of all the sense, especially the heart. That is the reason why, upon greetings,

---

<sup>12</sup> See Naguib Mahfouz, *The Cairo Trilogy*. Tr. By W.M. Hutchins et al. Cairo: American University Press 1992, and Rashid Enany, Naguib Mahfouz: Egypt's Laureate. London: Haus Publishers 2007.

among Arabic speaking peoples, and non-Arabic speaking people with Muslim faith, have a tendency to greet anyone, including the stranger or foreigner, with a hand gesture above the heart. The heart has symbolic meaning and is not simple a pump as is explained in medical journals or books, by secular minds. Contrary to the Logos of Greek philosophy, it is the heart that is the source of sacred belief. Thus, centuries of oral transmission of the sacred message provided even the illiterate a sense of belonging in the community (the Umma) and did not degrade him or her to a second class believer, as was the case in the Christian encounter, in which the priest had to mediate between the sacred and the layman and laywoman, because the latter could not read or write Latin, the official language of the Roman Church.

## **5. MAX WEBER'S DISENCHANTED WORLD**

In order to appreciate the tension and the life and death struggle between the secular mind and the sacred text it is useful to remind our audience of the German sociologist of religion, and economic historian, Max Weber, who, no doubt, at least in the western world that a most profound impact on the study of the relationship between the world of religion, economics, and the secular. We simply want to recall one of the basic thesis of Weber in term of the world historical process: the historical world, at one point, constituted a magical-mythological structure of explanation, specifically among pre-literate peoples: gods, magic, demons, underworld creature, and charismatic leaders appear to give meaning to the community of believers in the world of magic. In the course of world history, new actors appeared on the world stage, such as managers of the rational, organizers of disciplined formations that act according to rules and prescription. In short, a moral rationality, in the form of puritanism appears, that disenchant the previous world of magic and mythology. It started with the logos of Greek philosophy, but also a first attempt at monotheism in Ancient Egypt, and lastly the negation of polytheism in the deserts of Arabia. Monotheism in the understanding of Weber is already a first step at a disenchantment of the world (*Entzauberung der Welt*). The secular mind had not yet been discovered for the simply reason, it did not yet know the difference between the sacred and other worldliness. With the advent of the protestant ethics, as an historical example, the religious sphere was transformed from magic and miracles into rational morality. Prayer in Protestantism turns into a negotiation between the believer and his Deity; that is to say, he or she negotiates the obligations that the puritan, who is successful in this world, with his God, in order to provide good will for him and his family in terms of voluntary good works toward the less fortunate. He and she, in turns, is recognized as the anointed and the beloved of God, in that his and her fortunes in this world have been achieved with the blessing of the Lord. It is a give and take arrangement that is not yet understood as a struggle between the sacred and the secular. The great discovery of Max Weber lies in his detecting this struggle between humankind and God, the struggle between the world of magic (mythology) and the world of rational calculation (the disenchant world), that gives humankind the opportunity to play Faust (seeking knowledge as power and not enlightenment and betterment of the human species), and the opportunity to be released from the chains of traditional society. The individual secular



mind is born and along with it the struggle in world history, that moves, in Hegel's vision, from the East (China), where the many are slaves, to the West, where the many become free individuals and citizens with rights and obligation, engaged in free contracted labor. Whether this story of world history is as neat as Hegel let us believe is a matter of conjecture. Weber understood very well that the religious imagination of humankind is more powerful than simply Marx's opium. In the disenchanted world all books turn into reading material for the secular mind, including sacred books.<sup>13</sup>

Let us, for the sake of example, return to Ancient Egypt and the hieroglyphs. Any traveler to Rome and London, Paris, Berlin, or any visitors to western cemeteries from the 19<sup>th</sup> century, will note that Egyptian Obelisks and monumental art abound. In the Italian Renaissance hieroglyphs were considered sacred writings that contain hidden messages from the beyond and the underworld. The Book of the Dead had an aura to it and was assigned a sacred texts, despite the illiterate treatment of the hieroglyphs. In that sense Weber's magic world applies to Ancient Egypt, until Napoleon's expedition in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, accompanied by famous savants, some members of the French Academy of Science. The idea was clear: the French project had took on a systematic approach, to discover, classify, and research items of Ancient Egyptian antiquities. The goal: to unveil the hidden message of that world of magic and mystery. Thus, in the mind of the French savants and the western world the monuments, temples, tombs, and mummies of the Ancient Egyptian expressed a hidden world that had to be lifted, unveiled. The French expedition was a failure from the military point of view, but a great success from a cultural endeavor. After the results of the expedition was published as the famous *Description de L'Egypte* (published between 1809 and 1828), a secular book into Ancient Egypt into a this-worldly-place, and the tourist trek to the Land of the Pyramids never stopped. The locations of Ancient Egypt, Nile, Pyramids, and Valley of the Kings, were usually reserved as highlights after an obligatory visit to the Holy Land.<sup>14</sup>

As a result of the French expedition magical and mystical world of Ancient Egypt was disenchanted. A new science, called Egyptology, was called in life. From now on Ancient Egypt became the object of inquiry by scientific methods. The aura of the sacred gave away to the fascination of a very old civilization that needed to be unveiled. In due course, the west began to realize that it was looking into a mirror image dealing with Ancient Egypt. Many things had been forgotten and slowly rediscovered. Of course, the monumental event was the decipherment of the hieroglyphs themselves in 1822 by Jean-Francois Champollion. The disenchantment was complete. The so-called "Rosetta Stone", discovered by a French officer at Rosetta, on the Egyptian coast, turned out to be the key proof that the hieroglyphs was a system of phonetic and

---

<sup>13</sup> See Kristina Nelson, *The Art of Reciting the Qur'an*. University of Texas Press 1985; relevant, see Virginia Danielson, *The Voice of Egypt: Umm Kulthum, Arabic Song, and Egyptian Society in the Twentieth Century*. University of Chicago 1997.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Max Weber, *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Religionssoziologie* Bd. 1. Tuebingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1988, pp. 1-16 (Vorbemerkung); pp. 237-275 (Einleitung); pp. 536-573 (Zwischenbetrachtung); and Wolfgang Schluchter, *Die Entzauberung der Welt*. Tuebingen: Mohr Siebeck 2009

ideographic signs, and not simply some magical formulae that priests used to offer prayers to the gods. The translation methods used by Champollion was a comparative methodology by painstaking comparison between the demotic, the Greek, and the hieroglyphs. The inscription found on the "Rosetta Stone" gave the key to Champollion to unlock the mystery of a language rediscovered after many centuries. The importance of this discovery can't be overestimated for the process of disenchantment of the sacred transformed into the secular. Considering everything else, the modern tourist, standing in front of the Pyramids, still takes on a respectful attire, as though we find ourselves in front of something sacred. Every tourist finds himself/herself in astonishment and certainly doesn't convey the attitude as though the Pyramids are something ordinary, or even mortal. The Pyramids confront the modern tourist with mortality and immortality. It is no accident that Plato derived the notion of the immortality of the soul from the land of the temples and priests, as he says in the dialogue *Phaidon*.<sup>15</sup>

## 6. CONCLUSION IN PROGRESS

In this lecture we have tried to experiment with the dialectic relationship between sacred texts and the secular mind. Of course, it was necessary to go somewhat beyond the border of specific definitions of what exactly the sacred entails. Historical frameworks are necessarily in order to locate the specific usage of the sacred and the emerging moment of the secular. What is sacred should not necessarily be identified with what is religious, for the sacred may be something that is extraordinary from the conventional habits of sight and appearance. Spirituality need not be classified as religious exclusively, but may be a specific mode of devotion that includes the tension between this-worldliness and the beyond. Whether humankind needs religion by nature is a matter of definition as to what, exactly, is religion? Of course, ordinary people identify the religious with certain characteristics and visualization that they have been subjected since childhood. Yet, it seems to be the case, that humankind needs something to sense and feel that there is something beyond the immediate of life on the planet. Humankind searches for meaning and a complete, absolute meaning, can't be had without a reference to a beyond. What that might be is unknown to anyone alive, only the dead probably know, but they are silent.

---

<sup>15</sup> See Rudolf Wittkower, "Orient und Okzident: Das Problem kultureller Wechselbeziehungen" in: *Allegorie und der Wandel der Symbole in Antike und Renaissance*. Cologne: Dumont Verlag 2002, pp. 10-20.