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THE BOOK, DECONSTRUCTION, AND THE RELIGIOUS SIGN

ABSTRACT

In this article, I investigate a possibility in the structure of the Qur'an for rethinking the usually forgotten issue of the religious sign. This is where deconstruction, guided by a certain otherness or transcendence, renders all God's attributes as unthinkable. Thus, God's presence is not the opposite of absence and his will is not in the way of our freedom. In fact, God is the Other, not in a dual system. Such an otherness brings about the idea of a sign which is non-dual in nature: It presents Allah as the Other who is never outside the Book.[1] In addition, He is so near, yet no thing in the Book is like Him.

1. INTRODUCTION

One can hardly deny nowadays the significance of the question of deconstruction for philosophy, politics, literary criticism, sociology and other human disciplines. However, when it comes to religion, there is a certain doubt, as to whether the question can be asked at all. This is probably because deconstruction is approached by many scholars, like the theologian Mark C. Taylor, as a modern form of atheism. While affirming the theological significance of deconstruction, Taylor declares that "deconstruction is the hermeneutics of the death of God and the death of God is the (a)theology of deconstruction" (Hart 1989:65).

A totally different view is held by John Dominic Crossan, to whom deconstruction is not merely theologically significant, but is very much similar to and perhaps indistinguishable in its language from negative theology. "What Derrida is saying leads straight into a contemporary retrieval of negative theology" (Hart 1989:66). This is more or less similar to the position adopted by John D. Caputo:

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1   It should be noted that I use the term *Book* (with capital "B") to refer both to the entire being, as the Book of God and also to cases where the distinction between the Qur'an and the Book is not significant. I also use the term "religious sign" often as a substitute for the Book.

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> How could Derrida — for whom everything depends upon faith — rule out religious faith? Why would Derrida want to ban the name of God, a name he dearly loves? That would imply the excessively foolish notion, already sufficiently rebutted, that there is some sort of negative ontological argument embedded in *differance* which shows the non-existence of God … (1997a:59).

It should also be noted that Derrida has never attempted to deconstruct a religious text, probably because

> … what he finds in some literary texts is also at work in religious texts, in the writings of mystics and mystical theologians where the vocabulary and concepts of philosophy present themselves as limited and askew, at variance with themselves (Hart 1989:42).

Moreover, the question of faith and God appears as a major concern in Derrida's rather recent writings (1987 and 1995)[2] and in the writings of those like Caputo who, as we already noticed, describes Derrida as a lover of the name of God and as one for whom everything depends on faith.

One might consider the controversies on the possible link between religion and deconstruction to signify a re-emergence of the question of religion in a postmodern context. This re-emergence, as far as Derrida's project is concerned, has been closely linked to the turn toward language or to locating any problematic, even religion, in the structure of language. Derrida has uncovered in language a certain force or a space from which to question the very foundations of Western philosophy. It is interesting that along with this questioning, mysticism, which has been regarded by philosophers like Kant as the "other" of philosophy, reappears, perhaps more seriously this time. For Kant, "what gives life to the mystic brings death to philosophy" (Hart 1989:210).

The question, on the part of religion, has been whether deconstruction can lead the postmodern man again to religion and faith, and whether it can point to a universal faith, or in Derrida's own words, to a messianism (Caputo 1997b:164-168). However, we should not be too quick to identify messianism with any one of the existing religions. What Caputo says with regard to Derrida's love of the name of God should be considered against Derrida's own comments on his religion: "I have no stable position on the texts … the prophets and the Bible. For me this is an open field" (Caputo 1997b:21)." He has no one

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2   Derrida also defends himself against the accusation of being a nihilist:

> [N]ot only I but many people insist on the fact that Deconstruction is not negative, is not nihilistic … [D]econstruction is or should be an affirmation linked to promises, to involvement, to responsibility … So when people say it's negative, nihilistic and so forth, either they don't read or they are arguing in bad faith" (Norris 1989:6-11).

religion, in the sense of the existing religions, yet the universal faith he looks for can also be sought in determinable religions (Caputo 1997b:22).

Following this introduction which implies the theological significance of deconstruction, I will attempt to bring together deconstruction and religion into conversation on the account that both might be revisited as discourses on the sign. The logic for conducting such a research also appears in the next section. Then, I will discuss those structural aspects of the Qur'an which might put it at a distance from ordinary speech. Although this distance or absence of ordinary language attributes can make the text look like Derrida's writing, the presence of God to readers puts the Qur'an at a distance from deconstruction as well. In the structure of the religious sign, thus, one may no longer speak of speech-writing or absence-presence dualism. In the conclusion, I will briefly refer to possible implications of the present research for deconstruction.

2. THE TEXT AND THE BOOK: RELIGION AND DECONSTRUCTION BOTH TEACH US TO VIEW THE WORLD AS SIGN

Speaking in general terms and not denoting a particular monotheism, we may notice a certain feature linking Derrida's project to religion: Deconstruction has been, more than anything, a discourse on the sign, or more particularly, a critique of the sign, the most significant possession of the religion of the prophets. The specific conception of the sign Derrida offers shades into the religious sign, where it adopts a very significant theme of European structuralism: The great teaching of modern semiologies following structuralism has been to look at any system as *a system of signs* or *langue* which consists of empty elements defined only in relation to one another. Here, what constitutes the structure or system of signs is the difference which defines every member of the structure in relation to others. So every element is defined by its difference from others, by that which other elements are not (Saussure 1959:120). This idea of structure has come to be considered as a meta-language for all discourses, be it mythology, literary or anthropological discourse.[3]

Drawing upon De Saussure's concept of the *relational structure* and adding a further temporal dimension to the *difference* or the space by which elements are constituted as members of the structure, Derrida proposes the unnamable, unstable notion of *differance* as that which constitutes the structure. *Difference*

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3   Of course extending the structural model of language to other disciplines is for most part credited to Roland Barthes in works such as *Elements of Semiology* (1968), Levi-Strauss and his structural anthropology, and other poststructuralist thinkers, among whom Derrida stands as the most prominent.

is itself a by-product of a *differance*, which sets every element simultaneously in a relation of difference and deference with other forms in the structure. This specially invented term makes manifest the two meanings of the French verb *differer*. As Derrida describes it:

> On the one hand, it indicates difference as distinction, inequality, or discernibility; on the other, it expresses the interposition of delay, the interval of a spacing and temporalizing that puts off until "later" what is presently denied (Harland 1987:138).

By appealing to this "differance," deconstruction thus describes language or the text as infinitely productive and unstable. What Derrida proposes here is not merely a theory of language; it is, rather, a general framework for any system outside language as well. Derrida is leading us to view everything as language, as a text, or as a world based on "differance."[4] In fact, he has led us to see the world as a text whose play of significations nothing can escape.

Presenting the phenomenal world as language and more particularly as sign is an old religious theme without which religion is not thinkable. As Derrida puts it: "Sign and deity have the same place and time of birth. The age of the sign is essentially theological. Perhaps it will never end" (1974:14). Derrida has in fact touched a religious theme which, in my reading, places him one step away from a purely materialist position toward being. A point to note here is that the critique of the dual sign and destructing it — if such a task were possible at all — does not lead Derrida to claim it is no longer a sign; the critique and destruction of the opposition signified-signifier does not prevent it from functioning (1981:20). Likewise, the signifier is after all a sign which never ceases to signify. Accordingly, Derrida's language, though non-dual in nature, is still a system of signs.

In a similar and at the same time different manner, the scripture (here the Qur'an) as the sign from God, aims to describe the phenomenal world as the Book of God. The revelations perform two fundamental functions at the same time: They introduce themselves as signs from God, then by virtue of an interesting generalization, describe being as Book and the things as its words. This is clearly seen in the Qur'an, in verses which warn people against ignoring

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4   The statement "il n'y a pas de hors texte" is sometimes taken to mean that "nothing exists outside language" and that "deconstruction is a suspension of reference." This is apparently a mistake, as deconstruction is "deeply concerned with the 'other' of language." Derrida himself declares:

> I never cease to be surprised by critics who see my work as a declaration that there is nothing beyond language, that we are imprisoned in language; it is, in fact, saying the opposite. The critique of logocentrism is above all else the search for the 'other' (Kearney 1984:123-124).

and forgetting the signs of their Lord, the signs which are with us in every moment of our life. We live in the Book of our Lord (30:56).

Despite the similarities and the common interest both sides take in the sign, the concept *book* comes to be the most problematic in the epoch Derrida identifies with "the inflation of the sign and the inflation of language"; the book presumes a certain authority, unity and integrity which deconstruction threatens to disrupt. Speech as a concept closely related to book, which assumes the presence of a speaking subject who controls meanings is no longer the original form of language, for everything that we previously knew under the name of language, is summarised under the name of writing. It seems

> … as though the concept of writing — no longer indicating a particular, derivative, auxiliary form of language in general …, no longer designating the exterior surface, the insubstantial double of a major signifier, the signifier of the signifier — is beginning to go beyond the extension of language. In all senses of the word, writing, thus, comprehends language (1974:7).

In such a circumstance, Derrida can speak of the death of speech, and for the same reason, the death of the book — an idea which is apparently not consistent with monotheism. The Qur'an describes the world as the Book which is never detached from Allah, who is always inside addressing believers from no distance. This makes the Qur'an not only God's Book (*kitab*, from the root *k-t-b* meaning "to write"), but by virtue of his authority, also his speech, though, as we shall see, speech only in a special sense.

Nevertheless, there is a certain aspect of the religious sign or the Book which might be significant for deconstruction: The religious sign that the Qur'an represents is non-dual in nature. It transcends the attributes of ordinary language, and other dualities like speech-writing, or absence-presence. For the purpose of the present study, deconstruction is identified by trespassing reciprocity, the linear order of language, context, fixed speaker and addressee and other speech properties. What guides this transcending, going beyond, or so-called deconstruction is a certain otherness (of God) that is opposed or compared to no thing. As we shall see, it is by revealing the same otherness that the idea of an immanent God will be conceived.

An important concern here would be how a text is affected structurally by deconstruction. If, as we discussed earlier, the Qur'an describes anything outside as language or as the Book whose words are exclusively of Allah, we can plausibly expect that the Qur'an should reflect in its structure the same God-man or God-Book relation as witnessed outside in the endless Book of nature or being. I will argue that deconstruction, namely displacing language from its ordinary position and putting it beyond metaphysical attributes, contributes most to

exploring the above fact in the Qur'an. After this deconstruction, we can speak of the Qur'an as a non-temporal writing which is beyond any context. The interesting point I wish to underline is that, at least, as far as the structure is concerned, deconstruction need not stop anywhere, as the further we go, the more a certain "presence" which is introduced into the text only after deconstruction is felt. Deconstruction does not distance God from the text; conversely, it brings God closer. It is important to notice that the fact that God is so near derives from the fact of writing which constitutes God always as the Other. As we will see later, the otherness which deconstruction brings to the Book is the main message of the religious sign the Qur'an represents.

This study does not mean I am attempting to argue there is deconstruction, in the sense Derrida has employed the term, at work in the Qur'an. Nevertheless, I wish to put the claim this way: In the same way that there is so much for the religious to learn from deconstruction, conversely, there are good insights in the Qur'an for those interested in the link between deconstruction and religion. In fact, I am not going to apply one side to the other, nor will I carry the essential concepts of the two discourses one over the other; these are worlds apart. I would rather place them in a conversation with each other.

It is unfortunate that apart from a few works in the literature which have tried to incorporate deconstruction into a religious context, and more significantly, bring it into conversation with negative theology or Christian theology,[5] there has been little or no significant work to deal with deconstruction and religion this way. Derrida's own work is itself silent in this regard.

There are, nevertheless, a few works in which the ideas of Muslim Sufis have been compared to those of Derrida. Here we can cite Ian Almond's recent efforts to compare the great Muslim Sufi of the thirteenth century, Muhyiddin Ibn Arabi, to Derrida. In one article (2003), he points to something in Islamic mysticism which is very similar to Derrida's critique of metaphysical thinking. The mystic discourse of the Sufi can be related to Derrida's deconstructive discourse in their similar opposition to rational thought. Yet, in another work, he looks both in the Sufi and Derrida for

> ... the way a certain idea of infinity (be it the inexhaustible mind of an infinite God or the infinite array of different contexts for a text) leads to an infinitizing of the text (2004:97).

However, none of these studies, whether Islamic, comparative, or those with an interest in negative theology, have dealt with the question of the religious sign. They instead refer to the sign within the limits set by deconstruction, as if

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5   For a detailed discussion of deconstruction and Christian theology, see Kevin Hart (1989).

any approach to deconstruction and religion should forget about the sign, for it has been deconstructed once and for all. There remains nothing of the sign after this deconstruction. So the religious sign within the context of deconstruction is probably strange and out of place. In addition, although the Qur'an has been the core of almost all philosophical and linguistic works in Islam, to the best of my knowledge, the structure of the Qur'an has not been looked at this way, to see how monotheism presents itself in the structure of language.

The following analysis aims to be an immanent study of the Qur'an without directly taking into account anything of the history and the original context of the revelations. For the purpose of analysis, a very small part of the text has been chosen to cite as evidence here. I should declare that I have tried to look at the Qur'an from inside its structure and from the eye of a believer to whom reading it is communication with God.

3. THE QUR'AN AND ORDINARY LANGUAGE ATTRIBUTES

> Like Him there is [no thing] (42:11).
>
> It belongs not to any mortal that God should speak to him … (42:51)
>
> Glory be to God above that they describe (37:159).

A major theme in monotheist religions is that revelations are from God; hence they are the word of God and his speech. In the same way, Muslims believe the Qur'an to contain the exact word of God sent down to the prophet Mohammad. However, the fact of being sent down appears along with the assertion that God's words should not be understood as speech in the ordinary sense of the word. The fact is clearly indicated by the second verse above where to speak like a man has been denied of God; it is not fitting for God to speak to a human. The idea is supported by two other verses where God is presented as that which no thing resembles and no one can describe. Thus, the most significant attribute one might think of God is that He is above, beyond, and glorious; or using the Quranic term *sobhan* (from the root *s-b-h* literally meaning *floating*). His attributes as well as his discourse should be beyond anything and any ordinary use of language. The act of declaring God's transcendence (*tasbeeh*) is performed as a sort of worship, as an expression of obedience, and humbleness toward God. All a creature should do is declaring the fact that He is beyond description. Tasbeeh guides the first part of our task toward the Quranic discourse.

To understand God as *sobhan* one should place the Qur'an at a distance from ordinary language, or more particularly from speech, though not at a distance from God. For to say God is beyond does not entail distancing Him from beings. As the first move away from ordinary speech one might refer to the

Qur'an defining itself as *qur'an* (from the root "qara 'a" "to read" or to "recite"). Before the Book, the prophet assumes no position but that of being a reader. This can be shown by reference to the first revelatory experience, where he is commanded to read what is revealed to him:

> [Read]: In the name of thy Lord who created, created man of a blood-clot.
>
> [Read]: And thy Lord is the Most Generous, who taught by the pen, taught Man that he knew not (96:1-4).

Unlike ordinary speech in which the two sides cooperate to build the discourse, what is revealed is solely of Allah and the prophet knows very well that his part in this sort of communication lies not in saying something, but in listening, taking to his heart, and then reciting to people exactly what has been revealed. He must read and pronounce what his Lord has said. To put it more clearly, the Lord speaks through the prophet's voice. In fact, God's act of saying is not realized save by the prophet's reading.

The position of the prophet is more like a communication channel, or in Rumi's terms a flute blown by the Lord,

> We are as the flute, and the music in us is from thee;
>
> We are as the mountain, and the echo in us is from thee (Rumi 1926: Vol. 2,35).

Apparently, this is not consistent with facts of ordinary language which is necessarily reciprocal and dialogic. The Qur'an is not a report of a dialogue between God and his messenger. Though the prophet is addressed he does not address God except through God's own words. He is made to speak by God by being simultaneously the one who recites revelations to people and by being himself a significant part of the book and the message. Such is the position, not merely of the prophet, but of any other soul, as the Book out of which there is no way, belongs to God. We too as readers, much like the prophet, are part of the Sign. Reading, apart from its linguistic dimension, appears thus as a key theological term which describes our position as human beings toward the Lord. This I hope to be made clear as we proceed.

Another interesting point is that although the prophet is "addressed" to read or say something, having a fixed addressee, as we will see later, is not in line with the logic of the Book. This is equally true of the speaker. A text in the sense we explained above should not be expected to have been uttered by a "speaker" in the ordinary sense of the word. Accordingly, our question "who is speaking?" linguistically finds no one referent, or better, a variety of speakers, or as many as the names mentioned therein. In the majority of cases, after the phrase "In the Name of God" and before the story of a prophet begins, a first person plural

speaker who is the Sender of revelation, of messengers, and of water from heaven is speaking:

> We have sent it down as an Arabic [Qur'an]; haply you will understand (12:2).

The same speaker appears in first person singular as well:

> So remember Me, and I will remember you; and be thankful to Me; and be you not ungrateful towards Me (2:152).

> Nay, but they are in doubt of My remembrance; Nay, they have not yet tasted My chastisement (38:8).

Still in other verses, the angels speak:

> None of us is there, but has a known station; we are the rangers, we are they that give glory (37:164-6).

> We come not down, save at the commandment of thy Lord. To Him belongs all that is before us, and all that is behind us and all between that (19:64).

In the above verses, whose linguistic speaker is not the sender of the revelation, God appears in the third person referred to as "Allah", "Rabb" (Lord), or "Huwa" (He). But last of all comes the most interesting instance in which Allah is addressed by the prophet or any reader:

> Thee only we serve; to Thee alone we pray for succour, Guide us in the straight path, the path of those whom Thou hast blessed, not of those against whom Thou art wrathful, nor of those who are astray (1:5-7).

Deconstructing reciprocity and the speaking subject as witnessed above is well in line with a non-linear conception of language in which there is no longer a single voice to utter the sentences from a beginning to an end. A brief glance at the revelations indicates that they do not proceed in a linear order. There is even no chronological order, as some parts which came late in the prophet's life appear at the beginning and some early revelations appear almost at the end. It is thus expectable to see a permanent change of differing subjects, even where the story of a prophet is told. To understand this point, the story of Moses and his people in the Qur'an is most revealing. The story appears in almost all great chapters (2, 20, 26, 28, 40) in a variety of details with parts repeated every time. What is significant is that each mention of the story is not complete by itself, and to understand it better one should refer to other occurrences of the same story. This opens up the boundary of each chapter or verse to others so that all references to the same story will converse in a ceaseless dialogue. The same is true of the rest of the text. There is a permanent change of subject everywhere, in a way one might not tell where the Book begins or ends.

The non-linear ordering is an obvious fact one can hardly ignore. Never-theless, what concerns us here is not so much a question of the order in which revelations appear; it is rather the non-temporality that has given rise to it. It is possible to find stories like that of Joseph, which appears continuously in one chapter. Moreover, it is equally sensible to read each mention of Moses' report in the Qur'an as a coherent passage on its own. The main issue here which can link us to the next section is to conceive the Qur'an as a non-temporal writing. The ordering of verses becomes significant as long as it contributes to the above theme. I avoid citing examples here, as in the following section, we will deal with the non-temporality in some detail.

4. WRITING AND PRESENCE: THE LORD IS SO NEAR

> We indeed created man; and We know what his soul whispers within him, and We are nearer to him than the jugular vein (50:16).

As noticed above, the Qur'an presents itself as a text that in many respects resembles Derrida's concept of non-phonic writing. The question which makes itself felt now is how far we can proceed with deconstructing and escaping the logocentrism, or the duality inherent in any piece of discourse. However, if we wish the Book to continue resembling the Derridian concept of writing, we ought to end here, giving up the rest of the task. But what is the rest of the task? It may come to the reader as a surprise that thinking of a God who is so near to hear our praying, in this context, is dependent upon going further with the process of deconstructing. In fact, what may keep us from thinking of a God so near is to hesitate at this point. Up to here, what a negative theology does to language is very much similar to deconstruction. For the rest of the story, deconstruction as a school of thought and as an "-ism" might not choose to follow religion, fearing a collapse in the pure presence, supposedly because it would put an end to the science of writing or the grammatology which has based itself on negating the metaphysics of presence.

Yet, it is equally noticeable that theism too should not pause with decon-struction at this point, fearing a certain blindness to see the God who is hear-ing and seeing and nearer to men than the jugular vein. It is at this point that we part with deconstruction as a school, but deconstruction as an event that happens to language remains with us. Should we proceed further, we would face an even more serious destruction of ordinary language attributes, one which might lead to shaking our ordinary conception of presence, authority, and unity. Of these three and the many more attributes, presence stands out as the most widely discussed in the literature on deconstruction. Although *pre-sence* in the Quranic sense of the word, being guided by a certain otherness, is basically different from the metaphysical presence, Derrida's opposition to

presence seems to accept no exception, leaving no room for a non-metaphysical presence, probably because pointing to such a presence will save the sign. *Presence* and the sign at least in what we learn from Derrida's sharp criticism of the metaphysical tradition are not tolerable as concepts that always have threatened the very essence of writing as a form of language realized in absence.

But how does a writing as such open up to presence? Will it not be a death awaiting writing? Is it not a return to the voice whose presence always threatened the very essence of writing? For writing, to accompany presence is for the signifier or the material sign to unite or come to a compromise with the non-material meaning. Is it not the sign whose entire logic deconstruction seeks to destruct?

Despite a possible reluctance by deconstructionists to confirm and welcome such a presence, deconstruction has no power, no filter, and no initiative in keeping it out. It appears powerless and helpless as it is in response to such a presence that the text gives in to deconstruction. The very essence of deconstruction in this case seems to be tied up with such a presence which is not a death but a life for writing, for the simple reason that it comes to the text only after trespassing the metaphysical concepts. In fact, in this context, deconstruction moves hand in hand with the presence which is not the opposite of anything.

My hypothesis with regard to the Qur'an, which I hope to be confirmed toward the end of this section is that it is in response to an overwhelming Presence whom the text cannot stand that it gives in to deconstruction. That is, all deconstruction, of speaker, linearity, and so on, are sings of the Presence who, by now, accompanies the Book. The claim is borne out only if the text, now witnessing the Presence, directly addresses the reader who is supposed to be before their Lord. There being a present "I", the reader should be present before this "I" and ought to be directly addressed.

5. THE DIALOGUE BETWEEN GOD AND MAN

A brief glance at the text which is dialogic throughout will help us to conceive such an "I" in language. The Qur'an develops all narratives or stories of the prophets through dialogues. These dialogues, in most cases, are directly reported even when a chain of reported speech is at work. To substantiate our claim, let us consider an instance in which Moses' life and the story of his prophethood are reported in some detail. (Parts in italics where a new report begins.)

> *Hast thou received the story of Moses?*
>
> When he saw a fire and said to his family, "*Tarry you here; I observe a fire. Perhaps I shall bring you a brand from it …*

When he came to it, *a voice cried*, "Moses, I am thy Lord; put off thy shoes; Thou art in the holy valley, Towa … "What is that, Moses thou hast in thy right hand?

"Why, it is my staff," said Moses. "I lean upon it, and with it I beat down leaves to feed my sheep; other uses also I find in it."

Said He, "Cast it down, Moses!" And he cast it down and behold it was a serpent sliding.

Said He, "Take it, and fear not; We will restore it to its first state."

…

"Go to Pharaoh; he has waxed insolent."

"Lord open my breast," said Moses, "and do thou ease for me my task."

…

Said He, "Thou art granted, Moses, the petition. Already another time We favored thee, when We revealed what was revealed to thy mother: '*Cast him into the ark, and cast him into the river, and let the river throw him up on the shore … when thy sister went out, saying, "Shall I point you to one to have charge of him?*'"

…

"Surely I shall be with you, hearing and seeing. So go you both to Pharaoh, and say, ["*We are the messengers of thy Lord, so send forth with us the children of Israel and chastise them not; we have brought thee a sign from thy Lord; and peace be upon him who follow the guidance … chastisement shall light upon him who cries lies and turns his back.*"]

Pharaoh said, "Who is your Lord, Moses?" He said, "Our Lord is He Who gave everything its creation, Then guided it." Pharaoh said, "And what of the former generations?" Said Moses, "The knowledge of them is with my Lord, in a Book; my Lord goes not astray, nor forgets He Who appointed the earth to be a cradle for you, and therein threaded roads for you, and sent down water out of heaven, [and therewith We have brought forth divers kinds of plants."]

… So We showed Pharaoh all our signs (20:9-56).

Several points are immediately noticeable here. Firstly, the story of Moses is developed throughout in dialogues, the opening of which is between Allah and the reader or the prophet Mohammad. In what follows we are led down into a chain of embedded dialogues, that is, different layers of reported speech, all subordinate to the beginning sentence "Hast thou ...?" God reports the story of Moses for the reader. Then in a deeper level, the same speaker talks of what the Lord had revealed to Moses' mother, and also inform him of what his sister has said to Pharaoh. It is also interesting that the utterances reported are all in present tense direct and live. Meanwhile, it is to be noted that in ordinary speech, to avoid ambiguity, reported utterances are favoured more.

The direct address everywhere is necessarily twinned to a destruction of context as well. As we noticed above, the direct utterances are all necessarily in present tense, but not fixed to a certain present. It is a "present" that is extended to every moment of reading the Book. Here we can talk about an eternal present which knows no time limit.

An interesting extract which might support the above argument is when Moses, in response to Pharaoh's question, describes his Lord with "Our Lord is He Who…" Then Pharaoh asks a second question and Moses continues the same description, of Lord as "Creator of the earth as a cradle and Sender of water," but the same description is continued not by Moses but by the Creator Who speaks through "and therewith We have brought forth diverse kinds of plants …" In other words, the same utterances reported are shared by two different speakers, the Creator or the Sender of water and Moses himself.

Such examples, which are also found elsewhere in the text, invite the readers to find their part in the Book and act as one side of the dialogues, since the dialogues are present and no longer part of history. The reader, finding himself addressed in this way, is given a right to address his Lord in turn, using the utterances with which Moses addressed his Lord, as is often the case in Muslims' prayers and worship.

Turning to the hypothesis we formulated above, the direct dialogue is possible only in the presence of an "I" who is the Sender and the One Speaker of the Book. Hence "the addressed" is also and only a reader, in whose act of reading Allah's speech is verbalized.

It is interesting at this point to see that the more we attempted to show the deconstructive or grammatological features of revelations, the more the presence of an "I" was felt. Now that deconstruction is applied to destruct speaker, linearity, context, and for the same reason the reader or the addressed, we may justifiably claim that every part of the Book or every utterance comes to speak to the reader. Though Moses and others do speak, deconstruction of context and the interference of another speaker deprive Moses of any right to speak. The same is true of any other speaker. No one remains speaker to the end, save the "I" that is always present. It seems that the further away we go from ordinary speech, the more justifiably we may pose the claim that the text speaks itself and its speech is what our Lord says.

This is the simplest picture of monotheism reflected in the religious language which is never away from the Lord. What makes our analysis even more interesting is the fact that this unity reveals itself only through dialogue. It is in fact merely for the direct and everlasting dialogues that the essential element of speech (though not ordinary speech), namely presence, comes back to the text to make it the Book of God. It is further important to notice that before this Book, the role of the reader is essentially different from what we have in structuralism

or poststructuralism. Although the concept of the *Book* implies the infinite knowledge of Allah and his unquestionable authority over what He writes, the reader being merely a receiver, God's words are only realized in the reader's act of reading. Hence, to read is to do two different things at the same time: to utter God's words and to act in the course of uttering these as an interlocutor.

The significant point to stress again is that without this dialogue which is essentially dependent on the reader, no presence and hence no monotheism comes to be known. This makes the reader's reading and God's speaking one and the same act. So to speak, this is the unity of the two sides in the one Book whose words are only of God.

6. THE QUR'AN AS THE RELIGIOUS SIGN: ALLAH IS TRANSCENDENT AND IMMANENT

I began with "otherness" as the key to understanding the religious sign, and as what presents all divine attributes as unthinkable. I treated the realization of this otherness in language in a way as if it were easily possible to think of otherness without appealing to the inherent duality in the linguistic sign. Re-examining otherness at this point, we cannot fail to confirm the significant role played by the dual sign in thinking of God as the Other. Here I wish to stress that in the same way that Derrida cannot do deconstruction without the signified-signifier dualism, our thinking of a God who is the Other no thing in the Book resembles, is dependent on it. Thus the duality inherent in the sign may well serve as a starting point to describe the religious sign, which is a sign after all.

The Qur'an describes itself as a sign from God. What we have here is not so much different from the ordinary dual sign: The sovereign God has sent down a sign or the Book to people. Much like the communication process, there is a sender-sign-receiver chain. The process appears to be reciprocal, or better, dual, describing God and readers as the two sides in a dialogue. It would be difficult to believe that such a duality does nothing in the Book; it is the necessary or the essential core of any semiology without which one may hardly speak of communication between man and God. In fact, the Book, at certain moments, seems to be strengthening such a dual picture. Speaking of such duality may, at first notice, make the description similar to what is said of the hyper-being or hyper-essence of metaphysics. Muslim exegetes, nevertheless, take these only metaphorically, maintaining that the dual picture of the universe implies nothing but the sovereignty and authority of God over beings (Tabatabaii 1984: Vol. 14,167).

However, apart from the authority implied by the duality inherent in the sign, I will attempt to argue that it also plays a major part in presenting God as the Other. Yet, the otherness is *otherness* with a difference: It is closely tied to thinking of a God whose attributes are unthinkable, and who is beyond description.

From here, I will attempt to approach otherness by appealing to a certain nearness and immanence attributed to Allah. The God of the Qur'an "is the First and the Last, the Outward and the Inward. He is with you wherever you are" (57:3-4). He gets so near to address believers with very intimate words like "So remember me and I will remember you," so near, in fact, to home in the heart, to make it his throne from which revelations come down to the tongue (Shirazi 1982:191, 567). The likeness of God-man relation, as Ibn Arabi describes, is like the ocean and its waves, the ocean creates its waves and keeps watching them. He also describes the same relation as that between a person and his shadow (Jahangiri 1996:427).

But the God who is near and present is not caught in the Book and is able to do anything He wishes. In other words, He is in and with everything, yet not imprisoned in it (Ibn Abi-Talib 2000: Sermon 1). In addition, He becomes near only in his transcendence. As we argued earlier, the presence that the Qur'an introduces into the religious sign follows from the otherness which was realized by doing away with ordinary language attributes. Thus, we should think of his presence in terms of his otherness, as God is not a member among the characters in the Book. The best Quranic description of this is indicated in the following passage:

> … God knows whatsoever is in heavens, and whatsoever is in the earth? Three men conspire not secretly together, but He is the fourth of them, neither five men, but He is the sixth of them, but He is with them, wherever they may be (58:7).

It is important to notice that He is not the third of the three, nor is He the fifth of the five. Though He is always with us, He is not one of us.

Thus we have two related arguments to support the claim that God is not the other in a dual system: The first is that God is beyond description and the second the fact that the Other is so near. The transcendence or otherness is, thus, a very special one as Allah is comparable to no thing and no one. He is not simply a member of the system to be defined negatively as what other members are not. He is even not compared to or defined as the opposite of evil. He is beyond any such opposition or comparison, and beyond any attribute. To serve Allah properly is to deny Him of any attribute. One cannot ask where God is as it presupposes a place in which He is absent (Ibn Abi-Talib 2000: Sermon I). He is the other in all his attributes; his attributes should be conceived only in relation to otherness. Thus, otherness does not signify an opposition with everything, as his presence is not the other of absence. Furthermore, He is one not opposed to two and three; He is the uncountable number. Likewise this unity does not put an end to plurality, in the same way that his authority over being does not make us weak and powerless; we ac-

quire our authority over nature only for his authority. Nonetheless, the face of the religious sign is always turned toward God who gives any sign its life.

Accordingly, his transcendence is not opposed to his immanence. In this way, transcendence and immanence become one and the same concept, in much the same way that God's eternal communication with mankind or his speech is instantiated by the non-temporal writing in the Qur'an. It seems all that can be attributed to God should be understood not relative to any known example. As I indicated earlier, the immanence or the presence comes to the Book only after the transcendence or the unthinkability has been established.

Here we can ask what the function of this sign is. The linguistic sign and concepts associated with it, such as *presence*, fulfil a very crucial task for religion. They awaken us from the forgetfulness of routine life, of living in the phenomenal world, to reveal to us the divine nature of everything as a sign in the Book of God. They teach us to look for God everywhere. Ordinarily, we perceive what is material and phenomenal only in opposition to the non-material. This keeps us from thinking of God.

The religious sign which the Qur'an represents warns us not to think of a hyper/super-being, nor a Creator God who has created and withdrawn, and not to think of a God who is imprisoned in the material world. It teaches us to believe in his transcendence and immanence as one and the same thing, understanding one as dependent on the other. This transcendence and immanence as two mutually linked concepts constitute the structure of the Religious Sign. This is a sign which is not simply material or non-material. In its fundamentals, it is not dual and it does not leave anything outside, be it good or evil. This sign has no "other" and no opposite, though we continue using it to bear in mind and not to forget that *there* is a God who is beyond any attribute and any comparison.

7. CONCLUSION

We started with the plausible hypothesis that deconstruction is not atheist and negative, and that we may cautiously employ it to explore the religious sign. What we have done up to this point has been to demonstrate that deconstruction can be a key linguistic concept in the structure of the religious sign; it is an event occurring in language to make it a sign from God. However, even if we agree upon deconstruction's having a religious side, which both Derrida and his interpreters admit, the point remains largely controversial as to whether the linguistic event we know as deconstruction is entirely theological.

Nevertheless, treating deconstruction as theological and giving it a religious relevance is not new. This has been at work, as Caputo reminds us, from the very beginning.

> That is why, one day "early on" in the discussion following the original 1968 presentation of the famous paper "*Differance*", an interlocutor who had heard enough exclaimed with some exasperation, "It [*differance*] is the source of everything and one cannot know it: it is the God of negative theology." Derrida responded with the most exquisite precision and deconstructionist decisiveness, "It is and it is not." Yes and no (1997a:2).

However as Caputo adds, this "no" is not negative,

> [S]o over and beyond, this first, preparatory and merely negative point, deconstruction says "yes", affirming what negative theology affirms whenever it says "no". Deconstruction desires what negative theology desires and it shares the passion of negative theology — for the impossible (1997a:3).

In spite of the shared desire and passion Caputo talks about, it seems that deconstruction is usually presented even by Derrida himself as something exceeding theology. The similar syntax of deconstruction and the negative discourse on God, he warns us, should not lead us to consider them one and the same thing (1982:2), apparently because to him, "the negative movement of the discourse on God is only a phase of positive ontotheology" (1978:337, n. 37). Thus, for deconstruction to approximate negative theology is to come very close to admit the essential concepts of positive theology namely, the *sign* and *presence*.

However, the fact that negative theology and deconstruction should not be considered the same thing does not make deconstruction ultimately neutral, for as Caputo puts it:

> [D]*ifferance* describes the languages of faith and prayer which, as Derrida's work evolves, proves to be not just particular examples of language, but exemplary uses that exceed linguistic categorization and tend to coincide with language itself, to become the very *yes*, or *amen* of language to what is happening (Caputo 1997a:13).

We can consider this *yes* and *amen* as openness toward faith and God. Deconstruction can thus be presented as an event occurring in language preparing it for this *amen* to become open toward faith and to bow before God. Despite the appropriate linguistic tool deconstruction can lend us, it is nonetheless, as Hart rightly argues "neither theistic nor atheistic in any normal sense of the words" (1989:27). We can understand this the other way: Deconstruction can be both theistic and atheistic. This argument makes deconstruction not only open to theism but also open to secular readings. Given the textual nature of deconstruction as a discourse, it should allow for both possibilities; in fact, opposite readings make deconstruction what it is.

But is that enough reason for deconstructionists to remain between the-ism and atheism and at the same time claim that deconstruction is not "ulti-mately neutral" toward faith? When meeting deconstruction on purely syntac-tic grounds as what happens to language, no such question is necessary; it can also be at work in a religious text. The question arises when we look for an answer as to why the text opens up to deconstruction. In negative theol-ogy, we seem to have an answer: The negative discourse on God is one way of talking about the unthinkability of the attributes of a transcendent God. In the case of the Qur'an, deconstruction was a response of language to the presence of the one God whose attributes are not thinkable. Nonetheless, when it comes to deconstruction, no such answer exists. At issue is what the picture will look like if we tried to bring deconstruction closer to its semantics. I do not claim to have an answer to the questions I raise here. I would rather pose another question: What would deconstruction look like if it chose not to remain in between, becoming either totally theistic or entirely atheistic? To become atheistic, it should close the text to faith. This is what secular thinkers have been doing by totalizing Derrida's texts with respect to Nietzsche and the death of God doctrine. But what will happen to deconstruction if it goes the path of religion? This, I hope, will become clear.

Despite the similarity of the Quranic discourse to that of negative theology, I hesitate to equate monotheism to what is known in the West as negative or positive theology, for there is great doubt Derrida would have received mono-theism in the same way. In addition, I don't know of a mystic or literary text structured like the Qur'an. After all, there is a great difference between a liter-ary text that reveals deconstruction only at the price of meaning, or the prayers of a negative theologian whose text always bears the name of its author, and a non-temporal language which always addresses the readers.

The question I wish to underline here is: What if deconstruction of all that freezes the play of signs is realized in a sacred book which is realised in a distance from the *phone* and from the *logos*, but at the same time is never detached from the Lord? My contention is that deconstruction as an event occurring in language would not experience a destruction by welcoming the theological presence as it is this that keeps the text alive and signifies end-lessly. What is even more significant is that this presence spells no end to our life. It is not a presence after which we see no reason to live on. Quite the con-trary, this is what constitutes God as the "other" who is never outside, though resembled by nothing in the text. As we noticed earlier, the fact that there is a God who is the other in a dialogue is precisely dependent on the distance we move away from the *phone*.

Now, imagine if Derrida had started not from a literary or philosophical text, but from these revelations. This could have made everything the reverse. In that case, he could have read other texts, philosophical and literary, in search

of a *presence* which derives from a certain conception of transcendence or otherness. In ordinary discourses, the duality of absent-present places us in a state of forgetfulness, of blindness to that presence that is opposite to neither side of the dualities and that gives the text its life. The openness, freedom, and insight are not thinkable without this presence. It would need, then, a reader like Derrida to uncover the extra-human capacity of language to go beyond itself to become the word of God. He truly could have reminded us of what is hidden and forgotten in ordinary discourse.

What we may justifiably claim at this point is that the openness deconstruction seeks to place before our eyes is not foreign to monotheism, as deconstruction and thinking of the Presence are interdependent in this context. Opposite readings proliferate every moment, but we should take care that monotheism is not one reading among others, as evil is not a distinct realm. Atheism is merely a forgetfulness which takes place not outside the Book. Therefore, it should come as no surprise to explore religious readings even in texts notoriously associated with the death of God doctrine.

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