International Multi. J. of PURE LIFE. 9 (30): 51-89, Serial Number 2, Spring 2022

International Multidisciplinary Journal of PURE LIFE

Homepage: http://p-l.journals.miu.ac.ir

ORIGINAL RESEARCH PAPER

# The Nature of Religious Language from Rumi's Point of View

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*We appreciate our family, for helping us to compile the this paper.*

ARTICL INFO

**Article History:**
***Received: 19 February 2022***
***Revised: 24 April 2022***
***Accepted: 23 May 2022***

**Key Words:**
***Religious Language***
***Masnavi-ye Ma'navi***
***Rumi's Point of View***

**DOI:**
10.22034/IMJPL.2022.6992

**DOR:**
20.1001.1.26767619.2022.9.30.2.5

ABSTRACT

**SUBJECT AND OBJECTIVES**: Mystical literature has provided an extensive area in which the nature of religious language, as a common topic of philosophy and religion, can be considered from a mystical point of view as well. In the meantime, the large collection of "Masnavi-ye Ma'navi" is a paradigm example of mystical texts that helps investigate the views of its creator, Jalalu-'d-din Mohammad Rumi on the nature of religious language. Rumi (Mawlawi, Mawlana) is one of the greatest Iranian poets and probably one of the most renewed poets in world literature.

**METHOD AND FINDING**: This paper, which was conducted with the method of qualitative research and documentary review of Rumi poems, is organized as follows: First, the seven main theories about the nature of religious language will be explained briefly. Then, some paradigm examples of "Masnavi" in which Rumi has expressed his views about religious language will be interpreted. Finally, it will be shown that, according to Rumi, religious language is mainly symbolic, then analogous, followed by univocal, and lastly equivocal.

**CONCLUSION**: In the conclusion of the research, there will be a brief explanation of the reason behind the aforementioned order, which shows why Muslim mystics, as one of the main four groups of Muslim scholars, have chosen such a view about religious language.

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Article Address Published on the Journal Site:
http://p-l.journals.miu.ac.ir/article_6992.html

| NUMBER OF REFERENCES | NUMBER OF AUTHORS | NATIONALITY OF AUTHOR |
|---|---|---|
| 32 | 2 | (Iran) |

## Introduction

It is true that that the problem of religious language has been mainly viewed as a theological and a philosophical one; However, regarding its linguistic nature it can be considered as a literary issue too. Hence, it can be said that religious language is a common topic of philosophy, theology, and literature.

Philosophically, perhaps the most important issue about religious language is the problem of "meaning and reference". The basic question here is whether religious language is meaningful and referential?

Hence, the basic question is: can religious language be semantically descriptive and epistemically cognitive? If yes, how, and if not, i.e., if religious propositions are not and cannot be true descriptions of the world, then, what would be the role of such non-factual language and its propositions?

Theologically, one of the most important problems of religious language is providing a proper explanation of the nature of propositions describing God and His attributes. According to the doctrines of Abrahamic religions, God's properties are significantly different from those of human's; He is omniscient, omnipotent, omnibenevolent, absolutely simple, timeless, immutable, impassible, and such alike. That is, there is no divine composition, and all of God's properties are identical with his being or nature. *(Ref: Wainwright, 2013)*

Now the question that remains is: how can phrases and propositions, which are usually used to describe humans and finite creatures, be used properly to describe God and His attributes and actions?

Basically, is it possible for us, humans, with limited knowledge and linguistic abilities to speak meaningfully, truthfully, and factually about such a limitless and Supreme Being?

Literarily, religious sacred texts have usually been amongst the most important and influential books in humans' cultural history. For example, the Quran has always been not only the criterion of the correct use of the rules of Arabic language, but also an inspiring source of many literature texts throughout the world.

Accordingly, these texts have been viewed as inspiring sources of many literary texts throughout history. Now, is there any difference between the nature of the language of Divine texts and the language used in human literary texts? Can one not assume that the language of sacred texts, instead of being descriptive and factual, is mostly similar to the kind of symbolic, imaginary and vague language that is used in novels, poems and myths?

The roots of discussion about the nature of religious language can be traced back to Plato. *(Ref: Plato, 1892, Parmenides, Section 142; Ibid, 1962)*

Also, some past Christian and Muslim *(Ref: Aquinas, 1947; Zarkashi, 1957; Suyuti, 2008)* thinkers have made notes and written books on this issue. The topic, however, did not lead to a heated debate until the rise of analytic philosophy in the last century as well as the spread of Wittgenstein's ideas and the opinions of the members of the Vienna Circle regarding language and meaning.

Accordingly, various theories about the nature of religious language were proposed.

In this paper, regarding such theories, we aim to investigate the nature of religious language from Jalal-'d-din Mohammad Rumi's view on the basis of his poems, from his famous Divan, known as "Masnavi-ye Ma'navi".

Jalalu-'d-din Mohammad Rumi (1207-1273), also known as Jalalu-'d-din Mohammad Balkhi, Mawlavi and Mawlana, is regarded as one of the greatest Iranian poets.

Also, "Masnavi", whose complete name is "Masnavi-ye Ma'navi" (also written as Mathnavi and Mathnawi), includes almost 26,000 verses in 6 books, which to find Rumi's view we have examined almost all of these verses (and of course, not Rumi's other treatises and books), though for the scope of this paper only some paradigm examples of the poems will be stated.

On the other hand, Rumi is not only one of the greatest Iranian poets, but has also always been considered as one of the most prominent figures in Islamic mysticism.

Rumi has also been described as the "most popular poet" *(Haviland, 2007)* and the "best selling poet" in the America. *(Tompkins, 2002; Ciabattari, 2014)*

So, it seems that Rumi's ideas, in particular his mystic and religious opinions, deserve to be reinvestigated from a new point of view by using some frameworks that have been mainly provided by the philosophers of language and religion during the past century.

In this paper, firstly, the main seven theories about the

nature of religious language will be briefly explained. Then, some paradigm examples of "Masnavi" in which Rumi has expressed his views about religious language, will be interpreted. *(Ref: Foruzanfar, 1982; Dargahi, 1991; Khoramshahi and Mokhtari, 2005)*

Finally, it will be shown how Rumi's poems in "Masnavi" can be categorized under such theories.

In other words, the outcome of this paper is to show the weight of each theory of religious language from Rumi's point of view; that is, to determine which theory has the highest and which has the lowest position in "Masnavi".

It should be noticed that, regarding a vague and multilayer use of language in some of Rumi's poems, and also the overlapping of some theories with each other, we have to categorize such poems under two or three theories.

It seems that by examining Rumi's view as a paradigm example of a famous mystic, and on the basis of new theories, the dominant view of mystics, as one of the main four groups of Muslim scholars (other than philosophers, theologians and jurists), can be shown.

It is worth mentioning that in addition to ayat, Rumi has interpreted many traditions (hadiths) in his poems too. In this paper, however, only those poems have been examined which merely deals with the semantic and the referential aspects of ayat.

## The Main Theories of Religious Language

In terms of analyzing religious language, philosophers of religion can generally be divided into two groups:

1. According to the first group, influenced by the early *Wittgenstein (1961)* and particularly by the logical positivists of the Vienna Circle *(Schlick, 1996: 41)*, the principle of empirical verifiability is the criterion of meaningfulness.

That is, a statement is factually meaningful if it is empirically verifiable (theoretically and or practically). Hence, all religious and all metaphysical propositions are cognitively meaningless; since they are not empirically verifiable.

2. The second group who believe that religious propositions are meaningful, is itself divided into two subgroups:

According to the first one, religious propositions are not only meaningful, but also cognitively significant. That is, they convey information about the world, and can, therefore, be empirically verified or falsified. In fact, according to this view, some religious propositions are factually true description of the world. For example, the statement "Jesus is the son of God" conveys information about Jesus and is also true.

The second view, however, rejects this character of religious language.

The first view of the above division is itself divided into three groups:

A. The same words and phrases in everyday language and religious language have identical meanings.

In other words, the same words are applied univocally in both languages; that is, religious language is univocal.

For examples, the word "love" in "God loves humans" and "Abraham loves Sara" has identical meaning.

The main contemporary advocate of this view is William Alston. He argues that it is impossible to avoid "all creaturely terms [e.g., psychological and agential terms, like "know", "love", "forgive"] in thinking and speaking of God." *(Alston, 1985: 221)*

Of course, Alston does not defend complete univocality; nor does he reject the otherness of God. However, he argues that the radical otherness of God is not because of lacking common abstract features with creatures, rather it is due to the different ways those features are realized in the divine being. *(Ibid: 222)*

By appealing to functionalist concepts, which are unconcerned as to the intrinsic nature of the structure of the psyche in which they inhere, Alston claims that the same functional concept of knowledge, of purpose and the like can be applied in the same sense to Gad and humans. *(Ibid)*

According to this thesis known as "partial univocity", "by constructing tendency-versions of the law-like generalizations imbedded in the functional concepts" *(Ibid: 229)* one can attribute common functional psychological states to both God and humans.

B. Religious language is equivocal.

In this case, words are used to mean different things in different contexts. So, the same terms applied to God and creatures have different senses. For example, "good" in

"God is good" and "Socrates is good" refers to two distinct kinds of goodness.

One idea behind this thesis is that the natures of the Creator and creatures are so different that attributing any property positively to God makes Him a composite and a limited entity like creatures.

So, Moses ben Maimon; known as Maimonides *(Ref: Seeskin, 2010)* and his contemporary followers (*Ref: Wolfson, 1973, Vol. 2), Chapter. 5)* and Kenneth (*Ref: Seeskin, 2000)* have suggested that we are allowed to speak about God only negatively.

For example, one can say, "God is not body," in order to signify that change, generation and corruption do not basically apply to God. The affirmative propositions about God should be interpreted negatively too. For example, to say that "God is alive" only means that death cannot be attributed to Him. This doctrine is known as "negative theology".

The root of this idea can be traced back to Plato, when he says that:

> *One, then, is neither named, nor uttered, nor known, nor perceived, nor imagined. (Plato, 1892: 66)*

This idea was also later developed by Plotinus:

> *And we can and do state what it is not, while we are silent as to what it is: we are, in fact, speaking of it in the light of its sequels* ("Ennead V"). *(Plotinus, 1991: 14, Third Tractate)*

C. Terms that are used to describe God and His

attributes are not entirely equivocal nor are they entirely univocal; they are used analogously.

This is St. Thomas Aquinas's approach. He argues that,

> *Univocal predication is impossible between God and creatures. The reason for this is that when any term expressing perfection is applied to a creature, it signifies that perfection distinct in idea from other perfections; whereas when we apply it to God, we do not mean to signify anything distinct from His essence, or power, or existence… Neither… are names applied to God and creatures in a purely equivocal sense; Because if that were so, it follows that from creatures nothing could be known or demonstrated about God at all.*
>
> *Now names are thus used in two ways: either according as many things are proportionate to one, or according as one thing is proportionate to another; And in this way some things are said of God and creatures analogically.*
>
> *Now this mode of community of idea is a mean between pure equivocation and simple univocation. For in analogies, a term which is thus used in a multiple sense signifies various proportions to some one thing. (Aquinas, 1947: 85-86)*

For example, "good" is applied to God and creatures neither identical nor totally different;

it applies to the former, as all-good, unlimitedly; whereas it applies to the latter limitedly. In contemporary literature this approach has been defended by a number of philosophers, including Ralph McInerny. *(Ref: McInerny, 1961; Ibid, 1996)*

It is worth mentioning that metaphorical language, in propositions like "God is my rock or my shepherd", can be considered as a kind of symbolic language.

The second idea, according to which religious propositions are meaningful, but not cognitively significant has historically been outlined in various forms. The most important of them might be:

- The later Wittgenstein's idea of language game. *(Wittgenstein, 2001: 4)*
- Paul Tillich's thesis of symbolic language. *(Tillich, 1957)*
- Rudolf Bultmann's idea of religious language as a mythical language. *(Bultmann, 1934; Ibid, 1984; Ibid, 2000)*

The common aim of the early and the later Wittgenstein was to explain the proper relation between language and the world.

In *Tractatus* Wittgenstein believed the "picture theory of meaning/language" according to which the structure of our (formal and meaningful) language is the same as the structure of the world; *(Wittgenstein, 1961)* that is, a meaningful (atomic) proposition pictures a state of affairs or an atomic fact.

In Philosophical Investigations, however, Wittgenstein argued that the picture theory is not

true in its totality. So, he developed an alternative theory, according to which "the meaning of a word is its use in the language". *(Wittgenstein, 2001: 18)*

Therefore, to understand the meaning of a word we should look and see the variety of the uses of the word. *(Wittgenstein, 2001: 2-3)*

To address the multiplicity and variety of uses, Wittgenstein introduced the concept of "language-game", *(Wittgenstein, 2001: 4)* emphasizing "the fact that the *speaking* of language [i.e., language game] is part of an activity, or of a form of life". *(Ibid: 10).*

Religious activity, like scientific activity, is a form of life. However, the point is that these forms of life are totally different, and hence the language game of science is completely different from the language game of religion:

> *[i]n a religious discourse we use such expressions as… differently to the way in which we use them in science". (Ibid 1967: 57)*

Indeed, science and religion have a different criterion of meaning. *(Ibid: 58)*

This means that religious propositions are not factually cognitive and cannot be evaluated empirically. In other words, they are essentially self-referential, and there is no way to evaluate them on the basis of external facts. This view, known as "Wittgensteinian fideism", *(Nielsen, 1967)* implies that religion is mainly about intelligibility and unintelligibility, rather than trueness or falseness.

Of course, this is a controversial claim and some of Wittgenstein interpreters would object strongly to this.

In sum, the early Wittgenstein regarded religion as non-cognitive, meaningless and nonsensical; the later Wittgenstein, however, rejected the second and the third ideas; but continued to maintain the first idea.

The next thesis according to which religious language is meaningful but noncognitive is Paul Tillich's thesis of symbolic language. Tillich's thesis is mainly concerned with propositions that are about God and His attributions. According to Tillich, God is the ultimate concern of the believers, and at least in Abrahamic religions this is the case. *(Tillich, 1957: 2-3)*

On the other hand, since the true ultimate transcends the realm of finite reality infinitely…no finite reality can express it directly and properly. *(Ibid: 44)*

Therefore, we have no way but to transform concepts into symbols. Hence, any expression about the ultimate concern and his attributions must be symbolic. So, the "language of faith is the language of symbols." *(Ibid: 45)*

The only non-symbolic statement about God is that God is being-itself. *(Tillich, 1951: 238-9)*

What makes a symbol so powerful to play such a role is that a symbol (a) "participates in that to which it points". Hence, contrary to a sign that points to something by arbitrary convention, (b) symbols are not produced arbitrarily and intentionally, but "grow out of the individual or collective unconscious".

Furthermore, this "growing out of the unconscious" means that symbols (c) "unlock dimensions and elements of

our soul" and "open up levels of reality which otherwise are closed for us". *(Ibid, 1957: 42-3)*

It should be noticed, however, that the levels of reality that are opened by religious symbols are not the same levels of reality that are the subject of everyday life or scientific research.

In his "Systematic Theology", Tillich attacks positivistic verificationism as a general principle for all areas of knowledge, *(Tillich, 1951: 112)* and in his *Dynamics of Faith*, explicitly asserts that "[t]he dimension of faith is not the dimension of science, history, or psychology". *(Ibid, 1957: 33)*

Hence no conflict or even competition between religion, on the one hand, and science, history, psychology, and politics, on the other hand, is possible. *(Ibid: 39)*

All of this implies that religious language is not factually cognitive, though is meaningful in its domain.

According to Tillich:

> *The religious language, the language of symbol and myth, is created in the community of the believers and cannot be fully understood outside this community. (Ibid: 24)*

On the basis of statements like this, Irving Hexham argues that Tillich's view is very similar to Wittgenstein's idea of language game. *(Hexham, 1982: 344)*

The last important thesis according to which religious language is meaningful but non-cognitive is Rudolf Bultmann's idea of religious language as a mythical language.

Bultmann's main idea was that much of the "New Testament" Christianity is mythical rather than historical. In other words, what has been narrated as the life of Jesus should indeed be seen as a nonfactual story that was fabricated using the elements that mainly belonged to the pre-scientific cosmologies of the ancient Jewish and Greek world. *(Bultmann, 1984)*

Hence, in his "Jesus and the Word", Butlmann is seriously skeptic as to whether the "New Testament" could be viewed as a reliable source for Jesus's life story. *(Ibid, 1934)* However, this does not mean that the main figures of the "New Testament", in particular Jesus, are merely unreal beings fabricated by narrators.

He insists that

> *Jesus Christ is certainly presented as the Son of God, a pre-existent divine being, and therefore to that extent a mythical figure. But he is also a concrete figure of history-Jesus of Nazareth. His life is more than a mythical event, it is a human life which ended in the tragedy of the crucifixion. (Ibid 2000: 34)*

This quotation shows the line of Bultmann's main project, i.e., demythologization, whose aim is to distinguish the historical Jesus and the Christian message from its ancient mythical trappings and the christological descriptions and legends. Bultmann argues that the modern scientific view does not accept such a pre-scientific mythical worldview and so, "there is nothing to do but to demythologize it". *(Ibid, 1984: 9).*

This means that instead of rejecting the Christian message,

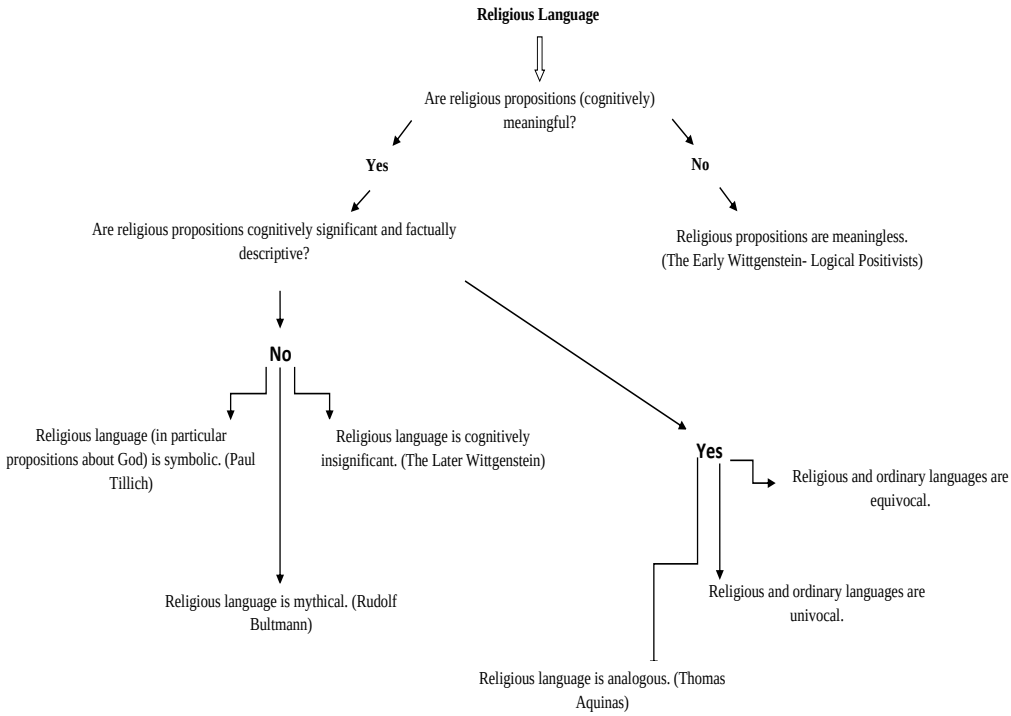
we should reinterpret it in modern terms such that it could be understood in the modern world.

For example, a scientific modern view does not accept that "Christ is Lord" is a historical fact. However, as a matter of faith, one can take this as a way of responding to God's message through responding to the calls of Jesus.

In sum, although the language of religion is factually non-cognitive and mythical, its meaningfulness for the modern world can be saved and heard through striping away its outdated and unacceptable worldview. The following diagram shows the abovementioned theories and their relations.

It is worth mentioning that all these theories have been criticized severely; however, discussion about such criticisms is out of the scope of this paper.

By having these theories in hand, let us now explain and interpret some paradigm examples of "Masnavi's" poems, and then, regarding the theories, explain and categorize Rumi's views on religious language.


Religious Language
Are religious propositions (cognitively) meaningful?
Yes
No
Are religious propositions cognitively significant and factually descriptive?
Religious propositions are meaningless. (The Early Wittgenstein- Logical Positivists)
No
Religious language (in particular propositions about God) is symbolic. (Paul Tillich)
Religious language is cognitively insignificant. (The Later Wittgenstein)
Religious language is mythical. (Rudolf Bultmann)
Yes
Religious and ordinary languages are equivocal.
Religious and ordinary languages are univocal.
Religious language is analogous. (Thomas Aquinas)

## Religious Language as a Symbolic Language

- *Thy Jonah has been cooked in the fish's belly: for his deliverance there is no means but glorification of God. (Rumi, 2013, 3135, Vol. 2)*
- *He had not glorified (God), the fish's belly would have been his jail and prison until they shall be raised (from the dead). (Ibid, 3136, Vol. 2)*
- *Through glorification he escaped from the body of the fish. What is glorification? The sign (and token) of the Day of Alast. (Ibid, 3137, Vol. 2)*

These poems refer to *some* verses of the *Quran*:

> *"Then the fish swallowed him, for he was blameworthy. * And had he not been among those who glorify. He would have tarried in its belly till the Day they are resurrected." (Quran, 37: 142-144)*

Similar verses can be found in the *"Bible"*:

> *"Now the Lord had prepared a great fish to swallow up Jonah. And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights". (Bible, The Old Testament, Jonah: 17)*

In the next poem, Rumi sees the three elements of the verses, i.e., sea, fish, and Jonah as the symbols of something else:

> *This world is a sea, and the body a fish, and the spirit is the Jonah debarred from*

*the light of the dawn. (Rumi, 2013, 3140, Vol. 2)*

Rumi says that as Jonah was imprisoned in the belly of the fish, one's spirit is jailed in his body as far as one has not seen the light of the truth. Rumi concludes that:

*If it be a glorifier (of God), it is delivered from the fish; otherwise, it becomes digested therein and vanishes. (Ibid, 3141, Vol. 2)*

Analogously, before the abovementioned poems, Rumi uses Joseph and his pit and prison as the symbols of the human's spirit and body respectively to advise that:

*Thou art the Joseph of the time and the sun of heaven: arise from this pit and prison, and show thy face. (Ibid, 3134, Vol. 2)*

The same theme is repeated in some other poems by referring to some verses Holy Quran, *(Quran, 12: 19-20)* and the Bible: *(Ref: Bible, The Old Testament, Genesis 38: 28)*

- *In order that thou mayst see that this world is a narrow well, and that, like Joseph, thou mayst grasp that rope. (Rumi, 2013, 673, Vol. 4)*
- *So that, when thou comest from the well (up) to the roof, the Soul will say, "Oh, good news for me! This is a youth for me." (Ibid, 674, Vol. 4)*

It is clear that in all these poems Rumi interprets religious terms as the symbols of something else; though, contrary to Tillich's main idea, these are not symbols of some unlimited transcendental reality.

However, in the following poems, which refer to verses from the Holy Quran, *(ReF: Quran, 28: 30; Ibid, 14: 24)* and Bible verses, *(Ref: Bible, The Old Testament, Exodus 3: 4&6)* some symbols have been used in line with Tillich's view:

- *Thou wilt see that this (pear-tree) has become a tree of fortune, its boughs (reaching) to the Seventh Heaven. (Rumi, 2013, 3564, Vol. 4)*
- *Afterwards go up the pear-tree which has been transformed and made verdant by the (Divine) command, "Be". (Ibid, 3569, Vol. 4)*
- *This tree has (now) become like the tree connected with Moses, inasmuch as thou hast transported thy baggage towards (hast been endued with the nature of) Moses. (Ibid, 3570, Vol. 4)*
- *The fire (of Divine illumination) makes it verdant and flourishing; its boughs cry "Lo, I am God." (Ibid, 3571, Vol. 4)*
- *Beneath its shade all thy needs are fulfilled: such is the Divine alchemy. (Ibid, 3572, Vol. 4)*
- *That personality and existence is lawful to thee, since thou beholdest therein the attributes of the Almighty. (Ibid, 3573, Vol. 4)*
- *The crooked tree has become straight, God-revealing: its root fixed (in the earth) and its branches in the sky. (Ibid, 3572, Vol. 4)*

When Moses arrived at the sacred tree in "*Wadi Ayman"* (Valley of Right Hand), he saw that its fire is becoming more and more illuminating. Then from the right hand of the valley a voice was heard saying that, "I am the Lord of the world."

The interesting point is that here not only do we seem to be dealing with symbolic language; but also with symbolic entities: the sacred tree is a symbol of unlimited existence of God, and its flourishing fire is a symbol of His manifestations.

Rumi, however, has taken the "tree" as a symbol of human existence. He first proclaims that if you relieve yourself from selfishness and self-centeredness, the tree of your existence will consequently ascend to the heavens; such that if you reach a position like Moses' then not only fire cannot annihilate you, but on the contrary make you livelier and more delightful.

Moreover, although the tree is a symbol of humans, since in such a high position it has absorbed in divine essence and made pure from any imperfection, it can also be a symbol of the ultimate concern and cries that I am God.

In this section, it is worth mentioning some of Rumi's poems in which he explicitly speaks about the symbolic language of the Quran. In the fifth volume of "Masnavi" he composed the following poems about the abbreviated letters of the Quran:

- *This Alif-Lám-Mím and Há-Mím, O father, have come from the presence of the Lord of Mankind. (Rumi, 2013, 1316, Vol. 5)*

- *The (other) letters resemble these Letters outwardly but are subject (to them) in respect of the (sublime) attributes of the latter. (Rumi, 2013, 1316, Vol. 5)*
- *A staff that any one takes on trial- how should it be described as being like that staff (Moses' rod)? (Ibid, 1317, Vol. 5)*
- *This Breath is (like the breath) of Jesus (in its effects); it is not (like) any wind and breath that arises from joy or sorrow. (Ibid, 1319, Vol. 5)*
- *This Alif-Lám-Mím and Há-Mím, O father, have come from the presence of the Lord of Mankind. (Ibid, 1320, Vol. 5)*
- *What resemblance has any (other) alif-lám to these? Do not regard them with this (external) eye, if you have a (rational) soul. (Ibid, 1321, Vol. 5)*

According to Rumi, the abbreviated letters of the *Quran*, such as *Alif-Lám-Mím* and *Há-Mím*, are symbols just like the Staff of Moses, and both are able to perform miracles. It is true that the abbreviated letters of the *Quran* appear to be like other letters, and likewise for Moses' cane. However, it is also true that both entities are symbols of a high and transcendental reality, and hence are miraculous. Analogously:

> *Muhammad is composed of flesh and skin; (but he is unique) although every body is homogeneous*

*with him in its composition.*[1] *(Rumi, 2013, 1316, Vol. 5)*

However, it should be noted that there is a big difference between Prophet Muhammad and other humans:

- *By the dispensation of God Há-Mím becomes a dragon and cleaves the sea like the rod (of Moses). (Ibid, 1328, Vol. 5)*
- *Its external appearance resembles (other) appearances; but the disc (round cake) of bread is very far from (being) the disc of the moon. (Ibid, 1329, Vol. 5)*

## Religious Language as an Equivocal Language

- The ox has his color outside; but in the case of a man seek the red and yellow hues within. *(Ibid, 764, Vol. 1)*
- The good colors are from the vat of purity; the color of the wicked is from the black water of iniquity. *(Ibid, 765, Vol. 1)*
- *The baptism of God* is the name of that subtle color; *the curse of God* is the smell of that gross color. *(Ibid, 764, Vol. 1)*

In these poems, by comparing people who have approached closeness to God with those who do not reach such a status, Rumi emphasizes that to recognize the difference between these two groups we should consider their inner states and what lies within.

Qualities regarding appearance, like color, shape and so on, are the signs often used to recognize animals, not humans. Hence, Rumi makes a difference between inner and outer color.

1. Ref: Quran, 18: 110.

The outer (apparent) colors of objects are sensible and so are perceived through the sense of sight.

The inner color, however, is a spiritual property that reveals humans' good or bad characteristics. In the latter use, the usual meaning of color has been replaced by an anomalous one. Hence, in the *Quran* the color, which is normally a physical property, has been attributed to God who is presumably immaterial and non-physical:

> *"(The) color (religion) (of) Allah! And who (is) better than Allah at coloring? And we to Him (are) worshippers."* *(Quran, 2: 138)*

The verse says that God's color is the best color by which He colors the faithful people, which implies that God's color is indeed the same as humans' good characteristics and behaviors.

It is clear that this kind of color is not equivalent to physical colors but is essentially a spiritual entity.

Hence, what the verse means by 'color' is different from what people normally mean by it. So, they are equivocal. Otherwise, it should be assumed that the Quran has attributed a physical property to God, which is against the belief of all Abrahamic religions, and hence is absurd. Rumi has mentioned to this equivocality by comparing the apparent color of a cow with the inner color of humans.

In other poems Rumi has considered God's color as a dyeing-vat in which different colors (diversity) has transformed to one color (oneness); such that, by falling in this vat the

diversity of colors vanishes and everyone gains divine ipseity, and hence deserves to be prostrated by angels:

- *The baptism of Allah is the dyeing-vat of Hú (the Absolute God): therein (all) piebald things become of one color. (Rumi, 2013, 1345, Vol. 2)*
- *When he (the mystic) falls into the vat, and you say to him, "Arise," he says in rapture, "I am the vat: do not blame (me)." (Ibid)*
- *That "I am the vat" is the (same as) saying "I am God": he has the color of the fire, albeit he is iron. (Ibid)*

In sum, all the above-mentioned poems are evidence for the equivocality of religious and everyday languages where both attribute different meanings to the same terms such as 'color'.

## Religious Language as a Univocal Language

In this section the aim is to reckon the poems wherein Rumi has considered religious language as univocal with everyday language.

In other words, it would be sufficient to find correlated poems and Verses and show that they have used the same terms identically, that is, with the same meaning.

Here are some examples:

> *Recite (the text), Every day He is (engaged) in some affair: do not deem Him idle and inactive. (Ibid, 3071, V. 1)*

The first hemistich of this verse refers to the following verse (Ayah) from the Holy Quran. The verse, however, states that:

> *Every day He is (engaged) in some affair. (Quran, 55: 29)*

The apparent meaning of the verse is not compatible with theological doctrines of Abrahamic religions according to which God is immutable and changeless.

Indeed, if the Arabic word "yom" means instant, then the verse says that at every instant God is (engaged) in some affair.

At any rate, the question of as to how this apparent meaning of the verse is compatible with the Abrahamic doctrines is not the issue of this paper; Rather the point is that Rumi has taken the apparent meaning of the verse and has not interpreted it differently mystically or any form alike.

> *No leaf drops from a tree without the predestination and ordainment of that Ruler of Fortune. (Rumi, 2013, 1899, Vol. 3)*

Some of the most difficult and controversial topics of theology are related to God's infallible and changeless foreknowledge about the material world and its particular events. One problem is that having such knowledge apparently implies assuming some changes in God's attributes, i.e., His knowledge. For the world is continuously changing and so it seems that knowledge about such world should continuously change too.

However, as we have mentioned already, God and all His attributes are presumably changeless and immutable.

Whether the proposed solutions to this problem are successful is not the

discussion point of this paper. The point, however, is that in this verse Rumi asserts that God's knowledge includes knowing everything, even the details of events of the material world.

This poem refers to the following verse from the Holy Quran:

> *"And with him are the keys of the unseen; none knows them except Him. And he knows what is on the land and in the sea. Not a leaf falls but that He knows it." (Quran, 6: 59)*

So, Rumi has repeated the apparent meaning of the *āyah* in his poems.

## Religious Language as an Analogous Language

> The Beloved is all and the lover (but) a veil; the Beloved is living and the lover a dead thing. *(Rumi, 2013, 30, Vol. 1)*

This verse refers to verse (Ayah) of the Holy Quran that "Everything will be destroyed except His Face", *(Quran, 28: 88)* and other verses that say:

> *"Everyone upon the earth will perish, and they will remain the Face of your Lord, Owner of Majesty and Honor". (Quran, 55: 26-27)*

Such verses that are very common in "Masnavi", at first glance, do not seem to be compatible with the analogous theory of religious language. For, as we explained already, according to this theory, the same property can be attributed to both the unlimited creator

and the limited creatures analogously. The apparent meaning of the above verse, however, is that all perfections belong only to God, whereas others have no perfection at all.

However, considering the verses following the abovementioned and also other verses of "Masnavi" shows that Rumi's view can be interpreted in such a way that it becomes compatible with the analogous thesis.

For example, in the next verse Rumi says:

> *When Love hath no care for him, he is left as a bird without wings. Alas for him then. (Rumi, 2013, 31, Vol. 1)*
>
> *How should I have consciousness (of aught) before or behind when the light of my Beloved is not before me and behind? (Ibid, 32, Vol. 1)*

In these verses, Rumi refers to verses (Ayat) from the Holy Quran:

- *"On the Day you see the believing men and believing women, their light proceeding before them and on their right, [it will be said], "your good tidings today are [of] gardens beneath which rivers flow, wherein you will abide eternally." That is what the great attainment." (Quran, 57: 12)*
- *"And those who believed with him. Their light will proceed before them and on their right; they will say, "Our Lord, perfect for us our light and forgive us." (Quran, 66: 8)*

According to these verses, the light Faithfull people will move swiftly before them and on their right.

Rumi says that Divine light is the source of other lights, and this light is manifested by His servants in lower levels.

It is true that the real cause and the actual source of the light is God; however, it is also true that humans as the weak exemplars of this light are similar to God in luminosity. Hence, "light" is not equivocal between God and humans. Since this light has a divine nature, it gives such a position to humans that they are able to know the mysteries of "names" and deserve to be prostrated by angels:

- *Inasmuch as the eye of Adam saw by means of the Pure Light, the soul and in most sense of the names became evident to him. (Rumi, 2013, 1245, Vol. 1)*
- *Since the angels perceived in him the rays of God, they fell in worship and hastened to do homage.*[1] *(Ref: Ibid, 1247, Vol. 1)*

In the second volume of "Masnavi", Rumi repeats his view according to which the true real light is Divine light, which has been deposited in prophets' mold and they reflect it as mirrors. Then, at the next level, saints and friends of God play the same role:

- *That splendour of lightning which shone over the spirits, so that Adam gained from that Light (his) knowledge (of God). (Ibid, 910, Vol. 2)*

1. Ref: Quran, 2: 34.

- *The hand of Seth gathered that which grew from Adam: therefore Adam, when he saw that (Light in him), made him his vicar. (Rumi, 2013, 911, Vol. 2)*
- *Since Noah had enjoyment of that Jewel, he showered pearls (of Divine wisdom) in the air of the Sea of Soul. (Ibid, 912, Vol. 2)*
- *From (possession of) that mighty radiance the spirit of Abraham went fearlessly into the flames of the fire. (Ibid, 913, Vol. 2)*
- *When Isma'el (Ishmael) fell into the stream thereof, he laid his head before his (Abraham's) flashing knife. (Ibid, 914, Vol. 2)*
- *The soul of David was heated by its rays: iron became soft in his hand-loom.[1] (Ibid, 915, Vol. 2)*
- *When Solomon was suckled on (the milk of) union with it, the demon became a thrall to his command and obedient.[2] (Ibid, 916, Vol. 2)*
- *When Jacob bowed his head (in submission) to the (Divine) destiny, it (the Light) illumined (gladdened) his eye with the scent of his (lost) son.[3] (Ibid, 917, Vol. 2)*
- *When the moon-faced Joseph beheld that Sun, he became so wide-awake (wise) in the interpretation of dreams. (Ibid, 918, Vol. 2)*
- *When the rod drank water (was imbued with the influence of the*

1. Ref: Quran, 34: 10.
2. Ref: Quran, 34: 12.
3. Ref: Quran, 12: 94-96.

*Light) from the hand of Moses, it made one mouthful of Pharaoh's empire.*[1] *(Rumi, 2013, 919, Vol. 2)*

- *When Jesus, the son of Mary, found its ladder, he sped to the topmost height of the Fourth Dome (of Heaven). (Ibid, 920, Vol. 2)*
- *When Mohammed gained that Kingdom and Felicity, he in a moment clave the disk of the moon in two halves.*[2] *(Ibid,, 921, Vol. 1)*
- *When at (the sight of) its countenance Murtaz (Imam Ali) began to scatter pearls (of spiritual truth), he became the Lion of God in the pasture of the soul. (Ibid, 925, Vol. 2)*

In other poems, Rumi again repeats his idea that the same light has been manifested in different hierarchies with various grades and intensity:

- *Go towards a sense on which the Light is riding: that Light is a good companion for the sense. (Ibid, 1292, Vol. 2)*
- *The Light of God is an ornament to the light of sense: this is the meaning of light upon light.*[3] *(Ibid, 1293, Vol. 2)*
- *The light of sense draws (a man) towards earth; the Light of God bears him aloft. (Ibid, 1294, Vol. 2)*

In all these verses the word "light" has been used analogously between God and different creatures.

1. Ref: Quran, 26: 45; Bible, The Old Testament, Exodus 7: 10-12.
2. Ref: Quran, 54: 1.
3. Ref: Quran, 24: 35.

## Data Evaluation and Analysis

By investigating all poems of "Masnavi", 369 verses were found wherein Rumi has somehow pointed to the Quran's Verses (Ayat) and interpreted them semantically. Examining these verses shows that they can be categorized under the titles of four theses as shown in the following table:

| Thesis | Number of Verses |
|---|---|
| Symbolic Language | 103 |
| Equivocal Language | 85 |
| Univocal Language | 88 |
| Analogous Language | 93 |

Now, considering this table, let us examine Rumi's view about the language of Quran.

The first point is that Rumi accepts neither the positivists' idea of meaninglessness of religious language nor the later Wittgenstein's view of language game. Moreover, there is no sign in "Masnavi" that shows his sympathy with the idea of religious language as a mythical language. The other four theories, however, somehow exist in "Masnavi".

Considering the characteristics of these theories, it can be asked, is it not the case that Rumi's view is paradoxical? In other words, since the theories are not compatible with each other, how has Rumi somehow employed all of them in his interpretations of the verses of the Quran? Doesn't this illustrate that Rumi have had a vague and unclear idea about religious language?

To solve this problem, it should be noticed that a variety of reasons, causes and occasions led to the descent of revelation and the Quran's verses. Hence, semantically, it is not the case that all

Quran verses have the same level of complexity and obscureness.

The Quran has indeed mentioned explicitly this property of the verses that there are two kinds of verses, namely, precise verses and ambiguous verses. *(Ref: Quran, 3: 7)*

This feature of the verses has historically opened a wide scope for the interpreters of the Quran, and has provided them the possibility of presenting a wide range of interpretations.

In other words, since many verses of the Quran have multilevel meanings, they accept different interpretations. So, there is no inconsistency in Rumi's view when he categorizes verses under different theses of religious language.

The next point that the table shows is that the symbolic and the equivocal languages have the highest and the lowest weight in "Masnavi" respectively. Also, the second and the third positions belong to analogous and univocal languages respectively.

Now, the important point is to examine the reason behind this order. In other words, the question is: why did Rumi interpret religious language mostly symbolically in his poems?

To reply to this question, it is worth mentioning again that the most important characteristic of religious language as a symbolic one is to speak about such transcendental realities that cannot be described cognitively by means of ordinary language. In other words, we use common expressions symbolically to

refer to realities that are unlimitedly beyond human's understanding.

Hence, it seems that the symbolic language deals mainly with the power of human's imagination. Poetry also possesses this property. That is, poets mainly use their power of imagination when composing poems; though the imaginary world is not the same as the transcendental world of religions. At any rate, the arationality of both worlds explains the similarity that exists between religious and poetry languages.

Another characteristic of symbolic language, which was explained previously, is that it is not cognitively meaningful. In other words, symbolic language does not explicitly describe the events of the world as they happen.

According to the followers of Abrahamic religions, the use of symbolic language is based on the fact that human's usual language is not able to describe truly and strictly Divine matters, acts and manifestations. From this point of view, symbolic language is very close to the language of poetry. For, the aim of poetic language is not to describe reality truly as it is. So, no poet is ostracized or encouraged because of what he/she has claimed to have commited in his/her poems.

In the Holy Quran, this characteristic of the language of poetry has been described:

> *"And the poets [only] the deviators follow them* Do you not see that in every valley they roam* And they what they do not do?".* *(Quran, 26: 224-226)*

## Conclusion

The similarities that exist between the language of poetry and symbolic language might explain why Rumi has given such a high position to symbolic language in his interpretation of the Quranic language. However, it should be asserted again that in the language of poetry using the power of imagination and imaginative language sometimes leads to declaring meaningless expressions.

When it is said that using symbolic language in religion is to report events by employing imagination power, this means that to describe the realities which are beyond of human understanding we have no way but to use such a language.

In sum, symbolic language is not about irrational matters, but is about a-rational Divine matters.

After the symbolic language, the analogous language has occupied the second position. A simple explanation of this is that the analogous interpretation of religious language has historically had the most advocates among Muslim philosophers and mystics.

There is also no doubt that Rumi had mystical views. Many Muslim scholars have considered Rumi as one of the greatest Muslim mystics. So, it seems natural that analogous interpretation of religious language has such a high position in "Masnavi".

However, the higher position of symbolic language in comparison to analogous language might be because Rumi's poetical view has a preference over his mystical view.

The comparison between equivocal and univocal languages shows that t Rumi believes that in the Quran the latter has been used more than the former.

A proper explanation for this can be that Rumi, from a well-known, kalam point of view, was theologically Ash'ari. The followers of this school, known as Asha`irah, had a kind of formalistic view about the interpretation of the Quran. They insisted that an interpreter of the Quran should remain as faithful as possible with regards to the apparent meaning of its verses.

That is, according to this school, the univocal approach toward religious language is initially prior to the equivocal language. Therefore, regarding Rumi's theological belief, the same priority is seen in his "Masnavi".

In sum, comparing the positions of all four theses in "Masnavi", it could be concluded that Rumi's poetry and mystical view is overwhelmingly superior to his theological opinion. This means that Rumi was mainly under the influence of mystics rather than theologians.

Of course, a valid judgment about Rumi's view concerning religious language needs a comprehensive literature survey across all his works, whereas in this paper, the scope of the discussion has been limited only to his famous book of "Masnavi".

However, regarding Rumi's other great work, "Divan Shams Tabrizi", it can be said that Rumi mainly interprets religious language based on the mystic viewpoint.

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## HOW TO CITE THIS ARTICLE

Mousavi Karimi, Mirsaeid. and Hamideh Tehrani Haeri (2022). **The Nature of Religious Language from Rumi's Point of View**. *International Multidisciplinary Journal of PURE LIFE*. 9 (30): 51-89.

**DOI:** ***10.22034/IMJPL.2022.6992***
**DOR:** ***20.1001.1.26767619.2022.9.30.2.5***
**URL:** ***http://p-l.journals.miu.ac.ir/article_6992.html***