

**Religious Word as a Variant of ‘Authoritative Word’ in Bakhtin / A  
palavra religiosa como uma variante da ‘palavra autoritária’ em Bakhtin  
/ La palabra religiosa como una variante de la ‘palabra autoritaria’, en  
Bajtín**

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**ABSTRACT**

According to Mikhail Bakhtin, a ‘monologic word’ is not realized in dialogue; related to it, an ‘authoritative word,’ as its name implies, comes from authority, be it legal or ecclesiastical, from teachers or parents. As in religious discourse, it does not allow discussion; it asks to be recognized and assimilated. However, it may be that this word, coming from the ‘discourse of the other,’ is convincing, being incorporated into our discourse in full consciousness. Being so, it can even be considered a ‘dialogical word.’ To better explain it, the ‘authoritative word’ will be connected to dogmatic utterances of religions, such as Judaism or Islam, and especially the Catholic Christianity.

**KEYWORDS:** Mikhail Bakhtin; Authoritative Word; Dogmas; Christianity; Religions

**RESUMO**

*Segundo Mikhail Bakhtin, a ‘palavra monológica’ não é realizada no diálogo; dela se depreende a ‘palavra autoritária’ que, como seu próprio nome indica, provém da autoridade, legal ou eclesiástica, do professor ou dos pais. Sua característica, como se escuta no discurso religioso, é a de não permitir a discussão; pede ser reconhecida e assimilada por nós. Entretanto, é possível que tal palavra, ainda que ‘de outrem’, seja convincente, incorporando-se ao nosso discurso com plena consciência; sendo assim, pode inclusive ser considerada ‘palavra dialógica’. Para explicá-la melhor, a ‘palavra autoritária’ será vinculada a enunciados dogmáticos próprios das religiões, como o judaísmo e o islã, e, sobretudo, do cristianismo católico.*

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Mikhail Bakhtin; Palavra autoritária; Dogmas; Cristianismo; Religiões

**RESUMEN**

*Según Mijaíl Bajtín, la ‘palabra monológica’ es una que no está en diálogo; a ella se vincula la ‘palabra autoritaria’ que, como su nombre lo indica, proviene de la autoridad, sea legal o eclesial, del maestro, de los padres. Su característica, como se escucha en el discurso religioso, es que no permite la discusión; pide ser reconocida y asimilada por nosotros. Sin embargo, puede ser que dicha palabra, aunque sea ‘ajena’, resulte convincente y se incorpore a nuestro discurso con plena conciencia; siendo así, puede, incluso, ser considerada ‘palabra dialógica’. Para explicarla mejor, la ‘palabra autoritaria’ será analizada con algunos enunciados dogmáticos, propios de las religiones, como el judaísmo o el islam y, sobre todo, del cristianismo católico.*

**PALABRAS-CLAVE:** Mijaíl Bajtín; palabra autoritaria; dogmas; cristianismo; religiones

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It is a common denominator for religions to attribute the Truth, at least theological Truth, to themselves. For centuries, this used to be the case, especially after the Council of Trent, when attacking dogma was equivalent to being a heretic. There is the case of the Dominican Giordano Bruno, who accumulated more than twenty charges against him, being sentenced to die at the stake on February 17, 1600 in the capital of Italy. One of the most important charges was that he denied the dogma of the Holy Trinity. “This sinister act marked the beginning of a long period of intolerance and persecution of free thought; the historical and intellectual effects would be felt in many ways” for more than four hundred years (BENITEZ, 2011, p.49; our translation).<sup>1 2</sup>

Bruno’s court believed that his assumptions and proposals attacked the Truth. And the Truth has had its own history. The example that Hans-Georg Gadamer gives is the way in which Aristotle answered the question, which became irrefutable, “How many legs does a fly have?” It does not have six legs, but eight, said the philosopher and: “[...] against all evidence the incorrect information was sustained throughout the scholastic teaching, because Aristotle’s authority was not to be doubted [...]. The doctrines that had been recognized remained intact, and they were defended against the most elementary observation” (2002, p.60; our translation).<sup>3</sup>

*Magister dixit* [the teacher has said it] from ancient Christian rhetoric was placed at the base of Tradition, as the authority to respond to all questions.

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<sup>1</sup> Cardinal Angelo Mercati, in 1940, founded the Giordano Bruno’s file in the personal case of Pope Pius XI, who had died the previous year. As a product of his research he published *Il sommario del processo di Giordano Bruno. Con appendice di Documenti sull’eresia e l’Inquisizione a Moderna nel secolo XVI* [Città of the Vatican, 1942]. On Holy Trinity, friar Giordano declared: “talking in a Christian way and according to Christian Theology in which there is everything that a faithful Christian and Catholic must believe in, I have doubt indeed about the name of the person of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, not understanding that these two people are different than the Father as I have said previously, philosophically speaking [...]. I have never denied, taught or written, but I only hesitated for myself as I said” (CAMPUZANO ARRIBAS, 2013, p.88; our translation). Source text: “hablando cristianamente y según la teología y que todo fiel cristiano y católico debe creer, he dudado, en efecto, acerca del nombre de la persona del Hijo y del Espíritu santo, no comprendiendo que estas dos personas sean distintas del Padre más que como he dicho anteriormente, hablando filosóficamente [...]. Nunca he negado, ni enseñado, ni escrito, sino solo he dudado para mí como he dicho.”

<sup>2</sup> Source text: “Este siniestro hecho marcó el inicio de una larga época de intolerancia y persecución del pensamiento libre, cuyos efectos históricos e intelectuales se harían sentir de múltiples formas.”

<sup>3</sup> Source text: “contra toda evidencia la cifra incorrecta se mantuvo a lo largo de la enseñanza escolástica, debido a que la autoridad de Aristóteles no se ponía en duda [...]. Las doctrinas que habían sido reconocidas se mantenían intactas, y se las defendía en contra de la más elemental observación.”

The Holy Inquisition was devoted to purging, censoring and banning books through the *Index Librorum Prohibitorum*, as was the case of Cervantes's *Don Quixote* or Quevedo's *El Buscón*. The basis — denounced in the *Index* in “General rules and mandates,” which appeared in following Spanish editions, including the 17th and 18th century editions—, was anchored in the malice of the “heretics” who disfigure “the Church’s beauty,” planting “errors in the books” that judge “the truths” of the Sacred Scriptures, the Fathers, the Doctors, and the Tradition. In the *Index* of 1790, for example, the General Inquisition of Spain continued to hold censorship on the basis of “authority and apostolic power.”

From this field of affirmations taken from a single interpretation are the monologic ones to which Mikhail Bakhtin referred in several of his works so as to distinguish these from the word or the polyphonic discourse which, in contrast, encourages the initiation of a dialogue that questions the truths that are affirmed through language, especially in literature.

This article will address the problem of the ‘authoritative word’ — in a Bakhtinian sense — that is imposed without discussion in religious discourse. Firstly, the types of ‘word,’ according to Bakhtin, will be explained in order to focus on the ‘authoritative’ and link it to a set of dogmatic utterances from religious creeds. Several *authoritative* utterances will be offered, most of which belong to the Christian Catholic dogmas, with some discursive intersections from others, such as from Islam and Judaism.

## 1 Types of Word in Bakhtin

The Russian philosopher focused his theory of language on the notion of a ‘discourse’ as the minimum unit in the structure of a text.<sup>4</sup> Bakhtinian metalinguistics does not tend to overcome only linguistics, but also language itself which by its very constitution tends to otherness. One of the members of the Bakhtin Circle, Valentin Voloshinov, explained that the word taken separately as a linguistic phenomenon cannot

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<sup>4</sup> *Word (slovo)* is the term Tatiana Bubnova and other translators have used when translating Bakhtin’s works from Russian into Spanish. *Word*, in Bakhtinian theory, encompasses both *utterance* and *discourse*.

be true or false; on the other hand, words in life go through an “extraverbal” situation, and those events of life are founded with them in “an indissoluble unity” (1983, p.10).<sup>5</sup>

Bakhtin posited that words are inseparable from the speaker and from the listener and are found moving in a determined space and time. “Dialogical relationships among utterances that also pervade individual utterances from within fall into the realm of metalinguistics” (1986, p.114).<sup>6</sup> For the word-utterance-discourse to be dialogical, it therefore needs a speaker (author), a listener (reader), and a word that is susceptible of being questioned, even varied, to give rise to a new Truth. It also needs an audience. Because of this condition, “every word is directed toward an *answer* and cannot escape the profound influence of the answering word that it anticipates” (BAKHTIN, 1981, p.280; emphasis in original).<sup>7</sup>

Bakhtin discusses the dialogic and the monologic word, the latter being where ‘authority’ (*avtoritarnoe slovo*) is located. The second comes from the first, and both are qualities of discourse. The first (dialogic) is fertile, changing; it can be bi-vocal or polyphonic, as in the concert of voices of the speaking humanity, and it can also behave either actively or passively; on the other hand, the second is basically monologic and, hence, indisputable. Another way to phrase this is to say that the dialogic word is alive in me and in my neighbor, and each dialogue that emanates from this kind of interaction is oriented towards a future word-reply. In a circular way, “the word is at the same time determined by that which has not yet been said but which is needed and in fact anticipated by the answering word. Such is the situation in any living dialogue” (BAKHTIN, 1981, p.280).<sup>8</sup>

At all times it should be noted that, according to Bakhtin, the ‘word-discourse,’ be it authoritative or not, originates in the ‘word of the other.’ This is how people begin to speak: they take discourse from the other, as occurs with children who are in the process of learning a language. This ‘word of the other’ is semantically changing. “For this reason

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<sup>5</sup> VOLOSHINOV, V. N. Discourse in Life and Discourse in Poetry: Questions of Sociological Poetics. In: SHUKMAN, Ann (Ed.). *Bakhtin School Papers*. Oxford: RPT Publications, 1983, pp.5-30.

<sup>6</sup> BAKHTIN, M. The Problem of the Text in Linguistics, Philology, and the Human Sciences: An Experiment in Philosophical Analysis. In: BAKHTIN, M. *Speech Genres & Other Late Essays*. Edited by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist; translated by Vern W. McGee. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1986, pp.103-131.

<sup>7</sup> BAKHTIN, M. Discourse in the Novel. In: BAKHTIN, M. *The Dialogic Imagination*. Edited by Michael Holquist; translated by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1981, pp.259-422.

<sup>8</sup> For reference, see footnote 7.

we cannot, when studying the various forms for transmitting another's speech treat any of these forms in isolation from the means for its contextualized (dialogizing) framing" (BAKHTIN, 1981, p.340).<sup>9</sup> In this way the Russian philosopher explains how all of our language consists of words borrowed from another; someone has already used them before: it is an "acknowledged" word (BAKHTIN, 1981, p.342).<sup>10</sup> Because time and place are changing, the words of others will also be modified throughout our existence: that which was rejected before is now accepted; the one that was defended in the past is now questioned, and so on, as long as there is that inner dialogue that promotes the generation of a new consciousness. In this Bakhtinian logic, the last word of something has never been said.

## 2 The Authoritative Word

I would like to focus now on the type of word that, by its nature, is not prepared for dialogue and, as we anticipated, is the "religious, political, moral; the word of a father, of adults and of teachers, etc." (BAKHTIN, 1981, p.342).<sup>11</sup> It is a monologic word, coming from the authority that, according to Gadamer, "exists" and "is not dependent upon the fact that we agree or disagree with it" (2002, p.59; our translation).<sup>12</sup> Gadamer and Bakhtin coincide when they affirm that one's relationship with authority occurs in all areas of our existence:

[...] to begin with, between parents and children, between teachers and students, but ultimately in any professional branch [...]. There is always someone who is an authority for others in something, and this is no more than acknowledging reasonably the other's superior knowledge about something (GADAMER, 2002, p.61; our translation).<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> For reference, see footnote 7.

<sup>10</sup> For reference, see footnote 7.

<sup>11</sup> For reference, see footnote 7.

<sup>12</sup> Source text: "no depende de que uno esté a favor o en contra de ella."

<sup>13</sup> Source text: "[...] para empezar entre padres e hijos, entre profesores y alumnos, pero en definitiva en cualquier rama profesional [...]. Siempre hay alguien que es una autoridad para otros en algo, y esto no es más que reconocerle al otro razonablemente su superior conocimiento de algo."

In Bakhtinian terms, the ‘authoritative word’:

[...] demands that we acknowledge it, that we make it our own; it binds us quiet independent of any power it might have to persuade us internally; we encounter it with an authority already fused [...]. It is, so to speak, the word of the fathers. Its authority was already *acknowledged* in the past. [...] It is given (it sounds) in lofty spheres, not those of familiar contacts. Its language is a special (as it were, hieratic) language. It can be profaned. It is akin to taboo, i. e., a name that must not be taken in vain (BAKHTIN, 1981, p.342; emphasis in original).<sup>14</sup>

The reified word, such as the religious one, “cannot be understood by attempts to penetrate its meaning dialogically: there can be no conversing with such a word” (BAKHTIN, 1981, p.352).<sup>15</sup> Unfortunately, Bakhtin, in *Discourse in the Novel*, owes us a more abundant explanation: “[w]e cannot embark here on a survey of the many and various types of authoritative discourse (for example, the authority of religious dogma, or of acknowledged scientific truth or of a fashionable fashion book), nor can we survey different degrees of authoritativeness” (1981, pp.342-343).<sup>16</sup> The Russian philosopher decided to focus on its special formal features, when represented and reproduced, so here I will try to investigate these variations by collating them with other articles of the author.

Bakhtin joins the authoritative discourse rightly with authority, “whether the authority is recognized by us or not,” which calls for a nuanced “distance” either positive or negative, so the attitude of the individual towards it can be respectful or hostile. Because of its status, it organizes other words around it —without joining them— which “interpret it, praise it, apply it in various ways” and should not only be quoted but written with “special script,” because it is very difficult to introduce changes in it: “its semantic structure is static and dead, for it is fully complete, it has but a single meaning, the letter is fully sufficient to the sense and calcifies it” (BAKHTIN, 1981, p.343).<sup>17</sup> This often occurs with books that govern the semantic theology of the sacred word. In Judaism, Islam and Christianity, to mention the major religions, besides the holy word, there are books of laws or accepted interpretations such as the *Halakhah*, in the first case, the

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<sup>14</sup> For reference, see footnote 7.

<sup>15</sup> For reference, see footnote 7.

<sup>16</sup> For reference, see footnote 7.

<sup>17</sup> For reference, see footnote 7.

*Hadith*, in the second, or the ecclesial Magisterium for Orthodox and Catholic Christianity.

As inferred, according to Bakhtin, the ‘authoritative word’ asks of us an absolute recognition, “[i]t is not a free appropriation and assimilation of the word itself” (BAKHTIN, 1981, p.343)<sup>18</sup> with our own words. Seen this way, it has the advantage that

[...] it allows the continuity and adherence of values, beliefs and rules that are the more constrictive conditions of a person’s life. At the same, it offers belonging, a sense of continuity and common ground with their social life (DEL RÍO, 2012, p.111; our translation).<sup>19</sup>

That word comes into our verbal conscience as “a compact and indivisible mass”; one must

[...] either totally affirm it, or totally reject it. It is indissolubly fused with its authority —with political power, and institution, a person—, and it stands and falls together with that authority. One cannot divide it up – agree with one part, accept but not completely another part, reject utterly a third part. Therefore the distance we ourselves vis-à-vis this authoritative discourse remains unchanged (BAKHTIN, 1981, p.343).<sup>20</sup>

This is the way religious dogma works, which, in a clear example of Roman Catholic Christianity, is issued to be accepted by the flock. In the case of Islam, to mention another one, dogma stems not only from the Quran, but also, in good part, from the interpretation assumed not by a vertical Church (which does not exist in their religion), in the manner of Catholic Christianity, but by an Imam or Ayatollah who addresses how any Surah should be interpreted in particular moments. Such is the case of the muftis or other leader’s fatwas.

Thus, as Bakhtin claims convincingly, the authoritative word is only transmitted and, therefore, “[i]t is by its very nature incapable of being double-voiced; it cannot enter into hybrid constructions”; “it is not surrounded by an agitated and cacophonous dialogic life” (1981, p.344).<sup>21</sup> Authoritative discourses can give form to different contents: “authority as such, or the authoritativeness of tradition, of generally acknowledged truths,

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<sup>18</sup> For reference, see footnote 7.

<sup>19</sup> Source text: “[...] permite la continuidad y adherencia a valores, creencias y reglas que son las condiciones más constrictoras de la vida de una persona. A la vez le ofrece pertenencia, un sentido de continuidad y terreno común con su vida social.”

<sup>20</sup> For reference, see footnote 7.

<sup>21</sup> For reference, see footnote 7.

of the official line and other similar authorities (BAKHTIN, 1981, p.344).<sup>22</sup> They may not be necessarily true or false or verifiable, because their origin is not in the enunciated Truth, but in the authority that proclaims them. They are built from an assumption previously given; in our case, for example, in religions, upon the first dogma, that is: God exists.<sup>23</sup>

In the religious thought and word (objectified word), the main object “is a being who speaks: a deity, a demon, a soothsayer, a prophet” (BAKHTIN, 1981, p.351)<sup>24</sup> because in mythological thinking no inanimate and speechless things are known. When ‘the other’s word’ is made an object, it dies, “for the signifying word lives beyond itself, that is, it lives by means of directing its purposiveness outward” (BAKHTIN, 1981, p.354).<sup>25</sup> In such a condition, petrified, monologized, immovable,

the authoritative word is located in a distanced zone, organically connected with a past that is felt to be hierarchically higher. It is, so to speak, the word of the fathers. Its authority was already *acknowledged* in the past. It is a *prior* discourse. It is therefore not a question of choosing it from among other possible discourses that are its equal. It is given (it sounds) in lofty spheres, not those of familiar contact (BAKHTIN, 1981, p.342; emphasis in original).<sup>26</sup>

Despite being surrounded by authoritative words, and not only in the dogmatic religious sphere, it may occur that an authoritative slogan becomes “another’s ideological word”: “[c]onsciousness awakens to independent ideological life precisely in a world of alien discourses surrounding it, and from which it cannot initially separate itself; the process of distinguishing between one’s own and another’s discourse [...] is activated rather late in development” (BAKHTIN, 1981, p.345).<sup>27</sup> Indeed, the ‘other’s word’ that comes to us from everywhere and is molding our consciousness can enter us because, according to Bakhtin, it “takes on an even deeper and more basic significance in an individual’s ideological becoming, in the most fundamental sense” (BAKHTIN, 1981,

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<sup>22</sup> For reference, see footnote 7.

<sup>23</sup> Russell establishes that the big difference between religious belief and scientific theory is that the first “seeks to embody an eternal and absolutely certain truth, while science is always provisional” because theories are changing according to the new findings, the experiments (1951 [1935], p.14; our translation). Source text: “pretende encarnar una verdad eterna y absolutamente cierta, mientras que la ciencia es siempre provisional.”

<sup>24</sup> For reference, see footnote 7.

<sup>25</sup> For reference, see footnote 7.

<sup>26</sup> For reference, see footnote 7.

<sup>27</sup> For reference, see footnote 7.



p.342).<sup>28</sup> It can also become an “internally persuasive discourse” to persuade the individual, beyond the imposing character with which it presented itself. It is interlaced, closely related to our ‘own word’; Therefore, it is “half-ours, half-others” as it has caused by the fact that “such a word awakens new and independent words, that it organizes masses of our words from within, and does not remain in an isolated and static condition” (BAKHTIN, 1981, p.345).<sup>29</sup> Its semantic structure “is not *finite*, it is open; in each of the new contexts that dialogize it, this discourse is able to reveal ever newer *ways to mean*” (BAKHTIN, 1981, p.346; emphasis in original).<sup>30</sup>

The authoritative word is fitted into a dialogical context. It is a response to another word. On the one hand, for Bakhtin, “[c]omplete maximum reification would inevitably lead to the disappearance of the infinitude and bottomlessness of meaning (any meaning)” (BAKHTIN, 1986, p.162).<sup>31</sup> On the other hand, a text (such as a sacred book), has life only “by coming into contact with another text (with context). Only at the point of this contact between texts does a light flash, illuminating both the posterior and anterior, joining a given text to a dialogue” (BAKHTIN, 1986, p.162).<sup>32</sup> Celsus-Origen is an example of an approach to this kind of controversy. The first one attacked Christianity, which he viewed as a “secret” and “illegal” sect that taught a doctrine of “barbarian origin,” capable of “inventing dogmas” but without the correction and refinement provided by logos or reason (BODELÓN, 2009, pp.32-63). The Greek philosopher —of whom we know very little, except that he was Luciano’s friend, from whom he took “the torch of the dispute against the Christians” (BODELÓN, 2009, p.26; our translation)<sup>33</sup>— managed, in his book written around 178, to grant that Jesus was actually chosen “to redeem any sin of the Jews, who were blamed for corrupting religion [...] as Christianity implies”<sup>34</sup>; nevertheless, from this to having him suffer, die and be resurrected, is a long stretch. God, he argued, Who is all Beauty and Goodness, the Infinite, the Unfading, the Perfection, the highest Good, according to Plato, his mentor, cannot be body:

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<sup>28</sup> For reference, see footnote 7.

<sup>29</sup> For reference, see footnote 7.

<sup>30</sup> For reference, see footnote 7.

<sup>31</sup> BAKHTIN, M. Toward a Methodology for the Human Sciences. In: BAKHTIN, M. *Speech Genres & Other Late Essays*. Edited by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist; translated by Vern W. McGee. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1986, pp.159-172.

<sup>32</sup> For reference, see footnote 31.

<sup>33</sup> Source text: “la antorcha de la disputa contra los cristianos.”

<sup>34</sup> Source text: “para redimir algún pecado de los judíos, culpados de corromper la religión [...] como los cristianos dan a entender.”

[...] the body of a God could not be made like yours; the body of a God would be not formed and procreated as yours was [...] What kind of God, what Son of God, is that whose father may not be able to save him from the most infamous torture, and that He Himself cannot save Himself? (CELSE, 2009, p.72; our translation).<sup>35</sup>

This harsh criticism by the Greek, as he is known, made Origen write *Against Celsus*, around 248, to refute, one by one, the Celsian theses, trying to follow reasoning. With regard to this point in particular, Origen responded that Jesus was the only son of God, and that His divine nature did not keep Him from being a man who was born, died and was buried, according to the New Testament, and then resurrected. That is to say, Origen was giving the Bible the character of logos and, therefore, the word of God. From this plane, in the Bakhtinian way, this word was *petrified* not just as a metaphor; in *Exodus* 31:18 we read that “[...]when he had made an end of speaking with him on Mount Sinai, He gave Moses two tables of the Testimony, tables of stone, written with the finger of God” (BIBLE, 2002, p.134).<sup>36</sup>

Thus, Bakhtin differentiates the “authoritative word” from the “persuasive” or the “other’s ideological word.” Speaking of Christian theology, without a doubt, the discourse of the New Testament ended up being persuasive enough so that today Christianity is one of the most important religions in the world. Religions opposed to it were also persuasive in answering to their faithful with their own authoritative word, which answers, inevitably and seemingly contradictorily, as if it were a dialogue, but proposing new dogmas. This thought, exemplifies Bakhtin, is “like a fish in an aquarium, knocks against the bottom and the sides and cannot swim farther or deeper. Dogmatic thoughts” (1986, p.162).<sup>37</sup> That is to say, it exhausts itself, but “another’s word” will propose a dialogue in order to build a new discourse.

We should not lose sight of the fact that the persuasive word (as the above-mentioned ‘other’s ideological word’) in the writings of Bakhtin, appears as semi-own and semi-others, because it is always in combat with convincing words. Let us put it this way: when that “half-own word” or “half-other’s word” is in tension, and the individual

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<sup>35</sup> Source text: “[...] el cuerpo de un Dios no podría estar hecho como el tuyo; el cuerpo de un Dios no sería formado y procreado como el tuyo lo fue [...] ¿Qué Dios, qué Hijo de Dios, es aquél cuyo padre no puede salvarlo del más infame suplicio y que no puede él salvarse a sí mismo?”

<sup>36</sup> THE Scofield Study Bible: New King James Version. Edited by C. I. Scofield and Doris W. Rikkers. New York: Oxford University Press, 2002.

<sup>37</sup> For reference, see footnote 31.

does not know whether to appropriate it or not, the consciousness is being appealed to. If the appropriation wins, that is, if the person added that authoritative ‘other’s word’ to his/her speech, it is because it is convincing enough and is now an ‘own word.’ The fight against the ‘other’s word’ begins at the same time that Bakhtin calls the “ideological consciousness” (1981, p.342).<sup>38</sup> Here we have as an example the dogma of the resurrection, which Celsus attacked for being implausible as — according to his reasoning, based on Plato — when dead, a body does not go towards any place, and only its soul comes to the God-one. Christian theology, accepting in some way that this would not be possible, opted to keep it as a “mystery,” only attainable for the person who has faith. Arce Gargollo and Sada Fernández (2006, p.85) explain that Trinity, enacted at Chalcedon in the 5th Century, is, for example “a dogma of faith defined” and has its origin in *Matthew*. They say: “any created or creatable intelligence is unable to comprehend the mystery of the Holy Trinity. The theologians — and mainly Saint Thomas Aquinas’s — rational effort has sought to illustrate it from revealed data” (p.87; our translation).<sup>39</sup>

Resurrection “is not but the transition from death to life,” interprets Ocariz (1982, p.749; our translation).<sup>40</sup> Thus, in general, religions like Catholicism see that which has no rational explanation as a mystery.

Vauthier connects things quite well: both words, the “intrinsically convincing” and the “authoritarian” “struggle to ideologically configure the consciousness of man” and the difference between these two categories is what conditions the “means of elaboration and focus of ‘other’s words’ with which one weaves his own speech.” The authoritarian words come from the authority; the “intrinsically convincing” ones come only from persuasion, which is indispensable to understand the ideological formations of the consciousness. “However, they do not come from authority and may lack official recognition and even legitimacy” (2009, p.71; our translation).<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> For reference, see footnote 7.

<sup>39</sup> Source text: “a ninguna inteligencia creada o creable le es posible comprender el misterio de la Santísima Trinidad. El esfuerzo racional de los teólogos —y principalmente de S. Tomás de Aquino— ha tratado de ilustrarlo a partir de los datos revelados.”

<sup>40</sup> Source text: “is not but the transition from death to life.”

<sup>41</sup> Source text: “luchan por configurar ideológicamente la conciencia del hombre; «los medios de elaboración y encuadramiento de las palabras ajenas con las cuales uno teje su propio discurso.”

### 3 Religious Dogma

Despite how constrained the Bakhtinian ‘authoritative word’ may be, either in the field of public or private law, or in the field of religions, it has the possibility of being persuaded to go from being ‘another’s word’ to ‘one’s own word’, or not. And the day may come when the authority that uttered it collapses, along with its speech, such acceptance ending with the monopoly of Truth.

The appropriation of the ‘word of God’ by the Roman (or Oriental) ecclesial hierarchy, or by Judaism or Islam, has generated dogmas and, in consequence, the conflicts caused by faith, while one word of Truth competes against another that is Truth for others.

It is curious that Islam is accustomed to saying, through Imams, Ayatollahs, Muftis, or teachers, and even believers, that there are no dogmas because “nobody tells them what they must believe to feel like Muslims” (AYA, 2010, p.48).<sup>42</sup> However, the Quran is considered a sacred book, in which what they must believe is written; the Quran is sacred, like the Bible, because it was revealed, in this case to Muhammad, “by means of an angel, which tradition identifies with Gabriel” (BROWERS, 2005, p.15). Maulana Muhammad Ali (2011), of the Ahmadi belief, reiterates: there are no dogmas or mysteries because believing “is not only a conviction of the truth of a given proposition, but is essentially the acceptance of a proposition as a basis for action.” Followers of the social Theosophy of Sohrevardî, a tradition that began in ancient Persia in the 12th Century, would not say the same. Or the book attributed to Majrîfî the previous century, where one can read that “perfect nature is described as the ‘Angel of the philosopher,’ initiator and preceptor of the philosopher, and finally as the object and the secret of all philosophy, leader figure of the scholar’s personal religion” (CORBIN, 2000, p.34; our translation),<sup>43</sup> i.e., an Islam for initiates.

It is necessary to clarify that by “religious dogma” we mean here the belief in a truth that is unassailable because God has revealed it. Therefore, the believer is obligated to believe it, and in this type of commandments there is quite a need to distinguish it from

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<sup>42</sup> Source text: “nadie les dice qué deben creer para sentirse musulmanes.”

<sup>43</sup> Source text: “la Naturaleza Perfecta es descrita como el ‘Ángel del filósofo’, iniciadora y preceptora del filósofo, y finalmente como el objeto y el secreto de toda filosofía, la figura rectora de la religión personal del sábio.”

others and to defend belief in it. One must read what theologian Paul Tillich said in his Dogmatic course, almost a hundred years ago, when he argued that since “the feeling of safely owning something does not exist anywhere”, in “all dogmatic proposition there is a defense” (2013, p.47; our translation).<sup>44</sup>

Just as Christianity believes in the Trinitarian God, in the Islamic world, the canonical authority (the Quran) wanted to distinguish the oneness of God.<sup>45</sup> “The rotundity of the [Islamic] monotheistic principle was headed against the Paganism of the tribes of pre-Islamic Arabia and also against the Christian doctrine of the Trinity, which was considered a form of polytheism” (SEGURA I MAS, 2014, p.42; our translation).<sup>46</sup> On his part, Aya expresses that “the absence of a church makes the definition of dogmas an impossible task. It is the *Ummah* as a whole, the community of Muslims, who in a general way feel that the expressions said about Allah, by one or another, are Islam or not” (2010, p.47; our translation).<sup>47</sup> However, Küng warns that there was “a division of the Islamic *Ummah* already, long before the Crusades, caused not by hostile foreign forces, but generated from within” (2011, p.346; our translation).<sup>48</sup>

Judaism also has dogmas, starting from the affirmation of God’s existence, the one God, unique, creator and providential, eternal, the one who cannot be represented. In the Jewish world they are called Articles of Faith, commandments or laws. For example,

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<sup>44</sup> Source text: “el sentimiento de poseer algo seguro no existe en ninguna parte”; “en toda proposición dogmática hay defensa.”

<sup>45</sup> For example, in the Catholic Church there are 44 dogmas and not always exempted from controversy, even within the same Christianity and at the same time, its condemnation not only in the religious order but in the civil one. So did the wise man Origen, anathematized post-mortem by Teofilus of Alexandria, in rejecting his notion of apocatastasis. This concept in Origen meant that, at the end of times, there would be a new heaven and a new Earth that Christ would dominate to defeat evil once and for all. It was condemned in the 3rd century because the Conciliars considered that he was contradicting the dogma of God’s infinite love for His creatures. In the Eastern Orthodox Church, for example, the Romanian Archbishop Dumitru Staniloae, in his famous *Dogmatic Theology*, admits the Sacred Writings as a source of revelation but, to be different from Rome, he considered that the revelation has two inseparable natures: the natural and the supernatural, the principle of Bi-Fixism, which ended up being imposed in the Oriental Churches. One of the basic tenets of God, the Supreme Person, is to consider that He has these attributes: life, existence and wisdom, which “do not exist themselves, but only if they belong to Supreme Person. In fact, only in relation with such Personal reality do we also feel ourselves overwhelmed by his powers which we feel no longer as coming from somewhere else or as merely relative” (STANILOAE, 1994, p.132).

<sup>46</sup> Source text: “La rotundidad del principio monoteísta [islámico] se dirigía contra el paganismo de las tribus de la Arabia preislámica y también contra la doctrina cristiana de la Trinidad, que era considerada como una forma de politeísmo.”

<sup>47</sup> Source text: “la inexistencia de una Iglesia hace imposible la definición de dogmas. Es la umma en su conjunto, la comunidad de los musulmanes, la que de una forma general siente que las expresiones sobre Alláh de unos u otros son Islâm o no lo son.”

<sup>48</sup> Source text: “una división de la umma islámica ya mucho antes de las cruzadas, originada no por fuerzas exteriores hostiles, sino generada desde dentro.”

Jewish law or *Halakhah* includes the 613 *mitzvot* or commandments, derived from the Torah, which are extended to a way of life. Or the famous *Thirteen Articles* that Maimonides revealed in the 12th Century, “one of various faiths to which many Orthodox Jews still adhere” (ÁNJEL RENDO, 2010, p.480; our translation).<sup>49</sup>

Religious dogma belongs, as Bakhtin warned, to the realm of the sacred. In every religious Constitution, in their holy books or validated exegetes, the word of the “authority” stands as the acceptable. That “authority” can begin with God himself, to whom they give existence, or with the “authorities” emanating from Him, however religions are organized. Thus, the “authoritative word” not only comes from commands, it is also imposed. However, as I have said, it can become an “intrinsically persuasive word.”

Where is this authorized word located? In canonized books. Canonization “is a process of choosing the texts that will become the object of interpretation, which simultaneously elevates them into a position of censorship over other texts, whose study and interpretation may even be forbidden” (ISER, 2000, p.13).<sup>50</sup> The “sealed canon” — as Wolfgang Iser calls it— in the case of the Catholic Church, is shaped by the list defined by the Council of Trent, up to the 16th century, when the bishops gathered to determine that the official ones were those written in Hebrew and Greek (seven, which they called Deuterocanonical books), plus 27 of the New Testament, coming to a total of 74.

Sealed cannons — as Wolfgang Iser calls them— are the Bible, the Torah and the Quran, according to each of the three religions here reviewed. But the Bible does not contain the same books if we speak of Catholicism or Reformed Churches; still, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints gives priority to the *Book of Mormon*, a set of old prophecies revealed to Joseph Smith, by the heavenly Messenger called Moroni. It was published in 1830 for the first time. Among these three or four sacred books, the names of God vary.

Here I pause to demonstrate how the authoritative word of a creed renders its version as true in order to proceed, even, to disqualify the other word in a dialogical way: Catholics reject the name of Jehovah by considering that it is an arbitrary Hebraism introduced by Evangelicals, who, in turn, determine that Jehovah should be preferred as

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<sup>49</sup> Source text: “uno de los diversos credos a los que numerosos judíos ortodoxos todavía se adhieren.”

<sup>50</sup> ISER, W. *The Range of Interpretation*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2000.

this was the first name (in Hebrew), following the humanist and Lutheran principle and the *hebraica veritas*. It is a fact that in the Old Testament, which both Christians and Jews recognize, the names of God change from book to book, and epoch to epoch: Yahweh, Shaddai, Adonay, El, Elohim, El Elion, El Gibor and El Roi are some of them. The fight is to impose theirs. Such discussion is not new: friar Luis de León even wrote *The Names of Christ* [Salamanca, 1583], in which he collected the Jewish tradition of naming the Lord in different ways, as His proper name or as His attributes: God's arm, King, Lamb, Jesus, and others. On September 11, 2008 Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, with headquarters in Vatican State, asked that the Yahweh name be eliminated from all the Episcopal Conferences speeches. The reason? This name does not equate to "Lord" (for such case it is Adonai) but "an expression of the infinite greatness and Majesty of God." Cardinal Francis Arinze and Archbishop Albert Malcolm Ranjith argued that it is not His proper name (*La santa sede pide...*, 2008; our translation).<sup>51</sup> On the other hand, Islam considers Muhammad the spokesman for the final revelation in the history of salvation, and the name is not God, Yahweh or Jehovah, but Allah. The Arabic language is, therefore, sacred and cannot be transliterated. Writing ﷲ, as indicative of the "Magnificence of Allah," is not equivalent to a proper name, but is "an indicative reference which cannot be transcribed to the letters of another language; it should be interpreted under its corresponding linguistics, otherwise it would mean serious blasphemy" (ALNASIR, 2016; our translation).<sup>52</sup> Its basis is what we have already said: an authority (Imams, Doctors of Islam) determines, in this case, what the sign for the Magnificence of Allah is.

I am going to question another fixed idea: is God representable or unrepresentable? Maimonides made it clear in the 2nd century that Yahweh is a spirit and cannot be symbolized in any form. By the time this principle became established, Christianity in the Middle Ages had covered temples and streets with images of Jesus as a child, an adult, in the Calvary, at the cross, and in dozens of other ways, to achieve a form of iconolatry in which a diversity of saints and virgins also participated. That was the reason for propelling the Byzantine iconoclasm of the 8th and 9th centuries. There are several episodes "in which Muslims (and at the same time Christians) destroyed images

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<sup>51</sup> Source text: "una expresión de la infinita grandeza y majestad de Dios."

<sup>52</sup> Source text: "un indicativo referencial que no puede ser transcrito en letras de otro idioma; debe ser interpretado a su correspondiente lingüístico, de lo contrario supondría grave blasfemia."

of ancestors (on many occasions Hindu icons), fearing the danger of idolatry” (CAPUTO JAFFE, 2011, p.7; our translation).<sup>53</sup> From its origin, iconoclasm has distinguished (and differentiated) Islam, although this situation was not out of controversy within the Caliphate. “There is no imagination that can conceive Him, nor intellect that can encompass Him,”<sup>54</sup> one can read in *Aqeedah At-Tahawiah*, from the 10th century theologian Abû Ya’far Al Uarrâq At Tahâui. It is heresy to worship images or representations of Allah.

The previously summarized controversy extended, as is known, to the time of the Reform: iconolatry and idolatry were forbidden by a literal interpretation of the Bible (the prescription is in both Old and New Testament). It came as a response “to what was perceived as a hypertrophy of visual behavior. Physical blindness, argued Calvin, was spiritually valuable because people were forced to listen to the voice of God” (JAY, 2007 [1993], p.40; our translation).<sup>55</sup>

During the Enlightenment times, the attempt was “to fight” against “false preconceived inclination in favor of what was ancient, the authorities,” according to Gadamer. From here precisely, hermeneutics would arise, “its task being to defend the reasonable meaning of the text against all imposition” (GADAMER, 1984, p.345; our translation).<sup>56</sup> “All religious systems, even primitive ones, possess an enormous, highly specialized methodological apparatus (hermeneutics) for the transmitting and interpreting various kinds of holy word” (BAKTIN, 1981, p.351).<sup>57</sup> Hermeneutics has made this possible although it is always within the confines set by the canon. Iser considers: If endowing a text with authority implies that the authority “is a unique and unrepeatable act” and “the authority attributed may be supplemented, augmented, broadened, specified,” (ISER, 2000, p.13)<sup>58</sup> then there is a sealed and open cannon, in which interpretation finds its working. Thereby, “authority rests exclusively neither in the canon nor in the reading; instead, it oscillates between the two, and this oscillation is an

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<sup>53</sup> Source text: “en los que musulmanes (y paralelamente los cristianos) destruyeron imágenes de antecesores suyos (en muchas ocasiones iconos hinduistas), por miedo al peligro de la idolatria.”

<sup>54</sup> Source text: “No hay imaginación que Lo pueda concebir, ni intelecto que Lo pueda abarcar.”

<sup>55</sup> Source text: “ante lo que se percibía como una hipertrofia de lo visual. La ceguera física, sostenía Calvino, era espiritualmente valiosa porque le forzaba a uno a escuchar la voz de Dios.”

<sup>56</sup> Source text: “la falsa inclinación preconcebida en favor de lo antiguo, de las autoridades”; “cuya tarea es defender el sentido razonable del texto contra toda imposición.”

<sup>57</sup> For reference, see footnote 7.

<sup>58</sup> For reference, see footnote 50.



indication of the ineradicable space between the canon and its interpretation” (ISER, 2000, p.19).<sup>59</sup> Jauss explains the reasoning behind hermeneutics applied to biblical texts even better: “understanding cannot be imposed” (2012, p.26; our translation).<sup>60</sup>

However, while hermeneutics was instituted as a scientific method, the process has been characterized by its tensions. Russell talks about at least two historical stages of total closure of the “authoritative word,” emanating from the Christian authority to a new formulation. “Darwinism was as severe a blow to theology as Copernicanism. Not only was it necessary to abandon the fixity of species and the many separate acts of creation, which Genesis seemed to assert,” he writes in *Religion and science*, but it was also necessary to accept that man “was descended from the lower animals” like the monkey (RUSSEL, 1997, pp.69, 70).<sup>61</sup>

Rationalism did the rest, at least in the West. In 1903, the famous theologian Maurice Blondel was thought to be concerned about the conflict, “more acute and general every day” (2004 [1997], p.82; our translation),<sup>62</sup> that the Catholics were facing in the philosophical, political and economic orders. Rationalism opposed the dogma (Christian beliefs) in history, and from his teaching he asked that, in such movement, Tradition be taken as a source of historical events: “the Catholic faith and the authority of the Church, which such implies, guarantee the facts and extract from them a doctrinal interpretation which is imposed on the believer as a historical reality, but for reasons other than those that the historian assesses” (p.84; our translation).<sup>63</sup> The fundamental is the Tradition through which those “Christian facts” have been interpreted, he insisted.

Bakhtin believes that ‘authoritative word,’ germinated in those areas of the Holy and the Sacred, has also been answered with parody: by transposing the strict and severe dimension of life to laughter, to the prosaic world and to comedy, in a way deliberately “outside officialdom” (1984, p.6).<sup>64</sup> The intention? To get relief from the rigors of the classicistic world and laugh a little, as if at a carnival. In *Rabelais and His World*, he

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<sup>59</sup> For reference, see footnote 50.

<sup>60</sup> Source text: “la comprensión no puede ser impuesta.”

<sup>61</sup> RUSSEL, B. *Religion and Science*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997.

<sup>62</sup> Source text: “cada día más agudo y general.”

<sup>63</sup> Source text: “la fe católica y la autoridad de la Iglesia que ella implica, garantizan los hechos y extraen de ellos una interpretación doctrinal que se impone al creyente como una realidad histórica, pero por razones diferentes a las que evalúa el historiador.”

<sup>64</sup> BAKHTIN, M. *Rabelais and His World*. Translated by Helene Iswolsky. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1984.

explains this duality between the world of the ecclesial and civil authority, and the marketplace language of the carnival, fresh and funny, vulgar and sincere at the same time. For Bakhtin this word of “popular culture” is “polyphonic” and is always striving to win, through laughter, that extreme expression of grim seriousness, and transform it into a festive showy Carnival. In such a way the people’s word permeated the “authoritative word,” which, for example, through profane elements containing the image of hell in the Medieval vulgar world, “could not but penetrate the images of hell” (BAKHTIN, 1984, p.391),<sup>65</sup> which is a very important subject in Christianity when one is discussing good and evil:

Officially the palaces, churches, institutions, and private homes were dominated by hierarchy and etiquette, but in the market place a special kind of speech was heard, almost a language of its own, quiet unlike the language of Church, palace, courts, and institutions. It was also unlike the tongue of official literature or of the ruling classes —the aristocracy, the nobles, the high-ranking clergy and the top burghers— (BAKHTIN, 1984, p.154).<sup>66</sup>

Finally, when reviewing the Rabelaisian chronotope, Bakhtin again appreciated the need for laughter and parody to counteract dogmatic rigor: “false connections that distort the authentic nature of things, false associations established and reinforced by tradition and sanctioned by religious and official ideology.” Rabelais proposed to destroy and rebuild “these false links,” “reinforced by scholastic thought, by a false theological and legalistic casuistry and ultimately by language itself —shot through with centuries and millennia or error— false links between [...] good material words and [...] authentically human ideas” (BAKHTIN, 1981, p.169).<sup>67</sup>

## Final Remarks

As we have studied, the word of a religious authority demands to be recognized and accepted by us, and, according to Bakhtin, it is imposed on us regardless of the degree

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<sup>65</sup> For reference, see footnote 64.

<sup>66</sup> For reference, see footnote 64.

<sup>67</sup> BAKHTIN, M. Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel. In: BAKHTIN, M. *The Dialogic Imagination*. Edited by Michael Holquist; translated by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1981, pp.84-258.

of its inner persuasion. Somehow, this authoritative word has the discretion to put things in order at any given time and to minimize the conflicts resulting from the juxtaposition of ideologies and interpretations. This word generates respect if it can make itself fundamental and persuasive, or it adheres to the plane of obligation for the believer, who assumes it without any type of restriction, because, ultimately, the interpretation of symbolic structures, derived from religious thought, makes it necessary to accept that there is an “infinity of symbolic contextual meanings” (BAKHTIN, 1986, p.160).<sup>68</sup> Although it is related to a dialogue between religious authorities, “[t]here is neither a first nor a last word and there are no limits to the dialogic context” (BAKHTIN, 1986, p.170).<sup>69</sup>

Human speech is full of “authoritative words.” They begin in the outside universe and the individual starts appropriating them and, in turn, will lend them to others in an endless process of polyphonies, because one is the sum of multiple voices outside and inside oneself, and one is also the sum of authoritative words reproduced every day as orders, mandates, terms, and clauses. Bakhtin clearly pointed out that this is the language of parents towards their children.

The fundamental problem of the ‘authoritative word’ is that, because it lacks a bi-vocal essence, it naturally becomes (and has become, especially in the religious field) an inevitable commandment—even though it is implausible, reasonless or inexplicable—and extends to the civilian sphere. It is also a petrified word because of its degree of “mystery” and its incomprehensiveness. Many scholars and theologians have come to accept it, although not so publicly and openly, as the controversial rationalist Chesterton did in 1908, in *Orthodoxy*: we must take the best of Christianity “what really has value, what one can understand” and leave aside “all the absolute dogmas which are incomprehensible by nature” (1987 [1909], pp.274-275; our translation).<sup>70</sup>

Even if it is petrified, it is possible that the authoritative word not be sustained forever, by virtue of what, for example, Russell has said, of the coming of non-official discourses, such as those that are scientific or popular, that end up diminishing that authority on which it was sustained. Let us think about what a new Constitution means to a revolutionized nation: the word of the new authority, in this case, is the answer to the

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<sup>68</sup> For reference, see footnote 31.

<sup>69</sup> For reference, see footnote 31.

<sup>70</sup> Source text: “lo que realmente tiene valor, lo que se puede comprender”; “todos los dogmas absolutos que son incomprensibles por naturaliza.”

previous authoritarianism against which they fought; the new legislation is, even in its *petrified* way, following Bakhtin, a new dialogized order emanating (we assume) from multiple voices coming from the public square. Change of discourse revealed otherness and rejected the previous ‘authoritative word.’ Therefore, as the Russian philosopher emphasizes, this word is united to authority and maintains itself in its discourse, until the authority falls down. Although ‘authoritative word’ is not completely hieratic, it will live as long as it allows continuity and adherence to social values, beliefs and rules, and it can also be discovered, attacked and discarded, as long as is exceeded by dialogic reality.

If the ‘authoritative word’ is preserved in a petrified state, it will continue being monosemantic. If it is interpreted and updated, although it is sacred, it will be vitalized and produce new spiritual meanings and perhaps fewer conflicts in a world surrounded by ideological fanaticism.

The ‘authoritative word’ has not been studied here necessarily with a negative connotation, in the sense of rejecting what comes from the authority only for the sake of contradicting. What Bakhtin brings by explaining it is to distinguish it from the ‘bi-vocal word’ and polyphony, which ought to be preferred in the course of human history. I say ‘preferred’ because the dialogic implies breaking with the monologic, recognizing the Other, who also has nourished his/her own speech with someone else’s words and has gone more or less consciously through an ideological process. That Other and I are embedded in a time and place that can also change, or they will change beyond the authority that rules the world.

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