Language as Power: Literary Interpretations of the

Qur'an in Early Islam

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Abstract

How did pre-modern Muslim exegetes view the mediating role of language in accessing the Qur'an's meaning? What conception of language undergirded their arguments? And what sources of normative authority informed their interpretive canvas? By pursuing this cluster of questions, this essay aims to sketch a picture of the relationship between language and revelation in pre-modern traditions of Qur'an exegesis. More specifically, I conduct a close reading of the Qur'an commentary authored by the prominent Twelver Shi'i theologian, poet, and historian, al-Sharif al-Radi (d.1015 CE). Al-Radi's commentary is a literary exegesis of the Qur'an; in it he presents his concern with ambiguity in the Qur'an and presents language as the hermeneutical key to resolving it. I argue that al-Radi's invocation of varied grammatical rules and his construction of literary arguments were embedded in a particular epistemological and theological conception of the normative relationship between language and revelation. Further, I also interrogate the historically specific conditions and the variety of intellectual currents and vectors (other than sectarian affiliation) that informed al-Radi's hermeneutical choices. By paying close attention to describing the multivalent interpretive traditions that informed al-Radi's Qur'an hermeneutic, this article highlights the conceptual problems attached to the very category of a "Shi'i Qur'an hermeneutic," a category that stands authorised through the unsound assumption that sectarian identity and hermeneutical horizons readily correspond in a predictable and seamless fashion. It is precisely this assumption of neat correspondence between sectarian identity and hermeneutical temperament that this essay seeks to challenge and disrupt.

Thinking the Question of Shi'i Exegesis

The tradition of "Twelver Shi'i Qur'an commentaries" poses an interesting conundrum: according to Shi'i thought, the authority to interpret the Qur'an lies exclusively with the Twelve Imams or successors of Prophet Muhammad from his noble family. How is it then that the production of Qur'an commentaries did not end with these Imams, the last of whom died in the tenth century? Given the flourishing tradition of Shi'i scholars composing commentaries on the Qur'an up until current times, with what reasoning or justification do they transgress those very limits of interpretive authority that they themselves have drawn? And in what religious capacity do they present their oral and written interpretations?

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During a recent trip to Qom, Iran, one of the main centres of Twelver Shi'i learning in the world today, I was pursuing these same set of questions that I had come to regard as the conundrum of "Twelver Shi'i exegesis": I asked students and scholars how they explained the thriving tradition of Imami exegesis in the absence of the Imams. The most frequent response I received to this question was that in Shi'i commentaries of the Qur'an composed after the period of the twelve appointed successors, the presence of these designated successors is ensured through the inclusion of their collected sayings and teachings. So essentially their response to the question of how Shi'i exegesis could continue after the passing away of the twelve successors of Prophet Muhammad was that the invocation and mobilisation of the sayings and teachings of these successors in the Qur'an commentaries of later exegetes confirmed the legitimacy and authority of their works. This response is telling. It illustrates how the doctrinal demand for Imami authority determines current Twelver Shi'i scholars' conceptions and articulations of the common thread that ties "Imami exegesis" together. According to these students and scholars, faithful adherence to Imami authority is not forsaken in the absence of the Imams but rather confirmed and revitalised through a hermeneutical structure that relies exclusively on their teachings. This portrayal of Imami exegesis as tradition-centred, or as exclusively derived from Imami sayings, is rhetorically effective, but not historically sound. It does not account for the variety of approaches and interpretive styles associated with Shi'i exegetes throughout the centuries.[1] Yet, what must be noticed in this framing of Shi'i exegesis is the concerted effort by contemporary students and scholars to carve an explicitly Shi'i exegetical paradigm that draws on the authority of the Imams and that could thus be distinguished along sectarian lines.

Such a sectarian driven approach to Imami exegesis is not only found among adherents within the tradition. Rather, it is perhaps echoed in even more explicit terms in Euro-American scholarship about Shi'i exegesis, from early Orientalist writings up until the present day. This is to say that the hermeneutics of scholars identified as Shi'i are almost exclusively studied as products of an identifiable Shi'i outlook. The primary concern in the majority of recent examinations of Shi'i exegesis consists of identifying what characterises or makes the work distinctly "Shi'i".[2] Some of the features that are most often characterised as hallmarks of a distinctly Shi'i exegesis include: the strict adherence to the tradition of sayings of the Imams (*tafsir bi 'l-ma'thur*), the existence of an explicitly anti-Sunni bias,[3] an affirmation of the doctrine of the imamate, the frequent use of allegory,[4] and being centred on the principle that the Qur'an has an outer dimension (*zahir*) and an inner dimension (*batin*).[5]

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[1] One reference that illustrates the diversity of approaches that constitutes the tradition of Shi'i exegesis is the entry on "*tafsir*" in the encyclopedic compendium, *Da'iratul ma'arif buzurg islami,* which lists the variety of methods and styles associated with Qur'an commentaries composed by Shi'i scholars in different time periods.

[2] See Meir Bar Asher, *Scripture and Exegesis in Early Imami-Shi'ism,* (Boston, 1999); *idem.* "The Qur'an commentary ascribed to Imam Hasan al-Askari," in *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 24 (2000), pp. 358-379; Diane Steigerwald, "Twelver Shi'i Ta'wil" in *The Blackwell Companion to the Qur'an,* (ed.) Andrew Rippin, (Malden, 2006); Mahmoud Ayoub, "The speaking Qur'an and the silent Qur'an: a study of the principles and development of Imami Shi'i tafsir," in *Approaches to the History of the Interpretation of the Qur'an,* (ed.) Andrew Rippin, (Oxford, 1988), pp. 177–198.

[3] Meir Bar Asher, *Encyclopedia Iranica,* s.v. "Exegesis ii. in Shi'ism," in Vol. IX, Fasc. 2, pp. 116- 119.

[4] *Ibid.*

[5] Steigerwald draws on Ayoub's article on Imami Shi'i tafsir to state: "The main principle of Shi'i exegesis is based on the fact that the Qur'an has an outer dimension and an inner dimension which has up to seven inner

It is my contention that this narrow approach leaves much to be explored in the vast corpus of literature that currently comes under the classification of Twelver Shi'i exegesis. My argument is not to undermine the presence and indeed the critical role of Imami sayings (*hadith*) in several Qur'an commentaries authored by Shi'i scholars. Moreover, certainly, several exegetical works authored by Shi'i scholars do adopt and assert an explicitly Shi'i theological position. At the same time, however, privileging such seemingly sectarian hermeneutical preferences as the most worthy aspect of discussion in Shi'i Qur'an commentaries is problematic. This is so because privileging a primarily sectarian reading of exegetical texts undermines the historically specific conditions and the variety of intellectual currents (other than sectarian) that inform such texts. Put differently, while sectarian interests might be a part of Shi'i exegetical projects, their problem spaces are not exhausted by such interests.

The purpose of this essay is to argue for, and illustrate, the importance of broadening our analytical horizons in the study of Twelver Shi'i exegesis. I will do so through a close reading of the Qur'an commentary authored by the prominent Twelver Shi'i theologian, poet, and historian, al-Sharif al-Radi (d.1015 CE) entitled *Hermeneutical Realities in [Uncovering] the Ambiguities of Revelation*, (*Haqa'iq al-Tawil fi Mutashabih al-Tanzil*), (hereafter *Haqa'iq*).[6] Al-Radi's commentary is a literary exegesis of the Qur'an in which the trope of "ambiguity" functions as the principle interpretive device.[7] Al-Radi identifies the Qur'an's "ambiguous verses" (*mutashabihat*) as those verses deemed to contain theological, linguistic, and other difficulties that require the extensive exertion of hermeneutical energies. The category of "ambiguous" verses around which al-Radi frames his discussion is a Qur'anic term, derived from the iconic Qur'anic verse, 3:7. For centuries this verse has been the starting point for scholarly discussions on the question of interpretive authority. It reads, "It is He who has sent this Scripture down to you [Prophet]. Some of its verses are definite in meaning–these are the cornerstone of the Scripture–and others are ambiguous".[8] Thus the verse entails a self-description of the Qur'an as a repository of two kinds of verses: clear and ambiguous. Critical here is that the actual task of determining which of the Qur'an's verses fall under the category of clear or ambiguous was ultimately left to the individual interpreter.

In al-Radi's commentary on the ambiguous verses, not only does he take authoritative positions on which verses are ambiguous and why, but more importantly he uses literary arguments to uncover their meaning. This is a crucial point because by turning to literary arguments as authoritative proof for his interpretations, al-Radi departs from previous scholars of Shi'i Qur'an exegesis. Prior to al-Radi, Shi'i exegetes had primarily relied on the authoritative tradition of sayings of the Prophet and the twelve appointed successors

dimensions." See Diane Steigerwald, 2006, p. 385; Ayoub, 1988, p. 187. This reference to the apparent/hidden dialectic of the Qur'an's meaning is supported by a saying of the sixth Shi'i Imam, Ja'far al-Sadiq.

[6]Only the fifth volume of this text is extant. It includes al-Radi's commentary on the third sura of the Qur'an, *Al 'Imran*, and on the first few verses of the fourth sura, *al-Nisa*. See *Haqa'iq al-ta'wil fi mutashabih al-tanzil*, vol. 5, introduction by 'Abd al-Husayn al-Hilli, edited by Muhammad al-Rida Al Kashif al-Ghita, (Beirut, 1986).

[7]A focus on the Qur'an's ambiguous verses is often associated with the Mu'tazili school. Elsewhere I have explored in some detail the interactions between al-Radi's Qur'an hermeneutic and Mu'tazili thought, especially in connection to al-Radi's relationship with his teacher, the major Mu'tazili scholar, Qadi 'Abd al-Jabbar (d.1025 CE). See Tehseen Thaver, "Encountering Ambiguity: Mu'tazili and Twelver Shi'i Approaches to the Qur'an's Ambiguous Verses," *Journal of Qur'anic Studies,* 18, no. 3 (2016), pp. 91–115.

[8]Translation M. A. Abdel Haleem, *The Qur'an: English translation and parallel Arabic text*, (Oxford, 2010).

from his family.[9] This meant that the intended meaning and application of any given verse was determined by identifying explicatory statements made by the Prophet or by his twelve appointed successors. Such a tradition-centred approach to exegesis during the early years of Shi'i scholarship speaks to a moment when the Imams as authoritative leaders of the community were still living amongst the people (the twelfth and final Imam's occultation is said to have occurred in 941CE). However, under the unprecedented circumstances of the second half of the tenth century, whereby the Imam was no longer among the people, Twelver Shi'i scholars were in a radically altered intellectual and political terrain. It was at this critical juncture in Twelver Shi'i thought that a figure like al-Radi composed a Qur'an commentary in which the most authoritative and indispensable tool used to disentangle the literary and theological conundrums that populate the Qur'an was language.

As I will show, al-Radi's hermeneutical choices reflect an intellectual training and career informed by a moment of tremendous epistemological cross-pollination between multiple scholarly traditions in early Islam. Yet, in recent Euro-American scholarship, al-Radi's writings continue to be approached through a framework that privileges his Shi'i identity as the primary determinant of his thought.[10] By focusing primarily on his relationship to a pre-existing template of Shi'i exegesis, such an approach narrows the set of questions we bring to works composed by Shi'i scholars such as al-Sharif al-Radi. Interrupting such a sectarian driven approach to the examination of Qur'anic exegesis, in this article, I argue that approaching "Twelver Shi'i Qur'an hermeneutics" as an interpretive method that corresponds to clearly defined Shi'i "beliefs", is a relatively recent formulation that reflects a particular normative ideal of what the category "Shi'i" signifies. It belongs to a discourse that regards Shi'i identity as a predetermined, predictable, unchanging entity, essentially reducible to certain propositional doctrinal claims and features.

I show that al-Radi's Qur'an commentary represents an instructive site through which to explore the variety of ways in which religious identity informed the interpretive frameworks of scholars during the Buyid period – a strikingly cosmopolitan moment when religious thinkers, litterateurs, and rulers alike participated to create a rich and lively milieu of intellectual exchange. Far from adopting rigid methods that conform to fixed sectarian templates, al-Radi strategically mobilised the literary trope of Qur'anic ambiguity for

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[9]My own deployment of the label "Shi'i" and "Shi'i exegesis" in this article should be understood in the meaning of Shi'ism not as a predetermined entity, rather as "an ongoing argument", made possible and centrally visible in particular historical conjunctures of authoritative debates, discord, and disagreement and dissent. I want to be clear that with this approach, I do not deny the heuristic value, or the existence, of a Shi'i identity. This is evident from my own use of this term. However, I do hold that what it stands for cannot be canonised into a predictable and predetermined entity, even if we are bound by language to refer to it by this name. A sustained discussion on "identity" is beyond the scope of this article, however for this particular reading I am indebted to and would refer the reader to Ananda Abeysekara's *The Politics of Postsecular Religion: Mourning Secular Futures*, (New York, 2008), pp. 84–100, and his "Identity for and against Itself: Religion, Criticism, and Pluralization," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 72, no. 4 (2004), pp. 973–1001.

[10]For instance, in the edited volume, *Literary Structures of Religious Meaning in the Qur'an*, two articles on al-Radi's exegetical works brought attention to the distinctly literary taste and aesthetic of al-Radi, but no attempt was made to situate his intellectual ambitions in the broader context of scholarly and imperial life in tenth century Baghdad. See Mahmoud Ayoub, "Literary Exegesis of the Qur'an: The Case of Sharif al-Radi" and Kamal Abu-Deeb, "Studies in the Majaz and Metaphorical Language of the Qur'an: Abu 'Ubayda and al-Sharif al-Radi," in *Literary structures of religious meaning in the Qur'an*, (ed.) Issa J. Boullata, (Richmond, 2000). Moreover, Abu-Deeb assumes that al-Radi's foray into the topic of the Qur'an's ambiguous elements reflects his Shi'i background and the supposed familiarity of any Shi'i scholar with the Qur'an's hidden (*batini*) meanings. (Abu-Deeb, 2000), p. 316.

remarkably varied hermeneutical and political projects. Now one may raise here the objection that al-Radi's case represents an idiosyncrasy that cannot bring into question the otherwise predictable correspondence between sectarian leanings and hermeneutical choices in the Shi'i exegetical tradition. I would counter argue that such an objection would miss the main point of my argument. My point is not a historicist argument for replacing one narrative of Shi'i hermeneutics (one that privileges sectarian identity) with another that entirely dismisses the importance of that identity. Regardless of whether one should consider a major figure like al-Sharif al-Radi an aberration and however one might circumscribe the mainstream from the margins, the point of this article is to push for a wider interpretive canvas while examining labours of exegesis that does not take sectarian identity as its point of departure. In pushing for such an approach, I turn the focus to the key concerns and questions that inspired al-Radi's work, rather than imposing on this work preconceived notions of the terms and stakes that must occupy a Shi'i exegete.

Al-Radi's commentary is concerned with ambiguity and presents language as the hermeneutical key to resolving it. Conceptually, my reading of this commentary is animated by questions of the following sort: what understanding of language informed his hermeneutical moves? How was the question of language connected to the way he understood the interaction of divine discourse and his own temporal authority as an exegete? And what sources of normative authority informed and undergirded his exegetical arguments and explanations? By pursuing this cluster of questions, I aim to sketch a picture of the interaction of language and revelation in al-Radi's Qur'an commentary. More specifically I will show that al-Radi's invocation of varied grammatical rules and his construction of literary arguments were embedded in a particular epistemological and theological conception of the normative relationship between language and revelation.

Through the specific exercise of interrogating al-Radi's Qur'an exegesis I wish to make a larger argument for bringing into question a narrative of neat correspondence between sectarian identity and hermeneutical choices. Even as al-Radi was marked as and indeed self-identified as a "Shi'i" scholar, his exegetical imagination was not subsumed by his sectarian identity. But in preparation for a closer examination of al-Radi's thought, it is imperative to first consider the intellectual and political conditions in which al-Radi's career as a scholar unfolded. It is to this task that I now turn.

Buyid Baghdad and al-Radi's Hermeneutical Identity

The tenth century marks a distinct period in early Muslim history as one marred by immense political fragmentation; several independent dynasties scattered a landscape that had previously been united under the 'Abbasids. The Buyids occupied the southern and western parts of Iran and all of Iraq, the Samanids and later the Ghaznavids neighboured them in the east, the Hamdanids had their stronghold in Aleppo and Mosul, while Egypt and Syria had come under the rule of the Fatimids.

From a cultural perspective, the political fragmentation under the Buyids catalyzed an unprecedented boon. The establishment of regional principalities resulted in the expansion of impressive courts and cultural centres that were at par with the flourishing city of Baghdad. One medium through which each of the courts competed for power was through patronage

of the arts. Thus, if a talented personality in one region faced hardships under a particular regime, it was possible for him to seek high positions in the court of a different ruler.

Developments in the cultural and intellectual infrastructure of the empire also energised the scholarly life of the Muslim community. For instance, important schools were established, such as the Dar al-ʿilm (House of Learning) founded by the vizier Sabur ibn Ardeshir (d.1025 CE), hospitals were set up in Baghdad and Shiraz, and impressive libraries were built in Shiraz, Rayy and Isfahan by successive generations of Buyid leaders. Although the first generation of Buyid leaders had inadequate knowledge of Arabic, they equipped themselves with the most illustrious Arabic scholars of their day. Scholars of different stripes were invited to come and publicly debate at the courts for the pleasure and learning of the vizier who served as their host. Moreover, distinguished scholars were well received by the Buyid rulers and by their viziers, especially those scholars, such as geographers, astrologers, physicians, and mathematicians, whose expertise could be put to practical use.[11]

Professionalisation of the Poetic Enterprise

All of these developments were part of a broader reconfiguration of patronage relations that took place under the Buyids. As social historian Roy Mottahedeh has aptly argued in his seminal study of the Buyid period, both individual ties as well ties based on category (genealogical or professional) to which one belonged contributed to the creation of loyalties in the tenth and eleventh centuries.[12] Accordingly, the value of an individual in Baghdad's intellectual circles was increasingly tied to a person's ability to *demonstrate* the knowledge he possessed. In other words, relationships of proximity to powerful patrons were acquired through one's worth or capacity, and inherited through one's lineage. This shift enabled a much wider group of scholars to vie for power and prominence, which in turn produced a climate of fierce competition.

It is in the context of this moment in Baghdad's history, a period of vibrant intellectual activity, that ʿAbd al-Wahhab al-Maliki (d.1031 CE), a struggling poet like many others came to the city in search of an intellectual community and recognition for his talents. He is reported to have composed the following verses about his experience:

> Baghdad is a delightful residence for those who have money,
> but for the poor it is an abode of misery and suffering.
> I walked all day through its streets bewildered and desolate;
> I was treated with neglect like a Qur'an in the house of an atheist.[13]

A similar resentment is recorded in the writings of other struggling writers and poets such as the famous Abu Hayyan al-Tawhidi (d.1023 CE) and al-Maʿarri (d. 1058 CE). In powerful and dramatic verse, each of these scholars had lamented the destitute states of poverty and

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[11]Cl. Cahen, "Buwayhids or Buyids," *Encyclopaedia of Islam,* Second Edition, Brill Online, 2012; Joel L. Kraemer, *Humanism in the Renaissance of Islam,* (Leiden, 1992); Lenn Evan Goodman, *Islamic Humanism,* (New York, 2003).

[12]Roy P. Mottahedeh, *Loyalty and Leadership in an Early Islamic Society,* (London, 2001), pp. 98–104.

[13]Ibn Khalikan, *Wafayat al-Aʿyan*, translated by De Slane, 4 vols, (Paris, 1848-1871) vol. ii, p. 167. Cited in Isam ʿAbd ʿAli, *Al-Sharif Al-Radi: His Life and Poetry*, p. 44.

the tragic reception they received in the bustling cultural centre of the Buyid empire. The sad fate of these struggling scholars is symptomatic of a broader trend sweeping the literary culture of Baghdad during the tenth and eleventh centuries: the increasing professionalisation of the poetic enterprise.[14]

Praise poetry, that employed innovative techniques for glorifying the caliphs, sultans, and their viziers, represented the kind of poetry through which a poet was best able to communicate his expertise to his royal patrons. With the establishment of a wider patronage system, and increased contact with diverse peoples inhabiting the fringes of the empire, the intellectual climate was imbued with a new vitality, which consequently enabled a professionalisation of poetry that had not previously existed. In this environment, poetry came to function as a social and political commodity, attracting a host of claimants motivated by the desire to attain power and place in the courts.[15] What is crucial to note in this development – where poetry became a professional enterprise – is the way the professionalisation of poetry threatened the intimate connection between noble lineage, purity of language, and the mastery of Arabic poetry, which formed the foundation of the older poetic tradition.

Al-Radi's Role as Poet

Al-Radi's ties to a noble sayyid lineage from both his parents granted him an important place in Baghdad's intellectual aristocracy. And like other poets of the day, al-Radi too first made his name in scholarly circles through the writing of praise poems dedicated to the Buyid sultans, their viziers, and the 'Abbasid caliph of the period. Since these ruling figures were also the main patrons and hosts for the literary arts, al-Radi's skills put him on friendly terms with the leading political players of Buyid Baghdad. But al-Radi did not only use the power of his poetry and the recognition it enjoyed to shower lavish praise on the leaders. At times, he also condemned the unjust use of political power and expressed his distrust of hypocritical sovereign rulers. Other times, al-Radi used his poetry to lament the fate of the poetic enterprise. In doing so, he argued for the critical relationship between the purity of an individual's lineage and the purity of their language. He was openly critical of the increasing professionalisation of the poetic enterprise and the many claimants it produced. His views are captured in the following verses:

> Buy stature with what you want, but real stature is not for sale,
> With some gold if you like, or with long nights of discourse,
> Lacking in intelligence is the deceived, who tries to purchase stature with wealth,
> For the price of high station, wealth is a despicable thing[16]

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[14] Fuller discussions on the intellectual and literary climate during the Buyid period can be found in: Nuha A. Alshaar, *Ethics in Islam: Friendship in the Political Thought of al-Tawhidi and his Contemporaries,* (New York, 2015), chapter titled "The Buyid Social Imaginary," pp. 27-58; Erez Naaman, *Literature and the Islamic* Court, (Abingdon, 2016); John Donohue, *The Buwayhid Dynasty in Iraq: Shaping Institutions for the Future,* (Leiden, 2003); Joel L. Kraemer, *Humanism*; Kabir Maafizullah*, The Buwayhid Dynasty of Baghdad 946-1055,* (Calcutta, Iran Society, 1964).

[15] Wen-chin Ouyang, *Literary criticism in medieval Arabic-Islamic culture: The making of a tradition,* (Edinburgh, 1997), chapter titled "Functions of Poetry in Medieval Arabic-Islamic Society", pp. 55-83.

[16] Al-Khatib al-Baghdadi, *Taʾrikh Baghdad*, vol. ii, (Cairo, 1931), pp. 246–247.

As a vocal critic of the effects of the democratisation of knowledge and increasing social mobility made possible under the various political dynasties scattered across the Muslim lands, al-Radi argued for a fixed literary and linguistic canon, and for the exclusive authority of elite scholars to interpret that canon. In so doing, al-Radi asserted his privileged place in a society by arguing for the inextricable link between lineage, language and social, political and intellectual power.

Although al-Radi was opposed to the social mobility granted to poets who didn't uphold the strictures of a pure Arabic language during his time, it is critical to note that he himself benefited from and actively participated in tenth century Baghdad's distinctly cosmopolitan literary culture. Al-Radi's sectarian identity did not hinder his movement in this environment, where circles of students assembled in mosques, courts, and the shops of book-dealers – blurring differences of faith, school and sect to engage in theological, literary and juridical discussion. From a young age, he enjoyed the tutelage of the finest teachers that Baghdad had to offer, and distinguished himself in their eyes as a quick learner with a sharp wit. It is important to note that al-Radi's identification as an "'Alid", the label used at the time to identify Shi'is descending from the line of the first Shi'i Imam, 'Ali ibn Abi Talib, did not "other" him in a way that bounded him off from other intellectuals of his time.

Al-Radi received his training with an eclectic group of scholars. His teachers included the two prominent Sunni grammarians Ibn Jinni (d.1002 CE) and al-Sirafi (d.932 CE), the Sabian[17] poet and litterateur, Abu Ishaq Ibrahim ibn Hilal al-Sabi (d.994 CE), the Sunni Mu'tazili theologian, 'Abd al-Jabbar (d.1025 CE), the Shi'i theologian, Shaykh al-Mufid (d.1022 CE), and the Maliki jurist, Ibrahim ibn Ahmad al-Tabari (d.1002 CE), to name a few. Al-Radi's range of writings in scholarly arenas apart from exegesis, such as poetry and history, also reflect the cosmopolitan cultural milieu prevalent in Baghdad during that time.[18]

Clearly then, the intellectual and political context in which al-Radi wrote was more complicated and nuanced than what a sectarian reading of this moment, conducted through a binary prism of an a priori Sunni/Shi'i division would suggest. Furthermore, the intellectual efflorescence and cosmopolitanism that saturated the Buyid period is also important to consider with regards to appreciating and contextualising the multivalent hermeneutic found in al-Radi's Qur'an commentary.

Al-Radi's confidence in his own ability to provide answers to Qur'anic conundrums provides important insight into his attitude towards the larger question of who was most qualified to explain the Arabic language, and demonstrates his view of the Qur'an as first and foremost an *Arabic* text that ought to be understood through the mastery of this critical linguistic tool. I argue that al-Radi's experience as a renowned poet in Baghdad's literary circles is a critical vantage point from which to approach his hermeneutical posturing in the *Haqa'iq*. The older class of poets to which he belonged, wielded significant authority as the

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[17]"Sabian" here refers to his association to the Sabians of Harran, a community who followed an old Semitic polytheistic religion but had a strongly Hellenised elite. They adopted the Qur'anic name *Ṣabiʾa* during the 3rd/9th century so as to be able to claim the status of *ahl al-kitab* and thus avoid persecution. See F. C. de Blois, "Ṣabi'," in *Encyclopedia of Islam,* Second Edition, Brill Online, 2012.
[18]For biographical overviews on al-Sharif al-Radi see 'Abd al-Ghani Hasan, *al-Sharif al-Radi*, (Cairo, 1970), Muhammad Sayyid al-Kilani, *al-Sharif al-Radi,* (Cairo, 1937), Mahfuz, *al-Sharif al-Radi*, (Beirut, 1938), and Abu 'Ali, Islam, *Al-Sharif Al-Radi: His Life and Poetry*, (Ph.D. dissertation, Durham University, 1974).

primary custodians of the Arabic language, and it is precisely on the basis of this authority that al-Radi presents his interpretation of the ambiguous verses.

The fact that al-Radi's Shi'i identity did not neatly translate into a definable Qur'anic hermeneutic and nor into a definitive conception of language amplifies the conceptual problems attached to the very category of a "Shi'i hermeneutic," a category that stands authorised through the unsound assumption that sectarian identity and hermeneutical imagination readily correspond in a predictable and seamless fashion. It is precisely this assumption that I challenge and question by describing the multivalent interpretive traditions that informed al-Radi's Qur'an hermeneutic.

Through this article, I seek to question the tendency in the field of Qur'anic Studies to mobilise terms like "Imami exegesis" in a functionalist fashion as always signifying a particular notion of Shi'i identity, one that is assumed to operate in an unchanging discursive and institutional framework. As an alternative to this model that generates a closed system of attribution of the signifier to the signified, in this case the attribution of Shi'i identity to a Shi'i hermeneutic, and where the signs are assumed to be preceded by a truth or meaning already constituted by and within the notion of "identity", I do not attribute to al-Radi's writings any stable notions of a characteristically Shi'i work.

An important qualifier is in order here. My argument is not that the category of "Shi'i" is altogether inapplicable to al-Radi. Rather, I wish to argue that al-Radi's hermeneutical temperament, one that is situated at the interstices of exegesis and literary theory, cannot be subsumed by the strictly defined sectarian identity of "Shi'i". I suggest that while al-Radi may be identified as a Shi'i scholar, his intellectual work or identity is not available for neat categorisation through the master signifier of a "Shi'i" exegete. Indeed, al-Radi's role as Shi'i leader, poet and literary scholar were inseparably enmeshed. As a way to show this enmeshment in al-Radi's thought and work let me now turn to an examination of some illustrative ways in which he negotiated the interplay of language and revelation in his Qur'an exegesis. Perhaps no other example demonstrates the operations of such negotiation in more glistening ways than al-Radi's discussion of verse 3:61, known as the "*mubahala*" (mutual invocation of a curse) verse.[19] It is to a discussion of his engagement with this verse that I now turn.

Ambiguity of Linguistic Eloquence: The case of the *Mubahala* Verse

The central ambiguity that al-Radi highlights in his discussion of the *mubahala* verse is tied to the Qur'an's grammatical and linguistic eloquence. This verse, occurring in Sura Al 'Imran, reads as follows:

> If anyone disputes this with you now that you have been given this knowledge, say, 'Come, let us gather our sons and your sons, our women and your women, ourselves and yourselves, and let us pray earnestly and invoke God's rejection on those of us who are lying'.[20]

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[19] W. Schmucker, "Mubahala" *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, (Brill Online, 2013), http://referenceworks. brillonline.com.libproxy.lib.unc.edu/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-2/mubahala-SIM_5289 (accessed April 5, 2014).

[20] Qur'an 3:61, Translation Haleem, *The Qur'an*.

Historically, the verse refers to an incident that took place in 632 CE, where the Prophet participated in what may be called an "embodied argument" in its very literal sense. Two parties, namely the Prophet and his companions, and the Christians of Najran had disagreed over the nature of Jesus Christ (whether he is man or god). As a way of "resolving" their disagreement, the physical presence of each group at an agreed meeting place symbolised the offering up of their bodies for the proof of their claim. It was understood that God's wrath on the lying party would finalise the disagreement through a vivid display of separating the right from the wrong. In an event of this kind the companions that accompanied the leader of each party functioned as guarantors of the leader's claim. The Prophet took with him (according to al-Radi) his daughter Fatima, his son in law 'Ali ibn Abi Talib, and their sons Hasan and Husayn, and together they waited for the rival delegation to arrive. The Najrani group never arrived, and their failure to take on the challenge was interpreted by exegetes and historians as a victory for the message of the Prophet.

i) *Recent Literature on the* Mubahala: *Two Main Approaches*

Before turning to al-Radi's discussion of this verse, it is important to first examine some of the recent literature surrounding this unusual incident. There are two main topics through which the *mubahala* verse has been treated in recent studies. First, the *mubahala* event has piqued the interest of several scholars of mysticism for the way in which it vividly illustrates the themes of "divine designation" and "substitute-sacrifice".[21] The view of the *mubahala* as a *shared* mission between the Prophet as leader and his family as the guarantors of his mission gave rise to the concept of a *substitution* between the two groups. Herbert Mason, in his biography on the mystic Husayn ibn Mansur al-Hallaj (d.922 CE) points to the significance of the theme of "substitution" in the *mubahala* event:

> . . . they [the 'Alids] were his [Muhammad's] private heirs according to the unwritten Arab law, but also, and especially, that they were established publicly as his juridical "substitutes," acting in this capacity vis-a-vis his clients as his debts of blood. This substitution dates, as the whole of Shi'ism affirms and the Qur'an and historical data agree, from a public test of an ordeal, the *mubahala* of 21 Hijjia 10/March 22, 632. On this particular day, in Medina, Muhammad had challenged the Christian Banu 'Abd al-Madan emissaries of the Balharith of Najran to a "judgment of God" (seized with fear, the Christians declined it the next day, signing a *musalaha*, "capitulation", the first between Christianity and Islam). For this "judgment of God", Muhammad had placed as hostages of his sincerity (about the negation of the Incarnation) and of his faith (in his own mission), "his own people", the "five whom he covered with his mantle" (*ashab al-kisa'*): his two grandsons, Hasan and Husayn, his daughter Fatima, his son-in-law 'Ali, [and himself]. Henceforward this solemn judiciary substitution was to transfer to each of them the expectation of justice and the devoted service that the true friends of Muhammad had pledged to him; and it also transferred equally all vendetta, all of the hatred that the Umayyads, of the Quraysh, nurtured against the founder of Islam for their pagan dead killed in cold blood after Badr (in AD 624).[22]

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[21] Louis Massignon, *La Mubahala de Medine*, (Paris, 1955); Idem., *La Mubahala de Medine et l'Hyperdulie de Fatima*, (Paris, 1955).

[22] Louis Massignon, translated by Herbert Mason, *The passion of al-Hallaj: mystic and martyr of Islam*, (Princeton, 1982), p. 154.

This theme of substitution and specifically substitute-sacrifice also emerges as a trope in Sufi discourses. For example, Louis Massignon, whose biographical reconstruction of al-Hallaj has dominated how he is now remembered, notes a provocative exchange between al-Hallaj and the vizier who condemned him.

> Al-Hallaj: I will die attached to the Cross!
> Vizier: Do you think you are taking up the *mubahala* of the Christians of Najran?

Through this conversation, Massignon gestures towards the Christ-like character of al-Hallaj, and how through his martyrdom, he became a substitute (*badal*) for the Christians of Najran who had not dared to confront the trial themselves.[23]

The second approach most frequently found for studying the *mubahala* verse is in the domain of traditional Shi'i scholarship, where authors seek to support the argument that 'Ali is the rightful successor to the Prophet and the Household of the Prophet are the authoritative interpreters of the tradition.[24] According to this view, the family members who accompanied the Prophet acted as guarantors of his claim and they too were infused with authority and conferred with a "divine right" like that of the Prophet. The *mubahala* is thus celebrated as a public demonstration of this investiture of authority. What is interesting is how this investiture is understood as visually communicated such that the Prophet's companions offer their bodies as sites for the public confirmation of his claim. In doing this, their own right to share in the authority of the Prophet is assured. The *mubahala* event has been remembered in the Shi'i tradition alongside two other pivotal moments. The first of these is the *Hadith al-Kisa'* (report of the cloak) which narrates how the Prophet gathered the same five family members under his cloak, immediately after which the Qur'anic verse 33:33 is said to have been revealed: "God wishes only to remove taint from you, people of the Household, and to make you utterly pure." The *Hadith Kisa'* is accordingly invoked as proof of the purity and infallibility of the Family of the Prophet. The second crucial incident to which the *mubahala* is connected is the occasion known as *Ghadir Qumm* (Pool of Qumm), which is the location where the Prophet publicly proclaimed 'Ali as *mawla* (master) of the Muslim community. By interpreting "*mawla*" as "successor", traditional Shi'i scholars have argued that this incident is evidence of 'Ali's succession to the Prophet. Together, these three events, namely, the *mubahala, hadith kisa',* and *ghadir qumm,* form a powerful cluster of publicly witnessed events where members of the Prophet's Family were not only distinguished from other companions but also were also made to physically embody and thus share in his mission.

ii) Al-Radi on the Mubahala

Al-Radi's interpretation of this verse does not hinge on an effort to demonstrate the status of the Prophet's Family as divinely appointed. While he certainly alludes to this point, as we will soon see, it is not central to his interpretive scheme. Rather, al-Radi's discussion of the

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[23]John Victor Tolan, *Saint Francis and the Sultan: The Curious History of a Christian-Muslim Encounter*, (Oxford, 2009), p. 296.

[24]Ali Ma'mouri, "Bar Rasi-i Ta'rikhi-i Ayah-i Mubahala wa Baz Tabha-yi Kalami-i An," *Fasalnamah-i Shi'ah Shanasi* 5, no 19 (1964), pp. 85-100; Qawam al-Din Muhammad Washnawi, *Ahl Bayt wa Ayah-i Mubahala*, (Qom, 1972); Muhammad Rada Ansari, *Asrar-i Mubahala,* (Tehran, 1963).

verse centres on the seeming incoherence of the grammatical structure of the sentence. The underlying linguistic puzzle that al-Radi sought to resolve was this: how, asks al-Radi's self-staged interlocutor, can God's injunction (Say!) (*qul!*) direct the Prophet to state, "let us invite our sons and your sons, our women and your women, ourselves (*anfusana*) and yourselves?" In other words, how can anyone *invite* him or herself? In order to tackle the puzzle of *who* the term selves (*anfus*) is referring to, al-Radi begins by giving his readers a visual depiction of all the people present, including details of their physical arrangement in relation to the Prophet. Standing before the Prophet (*bayna yadayhi*) was the Commander of the Faithful 'Ali, behind the Prophet was Fatima, to his right was Hasan, and to his left was Husayn. He then proceeds to decipher the Prophetic invitation of the term "ourselves" through a careful process of elimination. "Our sons" refers to (*masrufan ila*) Hasan and Husayn, "our women" refers to Fatima, which leaves the term "ourselves", and its reference to either 'Ali or the Prophet. Al-Radi concludes that the term "ourselves" must refer to 'Ali since there was no one else present in the congregation to whom this could apply and it was not grammatically correct for the Prophet to have invited himself.

Al-Radi then turns to a sustained defense of the linguistic rule that categorically negates the possibility of the term *anfus* being used in reference to the Prophet. The rule is that an individual cannot invite, command or forbid him or herself. Quite remarkable in this discussion is the way in which al-Radi, in an effort to offer proof texts (*shawahid*) for this normative grammatical ruling, goes as far as to reduce a historical moment from the Prophet's life to the performative illustration of a linguistic rule! Specifically, he refers to a narration by al-Waqidi (d.823 CE) in his book on the battles and expeditions of the Prophet (*maghazi*). When the Prophet left Badr in 624 CE, with him were the prisoners from the hypocrites including Suhayl ibn 'Amr, who was tied to the camel of the Prophet. When they reached Medina, Suhayl managed to free himself and fled. At this point, the Prophet said to his companions that whoever finds Suhayl ibn 'Amr should kill him. As it turns out, the Prophet found Suhayl hiding under the cover of a tree branch, and he brought him back (instead of killing him). Here, al-Radi's narration of al-Waqidi ends, and he puts forward his own view on this incident. He explains that since the Prophet himself had issued the order, he was not obliged to abide by it himself, whereas if someone else had found Suhayl they would be obligated to kill him.

So what may have been interpreted by al-Radi as an exemplary moment of Prophetic kindness and forgiveness is put forward as a clear proof of how the Prophet's life can also be read as a manual for grammatical rulings. This indicates that for al-Radi, the Prophet's lived tradition was no different from his verbal statements. If a Prophetic saying or another Qur'anic verse could be offered as the proof text of a linguistic rule, so could a Prophetic *action*. Of course, al-Radi's emphasis on the linguistic and grammatical harmony of the Prophet's life does not preclude the possibility that it carried other ethical-moral meanings. Yet the purpose of the *Haqa'iq* was to creatively forge a correspondence between the revelatory sources (Qur'an and Prophetic *hadith*) and a pre-existing literary canon, and this is what al-Radi successfully achieved.

To further bolster his position on the grammatical incoherence of an invitation in which the speaker invites him/herself, al-Radi cites a tradition which records a conversation that was held between the 'Abbasid caliph 'Abdullah al-Ma'mun (d.833 CE), Qasim ibn Sahl

al-Nushjani (death date unknown) and the eighth Shi'i Imam, 'Ali al-Rida (d.818 CE). The scene is set in Marv. Al-Ma'mun asks al-Nushjani: which of the stories praising the companions (*fada'il*) is the best? Al-Nushjani replies, "the *mubahala* verse since in it God fuses the self of the Prophet with the self of 'Ali". Al-Ma'mun, who is apparently familiar with varying interpretations of this verse, quizzes al-Nushjani on what his response would be if an opponent were to argue that people understand *al-anfus* to mean the Prophet himself. Al-Nushjani is stumped by this query. Al-Ma'mun then turns to 'Ali al-Rida for his opinion. Al-Rida explains that "the Prophet extended the invitation, and the one who invites cannot include himself in the invitation; he can only invite others. Thus the Prophet invited the sons and women, but it was not correct for him to invite himself". Al-Rida continued that "the only plausible reference for his invitation to selves is 'Ali ibn Abi Talib since there was no one else present to whom this invitation could refer to. If it were not this way then the verse would not make sense". At this moment al-Nushjani intervened, with the gleeful proclamation: "now this has become clear to me!" Al-Ma'mun paused and expressed his satisfaction for al-Rida: "O Abu'l Hasan, when the target is hit, no answers are left!" In this narrative, Imam al-Rida's explanation establishes the unity of the self of 'Ali and the self of the Prophet through a logical process of elimination which is premised on the same grammatical rule that was outlined by al-Radi.

It might be tempting to read al-Radi's invocation of 'Ali al-Rida's astute response to al-Ma'mun as a characteristically Shi'i hermeneutical move on his part. Certainly, by mobilising the authority of a prominent Imam, al-Radi could be said to draw on a reservoir of religious authority imbued with Shi'i imaginaries of charisma. However, this move also serves as a useful example to further underscore my underlying argument that reducing al-Radi's interpretive strategies to a sectarian template obscures more than it reveals. A couple of observations will be useful in seeing how this is the case. First, this was a rare instance in al-Radi's commentary to the Qur'an in which he explicitly referred to the report of an Imam to advance his argument. But even then, the focus of al-Radi's mobilisation of al-Rida centred on establishing an argument that was decidedly of a linguistic nature. It is telling that al-Radi's reference to an Imam occurs precisely during a moment where the latter was advancing a linguistic argument, thus fitting nicely with the larger literary hermeneutic that undergirded al-Radi's exegetical project. Again, the point here is not to measure how well al-Radi's discussion aligns with or departs from a fixed template of Shi'i hermeneutics. Nor is it to claim that a Shi'i hermeneutic is mutually exclusive to a literary one. Rather the point is to broaden one's analysis of a scholar's exegetical labour in a manner that does not reduce that labour to predictable patterns of sectarian readings.

iii) Sources of a Literary Hermeneutic

Al-Radi saw three major discursive sources and knowledge traditions as constituting a literary canon on which he would graft his literary hermeneutic: the speech of Arabs, Qur'anic verses, and the Arabic poetic tradition. It was by drawing on these literary sources that al-Radi sought to argue that justifications for substituting one individual "self" for another were intimacy (*qaraba*) and a shared religiosity (*al-ijtima' fi 'aqd al-diyana*). This argument clearly carried significant weight, since it implicitly made the case for 'Ali's substitution with

the Prophet in the *mubahala* verse on the basis of a shared religiosity. For other examples of this rule, al-Radi first turns to the Arabic usage of the term "*nafs*" in the meaning of an intimate friend, and how a close relative can be called the "self" of the person with whom s/he shares that relation. From the Qur'an, he referred to verse 49:11: ". . . nor defame nor be sarcastic to yourselves (*anfusakum*), nor call each other by (offensive) nicknames". Al-Radi explains that the verse intends to state that believing Muslims should not slander their believing brothers. Critically, al-Radi argues that their brotherhood in *religiosity* (*al-ukhuwwa bi'l-diyana*) becomes the basis for their brotherhood in intimacy (*al-ukhuwwa fi'l-qaraba*).

Al-Radi also brings in a verse by pre-Islamic poet Dhu l-'Isba' Hurthan al-'Adwani[25]: "as if on the Day of Qurra . . . we were killing ourselves (*iyana*)" Al-Radi explains that the poet intended a substitution between the selves (*nufus*) of a person's kin with his own self (*nafs*) on the basis of their marital connections (*shawabik al-'isam*), paternal relations (lit. relations of the flesh (*nawa'it al-luham*)), and maternal relations (lit. relations of the womb (*atit al-raham*)).

Finally al-Radi refers to the Qur'anic verse 24:61, which states: "when you enter any house, greet yourselves (*anfusakum*) with a greeting of blessing and goodness as enjoined by God". Al-Radi employs this use of *anfusakum* to explain that the intended meaning is "for some of you to greet others since it is not possible for a person to greet him or herself. The use of the term yourselves then is fitting since the selves of all believers coalesces into a single self due to the bond of a shared religiosity and the common language of the Shari'a (*nufus al-mu'minin tajri majra al-nafs al-wahida li'l-ijtima' fi 'aqd al-diyana wa-l-khitab bi'l-lisan al-shari'a*). So when one of them greets his brother, it is as if he has greeted himself, because of the removal of difference and the mixing of their selves".[26]

The discussion above shows that in al-Radi's work, logical, doctrinal and theological ambiguities are resolved by reference to an authoritative Arabic language the operations of which al-Radi regarded as fixed. Thus I have tried to push for a reading of al-Radi's hermeneutic that takes seriously its literary emphasis rather than approaching al-Radi exclusively as a Shi'i exegete. Here one may raise a doubt that I should like to address. One could argue that despite al-Radi's focus on the question of language, he nonetheless directs his linguistic energies to the service of his sectarian desires. For instance, one might argue that in al-Radi's linguistic framing of the puzzle surrounding the referents of ourselves (*anfusana*) in verse 3:61, the theological and mystical implications of his interpretation were yet of a decisively Shi'i leaning. Such a line of argument might point to the possibility that for all his linguistic gymnastics the underlying outcome of al-Radi's discourse was the establishment of a deeply mystical connection between 'Ali and the Prophet, supposedly a quintessentially Shi'i project. It could be further argued that not only the outcome but also the method of al-Radi's exegesis, invested in excavating the hidden meaning of a text, as exemplified by his claim that the term "ourselves" represents a metaphor for 'Ali only underscores his commitment to a Shi'i sectarian narrative. While not without merit, these observations make for rather simple and easily digestible understandings of exegetical projects in early Islam. Such an analytical lens tethered to sectarian readings prohibits a more nuanced

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[25] Poet and warrior from the late sixth century of the common era, who mourned the past glories of his tribe al-'Adwan.

[26] Al-Radi, *Haqa'iq*, 114.

understanding of the wider intellectual currents, conversations, and contestations that inform and inflect labours of exegesis like al–Radi's Qur'an commentary.

The critical question that arises here is this: must we preemptively ascribe al–Radi's attention to literary devices like *mutashabih* (ambiguity) and *majaz* (linguistic transgression),[27] which point to a different register of meaning, as reflections of a "characteristically Shi'i" inclination towards *batini* (hidden) meanings in the text? I think not. There are several important questions and avenues of inquiry that such a decidedly sectarian approach would foreclose. To begin with, al–Radi's hermeneutical posturing alerts us to the multiple intellectual conversations from which he drew his positions. Further, rather than simply situating his arguments within any given sect, discipline, or school it is important to understand the critical purchase of his arguments at the specific historical juncture during which he was writing.

iv) The Intellectual Landscape

What demands further examination from us as readers in these examples of al–Radi's hermeneutical choices is that al–Radi's emphasis on everyday speech, poetry and the Qur'an was deeply rooted in the intellectual debates that dominated the intellectual landscape of Islam in tenth century Baghdad. At the heart of these debates was the question of the authority of language over logic as a source of knowledge. One such famous debate took place in 932 CE between the prominent Muslim philologist of that time, Abu Sa'id al-Sirafi (d.979 CE), and leading Christian philosopher, Matta ibn Yunus (d.940 CE). It is critical to clarify here, as scholars have already done,[28] that it would be misplaced to approach this debate in binary terms as one that pitted Arabic against the Greek sciences or logic against language. In fact, the goal of al-Sirafi (the grammarian) was not to question the validity and importance of logic (or reason) as critical epistemological tools. Rather, he sought to challenge the very premise that logic can be separated from language and hailed as a universal tool capable of being applied to any cultural and linguistic context. Al-Sirafi's main contention was that logic is in fact inseparable from language. This is so because in his view, the language in which a thought is articulated shapes that thought. Thus, contrary to Matta's assertion, logic cannot be universal. And to argue for the universality of logic is to ascribe to Greek logic the exceptional status of transcending language. According to al-Sirafi then, logic does not stand outside or above language, rather it is part of language; he argues that it is the grammar and syntax of language that makes thought logical. To reiterate: by upholding the role of grammar and language as primary, al-Sirafi did not question the inherent value of logic or reason per se. Rather he argued that they too were mediated by language. Thus

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[27] In rendering *majaz* as linguistic transgression or transgression from normative modes of expression, I have followed David Vishanoff. As he explains, "majaz is often translated "figurative" or "metaphorical," but this suggests a much narrower concept than is usually in view, so I will most often translate the word in its most basic sense of crossing over or passing beyond, using the terms "transgression" and "transgressive," which should be understood without the strong negative connotation they have in English." See David Vishanoff, *The Formation of Islamic Hermeneutics: How Sunni Legal Theorists Imagined a Revealed Law,* (New Haven, 2011), 21.

[28] For a detailed account and analysis of this debate, see Muhsin Mahdi, "Language and Logic in Classical Islam," in G.E. von Grunebaum (ed.) *Logic in Classical Islamic Culture*, (Wiesbaden, 1970), pp. 51–83. Also see Wen Chen Ouyang, "Literature and Thought: Re-reading al-Tawhidi's Transcription of the Debate between Grammar and Logic" in *The Heritage of Arabo-Islamic Learning: Studies Presented to Wadad Kadi*, (ed.) Maurice A. Pomerantz and Aram A. Shahin (Leiden, 2016), pp. 444–460.

as Muhsin Mahdi insightfully states in his study of this iconic debate, Matta, in his facing of al-Sirafi, "is confronted by a dialectical theologian versed in popular Platonism rather than a grammarian who despises logic or the Greeks or reason as such.[29]

In addition to challenging the universalist claims of philosophers like Matta, another important critique that al-Sirafi presented against the philosophers centered on the issue of *accessibility*. He argued that Greek logic was inscrutable, bogged down in technical jargon, and deliberately rendered unnecessarily complicated by its proponents. They did so, he continued with disdain, only to confound the public and draw from them a hefty fee for their teaching. Underlying this criticism was the theological argument that Truth, as presented through the world and by religion, must be accessible. This principle of prioritising the clarity and accessibility of knowledge was also critical to al-Radi's thought. He, like al-Sirafi, understood language as based on convention and not divinely determined, thus ensuring its accessibility. An ambiguity that did not seem to ruffle al-Radi or al-Sirafi was that this promise of access was nonetheless limited to an exclusive scholarly elite whom they regarded as the ultimate custodians of language. This seeming tension also serves as a useful reminder that al-Radi's push for the accessibility of knowledge cannot be characterised as a championing of populism. The broader matrix of religious authority that undergirded his view of language and knowledge was indelibly rooted in an elitist vision. Moreover, in al-Radi's social imaginary, language and lineage were mutually entwined. For al-Radi, his authority to interpret the Qur'an's ambiguous verses derived from an index of expertise that combined his mastery of Arabic language and poetry with his pedigree boasting a noble Sayyid lineage.

The intellectual context described in what has preceded serves as an important backdrop to al-Radi's Qur'an commentary, especially his mobilisation of language as his principle hermeneutical device. Al-Radi's hermeneutic worked to strengthen the relevance of grammar as a source of authority by attaching it to a fixed body of sources, which simultaneously contributed to its canonisation. Again, to remind, these sources comprised of the Qur'anic text, the oral speech of the Arabs and Arabic poetry. His position of valorising the authority of language as the foundational source of knowledge closely aligned with the arguments of his teacher al-Sirafi. All of this is not to say that al-Radi's position as a "Shi'i" scholar played no part in his hermeneutical choices. The point is, however, that al-Radi's Shi'i identity cannot be abstracted from the multiple knowledge traditions and debates that thrived and came into view in the contested intellectual landscape of tenth century Buyid Baghdad.

So to return to the example of the *mubahala* verse, it is useful to observe that al-Radi justifies his mystical reading of this verse, whereby the souls of 'Ali and Muhammad are fused, not by referring to any doctrinal explanations of Imamate, but rather by drawing on the oral linguistic tradition of the Arabs. This again reinforces my central argument: al-Radi's

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[29]Mahdi, "Language and Logic in Classical Islam", p. 60. Mahdi also succinctly explains, "Matta's original thesis was based on the assumption that logic as it were builds a bridge or forms an intermediate stage between language and science or knowledge of the intelligible meanings, between conventional opinions and scientific knowledge. Al-Sirafi denies this place to logic. The necessary condition for attaining intelligible meanings is language, and logic does not provide a necessary bridge between the two. Logic does not transcend language and its conventional character, but merely reflects a particular linguistic convention or the rules and characteristic ways that a particular linguistic group agrees upon in speaking its language. To call upon non-Greeks to learn Greek logic is not to provide them with a universal instrument of thought, but with the characteristic structure of the Greek language, which is of no use unless one plans to learn that language." *Ibid.*, p.66.

hermeneutical temperament did not neatly embrace sectarian binaries and boundaries. I should clarify here that my argument should not be taken as the replication of Joel Kraemer's celebration of tenth century Buyid Baghdad as the site of the "renaissance of Islam", marked by the efflorescence of "individualism", "cosmopolitanism" and "secularism"; one where these features and conditions of a society are seen to be in an oppositional relationship to "religion", by which is implied Islamic law.[30]

I do not wish to pursue the anachronistic objective of positing al-Radi as a premodern example of a scholar who fulfilled the modern liberal secular ideal of overcoming religious and sectarian difference. Such a projection would be at once uncouthly anachronistic and conceptually unsound. The lack of focus in al-Radi's exegesis on hot button issues one might today associate with a sectarian Shi'i leaning does not equate on his part to a negation of his sectarian identity. Certainly al-Radi identified as a Shi'i Qur'an exegete even as his exegesis complicates the idea of a predictable and fixed template of what a Shi'i Qur'an exegesis looks like. Al-Radi's self-imagination as a Shi'i exegete and his affirmation of his Shi'i identity manifested in ways that were particular to his individual temperament and to the sorts of scholarly conversations and commitments in which he saw himself as contributing. Thus to the exact contrary of Kraemer, rather than projecting modern sensibilities and desires onto premodern actors, my project is inspired by the inverse task of provincialising modern sectarian expectations by showcasing the complexities and nuances marking the thought of a premodern Muslim scholar. So in contrast to Kraemer who imposes Europe on Baghdad, I am more interested in having Baghdad speak back to Europe.

Returning to al-Radi, another important feature of his discourse that should further clarify his investment in a literary canon is his emphasis on organising his exegetical moves by identifying and engaging grammatical obscurities marking individual verses. In the next section I show ways in which this specific focus on grammatical obscurities in al-Radi's exegesis compared and contrasted with the discourse of some other major exegetes of his time. By highlighting important distinctions and commonalities, I further situate and historicise al-Radi's exegetical choices in the broader intellectual milieu in which he operated.

v) Al-Radi and Other Exegetes on the Mubahala Verse

Al-Radi's discussion of this verse departs from the interpretations of other major exegetes of his time, such as 'Ali ibn Ibrahim al-Qummi (d.939 CE), Abu Ja'far al-Tusi (d.1067 CE) and Ahmad ibn Muhammad al-Tha'alabi (1035 CE), to name a few examples. The Qur'anic commentary of al-Qummi (*Tafsir al-Qummi*), a major tenth century Shi'i exegete, threads a noticeably traditionist (*akhbari*) approach which relies solely on traditions of the Prophet and the Imams to explicate the verses. He narrates the *mubahala* event without much discussion. He simply states what transpired between the Prophet and the Christian delegation and mentions the names of those who accompanied the Prophet.[31]

Let us next turn to al-Tusi and his important exegesis titled *al-Tibyan fi Tafsir al-Qur'an (The Elucidation of Qur'anic Exegesis)*. Al-Tusi was a pupil of al-Radi and his brother al-Murtada;

[30]Kraemer, *Humanism*, pp. 11-15.
[31]'Ali ibn Ibrahim Qummi, *Tafsir al-Qummi*, (Beirut, 1991), v. 1, p. 112.

he also succeeded them as the leading Twelver Shi'i scholar of the mid–eleventh century. Regarding the *mubahala* verse in the *Tibyan,* al-Tusi states that his contemporaries refer to this verse as evidence of 'Ali being the most virtuous of the Companions for two reasons. First, because the gathering was one where truth was to be distinguished from falsehood, and who could be better suited for such a task than 'Ali? And the second reason is connected to the fact that the Prophet likened 'Ali to his own self here.[32] While al-Tusi presents similar themes and conclusions as al-Radi, he shows no interest in the grammatical obscurity of the verse.

The third comparison can be made with the commentary of a leading Sunni exegete of the time, al-Tha'alabi's *al-Kashf wa-al-Bayan 'an Tafsir al-Qur'an (The Uncovering and Explanation of the Commentary of the Qur'an).* His discussion focuses on the dialogue between the Christians and the Prophet. He makes a passing reference to the referent of "self" acknowledging that "some say he intended themselves and others say (and this is doubtful) that he intended his wives".[33] He makes no mention of the specific individuals that accompanied the Prophet, nor the ambiguity in the grammatical construction. For al-Tha'labi, the people who stood with the Prophet at the *mubahala* were mere performers in an event that was eventful because of the victory it signified for the Prophet's mission.

When al-Radi's commentary is contrasted with the discussion of al-Qummi, al-Tusi, and al-Tha'labi on this verse, what is striking is the way in which he uses literary arguments to uncover the meaning. This is a crucial point because by turning to literary arguments derived from Qur'anic verses, Arabic speech and pre-Islamic poetry, and by relying on the overarching rules of language, al-Radi's approach undermined the juggernaut of sectarian, theological, and disciplinary boundaries. Al-Radi argued that in order to disentangle the literary and theological conundrums that populate the Qur'an, language was not only authoritative, but an indispensable tool.

Ambiguity of Redundancy in the Qur'an: "The Male is not like the Female"

Let me now turn to my second case-study from al-Radi's exegesis in which he not only explains an ambiguous verse in the Qur'an but also indicates what purpose he sees ambiguity to serve in the Qur'an. Al-Radi's hermeneutical project of resolving the Qur'anic "ambiguities" can thus also be interpreted as his challenge to the view that ambiguity in the Qur'an undermines its clarity. In other words, al-Radi's focus on the ambiguous verses was not only directed at removing doubt or confusion about their meaning. Much more than that, by positioning ambiguous verses at the heart of his hermeneutical enterprise, he valorised these verses as repositories of the most subtle secrets of the Qur'an that were only accessible through the equally subtle mysteries of the Arabic language.

According to al-Radi, the *purpose* of Qur'anic ambiguity was closely connected to the intimate relationship between language and ontology. Language, he explained, was a reflection of ontological reality, such that subtleties of linguistic expression represented the key through which realities of the world could subsequently be accessed and validated. The

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[32]Abu Ja'far Muhammad ibn al-Hasan al-Tusi, *al-Tibyan fi tafsir al-Qur'an*, (ed.) Ahmad Shawqi al-Amin and Ahmad Habib Qusayr al-'Amili, (Najaf, 1957), vol. 2, pp. 484–486.

[33]Tha'labi, Ahmad ibn Muhammad, *al-Kashf wa-al-bayan 'an tafsir al-Qur'an,* (ed.) Salah Ba'uthman [et al.], (Jeddah, 2015), v. 8, pp. 385–389.

idea of such correspondence between language and ontological reality profoundly impacted the way in which early Muslim custodians of language imagined the scope of their authority and the issues that came under their jurisdiction.

A particularly fascinating example of the intimacy of language and ontology in al-Radi's hermeneutics is found in his discussion of verse 3:36, which reads as follows:

> But when she gave birth, she said, 'My Lord! I have given birth to a girl'– God knew best what she had given birth to: **the male is not like the female** –' I name her Mary and I commend her and her offspring to Your protection from the rejected Satan.'[34]

This verse raises some pressing theological questions. For instance, how, asks the hypothetical interlocutor in al-Radi's commentary, can the verse state "the male is not like the female?" He argues that this seems to have no instructive purpose and only states the obvious. So the question or ambiguity that emerges from this verse is how can any part of the Qur'an be redundant since this would raise doubt about the Qur'an's rhetorical value.[35] Al-Radi's discussion is framed as a response to this charge that the revelatory text is redundant. During the course of his explanation, al-Radi drew on his understanding of language and its relationship to the realities it represents. He asserted that the name of a thing (in the language of the Arabs) can represent that which the thing aspires towards and desires to become. To paraphrase, al-Radi posits that language does not only reflect fixed essences or substances, it can also convey the process of becoming. For al-Radi, this aspect is one of the subtle mysteries of language, available only to the exclusive few endowed with the ability to traverse its multiple layers of meaning.

Al-Radi began his exposition by presenting the context of this verse. He explained that this verse refers to an incident involving the mother of Mary. More specifically, when she was pregnant with Mary, she vowed to offer her child to the service of God as a servant of the Holy Temple of Jerusalem. So when she gave birth to a daughter, she was anxious that her offer would not be accepted, since only men were permitted to serve there, and as the verse states she exclaimed, "My Lord! I have given birth to a girl".

With this context in place, al-Radi described the specific kind of male/female difference emphasised in this verse and explained *why* that difference might exist. He argued that the statement "the male is not like the female" does not refer to a difference in essential traits, since that would be to state the obvious. Rather, it pointed to the varied social conditions that exist for males and females. These include restrictions on women to serve in the Holy Temple, because of "menstruation and childbirth and the need for her to protect her adornments from the people. And because if she were to intermingle with men, they would be seduced by her (*iftatanu biha*) and her status would attract them (*wa istadarru bimakaniha*)".[36]

Al-Radi tied this restriction to a broader generalisation of women's failure to effectively fulfill social contracts. He argued that women are intellectually weaker and more feeble than men in this regard. Al-Radi connects this inadequacy on the part of women to the legal stipulation that their word is not counted as equal in weight to that of men in the affair of

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[34] Qur'an 3:36, Translation Haleem, *The Qur'an*.
[35] Al-Radi, *Haqai'q*, 84.
[36] *Ibid*.

giving testimonies. Most crucially, after establishing this variance between the sexes in the realm of social affairs, al-Radi sought to establish a correspondence between what he viewed as ontological realities and their linguistic equivalents. It is here that we find the interplay of language and ontology at work in al-Radi's hermeneutic.

Al-Radi noted that Abu al-Hasan al-Akhfash (d.825–835 CE), who was the student and transmitter of Sibawayh's teachings, stated that Arabs, when referring to women, say "this is a witness (*shahidi*) (with a masculine construction)" even though they mean a woman.[37] Crucial here is al-Radi's assertion that the use of a male label for a female, or the employment of the term witness in its masculine construction (*shahidi*) in place of the feminine construction (*shahidati*), unveils a subtle secret of the Arabic language. The secret is that through this label the Arabs seek to complete the deficiency in the woman's meaning by attaching a male descriptor to her. In al-Radi's view, the similarity drawn between "her" and "him" in this verse was akin to how the Arabs named a person who was stung (*ladigh*) as healthy (*salim*), and referred to the person who was destroyed (*mahlaka*) as victorious (*mafaza*).[38]

Al-Radi was of course no different from his medieval contemporaries in his less than egalitarian views on male/female relations. However, the critical point to underscore here is this: al-Radi imagined the rules of language (of the Arabs) as a repository for subtle social realities. Moreover, he regarded the subtle references of language to have been perfected in the revelatory text, which, for him, demonstrated a harmonious relationship between grammatical literality and ontological reality. Each element of language, including conjunctions, prepositions, particles and other grammatical operations was imbued with ontologically manifested meaning. Underlying al-Radi's appreciation for these epistemological connections was the idea that language ultimately mirrored both ontological realities (incomplete female aspiring towards the complete male) as well as social realities (legal equivalence of one man with two women).

One could mention in passing that this idea of there existing an intimate connection between language and the reality it represents, arose in a variety of genres at the time. For example, the literary term *majaz* (metaphor)[39] and its counterpart *haqiqa* (literal reality) were applied in both their linguistic and ontological meanings. One instance of this coalescence of the linguistic and ontological dimensions of the *haqiqa/majaz* dichotomy occurs in the work of al-Nashi' al-Akbar (d.906 CE), poet and Muʿtazilī theologian who made the claim that certain descriptive terms such as "living" and "hearing" apply literally to God but only figuratively to humans.[40] Wolfhart Heinrichs has situated this intermingling of language and ontological conditions by al-Nashi' to the Basran cultural milieu, Basra being the headquarters for many prominent mystics.[41] Although Heinrichs, in his remarks about al-Nashi's application of the *haqiqa-majaz* dichotomy, does hint at the pervasive effect of ideas

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[37] Al-Radi, *Haqai'q*, 86.

[38] Al-Radi, *Haqai'q*, 86–87.

[39] Although I previously render *majaz* as linguistic transgression (see footnote 27), when used in opposition with the term *haqiqa*, *majaz* carries the narrower sense of "metaphor."

[40] Vishanoff, *Formation of Islamic Hermeneutics,* 22; Heinrichs, "On the Genesis of the Haqiqa-Majaz Dichotomy," *Studia Islamica*, no. 59 (1984), p. 136.

[41] See Heinrichs, "On the Genesis", p. 136.

across boundaries set by discipline, school and sect, he does not pursue this possibility any further. Building on Heinrichs' inkling, my examination of the *haqiqa/majaz* dichotomy in al-Radi's work is directed at addressing how this approach constituted and was constitutive of broader cultural and hermeneutical episteme.

Conclusion

Scholar of Arabic literature Micheal Carter has convincingly argued that "linguistic ability" in Baghdad's intellectual milieu in the tenth century had become synonymous with social power and had given rise to a scholarly elite that aggressively defended a full-fledged grammatical orthodoxy.[42] Moreover, he makes the arresting observation that oftentimes a desire for professional infallibility was the real motive behind these disciplinary differences, such that the crux of the issue was ideological not theoretical. Under these conditions, the knowledge of grammar became a handy tool with which to discredit one's opponent without engaging his ideas. Thus Carter suggests that critiques of poor linguistic ability were often convenient tactics by which to sidestep and eliminate an opponent's ideas. In this context, it should be noted that the *Haqa'iq* also conforms to a "disputational style"[43] of writing, and it is in the sections where al-Radi seeks to defend a grammatical point that he adopts a distinctly belligerent tone. Carter's observations suggest that what are today reading as arguments over hair splittingly tedious details, did in fact carry immense critical purchase during al-Radi's time. Yet, limiting our understanding of differences about linguistic detail to external expressions of deeper, ideological motives risks us concluding that these exchanges did not yield any other critical force. Furthermore, a quest for the "underlying motivations" of early Muslim arguments over language might presume that not only professional infallibility but a predetermined identity politics governed the start and end of these exchanges.

While acknowledging the value of Carter's insights, I have moved away from a singular line of reasoning that regards linguistic debates as ideological battles. Instead, I have argued that it is crucial to consider the constitutive and productively conditioning features of these exchanges by shifting our attention from the ideological motivations of the actors to the conditions of possibility or what can be termed the discursive terrain that makes these debates thinkable and possible in the first place. Accordingly, the *Haqa'iq* can be understood as "a piece of living action or an ideological maneuver that takes up a position and puts forward a move in a particular historical-discursive context of argument".[44] With this shift in focus, it is possible to explore how al-Radi's theories on reading the ambiguous verses, according to the linguistic interpretations that he proposes, carried significant discursive and social power.

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[42]Michael Carter, "Language Control as People Control in Medieval Islam: The Aims of the Grammarians in Their Cultural Context," *al-Abhath,* 31, (Beirut, 1983), pp. 65–84.

[43]Structurally, al-Radi's work partially fits into a scheme termed the question and answer (*masa'il wa ajwiba*) style common to theological argumentation during this period. In his work on 'Abd al-Jabbar, Gabriel Reynolds points out that this method of presenting one's argument developed as a tool through which a scholar would demonstrate his position rather than inductively deriving it. Other such tactics employed to achieve this goal included for instance the positing of questions by hypothetical opponents, and then driving those hypothetical interlocutors to a logically untenable position. See Reynolds, *A Muslim Theologian in a Sectarian Milieu: 'Abd al-Jabbar and the Critique of Christian Origins*, (Leiden, 2004), 26. The beginning of each chapter in al-Radi's commentary follows this scheme of staging and then engaging the question of a hypothetical interlocutor.

[44]David Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment* (Durham, 2004), p. 53.

The two case studies of Qur'anic ambiguity discussed in this article, namely, the Prophetic invitation of "ourselves" to the *mubahala* in verse 3:61 and the seemingly redundant statement of difference between the male and female in verse 3:36 provide important insights into al-Radi's religious imaginary and into larger questions of language and revelation in early Islam. I have shown that in engaging the ambiguity posed by these two separate episodes, al-Radi's hermeneutical energies were primarily focused on how literary devices can illuminate meaning. Moreover, I have also shown that al-Radi's linguistic imaginary can be characterised by the marked tension between its definite structure that allow certain rules of grammar to be identified, recognised and verified, and by its subtle mysteries, the access to which is limited to an exclusive few. This accorded well with the scholarly ethos of Baghdad where the display of linguistic excellence represented a central mechanism of showcasing one's authority.

I have noted al-Radi's discontentment with the marginalisation of lineal and linguistic purity and his lament against the conditions of his time where political power lay with a family that was not of a pure and sacred lineage like his own. Additionally, he expressed his opposition to the social mobility granted to poets who didn't uphold the strictures of a "pure" Arabic language. These issues held an important place in the formation of al-Radi's hermeneutical identity. This is to say that al-Radi's standing as a renowned poet of 'Alid lineage played a determining role in how he conceived his interpretive enterprise.

But al-Radi's hermeneutical choices were also intimately connected with another theological debate taking place at the time, centred on competing theories of language. The *wad'*, or conventionalist position, by which language was understood to be "established by convention" more or less fit with the Mu'tazili position and was adopted by leading figures of that school including al-Radi's teacher Qadi 'Abd al-Jabbar.[45] The contrary revelationist position, where language was conceived as divinely ordained or revealed, was seen by its opponents to infringe on the notion of free will. At the same time, the debate between the revelationist vs. conventionalist theory was not always staged on strictly theological grounds.[46]

Turning to al-Radi, the examples from his commentary of verse 3:61 and 3:36 illustrate the way in which he used literary arguments to explain Qur'anic ambiguities and authorised his explanations by referring to Qur'anic verses, common utterances by the Arabs, and poetic verses by pre-Islamic poets. In so doing, al-Radi argued for an intimate connection between language and its temporal location in culture. The commanding voice of al-Radi in the *Haqa'iq*, which points to riddle after riddle in the Qur'anic text only to masterfully "resolve" them one by one points to his view that the language of the Qur'an had to be accessible through the rules of language, established by human convention. And it is language that shaped the parameters of the extent and sorts of liberties one could take while exercising one's exegetical will. By deriving the meaning of Qur'anic ambiguities from a fixed literary canon, al-Radi argued for an unshakeable linguistic ontology. In this way, although al-Radi's literary approach to the Qur'an argued for a linguistically "transgressive"[47] interpretation of

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[45]Margaret Larkin, *The theology of meaning: 'Abd al-Qahir al-Jurjani's theory of discourse*, (New Haven, 1995), pp. 31–38.

[46]See Bernard Weiss, "Medieval Muslim Discussions of the Origin of Language," *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenla̤ndischen Gesellschaft* 124, (1974), p.34.

[47]*Majaz* is rendered as linguistic transgression from normative modes of expression. See footnote 27.

certain verses, the clearly defined linguistic sources for his interpretation achieved a rhetorical lockdown on the text's hermeneutical possibilities.

Al-Radi's interpretive method also represents a confluence of multiple intellectual currents and positions, mediated by the intellectual and social milieu of Buyid Baghdad. I have demonstrated the interconnections between his work and prevailing discourses that reflected the fundamental concern of early Muslim scholars to establish the relationship between language and revelation on theological grounds. The theological demands on the text meant that al-Radi's challenge was to explain what *work* ambiguity performed, since as a rhetorical feature adopted in the revelatory text, it had to be purposeful. At the same time, al-Radi's discourse of ambiguity was mediated by the fundamental theological principle of clarity, according to which it was impossible for the Qur'an to be inaccessible. Thus the literary device of ambiguity in al-Radi's interpretive framework was regulated by an overarching linguistic canon, which limited the possibilities of meaning to an identifiable reference. Crucial to such a hermeneutical operation was the philosophical premise that language represented a mirror for reality, that language and ontology were inexorably bound. In sum, al-Radi's hermeneutic oscillated between what I term an "etymological essentialism" and a transgressive use of language. Al-Radi's movement between these two interpretive methods to constitute meaning reflected his embeddedness in a scholarly environment whereby a hermeneutics of concealing and revealing, authorised by the Qur'an and its ancillary disciplines, held considerable sway.

Ruqayya Khan in her compelling study, *Self and Secrecy in Early Islam,* observes the multiple manifestations of this dialectic in different types of literature: love treatises, the Qur'an, ethical works, and polythematic Arabic encyclopedias. She argued that in each of these, albeit in distinctive ways, the dialectic between concealing and revealing constitutes a central place in the way the self is imagined and constructed. In her examination of the multiple sources through which this notion was constituted, Khan argued that the revelatory text postulates the human ideal of a "transparent self" in its depiction of ideal God-human relations.[48] She makes the arresting observation that this emphasis in the Qur'anic text may have contributed to the awareness and cultivation of a hermeneutics of concealing and revealing in extra-Qur'anic literature.[49]

In a similar fashion, al-Radi also conceptualised Arabic language according to this trope of concealing and revealing, pointing to the lifting of veils to uncover its meaning, and to its subtle layers and nuances as it playfully gestures towards meaning. This interplay between

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[48]"What the Qur'an attempts to forge is a human self and subjectivity, a definitive trait of which is its complete transparency vis-à-vis God. This transparency involves the recognition that the self is always known (included watched, observed, heard) by God, and, most importantly, held accountable by God—thereby underscoring the profundity of the theme of human responsibility that characterises the scripture." Ruqayya Khan, *Self and Secrecy in Early Islam,* (Columbia, 2008), p. 8.

[49]" . . . I merely raise the possibility that numerous selections (dealing with secrecy) from early Arabo-Islamic ethical and literary discourses are suggestive of attempts to compensate for a perceived determining Qur'anic phenomenology of "self as transparent". How so? By persistently and consistently maintaining the need for creating spheres of secrecy and privacy in intrapersonal and interpersonal relations". Khan, *Self and Secrecy,* p. 127. And, "A defining trait of secrecy paradoxically is that it is always accompanied by revelation. This trait is also found in the Qur'an and early Arabo-Islamic ethical and didactic texts such as *Kitman*. This inextricability of secrecy and revelations, in turn, generates its own paradoxes that constitute the trope of the secret in early Arabic love literature—paradoxes embracing motifs regarding self, subjectivity, body, and gender relations". Khan, *Self and Secrecy,* p. 95.

concealment and revelation was best captured in the title of his exegesis, *Hermeneutical Realities in [Uncovering] the Ambiguities of Revelation*. In selecting ambiguity as the primary hermeneutical device through which to interpret the Qur'an, the dynamic of concealing and revealing was, for al-Radi, best exemplified in the character of the Arabic language. Of course, he did not go as far as the later literary theorist 'Abd al-Qahir al-Jurjani (d.1078 CE), who focused on the psychological effects of metaphors and the degree of perplexity that they inflicted. Nor was al-Radi preoccupied, like al-Jurjani, with the mental and psychological processes that occur in the creator's psyche (*al-nafs*), and the features that determine the emotional and aesthetic effect on the recipient.[50] However, al-Radi did nonetheless privilege Qur'anic ambiguity as a rhetorical feat that required intellectual effort to be deciphered. Moreover, he also emphasized the singular importance of expending intellectual energy in attaining an understanding of the Qur'an's linguistic puzzles and secrets.

Using al-Radi as one example, in this article I have demonstrated that to approach Qur'an commentaries as works in which authors make claims on the text's meaning solely on the basis of their sectarian identity has had a severely narrowing effect on the kinds of questions that get asked in contemporary examinations of Muslim engagements with scripture. Moreover, exclusively sectarian readings of Qur'an commentaries reinforce a conceptually unsound understanding of the formation and operations of religious identity. Identities are approached as predetermined bounded entities, or as one scholar has observed, "as if they were like "billiard balls, bouncing off each other on a table, but remaining indivisible wholes all the while".[51] This view does not account for the specific historical conditions in which identities are constituted, nor the processes through which they are constantly reinvented.

Consequently, in order to explain an author's hermeneutical decisions, language philosophy, political theory, and other intellectual arguments and dispositions, an uncritical emphasis on sectarian identity perpetuates explanations based on reductive binaries such as assimilation and resistance, borrowing and influence, majority and minority. Instead of such binary framings, I have argued that what is needed is a conceptual approach that resists a reified understanding of identity formation and that attends to the varied epistemological and ideological conditions that inform hermeneutical strategies and operations. It is precisely such an approach that I have sought to employ and showcase in the preceding discussion, through a close reading of al-Radi's Qur'an hermeneutic.[52] tthaver@bard.edu

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