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The Philosophical Assumptions behind the Non-Cognitive Use of Scriptures in Eastern Religions

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1 INTRODUCTION

In the most general sense the non-cognitive dimension of scripture-use refers to the practice of uttering the words of a text that is considered sacred in a given religion without any mental attempt to understand its lexical meaning. This is usually contrasted with the cognitive usage, i.e., the situation when scriptures are read with the goal of extracting some meaningful information from the text. Arguably, the cognitive usage is much more familiar to adherents of Western religion such as when, for example, the Bible is read to gain some insight into a puzzling life situation or inspiration from an ancient story or a parable, or to discover certain moral guidance which could then be practically applied in everyday dealings. Needless to say, all of these beneficial effects of Bible reading presuppose that the reader can grasp the cognitive content of the passage.

While reading a text for inspiration or instruction is by no means limited to the Western religious traditions, we may nonetheless observe that many of the Eastern religions are conspicuous in their special emphasis on the non-cognitive or ritualistic use of a sacred text. One such use may occur when a follower of a religion recites the text written in a language that he or she does not understand, and would yet believe in the accruement of some spiritual or worldly benefit from such reciting. It is a widespread conviction, shared by many Buddhists and Hindus, that sacred phrases in their written or oral form may have supernatural power, capable of bringing blessing or warding off evil for anyone who simply vocalises or inscribes them. Thus

various charms or talismans are often adorned with scriptural inscriptions or contain small scrolls with a sacred written text. We may also recall the popular Tibetan practice of spinning a prayer wheel – a cylindrical wheel which has mantras and prayers inscribed on the outside, or placed inside the cylinder. The mere spinning of the wheel with these sacred words will have the same meritorious effect for the believer as orally reciting these prayers. To be sure, the cognitive comprehension of the text by a person who spins the wheel or utters a prayer is not a prerequisite for the desired spiritual effect to transpire.

Another conspicuous peculiarity of the conception of language in Eastern religions has to do with the decidedly active role it plays in a variety of religious activities. The active or creative power of language is not foreign to the Western religious traditions either, but in most cases such power is reserved for the divine being alone, rather than for ordinary humans. In Hinduism and Buddhism, on the other hand, the devotee might actively participate in creating certain levels of spiritual reality by the power of the sacred sounds. As Staal observed once while discussing Indian traditions, "In India, language is not something with which you *name* something. It is in general something with which you *do* something"[1]. And, of course, reading (or singing) a sacred text aloud or chanting a mantra are the most obvious ways in which a believer participates in this creative process.

Scripture is still used primarily in a non-cognitive manner even when the reader understands the language of the text, but assigns the spiritual efficaciousness of the text to the mere fact of voicing the sacred words or the repetitive reciting of scriptural passages. One well-known historical example of such a practice is the obligation of the public daily reading of the Golden Light Sutra (*Suvarṇaprabhāsa Sūtra*), an important Mahayana text, by the early Japanese Buddhist monks as a means of protecting the nation and the Japanese Emperor[2]. Magical protective powers were ascribed to the very sound of that venerable Buddhist scripture, even if on other private occasions, monks might have read the text in a more familiar cognitive way – by trying to gain insight into Buddha's teaching and reading it as a guide for the proper rituals[3]. Interestingly enough, in addition to the regular scheduled

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[1] F. Staal, *Oriental Ideas on the Origin of Language*, "Journal of the American Oriental Society" no. 99 (1/1979), p. 9.

[2] R. Abe, *The Weaving of the Mantra: Kukai and the Construction of Esoteric Buddhist Discourse*, New York 1999, p. 238–240.

[3] The early Daoist practice of continuous recitation of the *Daode jing* in order to facilitate

reading of the sutra, the emperor would on occasion order special reading sessions or commission the copying of the sacred sutras in response to natural disasters, social unrest or pestilences – as an efficient way of pacifying the hostile natural and political forces. Below are several typical entries from the Japanese 8th century chronicle, *The Continued History of Japan* (*Shoku Nihongi*), which records both the national emergency and the remedies pursued by the authorities:

Year 726 (sixth month): The Grand Empress Genshō fell ill. The court ordered national monasteries and nunneries to copy the *Lotus Sutra* (*hokke-kyō*).

Year 728 (twelfth month): To ensure peace for the nation, 640 copies of the *Golden Light Sutra* were produced for distribution throughout provinces.

Year 740 (ninth month): The rebellion of Fujiwara no Hirotsugu. The court ordered the copying of the *Avalokitesvara Sutra* (*Jūichimen-jinshushin-gyō*) at the major monasteries and nunneries.

Year 745 (fifth month): There were earthquakes and volcanoes erupted. The court ordered major Buddhist institutions to recite sutras.

Year 774 (second month): An epidemic spread to many provinces. The court ordered priests of the major Buddhist temples to recite the *Greater Prajna-paramita Sutra*[4].

Likewise, a continuous chanting of a mantra or a *dhāraṇī* (such as the *Nembutsu* mantra of the Pure Land Buddhist sect or a famous *Oṃ maṇi padme hūṃ* mantra of the Tibetan Buddhism) – with or without understanding of the literal meaning of the phrase chanted – would fall under the category of the non-cognitive use of sacred words as well.

It seems clear that a religious practitioner who claims to perform a particular act and thus achieve a certain practical result merely by uttering the right words at the right time has a somewhat peculiar conception about the power of language and the metaphysical structure of the universe, which shows itself so responsive to the sound of certain words. My immediate aim in this paper is to identify the underlying philosophical assumptions behind these practices, even if these assumptions are not explicitly grasped by the

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petitions and to bring the devotee closer to Dao would fall under the category of the non-cognitive use of scripture as well, despite the fact that the practitioners would typically be able to understand the text (see L. Kohn, *The "Tao-te-ching" in Ritual*, [in:] *Lao-tzu and Tao-te-ching*, ed. L. Kohn and M. LaFargue, Albany 1998, p. 143–61.)

[4]R. Abe, op.cit., p. 318.

common practitioners themselves. My further goal is to encourage a fresh look at the Eastern religious traditions, where local practices are not evaluated and categorised according to Western standards, but are rather approached within the philosophical background of an indigenous tradition per se. By necessity, I shall limit my discussion to the instances of non-cognitive use of a religious text as it is practiced in several Hindu and Buddhist traditions, while recognising that these two world religions by no means exhaust all the occurrences of non-cognitive usage.

2   PHILOSOPHICAL JUSTIFICATION OF NON-COGNITIVE USAGE IN HINDU AND BUDDHIST PHILOSOPHY

Our understanding of a foreign cultural or religious phenomenon is often facilitated by setting up an explicit contrast with the more familiar modes of thought and existence. Let me thus list several beliefs about the relationship between language and the physical world, which are taken for granted by much of Western philosophy and science, or, indeed, the general public, at least since the time of the Enlightenment[5]. Identifying these (allegedly) self-evident beliefs would highlight the obvious differences and allow us eventually to make an informative comparison between the mainstream Western and Eastern approaches to the functions of language in religious practices. Let me call the following four basic assumptions "the Western platitudes":

1. Common terms and proper names are different from the objects or persons that they refer to. The signifier (using Saussure's terminology) is different from the signified[6].
2. All words in a natural language are in an important sense 'arbitrary'. It is just a matter of convention, or, at best, a result of accidental contingencies of history that the word "river" in English language happens

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[5]The general worldview, based on the belief in the power of empirical sciences and in the capacity of human reason to discover the hidden secrets of nature by distancing oneself from it, is what Alper aptly labels "the Enlightenment consensus". The "consensus" has straightforward implications for contemporary attitudes toward language as well. H. Alper, *Mantra*, Albany & New York 1989, p. 3.

[6]F. Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, trans. W. Baskin, London 2013 (reprint).

to refer to a body of flowing water, rather than to a blood-pumping organ inside a human body[7].

3. Language functions properly when the reference of the terms is more or less fixed, and, moreover, when that pattern of reference 'is known' by the language-user. A person who utters some words or sentences without any idea of what those words refer to, or what those sentences describe is not using a language properly (the subject 'bestows' meaning, while objects are meaningless in themselves).

4. In most circumstances, a linguistic utterance is a 'reaction' to a certain preexisting state of affairs; it is not a vehicle for producing or causing anything to happen in the "natural world". My utterance "the cat is on the mat" is a reaction to the preexisting situation which I observe in front of me; it is not what 'causes' the cat to be on the mat[8].

It is safe to say that all four of these "Western platitudes" about the nature and function of language are challenged at some level by the beliefs and practices of the Eastern religions, such as Buddhism, various Hindu traditions, Daoism and, to some extent, even Sikhism. Taking issues in a chronological order, the most direct challenge to the Western naturalistic understanding of language can be seen in the tradition of Vedic Hinduism where the original power of sound is deified in the form of a female goddess *Vāk* (lit. speech, voice, sound), and the origin of human speech is described in the Vedic texts as a process of divine revelation, accomplished by the ancient rishis and sages. It is important to observe that the divine *Vāk* of the Vedas does not connote only the sounds of human speech, but has a much wider application. In the *Rigveda*, *Vāk* also refers to the underlying language of nature itself, which includes the sounds produced by cows, birds, frogs, and even the sound of thunder (*vajra*) – Indra's main weapon. In the only Vedic hymn devoted exclusively to *Vāk* (*Rigveda*, 10.125), this goddess boldly proclaims her ubiquitous presence in all natural phenomena as "the great sustaining principle", and asserts her power over gods and humans alike.

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[7]Cf. Juliet's remark in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*: "What's in a name? That which we call a rose, by any other word would smell as sweet."

[8]Recently, this assumption has been challenged by the speech-act theorists (e.g., J. L. Austin and J. Searle), who point out that in certain circumstances an utterance can indeed produce the state of affairs in question, rather than simply describe it. They identify such use of linguistic statements as "performative utterances", with the famous example of "I now pronounce you husband and wife". Cf J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, Cambridge 1975; J. R. Searle, *Speech Acts*, Cambridge 1970.

By the time of the Brahmana literature, *Vāk* becomes an expression for the female aspect of the creative forces. *Vāk* is the consort of Prajapati, and by their sacred union all things are created. In the *atapatha Brāhmaṇa* (4.1.3.1–16) we find a mythological narrative which explicitly credits the god Indra with "separating sound from sound", thus allowing the goddess *Vāk* (and, by extension, humans) to articulate words as distinct units; and in the *Chāndogya-upaniṣad* (2.22.3) we are told that "all vowels are embodiments of Indra"[9]. The goddess of speech is further identified with the power of the Vedic ritual, which centrally involves the chanting of the Vedas and, as Guy Beck observes, the earliest meaning of the word Brahman itself is "sacred word" or "sacred formula"[10]. Thus *Vāk* can be rightly seen as the original source of all Vedic mantras.

This Vedic insight about the supernatural origin of spoken words clearly underlies popular Hindu beliefs and ritual practices, including the public re-citation of *shastras* and *mantras*. From a theoretical perspective, these prac-tices were systematically justified in India, among others, by the Mimamsa school of philosophy. Mimamsa originated as a school of deep exegesis of the Vedic literature (the earliest texts that can be associated with this movement appear in the 2nd cent. BCE – the *Mīmāṁsā Sūtra* by Jaimini). One of the later representatives of this school, Bhartrihari, lived in the 5th century CE, and developed an ingenious theory in the philosophy of language, arguing that speech – or *Śābda* – consists of words that are eternally tied to their prim-ordial meaning (*artha*), and are thus anything but arbitrary sounds coined by human invention. The signifier, or the sound, and the signified (meaning or reference) are thus essentially one, according to Bhartrihari, and when it comes to the sounds of the verses of the Vedas, they correspond to the eternal principles of the cosmic order itself due to the unique sequence of those sounds.

It would not be an exaggeration to claim that no other school in the his-tory of philosophy had such a sublime and such a radical view on the nature of language as the Mimamsa School. The words that make up the sacred texts of the four Vedas (*saṁhitā*) take ontological precedence even over the deit-ies that they claim to describe or refer too. Indeed, the Vedic gods, according to the Mimamsa thinkers, are never granted the ontological status of inde-pendent self-sufficient beings. Rather, their very existence is the product of

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[9]Cf. G. L. Beck, *Sonic Theology: Hinduism and Sacred Sound*, Chicago 1993, p. 25–26.
[10]Ibidem, p. 29.

the language-use by the devoted reciter of the Vedas. As Harold Coward observed, "these gods named in the Vedas have no existence apart from the mantras that speak their name, and the power of the gods is nothing other than the power of the mantras that name them"[11]. Language here in the Mimamsa philosophy takes the unique place that is reserved for a Creator God in theistic religions, and is seen as the only ultimate reality of the universe.

The assumed eternal link that exists between a word and its denotation has a straightforward consequence for the practice of reading or chanting a sacred text. The meaning of the uttered words is not "in the head" of the reader, it is not something mental, but rather obtains as an objective fact of the universe, quite independent of the subjective state of the person himself. A contemporary scholar of Indian thought – Surendranath Dasgupta – summarizes Mimamsa's position in this way:

> All words have natural denotative powers by which they themselves out of their own nature refer to certain objects irrespective of their comprehension or non-comprehension by the hearers...
> Words are thus acknowledged to be denotative of themselves and all words are believed to be eternally existent.

In other words, the reading of a sacred text achieves its denotative goal every time the words are pronounced, and the sound of those words is always laden with meaning in some absolute sense – regardless whether that meaning is also grasped by the readers or hearers of the word. If a word existed alone in the forest, and there was no one in the whole universe to hear and understand it, it would still remain a meaningful word.

We may observe a similar tendency toward an inflation of the ontological status of language in certain esoteric forms of Buddhism as well, even if the mainstream Buddhist philosophy (especially of the Theravada origin) advocated a naturalistic view of language close to the modern Western conceptions. Tantric Buddhism, which developed from the tantric Saivism from the 3rd century CE, is probably the most well-known Buddhist school which places special emphasis on the power of the spoken word. But it would be opportune to mention here a theory of language proposed by a less familiar branch of esoteric Buddhism, namely that of the Shingon sect, founded by Kūkai in 9th century Japan.

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[11]H. Coward, D. Goa, *Mantra: Hearing the Divine in India and America*, New York 2004, p. 36.

Kūkai (774–835) was one of the most prolific religious writers, literary figures and thinkers of his age. His rather sophisticated philosophy of language was developed in a book entitled "The Meaning of the True Aspects of the Voiced Syllable" (*Shōjijissōgi*) which presents an impressive theory of the human languages as being derivative from the signs and letters of the primordial world-text. Kūkai starts by expanding the concept of language to include within its scope some apparently non-linguistic items. Not only the letters of the alphabet but all things in the world – even trees, mountains, and streams – have the same claim as letters, and together they form the "cosmic text"[12]. Sensory objects are the basic semantic units of this cosmic language which is without beginning, and ordinary human speech is derived from the original world-text.

The Buddhist universe, in other words, is linguistic, textual at its deepest core (rather than, say, mathematical), which implies that a text of any sutra, written in an ordinary human language, is isomorphic to the very structure of the cosmos. As Ryūichi Abe observes, for Kūkai there is never a hard and fast distinction between text that describes the world and the world that is described in the text[13]. The universe is itself a scriptural text that has, perhaps, a peculiar syntax, but it stands in a straightforward relation to the natural languages[14]. This, in turn, guarantees the connection generated between the written characters or uttered sounds[15] and the world – after all, both the human text and the world are of the same ontological order.

And yet some words, for Kūkai, are more real and more efficacious than the others. The sacred sutras manifest the language that is derived from the realm of the Buddhas – the transcendental Dharmakaya realm (rather than the realm of humans, or any other of the lower realms), and in that sense it alone is real in the ultimate degree. All the words of the scriptural texts are genuine mantras – or "true words" (*shingon*) – and as such, they have special power within:

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[12]We may recall here the Vedic notion that the goddess of speech *Vāk* embodies not only human speech *per se*, but all natural sounds as well.

[13]R. Abe, op. cit., p. 15.

[14]Kūkai was not the first thinker who proposed the idea of the universe as a sacred scripture. For the history of this notion in Buddhist philosophy see L. Gomez, *The Whole Universe as a Sutra*, [in:] *Buddhism in Practice*, ed. D. Lopez, Princeton 1995.

[15]Contrary to the traditional Hindu emphasis on a spoken word, for Kūkai a written letter or a word is primary, and the sound of that word is secondary. He often refers to a voiced letter as a letter inscribed in the air by vibration patterns.

> All sorts of names originate from Dharmakaya. They all issue
> forth from it (him) and become the languages circulating in the
> world. The language that is aware of this truth is called the true
> word (*shingon*) and other languages that are not consciousness
> of their source are called illusory words[16].

As is common with esoteric teachings, Kūkai suggests that there are several levels of understanding when it comes to the nature of language and mantras. In a wider sense, as we have seen, any Buddhist scripture, no matter how long, has the status of a sacred mantra. But in the narrow sense, a mantra or a *dhāraṇī* refers to a traditional short chant, consisting of several words or syllables, and usually associated with a particular sutra. The chant may appear meaningless on the surface, but in reality each mantra or *dhāraṇī* is saturated with meaning, as it contains the meaning of the whole sutra within, although in a rather condensed form[17]. On yet another level of understanding, any word and, indeed, any letter of the alphabet, whether appearing in scriptures or nonreligious texts, acquires the mantric character. Kūkai believed that if one possessed the secret knowledge of the origin and nature of language, any word in any language could manifest its power as a mantra, since language in general is that realm where the Buddhist truth of emptiness manifests itself.

Language, for the Shingon sect, as we have seen, is much more than just the accidental means of communicating certain Buddhist truths in a propositional form – it is an essential element of the essence of that message. The dichotomy between the signifier and the signified is transcended by interpreting the empirical world as a sacred text itself. On the other hand, the letters and syllables of human languages have material properties, as the vibrations produced by sound are capable of direct interaction with the five elements that make up the "outside" world[18]. The popular slogan of the 20th

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[16]R. Abe, op. cit., p. 286.

[17]We may compare this with the Hindu belief that the sacred syllable "Om" contains the essence of all the Vedas; cf. also the explanation of the Prajñaparamita Mantra: *gate gate pāragate pārasaṃgate bodhi svāhā* – as containing the deeper essence of the Prajñaparamita sutras. Similarly, Rinzai Zen teachers advocated the practice compressing the "Heart Sutra" into a single word.

[18]"The five syllables of the Mahavairocana mantra [*A Vi Ra Hum Kham*] are equated with the five elements not because the letters are signs or representations of the five elements; rather, the sounds of the five syllables, the movements of the atmosphere when the syllables are pronounced, resonate respectively with the vibrant movements of each of the five great

century poststructuralists – "there is nothing outside the text"[19] – could be well adopted by Kūkai and the followers of the esoteric branch of Buddhism but even with a more radical emphasis – "there is nothing 'except' the text".

While Kūkai presents one of the most intricate and sophisticated theories of language in the history of Buddhism, many of his fundamental assumptions about the power of recited scriptures and mantras are shared by other schools of esoteric lineages, such as Tientai in China, Tendai and Nichiren sects in Japan, and, of course, the tantric forms of Buddhism in India and Tibet[20]. The ritualistic non-cognitive use of language occurs in other Mahayana traditions as well, a practice that presupposes some common assumptions both about human psychology and the ontology of the world. In the last section I shall focus specifically on the use of mantra in the Eastern religions, as a paradigmatic case of the non-cognitive use of a sacred text.

3   THE POWER OF A MANTRA

Eastern faiths are famous for their emphasis on the power of uttered syllables, words or phrases, which we usually designate by the term "mantra", so it would be appropriate to briefly address this interesting phenomenon in the context of our discussion of the non-cognitive use of sacred texts. The chanting of a mantra, a *dhāraṇī* or a *paritta*[21] confirms well to the paradigm examples of the non-cognitive use of sacred scriptures. The structure of the mantra itself in Buddhism or in Hinduism may significantly differ both in terms of its content and its form. We have seen that the Vedic hymns and the Buddhist sutras of any length may acquire a mantic character when recited by believers in the right context. On the other extreme, a mantra may consist of a single syllable (e.g., *Om*, *Hum*, *Hrum*) or even a single letter –

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elements". R. Abe, op. cit., p. 298.

[19] J. Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, Baltimore & London 1997. Derrida himself suggested that his famous slogan should be rather read as "There is nothing outside the context of the text".

[20] For the function of mantras in Japanese Tendai, see P. Groner, *Saicho: The Establishment of the Japanese Tendai School*, Honolulu 2000. The role of mantra recitation in Tantric traditions is analysed in A. Padoux, *Tantric Mantras: Studies on Mantrasastra*, London & New York 2011.

[21] The difference between the three terms is not always consistently preserved. In general, a mantra typically refers to a shorter chant, while *dhāraṇī* and *paritta* refer to relatively longer recited passages from scriptures. Moreover, while the term *mantra* has a cross-religious character and is applied both to Hindu and Buddhist chants, the terms *dhāraṇī* and *paritta* are primarily reserved for the Buddhist practices.

Kūkai, for instance, famously identified the first letter of the Sanskrit alphabet "A" as the ultimate mantra and the mysterious source of all other mantras and all other letters[22]. Sound, oral articulation, is a primary medium of most mantras, but in some cases the power of a mantra is located in the inscription rather than in the actual pronunciation of the sacred words – as, for example, in the case of mantras written on the sides of the cylinder of the Tibetan Prayer Wheels, or in the case of Nichiren's "Great Mandala" – a non-pictorial mandala, containing the inscription of the key mantra of the Nichiren Buddhist sect: Namu-Myōhō-renge-kyō ("Glory to the Sutra of the Lotus of the Supreme Law").

In the Tantric traditions of Hinduism and Buddhism, mantras were chanted during religious rites to aid the visualisations of the yogis, and each tantric deity was associated with his or her personal mantra – the one that expressed and embodied the nature of that deity. For example, the well-known *Oṃ maṇi padme hūṃ* mantra is the mantra of the Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara, the embodiment of compassion of all Buddhas. Furthermore, a particular mantra may have a straightforward cognitive meaning, or consist of the nonsensical combination of syllables, as is common with various Tantric chants. But even in those cases when a given mantra allows in principle for a meaningful translation into another language, it is typically valued for its sonic rather than semantic characteristics. We know that the *dhāraṇī* of the Buddhist *Golden Light Sutra* existed as the Chinese transliteration of the Sanskrit (both in China and Japan) so that the mystical power that allegedly inhered in their original sound would be preserved[23]. Indeed, the occasional semantic intelligibility of mantras is irrelevant for their ritual function.

One of the initial reactions of the Western scholars, who encountered the extensive use of mantras in India and the Buddhist countries, was to label it, somewhat derogatory, as an instance of primitive magic. Apparently, the underlying assumption behind magical spells and incantations is that there is a one-to-one connection between words and physical things whereby the things can be brought under control by the oral words themselves. These mental instruments, the sacred words of power, are frequently used both during the religious rites, and in various non-religious contexts for practical

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[22]R. Abe, op. cit., p. 288–293.

[23]Ibidem, p. 240. The practice could also be given a pragmatic explanation as well – the chants in ancient languages give them an added air of sanctity, and thus have a greater psychological effect on the participants.

personal needs. Indeed, we know that the chanting of mantras in Eastern religions is not always aimed at achieving a spiritual or purely psychological effect – there are numerous mantras whose chanting is purported specifically to realise mundane effects, such as causing rain to fall to produce good harvest, attaining health and long life, and eliminating rivals. Thus, it was argued, the classical mantras of Hinduism and Buddhism seem to fit the standard pattern of magical spells fairly well.

It is obvious that the word "magic", so often applied to the belief in the efficiency of mantras, is far from being a neutral scientific term. An authoritative tradition in the Western religious studies has long sought to marginalise the Eastern practice of the non-cognitive use of sacred words by consigning such practice to the category of primitive superstitions and, by extension, to the realm of the irrational. The distinction between magical and religious practices, that is, between a spell-formula and a genuine prayer was first drawn in Europe by the sixteenth-century Protestant theologians, whose main target initially were the rituals and beliefs of the Catholic Church. The magic vs. religion dichotomy was typically articulated in terms of the diverging goals and methods of the two: while magic was defined as manipulative, coercive and primarily aimed at satisfying individual desires, a religion was seen as pursuing a more sublime goal of communal welfare by means of humble submission to a higher power.

This ideological categorisation was somewhat uncritically taken over by the later anthropologists, sociologists, and philosophers, such as Edward Burnett Tylor, James Frazer, Emile Durkheim and Bronisław Malinowski. The claims to the power of mere words to effect real changes in the physical (or spiritual, for that matter) world have understandably met with a sceptical reception from Western scholars. The general assumption, shared by the majority of theorists in the 19th century, was that the exotic religious traditions which practice the repetition of a mantra or the reciting of a scriptural text to achieve practical aims exemplify manipulative and coercive attitudes toward the spiritual powers, and thus stand at a relatively primitive level on the scale of religious and cultural development. It is widely recognised today, however, that the demarcation between magic and religion cannot be consistently drawn over all contexts, and that historically the term 'magic' itself was more often used as a rhetorical weapon aimed at marginalising and condemning a practice, rather than at describing its essential features[24].

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[24]See S. I. Johnston, *Describing the Undefinable: New Books on Magic and Old Problems of Defin-*

One consistently repeated charge against the non-cognitive use of scriptures and mantras is the charge of irrationality. For instance, Bronisław Malinowski, the father of modern anthropology, suggested that the belief in the potency of mantras and magic formulas is based on the assumption that "the repetitive statement of certain words can produce the reality stated", the assumption which he univocally identified as "irrational in nature" and which stands "in direct opposition to the context of reality"[25]. We should observe that this reaction is fairly typical among modern scholars as well, and it is rooted in the idea that the *rationality of a given practice depends on the rationality of beliefs that underlie the practice itself*. If a practitioner of a religion holds a belief, for instance, that the mere reciting of the *Golden Light Sutra* will stop the drought and will cause the rain to fall, then he is guilty of holding a false or irrational belief, since no causal link between the reciting of a *Sutra* and the natural phenomena could be possibly established. Thus the 'act' of his reciting of a Sutra or a mantra would also inherit the property of being irrational.

I would like to suggest, on the other hand, that a religious practice, even if based on beliefs that are literally false, need not be irrational. The objective falsity of the theoretical justification of a practice does not render the actions irrational in so far as the agent is convinced of the truth of such a justification. The rationality of action is a matter of the relative coherence between the person's sincere practical judgments and his or her outer behaviour. One can be mistaken about the factual assumptions of his judgments, or commit some logical fallacy when drawing the conclusions, and yet act rationally in so far as his actions can be explained by his current beliefs. As Patton Burchett rightly observes with regard to the Indian tradition of mantra chanting: "If a practitioner believes that the structure and content of a mantra make it capable of communicating with the gods or effecting change in the world, then the use of that mantra, regardless of its semantic intelligibility, is entirely sensible"[26]. A practice is sensible or rational, in other words, if it confirms to the deeper convictions and sincere expectations of the agent regardless of the actual truth value of those convictions themselves. But to label a given practice rational simply means that it is in important sense 'un-

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ition, "History of Religions" no. 43, 2004, p. 50–54; P. E. Burchett, *The 'Magical' Language of Mantra*, "Journal of the American Academy of Religion" no. 76 (4/2008), p. 807–843.

[25]B. Malinowski, *Coral Gardens and Their Magic*, vol. 2, Bloomington 1965, p. 238.

[26]P. E. Burchett, op. cit., p. 812.

derstandable', and that the outsiders are capable of grasping its significance if they make an honest effort to familiarise themselves with the doctrinal beliefs of the practitioners, rather than trying to impose their own incommensurable cognitive matrix on the observed religious phenomena.

4   CONCLUSION

We may briefly summarise the main points reached at this stage. It is clear that in general scriptures in Eastern religions are perceived to be much more than the sources of useful information about the doctrines, ethical prescriptions or rituals of a particular faith. In many instances, the cognitive content of the text becomes secondary to the perceived spiritual power of the very sound of recited words, or even the shape of the inscribed letters. The emphasis on the non-cognitive aspect of a sacred text is perceived as foreign or even unintelligible to the mainstream Western culture since at least the time of modernity, which, in turn, prompts the accusations of religious primitivism and encourages the labelling many of the Eastern religious practices as instances of crude "magic". My primary aim in this paper was to show that such implicitly derogatory evaluations of some Hindu and Buddhist practices stem from a systematic failure to identify the underlying idiosyncratic philosophical assumptions which inform and justify such practices. Needless to say, our increased awareness of the Hindu, Buddhist or Jain metaphysical axioms, and especially their theories in the philosophy of language, does not necessarily make them yet acceptable to us in practical sense, but it surely deepens our understanding of these important religious traditions.

The central philosophical assumptions behind the non-cognitive use of various sacred texts in Eastern religions can now be formulated as follows:

1. No radical separation between the human and the divine realms. The physical world is infused with divine elements. Thus, humans may interact with the divine intimately through the ordinary sensory experiences of the empirical world, including the experience of sound and image.
2. The inherent potency of language – the uttered words have power not only to manifest or describe things in the world, but to change them. That mystical power results from the blurred distinction between the signifier and the signified; sacred words and sacred names are treated as if they are equivalent to things, events, processes or persons named.

3. Words are meaningful in virtue of their essential connection with their primordial reference; Meaning is objective and does not depend on one's subjective ability to grasp that connection. The 'proper' use of a spoken language (especially the language of sacred texts or mantras) does not presuppose the user's capacity to understand its semantic content.

4. Far from being a meaningless mumbo-jumbo, a Mantra is saturated with meaning in a condensed form, often expressing by its sounds the semantic content of a larger scriptural text. An uttered text, on the other hand, is a 'sonic representation' of some aspect of the eternal cosmic order, and thus, the very act of reciting the text inherits some of the 'supernatural' powers of the reality represented.

Needless to say, a devoted practitioner who recites a sutra or faithfully repeats a mantra need not be explicitly aware of these underlying theoretical claims. Nor is it suggested that all philosophical and religious schools of the eastern origin would accept the list of presuppositions mentioned above. Yet the list is instrumental in rendering the common practice of the non-cognitive use of scriptures meaningful, and, in a certain sense, rational, as long as we do not insist on applying the narrow standards of empirical verification to metaphysical and religious beliefs.

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ABSTRACT, KEYWORDS, ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Abstract

It is well-known that sacred scriptures play a dual role in many religions – cognitive (or informative) and non-cognitive (or performative). Arguably, the non-cognitive use of scriptures is especially prominent in Eastern Religions, such as Hinduism and Buddhism. The use of a text as a talisman to ward off evil forces, the uttering of mantras and sacred formulas, and the spinning of the "prayer wheels" containing scrolls of paper with excerpts from various sutras, are all examples of the use of the religious text in a non-cognitive manner. The paper aims to examine the philosophical background of such practices, and to identify the implicit metaphysical assumptions that allow the practitioners to use the word, whether in its written or spoken forms, as

a sacred ritual object with real powers. The Mimamsa school from the Hindu tradition and the Shingon sect of Japanese Buddhism are selected as representative examples, and their respective approaches to language are examined. My further goal is to encourage a fresh look at the Eastern religious traditions, where local practices are not evaluated and categorised according to western standards, but are rather approached from the philosophical background of an indigenous tradition per se.

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