



Marātib al-kalām: Word's Multiple States according to the Science of Letters

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ABSTRACT: The present contribution is an attempt to investigate the conception of Word's multiple states of manifestation (and non-manifestation) as stemming from the works of some of the most prominent exponents of *'ilm al-hurūf*, "the science of letters". More specifically, it focuses on the notion of *marātib al-hurūf*, "degrees of letters" in order to establish a connection between different *marātib al-wuġūd*, "levels of existence", and distinct *marātib al-kalām*, "Word's states". The result is the emergence of a fascinating vision that sees God's Word originally lying in an unmanifest state before/beyond creation and then passing through the three worlds of manifest existence to eventually take the shape of human language. The study emphasizes the theoretical significance of *'ilm al-hurūf* for the investigation of some of the fundamental principles that inform the Islamic metaphysics of language and the overall Islamic *Sprachanschauung*.

KEYWORDS: Arabic linguistic tradition, Islamic linguistic thought, Science of letters, Akbarian studies, Sufism.

1. Introduction¹

The idea that the divine Word might transit through multiple degrees of manifestation (and non-manifestation) is encountered in several religious traditions. In Christianity, a vivid formulation of it may be found, for instance, in the well-known *incipit* of John's Gospel:

Ἐν ἀρχῇ ἦν ὁ λόγος, καὶ ὁ λόγος ἦν πρὸς τὸν θεόν, καὶ θεὸς ἦν ὁ λόγος. Οὗτος ἦν ἐν ἀρχῇ πρὸς τὸν θεόν. Πάντα δι' αὐτοῦ ἐγένετο, καὶ χωρὶς αὐτοῦ ἐγένετο οὐδὲ ἔν ὁ γέγονεν. [...] Καὶ ὁ λόγος σὰρξ ἐγένετο καὶ ἐσκήνωσεν ἐν ἡμῖν.

In the origin there was the Logos, and the Logos was present with God, and the Logos was god. This one was present with God in the origin. All things came to be through him, and without him came to be not a single thing that has come to be. [...] And the Logos became flesh and pitched a tent among us. (*Gospel of John*: 1, 1-14; Greek text from Robinson and Pierpont 2005, 225; translation by Hart 2017, 168-9)

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The Word ($\lambda\circ\gamma\circ\varsigma$) is here described as assuming multiple states. At the beginning, before creation, the Word is with God and is God. Then the Word enters creation or rather becomes the medium through which creation unfolds and acts as a cosmogonic principle. Finally, the Word manifests itself in a physical state and is embodied in a human form, that of Jesus.

In Hinduism this notion of Word's manifold dimensions receives great attention and is formulated in quite sophisticated and articulated terms. In the first book of his *Vākyapadīya*, the Indian grammarian Bhartṛhari (5th century CE?) presents us with “one of the earliest formulations” of the theory of the Word's multiple states (Padoux 1990, 166). According to Bhartṛhari, the Word, in its descent towards the physical world from its original unseen and unspoken state, goes through three different phases: “*paśyantī*, the ‘visionary’ speech, *madhyamā*, the ‘intermediate,’ and *vaikhari*, the ‘corporeal’” (Padoux 1990, 166):

vaikharyā madhyamāyāś ca paśyantyāś caitad adbhutam | anekatīrthabhedāyāś trayyā vācaḥ param padam ||

It is the highest source of Speech, threefold as Vaikhari, Madhyamā and Pas'yanī and having various stages (through which it is realized). (*Vākyapadīya* I, 143, Sanskrit text and translation from Pillai 1971, 32)

Within Tantrism this theory of the three stages of the Word (*trayī vāc*) is further developed and receives the explicit addition of a fourth state: *parāvāc*.² As in the Gospel of John where the $\lambda\circ\gamma\circ\varsigma$ was with God and was God, at this level, *vāc* is seen in its primaeval state before (and beyond) creation. Abhinavagupta (10th-11th centuries CE) the great Kashmirian philosopher, describes this stage as that of “the primordial, uncreated Word, the very essence of the highest reality, ever-present and all-pervading” (Padoux 1990, 172).

Within the Islamic tradition the Word is indisputably identified with the Koran which is regarded as *kalām Allāh* ‘God's Word’. Thus, if in Christianity ο $\lambda\circ\gamma\circ\varsigma$ σὰρξ ἐγένετο, the *Word became flesh*, in Islam the *Word becomes book*.³ This concept is expressed, among others, by the Andalusian Sufi master Ibn 'Arabī (d. 1240) for whom the Koran is:

the concrete, linguistic embodiment of the Real Being, God Himself. [...] The revealed Book is the actual, true, authentic embodiment of God's Speech. Its every letter is full of significance, since the book manifests the divine realities in both its form and meaning. (Chittick 1989, XV)

Islamic scholars further distinguish this level of manifestation of God's Word in the terrestrial Koran, the physical book that can be heard and recited, from the level of God's Word, considered *per se* before and beyond creation or cosmic manifestation

² On the origin of the conception of such primordial stage as the ultimate reality of the Word in Bhartṛhari and before him cf. Sastri (1959, 66-70) and Coward and Raja (1990, 34-8).

³ As noted by Lory “pour les chrétiens, «Dieu s'est fait homme», pour les musulmans, «Dieu s'est fait Livre» (2004, 38).



(*kalām Allāh al-’azalī* ‘God’s eternal speech’), a level that is sometimes referred to as the level of the celestial Koran.⁴

Le Coran terrestre est de ce point de vue une partie manifestée sur terre du Livre céleste, modèle immuable de la divine Parole. (Lory 2004, 10)

This distinction implies the belief, within Islam, in the existence of at least two levels for God’s Word: a manifest (created/cosmic) and an unmanifest (uncreated/metacosmic) one. In the next section, in order to find, within the Islamic linguistic thought, a more explicit and detailed description of Word’s multiple states (*marātib al-kalām*) we will turn to a quite peculiar branch of Islamic knowledge known as the ‘science of letters’ (here understood as the broad domain of the Islamic metaphysical, symbolic, and philosophical speculations on the origin, nature, value, meaning, and function of letters).

2. Science of letters and metaphysics of language

The science of letters, *’ilm al-ḥurūf*, has been often regarded (inside and outside Islam), as a cryptic and niche discipline primarily concerned with magical and ‘practical’ applications (cf. Porter, Saif, and Savage-Smith 2017, 521-57). Nonetheless, the theoretical dimensions of this Islamic science have not escaped scholars’ attention. Lory has pointed out that the science of letters, as “discrète” or “secrète” as it might be, represents “un prolongement naturel” of the interest for the Koranic language within the Islamic civilization (Lory 2004, 11) and argued that its speculations “s’intègrent dans une vision du monde et de l’Islam globale et cohérente” (Lory 2004, 94). In line with these observations, some authors have demonstrated how *’ilm al-ḥurūf* becomes, for instance, the ground for the elaboration of complex Islamic cosmological and cosmogonic theories (cf. Sviri 2002; Lory 2004; Rašić 2021). Moreover, according to Gril it is precisely at this traditional domain of Islamic knowledge that we should look in order to discover the fundamentals of a “métalinguistique et une métaphysique énonçant les principes de la production du langage” (Gril 2008, 196). In accordance with Gril’s suggestion, in what follows, we will examine how letters are perceived by some of the most prominent exponents of ‘the science of letters’ with the intention of trying to individuate the main principles that inform their metaphysical vision of the Word in general and of Word’s multiple states in particular.

In order to shed light on the relation between the notions of ‘letter’, of ‘language’ in general, and of ‘Word’ in a transcendental sense, we should first notice that the term used for ‘letter’, *ḥarf*, is a particularly polysemous one. In Arabic *ḥarf* may be used to refer to a great many things: “letter, phoneme, articulated sound, function word, particle” (Ryding 1997, 156).⁵ Thus *ḥarf*, as used for example by the grammarians, may denote a specific category of words namely that of particles.

Within the Islamic symbolic and philosophical speculations on the nature of letters, the connection between *ḥarf* and ‘word’ stretches far beyond this specific usage and

⁴ On this topic and the related debate about the uncreatedness or createdness of the Koran cf. Waqas 2020.

⁵ On the root *ḥ-r-f* see Ryding (1997, 156-8).



acquires a much broader dimension. For example, the mysterious authors of the medieval Islamic *encyclopaedia Rasā'il Ihwān al-Ṣafā'* (*Epistles of the Brethren of Purity*, 10th century),⁶ directly identify letters with words and in particular with the first and original words uttered by mankind. After creating Adam, say the *'Ihwān al-Ṣafā'*, God united all things for him:

fī tis 'i 'alāmātin bi- 'aṣkālin muhtalifatin musammātin qad ḡama 'at 'asmā' a ḡamī'i al-mawgūdāti wa- 'aqṣarat al-ma' anī kulla-hā [...] fī al-tis 'ati al- 'āḥādi allatī hiya min wāhidin 'ilā tis 'atin [...] wa-hādihi al-ḥurūfi al-tis 'atu allatī 'allama-hā Allāhu subḥāna-hu li-Ādama 'alay-hi al-salāmu wa-hiya allatī yasta 'milu-hā ahlu al-Hindi 'alā hādā al-ṣakli: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9. wa-kāna bi-hādihi al-ḥurūfi ya 'rifū al- 'aṣyā' a kulla-hā wa-ṣifāti-hā 'alā mā hiya bi-hi mawgūdatun fī 'aṣkāli-hā wa-hay 'ati-hā.

in nine signs through different, designated shapes that combined the names of all existing things. The significations of them all were contracted [...] into nine units which go from one to nine. [...] These nine letters which God – He is Exalted! – taught Adam – upon him be peace! – are those which the people of Hind employ, according to this form: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9.⁷ Through these letters all things, and their specific characteristics by which they exist in their shapes and forms, are known (*Rasā'il Ihwān al-Ṣafā'*; Arabic text and translation from Ormsby 2021, 172-3).

These ideas about the very peculiar nature of the Adamic language are further developed by Sufi scholars like al-Ḥawwās (d. 1532), al-Šā'rānī (d. 1565), and al-Dabbāg (d. 1719) (cf. Patrizi 2014). This last scholar is arguably the one who provides the most accurate details about the inner structure of that primordial tongue and the role that ‘one-letter words’ (or rather ‘one-consonant words’)⁸ played within it. His disciple al-Lamaṭī (d. 1743), reporting the teachings of his master, remarks that the fundamental difference between the Adamic language and the multiple languages derived from it is that “in every language [...] speech is made up of words, not of letters of the alphabet” (*al-kalāma fī kulli luğatin [...] yatarakkabu min al-kalimāti lā min al-ḥurūfi al-hiğā' iyyati*) whereas the first language of mankind was “made up of letters of the alphabet” (*yatarakkabu min al-ḥurūfi al-hiğā' iyyati*) and each of its letters indicated “a self-contained meaning” (*yadullu 'alā mā 'nan mufidin*) (al-Lamaṭī 2002, 183; O’Kane and Ratke 2007, 424). In addition to that, not only were letters originally words, but because those primaeval letters (and those subsequently derived from them) may be still found “in every word in every language” (*fī kulli kalimatin min kulli luğatin*) (al-Lamaṭī 2002, 183; O’Kane and Ratke 2007, 425) it is always possible to explain any word of any given language (*tilka al-kalimata allatī fī tilka al-luğati*) by the primordial meanings embedded in each of its letters (al-Lamaṭī 2002, 183-4; O’Kane and Ratke 2007, 426). What we are presented here with is a conception of language that sees in letters and not in words (nor, of course, in morphemes) the minimal meaningful units of language. Such an approach is particularly evident in the case of Koranic hermeneutics and especially in the case of the interpretation of disjoined letters, *al-ḥurūf al-muqatṭa'āt*. These are isolated letters that open some surahs of the Koran and that, being

⁶ On this famous and influential medieval Islamic encyclopaedia, in 52 treatises, see El-Bizri 2008.

⁷ On the relation between letters and numbers see next section.

⁸ Generally speaking, in the Arabic grammatical tradition vowels are not considered *hurūf* but *harakāt* ‘movements’.



part of the revelation, are unanimously considered as endowed with meanings although the explanation of those meanings remains, for the vast majority of scholars, utterly baffling.⁹ Moreover, in the exegetical practice of Sufi scholars like ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt (d. 1131), the whole language of the Koran is broken up into isolated letters and interpreted accordingly.

When one becomes more ripe, the connected letters will become unconnected. This is what people read, *He loves them* (Q. 5:54)¹⁰, and they think that it is connected. When from behind the veil he comes out of his self, beauty itself will be presented to his sight in the disconnected letters, and he will say it all like this: *Yā’, Hā’, Bā’, Hā’, Mīm.* (Rustom 2021, 83, italics in the text)¹¹

Thus, through the process of atomisation of the Koranic speech, described by ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt, words are brought back to their original status of single and separate letters endowed with essential meanings. Such an approach not only resonates with the ideas expressed by the ‘Ihwān al-Ṣafā’ about the primordiality of letters as ‘one-letter’ words, but is also reminiscent of the teachings of previous Sufis like al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidī (d. 912),¹² for whom: “the names come out from the letters and to the letters go back” (*al-’asmā’ min al-hurūf ẓaharat, wa-’ilā al-hurūfi rağā’at*) (al-Tirmidī 1969, 105).¹³

The examples illustrated so far should help clarify how, within the domain of *ilm al-hurūf*, not only might letters, in some specific contexts, be identified with words, but also how the quintessence of words comes to be conceived of as lying in letters. In the next sections, we will see how, in consonance with these principles, some of the major representatives of the science of letters, by describing the various levels of manifestation of letters (*marātib al-hurūf*) actually provide an overall metaphysical account of language in general and of Word’s multiple states in particular.

3. The three manifest levels

In Chapter 73 of his famous *al-Futūhāt al-Makkiyah* (*The Meccan Openings*), Ibn ‘Arabī answers a list of questions posed by al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidī a few centuries before.¹⁴ In responding to question number 140, “How did the *’alif* become the starting point of the letters?” (*kayfa ṣāra al-’alifu mubtada’ a al-hurūfi?*), *al-ṣayḥ al-’akbar* ‘the Greatest Master’ proposes a tripartite classification of letters and illustrates the relation of each of the three categories presented with specific levels of cosmological manifestation (*marātib al-wuğūd*).

⁹ For an interpretation of the meanings of *al-hurūf al-muqatṭa’āt* by the philosopher Avicenna see Lory (2004, 77-82).

¹⁰ *yuhibbu-hum* (Koran V, 54).

¹¹ Excerpted and translated from ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt’s *Nāmahā* by Rustom (2021, 83, 87).

¹² On the date of Tirmidī’s death (and birth) cf. Radtke (2006, 51).

¹³ In the same passage, excerpted from his *Tahṣīl naẓā’ir al-Qur’ān*, al-Tirmidī illustrates his conception of the primary and central position of the science of letters in relation to all other sciences (al-Tirmidī 1969, 104-5; Sviri 2002, 210-1).

¹⁴ On this rather peculiar exchange across time between the two Sufi scholars see Sviri (2019).



fa-‘an al-hurūfi al-lafzīyyati yūğadu ‘ālamu al-‘arwāhi wa-‘an al-hurūfi al-raqmiyyati yūğadu ‘ālamu al-hissi wa-‘an al-hurūfi al-fikriyyati yūğadu ‘ālamu al-aqli fi al-hayāli.

and from the uttered letters arises the world of spirits, and from the written letters arises the world of sensation, and from the mental letters arises the world of the intellect in the imagination. (Futūhāt II, 123, translation is ours)

Thus, the three classes of letters, *lafzīyyah*, ‘uttered’, *raqmiyyah*, ‘written’, and *fikriyyah*, ‘mental’, respectively correspond to the three worlds in which the realm of manifestation is divided: the spiritual world (*‘ālam al-‘arwāh*), the corporeal or sensory world (*‘ālam al-hiss*), and the world of imagination (*‘ālam al-hayāl*) i.e. the intermediate state between the first two. The spiritual world, for which Ibn ‘Arabī also uses the term *al-malakūt* ‘sovereignty’ (Chittick 1989, 282), is regarded as the first level of manifestation in the cosmogonic process.¹⁵ Although pertaining to the manifest reality, this state is considered bereft of physical/sensory forms. Consequently, the realities of this world cannot be perceived by senses. With respect to the other two worlds its position is believed symbolically analogous to that of the spirit in relation to soul and body, or to that of light with regard to fire and earth (Chittick 1998, 258). In a diametrically opposed position stands the world of sensation or *al-mulk* ‘kingdom’ (Chittick 1989, 282). This is also called the corporeal or physical world (*‘ālam al-‘aġsām*) and is seen as the last stage of the cosmogonic process. It is symbolically put in relation to the concepts of body and earth and it is at this level that things, endowed with sensory forms (auditory or visual), are known through ordinary senses (Chittick 1998, 258). Between the two, in an intermediary position, lies the world of imagination or *al-ġabarūt* ‘domination’, which is symbolically associated with the notions of soul and fire (Chittick 1989, 282; Chittick 1998, 258). This is a liminal world (*barzah* ‘isthmus’) that separates *al-malakūt* from *al-mulk* while, at the same time, also brings the two worlds together by sharing elements of both.

In order for the divine Word to become perceptible, it needs to descend from its original unmanifest (metacosmic) stage and pass through all the three stages of manifest cosmological existence. In God’s knowledge the Word is initially present, in an unmanifest state, as pure meanings with “no necessary connection to any locus of manifestation”, then those meanings descend to “the suprasensory or spiritual world” (where they enter manifestation while still being formless), and eventually “become embodied through imagination in auditory or visual form” (Chittick 1994, 74). Thus, it is at the level of the world of imagination, that those meanings “without any outward form” are given the “sensory form (*sūrah maḥsūsah*)” with which they will eventually reach the level of the physical world and give rise to the ordinary human language that can be perceived by hearing or sight (Chittick 1989, 115).

The role of the *‘ālam al-hayāl* is essential in realizing the union of meaning (*ma ‘nā*) and form (*sūrah*) through a process of rarefaction of the physical forms (*fa-laṭṭafa al-*

¹⁵ Unlike other previous Sufi scholars who, to refer to the spiritual world, used the term *al-ġabarūt* and reserved *al-malakūt* for the intermediary world (Chittick 1989, 408), Ibn ‘Arabī, like al-Ġazālī (d. 1111), inverts the two terms and applies *al-malakūt* to the spiritual world and *al-ġabarūt* to the intermediary world (Chittick 1998, 260). For an historical survey of the uses of the expressions *ġabarūt*, *malakūt*, and *mulk* see Terrier (2023, 277-98).



mahsūs) of the ‘ālam al-’aġsām and condensation of the meanings (*wa-kattafa al-ma’na*) without form of the ‘ālam al-’arwāḥ (*Futūhāt III*, 451).

fa-’idā ’arāda al-ma’na ’an yanzila ’ilā al-hissi fa-lā budda ’an ya’bura ’alā hadrati al-hayāli qabla wuṣūli-hi ’ilā al-hissi wa-l-hayālu min haqīqati-hi ’an yuṣawwira kulla mā haṣala ’inda-hu fī šūrati al-maḥsūsi lā budda min dalika.

When God wants meaning to descend to sense perception, it has to pass through the Presence of Imagination before it reaches sense perception. The reality of imagination demands that it give sensory form to everything that becomes actualized within it. There is no escape from this. (*Futūhāt II*, 375-6; translation by Chittick 1994, 75)¹⁶

As seen so far, Word’s multiple states of existence may be expressed in terms of different categories of letters: *lafzīyyah*, *fikriyyah*, and *raqmiyyah* (in descending order). Needless to say, the term letter ‘*ḥarf*’ is used here in a rather symbolic and allusive sense since, as already discussed, only in the last physical level letters assume the form

¹⁶ An interesting parallel may be drawn between the function of this *barzah* level in the production of speech and the role of *madhyamā* (which literally means ‘intermediate’) in the Hindu/Tantric tradition. The state of *madhyamā* is the level of *vāc* that stands between *paśyantī* ‘the visionary’ and *vaikhari* ‘the articulate utterance’. According to Abhinavagupta it is precisely at the stage of *madhyamā* that the “differentiation between signs (*vācaka*, *sabda*) and what they mean or refer to (*vācya*, *artha*)” is firstly produced (Padoux 1990, 206).

madhyamā punah tayor eva vācyavācakayoh bhedam ādarśya sāmānādhikaraṇyena vimarśavyāpārā.

The Intermediate, for its part, reveals the duality of the expressing and the expressed, which, however, owing to the reflective awareness attached thereto, [appears] as grounded in the same subject. (*Parātrīśikā-Vivaraṇa* 2; Sanskrit text from Singh 1989; translation by Padoux 1990, 205)

Nevertheless, “since *madhyamā* is not yet the level of empirical, ‘gross’ manifestation, the signs, as well as that which they refer to or mean, have no physical existence” (Padoux 1990, 206) and it is only in the following state, the physical state of *vaikhari*, that “the division into expressing (*vācaka*) and expressed (*vācya*), begun in *madhyamā*, becomes marked and is finally established” (Padoux 1990, 219-20). As in the case of language in the ‘ālam al-’aġsām, *vāc* in the state of *vaikhari* can eventually be perceived by common senses and consists of “all the elements of the ‘significans’ empirically manifested and perceptible to the ear, namely of ‘gross’ phonemes and speech” (Padoux 1990, 220). As for the state that comes before *madhyamā*, the state of *paśyantī*, it represents “the initial undifferentiated moment of consciousness which precedes dualistic cognitive awareness, [...] when what expresses and what is expressed are not yet divided” (Padoux 1990, 190). Therefore, this level is not considered, like the Islamic ‘ālam al-’arwāḥ, as the degree of ‘pure meanings’ but rather as a stage where the differentiation between *vācaka* and *vācya* has yet to occur.

na hi prathamajñānakāle bhedo ’trāspurat, yatra vācyavācakaviśeṣayor abhedah.

At the time of initial indeterminate knowledge in *paśyantī* in which there is no distinction in the word and its referent, there was obviously not any sense of difference between the word and its referent. (*Parātrīśikā-Vivaraṇa* 2; Sanskrit text and translation from Singh 1989, 8)

Such convergences would definitely deserve an ad hoc disquisition that goes beyond the purposes of the present study, but this swift detour should give a first idea of the potential relevance of a similar comparison for the history of linguistic ideas and for the field of comparative religious studies.



through which they are normally known (auditory or visual).¹⁷ It should be noticed that Ibn ‘Arabī (in *Futūhāt* II, 123) uses the expression *al-ḥurūf al-lafzīyyah* ‘the uttered or pronounced letters’ to refer to the first level of manifestation.¹⁸ Other scholars, like the ‘*Ihwān al-Ṣafā*’, do otherwise and indicate the first level by the term *al-ḥurūf al-fikriyyah* and relegate the expression *al-ḥurūf al-lafzīyyah* to the intermediate level (Baffioni 2010, 68). In addition to that, an interesting case is that of the influential medieval grimoire *Šams al-ma ‘ārif* (*The Sun of Knowledge*), whose author, traditionally identified as al-Būnī (d. 1225),¹⁹ like the ‘*Ihwān al-Ṣafā*’, employs *al-ḥurūf al-lafzīyyah* to refer to the *barzah* level but does not use any letter symbolism at all in connection to the first level and resorts instead to the symbolism of numbers:

fa-’asrāru al-ḥurūfi fī al-’a’dādi, wa-taḡalliyātu al-’a’dādi fī al-ḥurūfi, fa-l-’a’dādu al-’ulwiyyātu li-l-rūḥāniyyāti wa-l-ḥurūfu li-dawā’iri al-ḡismāniyyāti wa-l-malakūtiyyāti

the secrets of the letters are in the numbers, and the theophanies of the numbers are in the letters, the higher numbers correspond to the spiritual entities and the letters belong to the realms of the physical entities and the entities of the intermediate world. (*Šams al-ma ‘ārif* 94; translation is ours)²⁰

Thus, for the author of *Šams al-ma ‘ārif*, the corporeal and the intermediate worlds are the domain of letters while the spiritual world is the domain of numbers. Consequently, numbers appear as more essential and primordial than letters which reminds us of what we have seen in the previous section with regard to the Adamic language and its being made up by letters represented by numerals.

4. The fourth level

As seen above, the three cosmological stages are considered emerging from a metacosmic level, before and beyond creation or manifestation, where the Word is present ἐν ἀρχῇ πρὸς τὸν θεόν ‘in the origin with God’ in an unmanifest state. To such a state the Islamic tradition refers in terms of *kalām Allāh al-’azalī* ‘God’s eternal Speech’.²¹

Quite early a debate arose among scholars as to whether God’s Word in that stage is made up of letters or not. In his *Kitāb al-ta’arruf li-madhab ‘ahl al-taṣawwuf* (*Book of*

¹⁷ In the intermediate level they have some sort of imaginal form (but not a *stricto sensu* physical/sensory form), and in the first level they are manifested as formless intelligible realities.

¹⁸ As we will see in the following section, this is also the terminological choice of ’Alḥmad al-Tiġānī. Perhaps such an association of *al-ḥurūf al-lafzīyyah* with the ‘*ālam al-’arwāḥ* implies a reference to the role of sound in initiating the cosmogonic process (cf. Sviri 2007).

¹⁹ For a discussion on this attribution cf. Coulon 2013.

²⁰ Al-Būnī like other scholars, and differently from Ibn ‘Arabī, applies the term *al-malakūt* to the intermediate world (cf. Lory 2004, 42-3).

²¹ As mentioned in the first section, the Tantric tradition also postulates the existence of “a fourth (or rather a first) level” which is above all the others and “contains them: *parāvāc*, the Supreme Word” (Padoux 1990, 168).



Acquaintance with the Sufi Doctrine), al-Kalābādī (d. 995?) commenting upon the opinion of the majority of scholars writes:

wa-’ağma’ a al-ğumhūru min-hum ‘alà ‘anna kalāma Allāhi ta’ālā laysa bi-hurūfin wa-lā şawtin wa-lā hiğā’ in bal al-ḥurūfu wa-l-şawtu wa-l-hiğā’ u dalālātun ‘alà al-kalāmi wa-’anna-hā li-dawī al-ālāti wa-l-ğawārihi allatī hiya al-lahawātu wa-l-şifāhu wa-l-’alsinatu wa-Llāhu ta’ālā laysa bi-dī ğārihatin wa-lā muhtāğun ‘ilà ālatin fa-laysa kalāmu-hu bi-hurūfin wa-la şawtin.

The greater part of them are agreed that God’s speech does not consist of letters, sound or spelling, but that letters, sound and spelling are indications of His speech, and that they have their own instruments and members, to wit, uvula, lips and tongue. Now God has no member and needs no instrument, therefore His speech does not consist of letters or sound. (*Kitāb al-ta’arruf* 18-9; translation by Arberry 1935, 22)

Then, after mentioning some scholars that did hold that “God’s speech does consist in letters and sound” (*kalāmu Allāh hurūfun wa-şawtun*) (*Kitāb al-ta’arruf* 19; translation by Arberry 1935, 22), he clarifies his own stance on the matter:

fa-’idā tabata kalāmu-hu wa-şabata ‘anna-hu laysa bi-muğdatin wağaba al-’iqrāru bi-hi, [wa-lammā] lam yağbut ‘anna-hu hurūfun wa-şawtun wağaba al-’imsāku ‘an-hu.

It is established that He [God] possesses speech, and that it is not created in time, it is necessary to confess this: since on the other hand it is not established that this speech consists of letters and sound, it is necessary to withhold from such an assertion. (*Kitāb al-ta’arruf* 19; translation by Arberry 1935, 23)

As for Ibn ‘Arabī’s position on this topic, judging from the following excerpt from the *Futūhāt*, the Andalusian master seems to incline to the idea that the divine speech, considered *per se*, has no letters.²²

takallama subḥāna-hu lā ‘an şamtin mutaqaddimin wa-lā sukūtin mutawahhamin bi-kalāmin qadīmin ‘azaliyyin ka-sā’iri şifāti-hi min ‘ilmi-hi wa-’irādati-hi wa-qudrati-hi kallama bi-hi Mūsā ‘alay-hi al-salātu wa-l-salāmu sammā-hu al-tanzīla wa-l-zabūra wa-l-tawrāta wa-l-’ingīla min ḡayri ḥurūfin wa-lā ‘aşwātin wa-lā nağamin wa-lā luğātin bal huwa ḥāliqu al-’aşwāti wa-l-’hurūfi wa-l-’luğāti fa-kalāmu-hu subḥāna-hu min ḡayr lahātin wa-lā lisānin.

He *exalted beyond* speaks, not from a previous silence, nor some presumed quiet, with a speech Old, pre-eternal, like all of His attributes, such as His knowledge, His desiring to be, His power. By such He spoke to Moses. He gave name to the Sent-down (Qur’ān), the Zabūr (Psalms), the Torah, the Injil (Gospels), with no letters and no sounds and no tones and no languages. Rather, He is the creator of the sounds and the letters and the languages. His *exalted beyond* speech is without an uvula or a tongue. (*Futūhāt* I, 38; translation by Winkel 2018, 91, italics in the text)

²² For a similar statement see also *Maşāhid al-’asrār al-qudsiyyah wa-matāli’ al-’anwār al-’ilāhiyyah* translated by Twinch and Beneito (2001, 114)



While this seems to be the understanding of the majority of scholars after him (Barone 2015, 11 note 27), to find an explicit and articulated opposite conviction on the existence of letters in the *kalām Allāh al-’azalī*, with the introduction of a specific fourth category of *hurūf* for that level, we need to move, to the best of our knowledge, to some six centuries after Ibn ‘Arabī and consider the opinion on the matter given by ’Ahmad al-Tiğānī (d. 1815), the founder of the *tiğānī* Sufi order who like Ibn ‘Arabī claimed for himself the rank of *hātim al-’awliyā* ‘seal of the saints’ (cf. Chodkiewicz 2012; Urizzi 2022, 9-17).

In the collection of his teachings, entitled *Ǧawāhir al-ma’ānī* (*The Gems of the Meanings*) and composed by his disciple ’Alī Harāzim (d. 1804), ’Ahmad al-Tiğānī is openly invited to comment on the different degrees of the letters and on their relation to the multiple states of existence. This gives the master the opportunity to clarify his position on the vexed question of the presence of letters in God’s eternal Word. He begins his answer by mentioning the three cosmological degrees of letters and their association with the three worlds in a passage reminiscent of that of Ibn ‘Arabī illustrated in the previous section (*Futūhāt* II, 123).

(*wa-sa’altu-hu radiya Allāh ‘an-hu*) ‘*an ma’nā al-ḥurūfi al-lafzīyyati wa-l-ḥurūfi al-raqmīyyati wa-l-ḥurūfi al-fikriyyati, maḍā yūğadu ‘an kulli wāhidin min-hum (fa-’ağāba radiya Allāh ‘an-hu) bi-qawli-hi: i’lam ’anna al-ḥurūfa al-lafzīyyata yūğadu min-hā ‘ālamu al-’arwāhi [...], al-ḥurūfu al-lafzīyyatu lā zuhūra la-hā fī ‘ālamī al-hissi; ’ammā al-ḥurūfu al-raqmīyyatu yūğadu min-hā ‘ālamu al-hissi ma’nā-hu huwa al-ḥurūfu allatī tudraku bi-l-basari; ’ammā al-ḥurūfu al-fikriyyatu yūğadu min-hā ‘ālamu al-’aqli fī al-hayāli ma’nā-hu yūğadu fī-hā mā yūğadu ‘an ḥukmi al-tahayyuli.*

(I asked him, may God be pleased with him) about the meaning of the uttered letters, written letters, and mental letters, what arises from each of them, (and he, may God be pleased with him, replied) by saying: know that from the uttered letter arises the world of spirits [...], the uttered letters never appear in the world of sensation; as for the written letters, it is from them that the world of sensation arises, that is, the letters that are perceived through vision; as for the mental letters, it is from them that the world of the intellect arises in the imagination, that is, through them arises what arises from the domain of imagination. (*Ǧawāhir al-ma’ānī* I, 190-1; translation is ours).

Then ’Ahmad al-Tiğānī introduces a forth category of letters that he calls *al-ḥurūf al-qudsiyyah* ‘the sacred letters’ and that he puts in direct relation with God’s eternal speech. These are letters that lie, within God’s Word, in pre-existence and pre-eternity in an unmanifest and metacosmic state that is beyond and before creation. The sacred letters are completely different from the letters in any of the three manifest worlds, but at the same time they are the ultimate *raison d’être* for the existence of those letters in those cosmological worlds.

wa-l-ḥurūfu kullu-hā qudsiyyatun fī kalāmi-hi ta’ālā wa-fī şūrati ‘ilmī-hi wa-kullu-hā qadīmatun ’azaliyyatun li-’anna-hā wuğidat fī kalāmi-hi wa-fī ‘ilmī-hi [...], fa-kullu-hā qadīmatun bi-qidamī al-dātī, wa-laysa qidamū-hā mā yūğadu fī ’alfāżi-nā, wa-yuktabu bi-banāni-nā wa-yataşawwaru fī hayāli-nā fa-laysat hiya al-ḥurūfu allatī naqūlu, wa-lakinna al-ḥurūfa al-qudsiyyata mā kānat hadīhi al-’umūru dāllatān ‘alay-hā faqat fa-l-ḥurūfu al-lafzīyyatu wa-l-banāniyyatu wa-l-hayāliyyatu hiya dāllatun ‘alā tilka al-ḥurūfi al-qudsiyyati allatī bi-hā kalāmu al-haqqi ’id lawlā şuratu al-ḥurūfi al-qudsiyyati mā



'urifat sūratu al-kalāmi, wa-lā tamayyaza ba 'du-hu min ba 'din wa-lā 'urifat ma 'ānī-hi, fa- 'inna al-tamayyuza bi-l-ḥurūfi. [...] wa- 'ammā al-kalāmu al- 'azaliyyu fa-huwa bi-ḥurūfin qudsiyyatin munazzahatin 'an al-ālāti allatī yaqa 'u al-nuṭqu bi-hā, wa-hiya wāqi 'atun fi kalāmi Allāh ta 'ālā ya 'nī al-ḥurūfa.

The letters are all sacred in the Word of God, the Sublime, as well as in the form of his knowledge and they are all eternal without beginning since they are found in his word and in his knowledge [...], they are all eternal by the eternity of the Essence, and their eternity is not what we have in our verbal expressions, or in what we write with our fingers, or in what we conceive in our imagination, they are not the letters that we use, but rather the sacred letters are what all these things actually refer to. The uttered, written and imaginal letters point to those sacred letters by which God's Word is made up, were it not for the form of the sacred letters, the features of language would not be known and it would not be possible to distinguish one part of it from another, nor to differentiate between its meanings: it is only by the letters that such a discrimination becomes possible. [...] As for the eternal Word, it is formulated by sacred letters, independent from the instruments of pronunciation, and they, that is the letters, are found in the Word of God, the Sublime. (*Ǧawāhir al-ma 'ānī* I, 191-2; translation is ours).

Hence, for 'Aḥmad al-Tiġānī, God's Word is indeed made up of letters but those sacred letters (*al-ḥurūf al-qudsiyyah*) are not like the letters that can be articulated by the organs of phonation and perceived by our senses (*al-ḥurūf al-raqmiyyah*), nor like the letters that can be visualised in their imaginary form in our imagination (*al-ḥurūf al-fikriyyah*) or conceptualized as pure intelligible realities in the spiritual world (*al-ḥurūf al-lafzīyyah*). In fact, the very notion of letters, as well as that of their form, in the passage above can only be interpreted in a metaphorical and allusive sense²³ since we are dealing with a reality not only devoid of any form but also not manifested in any way. Moreover, the introduction of this fourth category of letters is presented as the logical and ontological condition for the emergence of a principial discrimination (*tamayyuz*) in God's mind and Word. It is only because of this original discrimination (*in nuce* and *in divinis*) that the creation of the worlds may occur. Such a paradox of the necessity of some sort of differentiation in a state that is by definition absolutely undifferentiated is also addressed by 'Ibn 'Arabi through his notion of *tubūt*:

C'est ainsi paradoxalement dans la nature indéterminée de l'être que semble se situer, pour Ibn 'Arabī, la détermination première des choses, ce qu'il appelle leur « établissement » ou leur « positivité » (*thubūt*). [...] Ce paradoxe inhérent à l'acte créateur de Dieu apparaît implicitement, selon Ibn 'Arabī, dans la manière avec laquelle celui-ci est formulé par le Coran : « Son ordre, lorsqu'il veut une chose, est de lui dire : "Sois !", et elle est » (Coran 36: 82). Comme le fait remarquer Ibn 'Arabī, cet énoncé implique en effet que la chose soit nécessairement déjà *présente* à Dieu, pour qu'il puisse lui intimer l'ordre d'être. (Vandamme 2023, 212-3).

²³ With regard to this loose and metaphorical use of the term 'form' by Sufis, Burckhardt comments: "L'expression de «forme» (*qîrah*) est une de celles dont les auteurs soufis usent d'une manière très libre, car elle est susceptible de diverses transpositions au-delà de sa signification la plus proche, celle de «délimitation» ; la forme d'une chose comporte un aspect purement qualitatif, la qualité étant de nature essentielle" (Burckhardt 2008, 25 note 1).



In such a cosmogonic process, explains 'Ahmad al-Tīgānī, the role of *al-hurūf al-qudsiyyah* is essential. As mentioned in several occasions in the Koran (cf. Sviri 2007, 35), in order to appear in the creation all things must be called to existence by God's command 'kun!'.

'innamā qawlu-nā li-šay' in 'idā 'aradnā-hu 'an naqūla la-hu kun fa-yakūnu

The only words We say to a thing, when We desire it, is that We say to it 'Be', and it is. (Koran XVI, 40; translation by Arberry 2008)

To be called to existence though, things first need to be named and the discrimination between their names in God's Word is only possible because of the sacred letters. Consequently, without *al-hurūf al-qudsiyyah* those names would not be distinguishable from each other and even Jesus would end up being confused with the Devil.

fa-l-farqu bayna 'Iblīsa wa- 'Isā tamayyaza bi-l-hurūfi, wa-lawlā al-hurūfu la-kāna kullun min-humā yamuddu al-āhara, fa-l-hurūfu al-qudsiyyatu 'an-hā wuğidat al-'asmā'u al-'ilahiyatu kulla-hā, wa-'an-hā baraza al-'amru al-'ilahiyu bi-qawli-hi: 'kun' fa-bi-l-hurūfi żaharat al-'asmā'u al-'ilahiyatu mā fī al-wuğūdi kulli-hi 'illā mā qāla la-hu al-haqqu subhāna-hu wa-ta'ālā: 'kun' al-wuğūdu kullu-hu kalimātu al-haqqi, fa-zaydun matalan wa-bakrun wa-hālidun wa-'amrun kullu-ha kalimātu al-haqqi, wa-'an kalimati al-haqqi wuğidat al-mawğūdātu kulla-hā.

The difference between *'Iblīs* and Jesus is discerned through the letters, were it not for the letters, each of them would be like the other. It is from the sacred letters that all the divine names arise and from them emerges the divine order through His saying 'be', and it is from the letters that the divine names appear. If something exists in the creation it is only because God, glorified and exalted be He, said to it 'be'. The whole creation consists in God's words. For instance, the names *Zayd*, *Bakr*, *Hālid*, *'Amr* are all God's words. It is by God's word that all created things come to existence. (*Ǧawāhir al-ma'ānī* I, 192; translation is ours).

5. Conclusions

In the present contribution we have attempted to reconstruct the contours of the conception of Word's multiple states as stemming from some passages of the most important representatives of *'ilm al-hurūf*, 'the science of letters'. In particular, the discussion of the notion of *marātib al-hurūf*, 'degrees of letters', was fundamental in allowing to establish a connection between different *marātib al-kalām*, 'Word's states', and distinct *marātib al-wuğūd*, 'levels of existence'. The result is the emergence of a complex vision that sees God's Word originally lying in an unmanifest state before/beyond creation and then passing through the different worlds of manifest existence (*'ālam al-'arwāh*, *'ālam al-hayāl*, and *'ālam al-'aġsām*) to eventually take the shape of human language.

The analysis of the role of the *'ālam al-hayāl* in the production of language permitted to outline a fascinating interpretation of how the relation between *ma'nā*, 'meaning', and *sūrah*, 'form', is portrayed by authors like Ibn 'Arabī and others. Moreover, the examination in the teachings of 'Ahmad al-Tīgānī of letter symbolism in regard to



God's Word in its unmanifest, uncreated, and metacosmic stage, revealed a remarkably articulated conception that tries to reconcile the absence of any form of distinction in that undifferentiated state with the logical and ontological necessity of some sort of *primaeva*l discrimination (*tamayyuz*) in that original condition. Such a discrimination *in divinis* is described by the founder of the *tiğānī* order as the *sine qua non* for the differentiation of the divine names involved in the cosmogonic process; a differentiation without which nothing could be distinguished from anything else nor could the world be brought to existence. Ultimately, the study suggests that there is more to the science of letters than just magical operations and 'practical' concerns and emphasizes the theoretical significance of this traditional domain of Islamic knowledge for the investigation of the principles that inform the Islamic metaphysics of language. We do hope that the reflections presented here will stimulate further research into the yet to be fully explored connections between *'ilm al-hurūf* and the overall Islamic *Sprachanschauung* as well as into the multiple "phenomenological resonances" (Goodman 1994, 12)²⁴ between the Islamic vision of language and that of other religious traditions (and the Hindu/Tantric one in particular).

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²⁴ The expression is used by Goodman with reference to similar symbolic convergences between Judaism and Hinduism.



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