

The power of language: A comparative study of Kōan and Eucharist

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Andrew Prevot

Introduction

It is commonplace to maintain that with language there is power. But how exactly the relations between language and power should be construed remains a question of some dispute. At least two distinct approaches to this problem were developed in Western philosophical circles in the twentieth century. One approach, associated with J. L. Austin, analyses utterances not only in terms of what they mean but also what they do. The basic insight is that speech is not only composed of statements but also of acts: it is performative. In the appropriate situation, to say “I do” is not simply to articulate a sentence but to get married; to say “fire” is not just to utter a word but to excite a crowd or execute a prisoner. A second philosophical approach has strong ties to the work of Michel Foucault (and could also be associated with various schools of critical theory). It is concerned less with individual utterances and more with entire discourses or “régimes of truth” viewed in light of their historical emergence and institutional embodiment. The key idea is that discourses grow out of and prop up problematic collusions of political and material force. According to both Austin and Foucault, language does much more than speak: it acts and operates; it performs, empowers, and sometimes dominates.

But does language have the power to awaken or transform us in the diverse ways that religious thinkers in various traditions have articulated? This is not a question which Austin or Foucault address, nor can it be investigated with much fruitfulness from a strictly philosophical

perspective. To handle a properly religious question of this sort, it seems best to turn to the religions themselves in order to explore not only what their texts say but also how what they say works or functions. In particular, my focus will be the power of language within two distinct ritual contexts: on the one hand, the practice of meditating on *kōan* in Rinzai Zen Buddhism and, on the other hand, the verbal aspects of the Roman Catholic celebration of the Eucharist.

With assistance from Zen Buddhist scholar G. Victor Sōgen Hori and Catholic theologian Louis-Marie Chauvet—who have used Austin’s performative theory of language to analyze the *kōan* system and the Eucharistic liturgy, respectively—one can begin to see how language plays a crucial role in the movement toward awakening and salvation in each tradition. At the same time, Foucault’s account of the interrelation of power and discourse indicates that this *salutary* performance of religious language is inseparable from various powerful institutions which it builds up and sustains. Thus the performative force of the language is in distinct ways not only religiously transformative but also problematically *political*, and both of these at once. The terms “salutary” and “political” are not perfect, nor are they particularly distinct or determinate. Nevertheless, for the sake of the present argument they will have to do as placeholders for the two basic kinds of linguistic power being considered. When asked, then, if religious language can contribute to a process of awakening or salvation (a kind of transformation which we shall call “salutary”), our examples suggest a mixed, but nevertheless affirmative, response: yes, it can, and it does—according to the logic and experience internal to the religions themselves—but this is not all that such religious language accomplishes. It also institutes problematic relations of power (which we shall call “political”), and these two kinds of performance (the salutary and the political) are structurally interrelated.

Time does not permit a thorough analysis of the many relevant texts of Hori, Chauvet, Austin, and Foucault (not to mention other thinkers who could also be pertinent to this discussion). However, in the time that I have, I'd like to highlight a few crucial aspects of my thesis. *First*, I will argue that the performative speech in *kōan* meditation and the Eucharist is at least partially constitutive of a salutary religious transformation. This claim has already been defended by Hori and Chauvet, through their creative appropriations of Austin, but these results have not, to my knowledge, been presented together. *Second*, I will give some evidence to support the claim that, according to Foucault, discourses in every society function as régimes of truth and are implicated in problematic relations of power. To connect this point to the previous discussion, I will argue that the utterances which Hori and Chauvet discuss are central to, and crucially formative of, the discourses of these traditions, which Foucault's analysis invites one to consider more holistically in terms of their political origins and effects. *Finally*, I will share some reflections regarding the difficulty of evaluating the twofold power (salutary and political) which the discursive practices exhibit in each tradition. My hope is that these concluding remarks will point the way toward a broader discussion about certain foundational questions in comparative theology and the comparative study of religion.

Hori and Chauvet appropriating Austin: the “salutary”

Hori defines the *kōan* as “an artificial problem given by a teacher to a student with the aim of precipitating a genuine religious crisis that involves all the human faculties—intellect, emotion, and will.”¹ Although the *kōan* can be described as a “riddle” or “paradox,” this should not be done at the expense of its religious significance (ZS 5). Hori insists that *kōan* (in the plural) are linguistic features of a distinct tradition of religious practice; hence, their meaning

¹ Victor Sōgen Hori, *Zen Sand* [ZS] (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2003), 6.

should not be divorced from this practice, nor from the context of Zen monasteries in which it occurs. In this context, meditating on a *kōan* (such as “sound of one hand clapping,” to give perhaps the most well-known example) and searching for an answer or “capping phrase” (*jakugo*) that solves the problem are practices interwoven with the whole of monastic life, which includes “physical work, ritual and ceremonial practices such as the chanting of sutras, . . . community life, . . . [and] literary study” (ZS 30).

Literary study, in particular, immerses the students in an ongoing yet ancient practice of skillful textual commentary, rich with allusions to stories and poetry (ZS 44) and replete with analogy (ZS 47). Hori explains that “allusion refers to a thing without naming it directly,” whereas “analogy relates two particulars without revealing the general principle connecting them” (ZS 51). Because many interpreters in the Western world do not have the knowledge of the particulars of the literary traditions to which Zen *kōan* refer, they mistake allusion and analogy for sheer incomprehensibility. Hori does not claim that being exposed to the life and practices of the monastery gives one the ability to decode the *kōans*, as though simply making the right intellectual connections would yield a totally transparent understanding. The meaning which they acquire from this rich cultural context is not so straightforward and digital. Paradoxes and wordplays abound. Thus, even within the linguistic space of Zen practice, it may be difficult or impossible to state what any given *kōan* means exactly. The capping-phrases or *jakugo* crystallize the significance of the *kōan*, but not in such a way that all ambiguity is removed (ZS 30). Nevertheless, Hori’s point is that these verbal exchanges are *not meaningless*. By meditating upon the *kōan* as part of a monastic curriculum, one can gain what Hori calls “horizontal insight” into their meaning by relating them correctly to the stories, legends, symbols, and metaphors which they are meant to invoke (ZS 51).

But if the *kōan* are to be solved and progress is to be made toward religious awakening, “vertical insight” is also necessary. For Hori, “vertical insight” is emphatically not something that is wholly non-linguistic or non-conceptual.² Nevertheless, he also describes it as something that “takes one outside language to experience itself” (ZS 51). This is not a contradiction; rather, it is an expression of the paradoxical or ambiguous nature of the nonduality which is constitutive of Zen awakening (or *kenshō*). Just as the *kōan* themselves should not be interpreted apart from their context, neither should the state of nondualistic awakening which they are meant to bring about. According to Hori, this is where many Western interpreters of Zen have gone astray. Not only do they abstract the *kōan* from monastic practice, stripping it of its determinate religious meaning, they also treat it as an instrument whose paradoxical and supposedly irrational content causes the Zen participant to break through “to the realm of preconceptual and prelinguistic consciousness” (KK 280). The decision to construe the power of *kōan* in instrumental terms and to treat *kenshō* as a state of “pure consciousness” go together. Both of these interpretive moves abstract the language and experience of Zen from the normal ways of perceiving and acting which are present in the monastery, and in the whole of ordinary life, and thereby represent the experience of nonduality in dualistic opposition to the linguistically mediated experience of the everyday (KK 300). Thus they fundamentally misconstrue the “logic of nonduality” which is realized in the experience of *kenshō*, for this logic precisely does not allow for such a strict dichotomy between the linguistic and the pre-linguistic but rather “introduces a systematic ambiguity into the characterization of all experience, revealing it to be in one sense dual and in one sense nondual” (KK 301). If the *kenshō* which the *kōan* are meant to generate constitutes a

² Hori, “Koan and *Kensho* in the Rinzai Zen Curriculum” [KK], in *The Koan: Texts and Contexts in Zen Buddhism*, ed. Steven Heine and Dale S. Wright (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 281.

breakthrough, “then it is a breakthrough not out of, but into, conventional consciousness” (KK 307); it is a realization of nonduality in the midst of duality.

To represent this paradoxical experience of nonduality, Hori believes that a “realizational” model is superior to an “instrumental” model (ZS 281). Instead of abstracting *kōan* and *kenshō* from their meaningful context, *kōan* should be seen as bringing about the realization of *kenshō* within this context. One key term that Hori uses to express this process of realization is *kyōgai*, which can be translated as both consciousness and behavior (KK 292). In certain respects, *kyōgai* is similar to the Aristotlean notion of character: “it bears the quite personal imprint of the particular individual” as expressed in the daily affairs of life (KK 293) and signifies a form of understanding internalized in embodied activity rather than the thoughts of a disembodied Cartesian ego (KK 295). The insight which is manifest in the *kyōgai* of a Zen student making progress in the *kōan* curriculum is not determined entirely by the horizontal insight gained from literary study; it also includes the vertical insight into experience as it is, cultivated by meditation and daily activity. Recognizing the allusions and analogies is not enough; one must “make real” in one’s life the “nonduality of subject and object” (KK 289), and this is only possible if one also recognizes or becomes aware of things as they are, and not simply as the dualistic structures of language present them to be. These two forms of realization (recognizing and making real), which are in turn both linguistic and non-linguistic (horizontal and vertical), are gradually united into a single visible behavior or lived consciousness (*kyōgai*) through the religious practice of the Zen monastery.

Yet insofar as language in particular is conducive to the experience of *kenshō*, it is possible to attribute some agency to the *kōan* themselves. That is, they *do* something; they act; they have power. In Hori’s words, they constitute a “performance of *kenshō*” (KK 304). Hori

refers to Austin's theory of performative speech to make this point. Although the words of the *kōan* do have some meaning (however allusive and elusive it may be), they also act like the words "I apologize" which are themselves the performance of an apology (KK 304). The uttered words of a *kōan*, or of a *jakugo* which answers it, may express an insight; they may communicate something; in short, they may involve what Austin calls a "constative utterance."³ But they also bring about and at least partially constitute the consciousness or behavior (*kyōgai*) of the Zen student who is on the path toward realizing nonduality (*kenshō*); thus they fit Austin's description of a "performative utterance" equally well (and, notably, this coincidence of the constative and performative in the same utterance is something that Austin himself would predict). Hori clarifies that, generally, the utterances in *kōan* practice are "illocutionary" rather than "perlocutionary"—which just means, using Austin's terminology, that they *constitute* a performance rather than extrinsically *cause* one to occur (KK 304). In this sense, "I apologize" is a better analogy than "Fire!" or "Shoot him!" because *kōan* are themselves the action; they are not the catalysts of a separate action.

Hori's classification of the linguistic aspects of the *kōan* curriculum as illocutionary performances supports the contention of this paper that religious discourse in the Rinzai Zen tradition is at least partially constitutive of a salutary religious transformation. Chauvet makes a similar case on the Catholic side. For the sake of brevity, I will presuppose a general understanding of what takes place in the Roman Catholic liturgy of the Eucharist and focus on three key points of comparison with Chauvet's sacramental theology.

The first point is that, just as in Zen, so too in Catholicism, there is more to the experience of religious transformation than what is provided by language. Chauvet argues that although the Eucharist should be understood as a symbolic event, the Eucharist itself "cannot be

³ J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things With Words* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 1962), 3.

reduced to a simple socio-linguistic mechanism.”⁴ The Eucharist makes use of a symbolic order that is partially but not entirely constituted by language, in the narrow sense of the written and spoken word. The body (146) and other natural things such as bread and wine (392) are also crucially involved in the process of symbolization; they, too, speak. These features of the natural world are indispensable. But the more significant point to be made here is that God’s grace brings about the effectiveness of the sacrament in a way that incorporates but is not exhausted by this linguistic and non-linguistic symbolic order. Chauvet interprets this divine action in elaborate discussions of “gift,” “return gift,” and sacrifice (278) and of the presence of the Son and Holy Spirit (537) which cannot be considered in more detail here. The crucial point of comparison is that, whereas *kōan* practice requires the not-merely-linguistic element of “vertical insight,” the Catholic liturgy of the Eucharist implies the not-merely-linguistic activity of both natural symbols and the grace of God.

The second point has to do with the salutary purpose of the Eucharist: for Chauvet, this sacrament is crucial to the formation of Christian identity. He does not equate this identity with salvation as such. Nevertheless, embracing this identity does involve a salutary transformation insofar as it integrates those who participate in the Eucharist into the practice of a community (the Church) which symbolically expresses the recognition of salvation (180) and an openness to the reign of God (181). Moreover, the reception of the species of bread and wine is a moment of particular importance during the Eucharistic liturgy because through this act, participants receive the very Body and Blood of Christ into their bodies and become mysteriously and intimately united in communion with Him and with one another in the Holy Spirit (407). In a manner similar to Hori, Chauvet thinks that this event should be situated within the larger context of the

⁴ Louis-Marie Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament: A Sacramental Reinterpretation of Christian Existence*, trans. Patrick Madigan, S.J., and Madeleine Beaumont (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1995), 426.

ritual practice, and understanding the symbolic nature of this larger context is arguably the main emphasis of his work. Nevertheless, Chauvet does not negate the Catholic Church's general teaching regarding the importance of grace for the efficacy of the Eucharist, nor the idea that Christ is truly present in the sacrament that the faithful receive, as the one who, along with the Holy Spirit, primarily carries out the salutary transformation of the people in communion with Him. Much could be said regarding the similarities and differences between the Zen awareness of nonduality and the Catholic experience of communion, but the key idea for this paper is that they both involve processes of transformation that are perceived as being of great religious significance.

The third point is that, like Hori, Chauvet appropriates insights from Austin to argue that the verbal aspects of the Eucharistic liturgy partially perform the salutary transformation which the sacrament is meant to bring about. In other words, Eucharistic language is not only descriptive or "constative," to use Austin's word; it is also performative. Moreover, as performative, it is primarily illocutionary, rather than perlocutionary, because the language is itself the performance of the transformative action, not the extrinsic cause of it (135). Chauvet notes that statements of faith such as "'God is Father' or 'Jesus is the Christ' can be affirmed only if, *while* formulating these statements, I identify myself as and in some manner become a child of God and a disciple of Jesus Christ" (428). To utter words such as these is already to implicate oneself in the relationships they imply; the words *constitute* this implication. Other illocutionary utterances can be identified in the liturgy as well: "I confess to almighty God, and to you my brothers and sisters . . ."; the "We believe . . ." affirmations of the Nicene Creed; the self-implicating statements in prayers and hymns; and many other examples could be analyzed. The key idea is that these utterances function in the same manner as "I apologize": they do just

as much as they say. If the words of the creed are spoken with truthfulness, then they are identical to the act of faith itself and are its realization: they make the faith recognizable and actual in the life of the believer. Likewise, the saying of a prayer in good faith is nothing other than the act of praying itself. In sum, Chauvet's appeal to Austin helps him express the claim that the language of the Eucharist participates in the sacramental formation of Christian identity and one's entrance into a saving communion with God and with others, just as, in Hori's account, the language of *kōan* training participates in the realization of *kenshō*.

Foucault analyzing discourse: the “political”

Foucault's understanding of “régimes of truth” offers another lens through which to interpret the power of language in these two traditions. Foucault contends that

truth isn't outside power, or lacking in power; . . . Truth is a thing of this world: it is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint. And it induces regular effects of power. Each society has its régime of truth, its ‘general politics’ of truth: that is, the types of discourses which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true.⁵

Although much of Foucault's work is focused largely on specific practices, texts, and contexts, this statement from *Power/Knowledge* is of a general form. It implicates the discourses of “each society.” The key idea is that discourses of truth, wherever they may be, are bound up in a circular relation with powerful institutions and micro-level interactions. The “truth” and the “régime”—what passes for true and what regulates or controls relations of power within society—are mutually supportive. The international societies surrounding the discourses of *kōan* and Eucharistic practice would presumably not count as exceptions.

⁵ Michel Foucault, “Truth and Power” [TP], in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings: 1972-1977*, ed. Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 131.

The ritual contexts of *kōan* meditation and the Eucharist, which, as we have seen, are shaped by performative utterances, are central to—and in some sense constitutive of—the two traditions of Rinzai Zen and Catholicism, respectively. Both Hori and Chauvet maintain that, although these practices are particular elements within traditions which are much broader, nevertheless they are foundational to the religious identities which these traditions form. Thus they have a decisive impact on the discourses of these traditions, construed holistically as régimes of truth. Hori explains that *zazen* (which involves meditation on *kōan*) is “the one fundamental activity of the monastery, the center from which all else is done” (ZS 16). Monastic life, in turn, is the formative site in which Zen takes shape as a lived practice that can subsequently be extended to a mode of existence in the outside world (ZS 28). Likewise, Chauvet argues that, although the sacraments (including the Eucharist) are “only one element among others within the particular epistemological configuration of the faith,” they are nevertheless a “constitutive dimension of the faith” (160). The Eucharist in particular is a “paradigmatic expression” of the sacramentality of the Church (159), which is, in turn, a constitutive aspect of Christian identity. Thus, although Austin’s theory of utterances and Foucault’s analysis of discourses concern different levels of language, the examples discussed in this paper are positioned in such a way as to bridge this gap: they are at once *constituted* by performative speech acts and *constitutive* of entire discourses which extend far beyond these concrete ritual practices.

A *prima facie* analysis suggests that, indeed, the same texts and utterances which Hori and Chauvet have classified under the category of illocutionary performance would be, by Foucault’s lights, inseparable from innumerable power relations of a less salutary and more political kind. Some relations would occur *within* the religions themselves. Fixed hierarchical

relations such as those between Zen masters and students, Catholic priests and laypersons are clear examples. But these would be only the more salient outgrowths of “the multiplicity of force relations immanent in the sphere in which they operate and which constitute their own organization”: that is, the countless exchanges of power at a local or individual level which are nevertheless part of the same regime.⁶ Other power relations (of both an overtly hierarchical and more diffuse sort) would also be constantly engendered *between* these traditions and other régimes of truth which are outside or opposed to them. These relations could be classified according to the lines separating distinct denominations or religions, as well as those dividing religious and secular forms of discourse and power. The battles shaping these relations of power are doubtless waged daily, in small ways, in monasteries and churches, in schools, in legislative committees, in consumer spending practices, and in personal relationships—in short, they permeate the countless micro-relations which make up the social worlds that the linguistic practices of the *kōan* curriculum and the Eucharist have entered.

These diverse instances of discursive power—which I am calling “political”—are not primarily repressive: rather, as Foucault sees it, “the notion of repression is quite inadequate for capturing what is precisely the productive aspect of power” (TP 119). Power “doesn’t only weigh on us as a force that says no”; rather, it “traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourse” (TP 119). Nevertheless, throughout his work Foucault’s rhetoric of domination, exclusion, and hegemony casts doubt on the idea that the wide-ranging, productive power of discourses is typically a good thing. For example, Foucault maintains that the problem for the intellectual is to change “the political, economic, institutional regime of the production of truth” and to detach “the power of truth from the forms of hegemony, social,

⁶ Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: Volume 1: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1978), 92.

economic, and cultural, within which it operates at the present time” (TP 133). By encouraging intellectuals to change régimes of truth, Foucault does not necessarily imply that the political power wrapped up in every discourse of every society is wholly dominating or oppressive, but he does seem to endorse a general hermeneutics of suspicion with respect to it.

By contrast, although they do not develop these insights in great detail, both Hori and Chauvet suggest that the political performance of *kōan* meditation and the Eucharist is, at least ideally, an extension and concretization of the salutary performance, and not a hindrance to it. Thus, whereas Foucault authorizes a hermeneutics of suspicion with respect to the political, they gesture toward the possibility of a hermeneutics of charity applied to the same phenomenon. Hori, for example, identifies “selfless compassion” (or *karuna*) as one of the intended goals of Zen meditation and as a fruit of nondualistic awareness (ZS 6). Likewise, Chauvet contends that a moral and social praxis of the kind which Johann Baptist Metz advocates is a crucial element of the structure of Christian identity which stems from the sacrament of the Eucharist (179). In short, according to the logic and experience internal to these traditions, the political power which their religious language carries is arguably a good thing, insofar as it is an authentic expression of the awakening and communion which each tradition is meant to realize. The practices of *kōan* meditation and Eucharistic celebration may thus be seen as holding the potential to bring about a salutary transformation *of* the political, rather than a salutary transformation *in opposition* to it.

An open-ended conclusion

Of the two basic kinds of linguistic power discussed in this essay, salutary and political, one type of power may appear more positive (insofar as religious transformation is meant to be a good thing), and the other may seem more negative (insofar as, following Foucault, the political

power of discourses is linked, by way of a hermeneutics of suspicion, with domination and hegemony). Yet their relative value is much more difficult to assign than these initial impressions suggest. There are at least two reasons for this difficulty. The first reason has to do with the structural interdependence of these linguistic performances. Since, for each context, they stem from the same linguistic activity and cannot be separated from it, the two sorts of linguistic performance (salutary and political) must in some sense be treated as a single phenomenon proper to and partially constitutive of each tradition. This unity of structure (which is at bottom grounded in whatever unity holds each religion together as a whole) complicates any attempt to make sharp distinctions of value between religiously significant transformations and problematically operative régimes of truth. In some sense, it will always be the case that one is talking about the same thing.

Second, the relative value of the salutary and political performances of religious language is difficult to determine because it is not clear how the criteria for this sort of assessment should be established. For example, Foucault's use of the term "domination" should not be taken as though it were value-free or wholly separable from some disputable sense of what would constitute liberation, were it possible. This is so even if Foucault's sense of liberation remains largely implicit rather than clearly defined in many of his works (though the later volumes of *A History of Sexuality* are arguably more explicit on this score). Thus there is a sense in which Foucault himself may be read as offering an alternative view of the salutary, grounded in his own tradition (whether or not the term "religious" seems an appropriate classification of his perspective). If one does not want to decide at the outset in favor of Foucauldian liberation over against the kinds of religious transformation which Hori and Chauvet describe, then it is not clear from which texts or discourses criteria of judgment should be derived. To generalize the point,

both Foucault's hermeneutics of suspicion and Hori's and Chauvet's hermeneutics of charity with respect to their own traditions discourage any appropriation of particular values articulated in Western culture (and, by extension, in *any* culture) as though they could serve fairly as universal standards of assessment or interpretation. Thus neither Foucault's own implicit rules of interpretation, nor those of Chauvet, Hori, or Austin (for that matter) are to be assumed reliable for all situations. This familiar problem of hermeneutical contingency appears inescapable in the midst of an intellectual culture shaped by an irreducible plurality of voices, each sharing the freedom to speak in the absence of one single legitimating authority.

In sum, assigning any sort of relative value to the salutary and political power of the language in each tradition is difficult *first of all*, because although this power is diverse it has a structural unity roughly identifiable with the traditions themselves; and *secondly*, because no unproblematic standards for such judgment appear to be forthcoming. Nevertheless, despite these difficulties, *insofar as* the distinctions between salutary and political power in this paper already presuppose that there is some validity in both lines of interpretation which we have considered—the first being grounded in Hori's and Chauvet's appropriations of Austin and the second consisting of my own application of Foucault—it seems to follow that the values associated with these interpretations would also hold some weight, and in a sense would already constitute their own form of assessment. However much these interpretations have been persuasive, it is precisely to this extent that the values embedded in them have already been accepted as standards for judging what is good and what is problematic about the ways that language functions in each religious tradition.

In light of these reflections and the preceding analysis, I'd like to bring my remarks to a close by posing some general, foundational questions concerning comparative theology and the

comparative study of religion. These questions are genuine and not rhetorical: To what extent are the texts and colloquia that go by these names exerting power on behalf of particular (religious) traditions and the experiences which they distinctively shape? With what power are they investing the term “religion,” and thus presumably to some degree all things religious in contrast to those that are (merely) secular? Or rather, how much is this very distinction between the religious and the secular, and the practices it organizes, being reinforced by the utterances and discourses of these comparative disciplines? Finally, as the last position on this spectrum, to what extent is the project of secularization itself—however it is defined—precisely what these texts and dialogues are empowering?