Singing with the Mountains:
The Language of God in the Afghan Highlands

Table of Contents

Mountains and Messiahs:
An Introduction

O the mind, mind has mountains[1]

As the dawn drew near in the Afghan highlands, Maryam-i Thani began her fast. Her

name, *Second Mary*, portended a *Second Jesus*, and, indeed, the infant ‘Isa-yi Thani had just

been born in Mary's village. His first cries bore the name of God. They were a *dhikr*, a

recitation and recollection of God, and this infant's cries were enough for Mary. She let the

dhikr of God's name nourish her and carry her beyond sleep, beyond hunger, and beyond the

fatigue of her aged body. The day stretched to the night, the night to the next day, day to

night, and so it continued for forty days. Jesus' *dhikr* bore Mary past the impermanence of her

flesh until this *dhikr* bound her to God as a friend.

Maryam's forty days in devotion were not hers alone and nor was her death a private

matter. In these mountains on the edge of the Mughal Empire's control as the *hijri* calendar

turned ever nearer to the year 1000 (1591 CE), Mary's community of Tu'i Afghans

understood the significance of the infant's *dhikr* and the old woman's death. This was a time

electric with apocalyptic possibility. Day and night, month and year—these markers no longer

mattered as time bent and circled back on itself, saturated with possible pasts and

remembered futures. Time became a matter of repetition and transformation. The world was

spilling forth with this message.

In another portent of the End, the cows of Mary's neighbor ‘Abd al-Karim stretched

their necks willingly to his knife until he slaughtered twenty cows for the coming feast without

the assistance of any other hand. The community prepared themselves for this very moment:

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[1] Gerald Manley Hopkins, 'No Worst, There is None' in *Gerard Manley Hopkins: The Major Works* (Oxford 2009) 167.

the Greater Resurrection and the appearance of the messianic figure of the *mahdi*.[2] They had been taught by their teacher—Bayazid Ansari, *pir-i roshan,* the "the illuminated master"—to prepare for these events of the End, to train their tongues to recite *dhikr* phrases, and to let these blessed words transform the community into one freed from shadows and brought into angelic and divine light. They were no longer just *Tu'i Afghans*; they were *Roshaniyya*, the luminous people, the beings of light.

Shortly after the death of Second Mary, a merchant caravan passed through this community on its way north to Kabul. The Roshaniyya seized the goods of the caravan in a fit of disgust for the crass materialism that stood in flagrant rejection of the immediacy of these apocalyptic times.[3] Gathering the goods in a central field, the Roshaniyya used their horses to trample and destroy the goods. According to our sources, the dispossessed caravanners fled to Kabul and told the governing Mughal authorities that "the luminous master had drawn his sword" and the Roshaniyya had rebelled. Five hundred Mughal horsemen rode to this Tu'i community, slaughtered the community, and inaugurated some fifty years of violent clashes between the Roshaniyya and the Mughal Empire.[4]

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Here is what I find so strange and so intriguing about the story that I have just related: this is the fullest and most detailed account of the cause of the conflict between this group known as the Roshaniyya and the forces of the Mughal Empire. The conflict was an important one for a number of reasons. It resulted in the (temporary) consolidation of Mughal

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[2] This account is translated (and lightly adapted) from *The Book of States* ("Hal-Namah"), a hagiography of Bayazid Ansari. ʿAli Muḥammad Mukhliṣ Kandahārī Shīnvārī, *Ḥāl-Nāmah-yi Miyān Roshan* (Kabul: Vizārat-i Iṭṭilāʿāt va Farhang, 2009), 346-349.

[3] ʿAli Muḥammad Mukhliṣ, Ḥāl-Nāmah-yi Miyān Roshan, 346–349.

[4] Ibid., 349 and following.

control across the Khyber Pass and thus secured Mughal governance in much of what is now Afghanistan as well as the trade routes by which Central Asian horses would be brought for use in the powerful cavalries of the Mughal military machine. Moreover, the Roshaniyya were the first—or among the first—to use Pashto as a language of writing and literature. A language now spoken by some sixty million people and with a rich literature first found its way into ink on paper with the Roshaniyya. Furthermore, this conflict became a hermeneutic key for later British colonial administrators attempting to understand (and conquer and govern) the Afghans on either side of the Khyber Pass. In other words, this conflict played an important geo-political role in the sixteenth century, profoundly shaped and even inaugurated Pashto literature, and became a model through which later imperial projects of the nineteenth, twentieth, twenty-first centuries were understood. And despite the significance of this conflict, our fullest source from the premodern period hinges this conflict upon the death of a fasting woman named Second Mary, the prayers of a newborn named Second Jesus, the eschatological message seen in the cows' willingness to stretch their necks to the knives, and in the decision of some caravanners to interpret the anti-materialism of a village's apocalyptic anticipation as a declaration of war from Bayazid Ansari.

And yet this is not what we find in most recent accounts of the Roshaniyya. A different story is told about them—a story that has typically excised that language of end times and those references to *dhikr*-fasts that unsettle us, a story that anesthetizes the mystery so that we may see patterns and explanations that are more familiar. I will use this book to largely reject the story that we typically relate of the Roshaniyya, but *that* story—the one I invite you to reject along with me—is nonetheless an informative one that is worth telling.

That is a story that typically begins with Bayazid Ansari, the teacher of the Roshaniyya and the one recognized as the *mahdi* of a new, messianic age. He was born in 1525 CE in the

town of Jalandhar in the region of the Punjab (in present-day India). As an infant in 1526 CE, his family moved some 350 miles west of Jalandhar to Kaniguram, a town in the present-day Pakistani region of Waziristan. This was a significant year, for it is in this year that the Central Asian general Babur and his allies defeated king Ibrahim Lodi north of Delhi at the Battle of Panipat—and so began the *Mughal* dynasty that ruled much of South Asia until the era of British colonialism. According to one source, the infant Bayazid and his family passed the Mughal army of Babur as it moved south from Kabul on its way to defeat the ruling Lodis and conquer India. Bayazid grew up in the highlands of Kaniguram among people that are typically described as *Afghan*, though other words such as *Pashtun, Pukhtun*, and *Pathan* are frequently used to name the communities in the mountainous regions between Kabul, Peshawar, Kaniguram, and Kandahar. As Bayazid grew, he began to preach to the Afghans and call them to renew their devotion to the one true God. His reputation grew, and he was recognized as a Sufi *pir*—as a "master" who taught his disciples the spiritual path. He taught his vision of Islam to many people who did not receive the full attention of other religious leaders. Orphans, women, nomads, poor artisans, and farmers heard his message along with governors, tribal leaders, and princes. He trained them in *dhikr* practices in which his disciples would recite pious phrases, and he led them in forty-day *chilla* retreats. And so his reputation grew further, and he was recognized by some as the messianic *mahdi* and even as the voice of God. He spoke and wrote the revelations of God, and, radically, he did so in *Pashto,* the language of the Afghans. The typical, scholarly story goes that Bayazid tethered religious fervor—even fanaticism—to parochial Afghan virtues of self-governance and Mughal hostility such that Bayazid's *roshani* teachings (his "teachings of light") sparked an ever-increasing ethnic self-consciousness and cultural self-awareness. This ethnic self-consciousness, in fact, frequently serves as the *explanation* for the conflict between the Roshaniyya and the Mughals

mentioned above. The Roshaniyya resisted the Mughals because they were *Afghans*, and Bayazid "used" religion to temporarily unite the disorganized, fissiparous Afghan tribes of the highlands against the rule of the Mughal court.[5]

I will suggest that this story fails in many regards, and that many of the terms and assumptions of this story (especially the invocation of "Afghan tribes") are anachronistic. For the moment, though, let me register my biggest complaint: how *familiar* this story feels. The Roshaniyya are likely not familiar to readers, and the names of these towns and regions may also be unknown. But is the story not one that we can easily grasp? A story of local, "tribal" people uniting around a dangerous, charismatic, and fanatical leader to fight in the name of their own ethnic self-determination and their own vernacular literature in the face of the mighty empire? Told in such a way, we can process the history of the Roshaniyya and file them away as a somewhat-interesting example of the ways in which ethnic identities (and vernacular languages) adopted religious language and were then folded into empires during the early modern period.

But what of Second Mary and Second Jesus? Why is it that *their* details are the ones worth telling in the fullest source that we have to understand the Roshaniyya?

It is here, in this gap that opens between the strangeness of our sources and the familiarity of our explanations, that we find the real value of lending our imaginations to the Roshaniyya—or so I argue with this book. I do not want this book's sole aim to be a "correction" of the histories we record of the Roshaniyya, the Mughal Empire, and Afghanistan. Rather, I want us to seek that trembling space between the stories inked on manuscript and the histories printed on page, and I wager that it is in that space that the

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[5] Jonathan L. Lee, *Afghanistan: A History from 1260 to the Present* (Reaktion Books, 2018), 57–60.

stories of the Roshaniyya turn back on *us* and confront *us* with our habits of relating to language, of thinking the relationships between religion and belonging, and of telling stories of the past.

We will explore the reasons why stories such as that of the Tu'i village are transmuted into stories of ethnic self-determination and proto-nationalism against a horizon of an ostensibly known "Islamic orthodoxy" and fringe "heterodox messianism." But let me offer a simple, material reason why the strangeness of the Tu'i village is so often lost: it is difficult to access the sprawling, lurching, revelatory linguistic messianism of the Roshaniyya we find in early sources. A personal example can clarify this. I first encountered the story of the Roshaniyya in a short chapter in an edited volume on Sufism. In this chapter, there is mention of a text attributed to Bayazid Ansari called "Khayr al-bayan," *The Best Exposition*, that conveyed the doctrines of the Roshaniyya in Pashto—and this work is considered the *first* prose text written in Pashto.[6] Intrigued, I requested through interlibrary loan an edition of *The Best Exposition* published in 1967 in Peshawar by Muhammad ʿAbd al-Quddus Qasimi. In the decades since Partition and the emergence of the nation of Pakistan in 1947, there have been Pashtun activists, politicians, and scholars interested in the cultural and historical resources for theorizing a *Pashtunistan* that dissolves the infamous Durand Line dividing the Pashtun communities of Pakistan and Afghanistan—hence the existence of a published edition. I received my copy of *The Best Exposition* and was stunned by what I found. This was not a Pashto work of Sufi doctrine—as I had expected—but rather a cobweb of multiple, interpenetrating languages holding together the voices of God and Bayazid in revelatory

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[6] Sergei Andreyev, "The Rawshaniyya," in *The Heritage of Sufism: Late Classical Persianate Sufism (1501-1750)*, ed. Leonard Lewisohn (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 1999), 311.

dialogue.[7] In this text, Arabic was made to rhyme with Pashto while Persian and Hindawi flashed through *The Best Exposition* with a pattern I could not detect. Moreover, here, among the first pages of *The Best Exposition*, was God delivering the Arabic-Persian-Pashto alphabet—one letter at a time—to Bayazid so that he may tell the people of the oneness (*tawhid*) of God. And, here, among these first pages, was God telling Bayazid to deliver his messages according to the melodies (*alhan*) of Surat ar-Rahman of the Qur'an and to deliver this message to the peoples all over the world.

This was, in short, unlike any text that I had encountered in Islamic literary traditions, and it seemed shockingly ill-suited as a "manifesto" for a community ostensibly organized around ethnic Afghan self-consciousness and invested in Pashto vernacularization as a proto-nationalist means of reaching a popular Afghan audience. *The Best Exposition* was not unique in its capacity to startle and elude. The other sources of the Roshaniyya are in Arabic, Persian, Pashto, and Hindawi; they often rely upon cross-linguistic models (e.g., Pashto poems following Persian rhythms); and they evince a reliance upon previous literary traditions (e.g., the rich tradition of Persian hagiographies of saints) coupled in confounding ways with tropes and narrative patterns that seem distinctive (e.g., hagiographies that feature numerous doppelgängers of the saint). So here's that *gap* again—the gap that opens between a source that shakes free of our interpretative categories and the scholarly description of that source that wrestles it into something known, something familiar, something that does not challenge our definitions of "Islam," our notion of Afghanistan, and our relationship to the past.

This book seeks to understand why texts such as *The Best Exposition* were composed and inscribed, why they have been transmuted in our histories into the traces of proto-nationalism,

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[7] Andreyev's brief characterization did note that the work was dialogic, but, despite his description, I was not prepared for how perplexing and intriguing this dialogue would be.

and what we can understand by studying that *gap* and letting the tension between its two sides drive our efforts at methodological and theoretical reflection. I wager that the strangeness of the Roshaniyya (strange for our contemporary perspective, that is) is what makes the Roshaniyya a compelling site of study and wonder for readers with interests outside of the Mughal Empire, outside of Afghanistan, and outside of the premodern period. Indeed, it is the geographic, temporal, and intellectual distance between the story of Second Mary and the historical accounts we typically tell that will prove generative to think through language, history, and belonging.

So back to the story of Second Mary and Second Jesus. I began with this story of Second Mary among the Roshaniyya because it emerges from the intersecting themes of language, history, and belonging that define this book. This story insists that the inciting event of this conflict that would spell the doom of the Roshaniyya began with an elderly woman fasting herself to death because a newborn was reciting God's name. To understand the ways in which this story (and the other sources of the Roshaniyya) functions effectively and felicitously, we will attend to the Roshani imaginations of language and narrative that *precede* the specific stories they tell and revelations they preach. We find this particular story in a hagiography written about Bayazid Ansari, the *pir-i roshan* ("the illuminated master"), but this story of a Tu'i village's eschatological anticipation is not just a record of some local events; it is a declaration of messianic unveiling. Animal domesticity, the presence of a Jesus, the announcement of the imminent Resurrection, and the weight given to Mary's *dhikr* all coincide to announce and present Bayazid Ansari as the *mahdi*—the messianic figure and "guided one"

of Islamic eschatology who would accompany Jesus in the time of the End.[8] Intriguingly, Bayazid is absent in this narrated declaration of his messianic status—an indication that we are dealing with a different relationship between history, text, and language than we have often assumed in the study of religion. Bayazid's messianism is not a matter of a historical personage's claim for authority nor is his revelation a matter of new laws or predictions of the future. Rather, the messianism of Bayazid circulates in the language of the *dhikr*s practiced by his disciples, and his revelation emerges from the complex temporality that Roshani language seeks to create. Bayazid does not need to be present for his revelatory language to shape the worlds and times of his disciples. As uncomfortable as it may be at times, we only begin to understand the Roshaniyya in the realm of revelatory language and its ability to shape the very stuff of self, time, and cosmos.

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Mughal chronicles and, much later, British gazetteers would offer different cursory accounts of the origins of this conflict.[9] These accounts found it fit to explain away the Roshaniyya as exemplars of *Afghan* unruliness and excess, as if the ethnicity of the Roshani disciples was satisfactory reason for why they followed the illuminated master in unsheathing their swords. With modifications—often significant—this has continued to be the story told of the Roshaniyya. The story told by this book is a different story, one that centers their efforts to write the language of God by imitating the Qur'an in revelatory, tetralingual rhyming prose. They conceptualized language as powerful, nourishing, transformative, and material in

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[8] For consideration of Islamic eschatology and the place of 'Isa/Jesus in these narratives, consider: Abbas Amanat, *Apocalyptic Islam and Iranian Shi'ism* (I.B. Tauris, 2009); Zeki Saritoprak, *Islam's Jesus* (University of Florida, 2015).

[9] The conclusion of this book will briefly explore Mughal and British representations of the Roshaniyya in which Dr. John Leyden's 1812 account is of particular importance. J. Leyden, "On the Rosheniah Sect and Its Founder, Bayezid Ansari," *Asiatick Researches* 11 (1812).

a cosmos that was entering the time of the End; and they attempted to refashion their selves into angels and divine-beings by training their tongues to speak only God's praise and God's words. These efforts to distinguish themselves as *the luminous people*, paradoxically, demonstrate how thoroughly enmeshed they were in premodern cultures that were shared in Central Asia, Iran, and South Asia—cultures often called "Persianate" because of the influence of Persian-language in cultural and courtly expression.[10] As we lend our imaginations to theirs for the space of a book, we gain a greater sense of the complexity of belonging and identity in the premodern Persianate and Mughal world, of the breadth of possible ways of understanding the history of Islam and the place of the vernacular therein, and of the hollow universalism of our conceptual approaches to language.

I have already related the story as it is typically told, and the expanse of this book will be necessary to relate the alternative. In summary, though, this is the story I see in the sources of the Roshaniyya: an attempt to speak the language of God. In the Afghan highlands of the sixteenth century, the Roshaniyya sought revelation. This was a Sufi community that not only desired to find God's word and to abide by it, they also attempted to practice God's word and to develop techniques of language intended to render their own tongues the organs of continuous revelation. The Roshaniyya flourished in the region known today as Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in Pakistan between the years 1560 and 1620 C.E., but they were active on either side of the contemporary border that weaves throughout these frontier highlands. They followed the messianic Bayazid Ansari to *dhikr* practices, to spiritual retreats, to war with the soldiers of the Mughal Empire, and to the first use of Pashto as a written language. While they have often been described simply as *Afghans*, this term masks the social complexity of this

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[10] Richard Eaton, *Persianate India, 1000-1765* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2019).

group. The Roshaniyya consisted of orphans, blacksmiths, poets, women, merchants, visionaries, nomads, and wandering ascetics. Upon receiving the *dhikr* phrases from Bayazid and letting these words shape their tongues, many of the Roshaniyya disavowed the term *Afghan* and disavowed their local identification to receive a new name: *Roshani*. They sent epistles and missionaries to governors, princes, and emperors throughout South and Central Asia. Bayazid—and his sons, his wife, and his disciples—spoke to God and heard God *in and as language*; from this linguistic encounter, a number of Persian, Arabic, and Pashto texts emerged that sought not theological lesson alone but divine presence in the letter. Some of these texts were attributed to Bayazid, some to his followers, and others directly to God—but all of them attest to a bid to find God upon human tongues and through the ink of pens in human hands.

As their critics would contend, however, the Roshaniyya attempted to make language do something that language *should not* do; there is a heretical immediacy in the way the Roshaniyya sought to infuse the semiotic with the divine. While the practices and beliefs of the Roshaniyya were legible and familiar in the religious landscapes of a sixteenth-century Islamic world remade by the proliferation of Sufi networks in the preceding centuries, the Roshaniyya had enemies who claimed that the Roshaniyya had stepped across the precipice into outright disbelief. In this way, the Roshaniyya's is a story of the conditions of *impossibility* in the cultural and religious worlds of the sixteenth century. Thus, the story of their revelatory pursuit ends in a tower of skulls and the proliferation of heresiographies that detailed the linguistic sins of the Roshaniyya. Bayazid's career was short. His texts were rejected. His sons and Roshani followers were slaughtered, enslaved, displaced, and, if lucky, incorporated into the Mughal Empire. His ideas were condemned as heresy, and his messianic claims ridiculed as delusion and entombed as the bizarre prehistory of an emerging Afghanness.

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What does a failed messiah have to teach us?

Given the dearth of literature on histories of religion and culture in Afghanistan and among Afghan communities, the failures of Bayazid teach us much about a region that US American audiences have viewed through frames of violence and warfare—almost exclusively so.[11] As its primary aim, this book draws into relief the theoretical challenges posed by the literature of the Roshaniyya to our habits of imagining language, finding ourselves in time and history, and connecting religion, rhetoric, and belonging. Despite the conceptual richness of encountering Roshani texts and worlds, we should not lose focus of a simple historical point— how unusual the story of the Roshaniyya looks when placed within American discourses on Afghanistan and Afghans. As I write this, the United States' war in Afghanistan has lasted eighteen years.[12] These years have not witnessed the emergence in popular American media of sympathetic, textured, and historical accounts of the lives of Afghans.[13] To the cruel contrary, we mostly find neglect punctuated, perhaps, by an annual Hollywood movie celebrating US military might and violence.[14] As Shahzad Bashir and Robert Crews have noted, framed through Washington's security concerns, the inhabitants of this region "are portrayed as living

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[11] Judith Butler has explored the ethical consequences of Western narratives of war (including in Afghanistan) in *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* (Verso 2016). Important exceptions to this dominant American narrative of Afghanistan can be found in: Nile Green and Nushin Arbabzadah, eds., *Afghanistan in Ink: Literature Between Nation and Diaspora* (Oxford, 2012).

[12] For a discussion of why and how this is possible, consider: Noah Coburn, *Losing Afghanistan* (Stanford 2016).

[13] I have use the term "Afghan" to describe the community at the heart of my historical investigation that resided in the Afghan highlands and spoke Pashto, among other languages. In writing on modern Afghanistan and Pakistan, I use the term "Pashtun" in order to avoid equating citizens of Afghanistan with a single ethnic group. The historical sources of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, however, exclusively use the term "*Afghān*," and I have followed suit.

[14] See: Mark Graham, *Afghanistan in Cinema* (University of Illinois Press, 2010).

without any sense of change, eternally wallowing in a world of barbarity."[15] This image of

timelessness largely serves to mask the American (and, previously, Soviet and British)

entanglement in the violence of the region. Quite clearly, the Afghan highlands are a

crossroads and lie on the well-traveled paths between India and Iran and Central Asia. As

Bashir and Crews note, "Contrary to its stereotypical portrayal as a land forgotten by time ...

there is hardly any modern idea or weapon that has not had a significant impact on the

region."[16] Our historical attention will be given to the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, but

the story of the Roshaniyya echoes their point. Not only does this account of messiahs and

divine languages and visionary dreams given to women and doppelgängers roaming the

Afghan highlands represent a *different* story, but it is also a story that attests to Afghan

participation in transregional cultural and religious phenomena flourishing in the early

modern period—a story of *connection* and *change*.[17] Whwen written by Mughal, British, and

American scholars, the history of the Roshaniyya has been a *cause of* (and not a *remedy against*)

the amnesia, timelessness, and isolation that characterizes the current, warped imagination of

Afghanistan. This book offers a different story.

Much of the work of this book lies in examining *what* the Roshaniyya tell us about a

broader religio-cultural moment (that we might label as premodern or early-modern

Persianate) and examining the process by which the very markers of transgregional

participation were reinterpreted to be markers of parochialism, nativism, and isolation among

a timeless Afghan people. How did we become so confident that a term such as *tribe* or a

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[15] Shahzad Bashir and Robert D Crews, Under the Drones: Modern Lives in the Afghanistan-Pakistan Borderlands (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012) 2.

[16] Ibid., 262.

[17] In this way, I seek to contribute and expand upon a project such as Robert Crews's in *Afghan Modern*. Robert D. Crews, Afghan Modern: The History of a Global Nation, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press, 2015.

concept such as *vernacular* speaks to local concerns among Afghans?[18] A central figure in this regard was Akhund Darweza—a Sunni theologian who inhabited the town of Nangrahar (near present-day Jalalabad, Afghanistan) and debated the Roshaniyya circa 1600 C.E. and detailed their sins. As we find him in his own texts, he seems terrified, even debilitated, by the unstable semiotic imagination of the Roshaniyya. In response to Roshani efforts to warp time with language and bring God into Pashto, Akhund Darweza wrote a series of texts that became central to Afghan traditions of Islam throughout South Asia. Despite his absence from Euro-American scholarship, his vision of Afghan belonging and religion was more foundational than that of the celebrated poet, Khushhal Khan Khattak.[19] Akhund Darweza penned an immensely popular summary of Islamic theology that reads much like an "Introduction to Islam" textbook today; he condemned the Roshaniyya in unrelenting heresiographies; and he inscribed one of the first written genealogies of the descent of the Afghans from King Saul (*malik talut*). The debate between Akhund Darweza and the Roshaniyya—despite its intensity and the frequency with which *damnation!* was hurled—nevertheless speaks to a shared appreciation of the stakes of language in a religio-cultural moment alive with eschatological anticipation of the End. It was only later nineteenth-century British readers of Akhund Darweza that began to interpret this debate between Akhund

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[18] For a critique of the work performed by "tribe" in American discourses, consider: Robert Crews, "The Taliban and Nationalist Militancy in Afghanistan," in *Contextualising Jihadi Thought*, edited by Jeevan Deol and Zaheer Kazmi, 369–84. New York: Columbia University Press, 2011; M. Jamil Hanifi, "Editing the Past: Colonial Production of Hegemony through the 'Loya

Jerga' in Afghanistan," *Iranian Studies* 37, no. 2 (2004): 295–322. For a discussion of the emergence of "tribe" as a category of analysis in English-language sources on Afghanistan, consider the conclusion of this book as well as: Bernard Hopkins, *The Making of Modern Afghanistan* (Basingstoke; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012); Martin J. Bayly, *Taming the Imperial Imagination: Colonial Knowledge, International Relations, and the Anglo-Afghan Encounter, 1808-1878* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

[19] For a useful survey of Pashto literature, consider: Sergei Andreyev, "Pashto Literature: The Classical Period," in Oral Literature of Iranian Languages: Kurdish, Pashto, Balochi, Ossetic, Persian and Tajik: Companion Volume II: History of Persian Literature A, Volume 18, by Philip G. Kreyenbroek (London: I.B. Tauris, 2010), 89–113.

Darweza and the Roshaniyya as something confined to the timeless disorder of a *race* or

ethnicity known as the Afghans. That, too, is part of our consideration: how debates regarding

the possibility of continuous revelation were translated into ethnic and racialized accounts of

Afghanistan.

So that is the *what* that this failed messiah has to teach us: a stranger story of the Afghan

past, a story centered on a pursuit of revelation that ended in ruin but offers a glimpse of a

larger regional concern for finding gods and messiahs in language and *as language*. The first

use of Pashto (or "Afghan," as the language is called in our sources), to name an example that

we will revisit in some detail, speaks not to a Roshani concern for Afghan independence but to

a larger regional pattern of expanding the repertoire of God's communication through an

expanded alphabet. Rather than condemning them to heterodox isolation, it is precisely in the

intersection of language and messianic revelation that the Roshaniyya form their identities and

make a bid for a universality that exceeds the limits of ethnic particularism and

historiographical marginalization.

But if that's the *what*, the more substantial lesson of our failed messiah rests in the *how*—

how we encounter this story. And this *how* pulls us to reflect upon theoretical commitments to

certain ideologies of language, time, and belonging that silently shape and delimit our history-

telling. Bayazid's failure to build an empire like other sword-drawn messiahs of the

premodern Islamic world—such as Shah Ismaʿil Safavi—leaves a historiographical record of

aporia and absence. Even relative to the traces of other premodern Muslim movements, we

have few details for an elaborate social history of the Roshaniyya.[20] But into this absence

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[20] For descriptions of Safavid and Mughal monarchs such as Shah Ismail Safavi that similarly emphasize the centrality of messianism, Sufi sainthood, embodiment, and millenarianism, consider especially the following works: Shahzad Bashir, "Shah Ismaʿil and the Qizilbash: Cannibalism in the Religious History of Early Safavid

various actors have projected images of Bayazid and the Roshaniyya that disclose much about those doing the projecting. As representations of Bayazid pass through Roshani, Mughal, British, and scholarly histories, different Bayazids emerge. Indeed, this was a miracle of Bayazid, according to the Roshaniyya: "His heart could take the shape of all that appears in it."[21]

The indeterminacy of the historical Bayazid is at once a frustrating and revealing conundrum. There is no way to fully grasp or to fully know the "Bayazid" to whom Sufi texts, tetralingual revelations, and messianic stories are attributed. There are multiple Bayazids we will encounter: a Hindustani fanatic, an Afghan heretic, a Turkic preacher, a saint capable of doubling and dissolving his physical body, and a messiah granted dreams and words of God. There is no way to write his history without implicating ourselves, without filling in the gaps, and without irrevocably shaping the Bayazid of our projects according to present concerns and ideologies. This is true of all history writing, but it is both Bayazid's failures and his position on geographic, ideological, and categorical frontiers that intensify our entanglement in telling his story.[22] Rather than striving to untangle these knots of complicity and construction, the approach of this book is to maintain their tension. Habits of representation and imaginations of language are intimately bound up with the social formations of the Roshaniyya and their historical fate. The revelatory words constitute the social worlds by and the cosmos imagined by the Roshaniyya.

Iran," *History of Religions* 45 (2006): 234–56; Kathryn Babayan, *Mystics, Monarchs, and Messiahs: Cultural Landscapes of Early Modern Iran*, Harvard Middle Eastern Monographs (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002); Azfar Moin, *The Millennial Sovereign* (Columbia 2012.

[21] ʿAlī Muḥammad Mukhliṣ, Ḥāl-Nāmah-yi Miyān Roshan, 257.

[22] We can consider Kerwin Klein's work on US American historiography as a helpful comparative point that also demonstrates the intense ideological work performed by history writing about "frontiers." Kerwin Klein, *Frontiers of historical imagination: narrating the European conquest of native America, 1890-1990* (University of California Press, 1997).

The historiography of the Roshaniyya and, more generally, of religious cultures of the Afghan highlands has consistently sought to cut through the veils of religious language, miraculous narratives, apocalyptic urgency, and messianic timescapes.[23] With few exceptions (such as Sana Haroon's *Frontiers of Faith*),[24] histories of Afghanistan have striven to identify and relate—and, possibly, generate—accounts of ethnic groups and tribal societies that are alternatively motivated, inspired, burdened, and constrained in simple ways by a simple concept of religious "belief."[25] The implicit premise is that Afghan ethnicity, tribal society, and frontier geography are ontologically thicker, analytically richer, and historically more consequential than the religious ephemera described in texts of *dhikr* practice, hagiographies replete with dream visions and doubles, and eclectic imitations of the Qur'an. The premise in much of this literature is that "religious language" is an obstacle to overcome in order to understand the *really real*.[26] We often seek to look beyond the false messiahs and orient our scholarship with something more natural and more material: those enduring mountains of analysis such as ethnicity, tribe, and fanaticism that populate the writing on Afghan religion and history.

While I will argue that the analytical categories previously brought to a study of the Roshaniyya, Afghanistan, and religion in South Asia have tripped on unexamined metaphysical and ontological premises, we must be wary of replacing "ethnicity" with

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[23] For examples of this impulse, see especially: André Wink, "On the Road of Failure: The Afghans in Mughal India," *Cracow Indological Studies*, no. 11 (2009): 267–339; Sergei Andreyev, "The Rawshaniyya," in *The Heritage of Sufism: Late Classical Persianate Sufism (1501-1750)*, ed. Leonard Lewisohn (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 1999), 290–318; Arlinghaus, "The Transformation of Afghan Tribal Society," chap. 6.

[24] Sana Haroon, *Frontier of Faith: Islam in the Indo-Afghan Borderland* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).

[25] For the limitations of "belief" as a gravitational center of the academic study of religion, consider: Manuel Vasquez, *More Than Belief: A Materialist Theory of Religion* (Oxford 2010).

[26] Bruno Latour has made a similar point (with much more elegance) in: *Rejoicing: Or the Torments of Religious Speech*, trans. Julie Rose (Polity, 2013).

"Sufism" or "tribe" with "religion" as firmer footholds. In Euro-American studies of Islam, an idea of *mysticism* has been a tool to pry "Sufism" away from the rigidities spotted and posited in Islamic traditions of learning and practice—a procedure often performed according to the political interests of empires both American and European.[27] This is, in fact, a central rhetorical move of John Leyden, an English doctor who wrote an early and influential analysis of Sufism based upon his understanding of the Roshaniyya. My motivation for this study emerges not from a commitment to "taking religion seriously." The issue is both stickier and more elemental. The issue is this: the revelatory, messianic language of the Roshaniyya does not primarily aim to relate some religious experience out there nor describe a transcendent God up there or beatify an individual saint back then. This is not an account of *beyonds*, *aboves*, or *hidden withins*. Rather, the revelatory language of the Roshaniyya is the ground itself for the idealization, reflection, and—critically—constitution of Roshani social formations. The Roshaniyya emerge from world-making words, and our analyses will stumble from their very beginnings if we force Roshani language to conform to our semiotic imaginations. And if language—and the use, imagination, habits, genres, and structures of language—are the very grounds through which the Roshaniyya understand their being and becoming, then we cannot so easily unravel religious text and historical reality.

So to pose the question again: what does a failed messiah have to teach us? In this book, I argue that the story of the Roshaniyya offers a different perspective on the religious cultures and literatures of premodern South and Central Asia than we often encounter, and this perspective is one that will benefit those interested in questions of language, religion, and

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[27] Carl Ernst's eminently readable discussion of this topic remains an excellent standard for the study of Orientalism and Sufism: Carl Ernst, *Sufism* (Shambhala, 2011), chapter 1. Also consider: Rosemary Corbett, *Making Moderate Islam* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2016); Richard King, *Orientalism and Religion* (London: Routledge, 1999).

belonging—regardless of their geographic focus. If we lend our imaginations over to the world conjured by the Roshaniyya, we find that the Afghans are not isolated among timeless mountains, that language moves and functions in powerful, material ways, that the anticipated apocalypse allows for new potentialities of self and semiosis, and that vernacularization can also be a process of divinization. In attempting to reconstruct this vision of language, self, and belonging that we find in the Roshani texts, moreover, we are confronted with the strangeness of our own conceptions of language and time—strange in that our language comes ripe with ethical, ontological, and epistemological stakes that we rarely consider.

Mountains and Messiahs (A Note on the Past)

Why call this chapter "Mountains and Messiahs"? At a simple level, it names elements of our story. Set among the Spin Ghar and Hindu Kush mountains, Roshani devotees recognized Bayazid as the *mahdi*, a messianic figure of Islamic eschatology. As chapter two will explore, however, the narratives of Bayazid center on the multiplicity of this messianic figure. In these hagiographic accounts, there are multiple Bayazids, proliferating Bayazids, and disciples who seem to become Bayazid—and, thus, multiple messiahs. The archcritic of the Roshaniyya, Akhund Darweza, also relates stories of multiple (would-be) messiahs. Bayazid is only one of many messianic claimants that Akhund Darweza must debate, defuse, and castigate.

More significantly, this book finds itself caught between two approaches to temporality and the past. As noted, previous scholarship on the Roshaniyya has focused upon their importance (or unimportance) in the history of Afghan ethnic mobilization. The Roshaniyya are but a chapter in an enduring tale of Afghans failing to unite but temporarily, ever pulled apart by the centripetal force of tribal society. Or perhaps their use of Pashto attests to a

burgeoning nationalist sentiment, an early stirring on the frontier of political organization

along the lines of ethnicity. As Olaf Caroe wrote in his influential 1958 history of Afghans:

> Rather are [the tribes] like the waters of the sea; the storm-waves pass and disturb the
> surface, bringing flotsam and jetsam with the wind and sending the froth flying; the
> water, the essential element, mixes and turns around, but in itself remains the same.[28]

Tribe, ethnicity, frontier have become naturalized in the historiography of Afghanistan and

are laden with greater ontological weight and explanatory heft than the miracles, dreams, and

recitations of the Roshaniyya.

Joining this naturalization of ethnicity and tribe in histories of Afghan religion are

naturalized visions of Islamic history. As Saba Mahmood, Shahzad Bashir, and Anand Vivek

Taneja have argued, the "homogenous, empty time" of the modern, secular state has

converged with specific sectarian visions of Islamic history.[29] There is overwhelming

acceptance of the idea that Islam has "a single timeline" beginning with the Prophet

Muhammad and continuing until today.[30] And so it is that we frequently speak of Islam's

emergence at the time of the prophet, Islam's consolidation in ninth and tenth centuries, a

medieval period for Islam, and globalization of Islam in modernity—a tree growing upwards

from seventh-century soil with a solid trunk.[31] As instinctual as this timeline may appear, it is

a nakedly theological and sectarian argument emerging from particular formations of being

Muslim in the modern world.[32] In this book alone, we find multiple alternative textures to

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[28] Olaf Caroe, *The Pathans: 550 B.C.-A.D. 1957.* (London; New York: Macmillan; St. Martin's Press, 1958), 192.

[29] Shahzad Bashir, "On Islamic Time: Rethinking Chronology in the Historiography of Muslim Societies." *History and Theory* 53, no. 4 (2014): 519-544; Anand Vivek Taneja, *Jinnealogy: Time, Islam, and Ecological Thought in the Medieval Ruins of Delhi* (Stanford University Press, 2017). The phrase "homogenous, empty time" is Walter Benjamin's. Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Random House, 2007), 262.

[30] Bashir, "On Islamic Time," 520.

[31] Bashir cites Jonathan Berkey, Ira Lapidus, and Marshall Hodgson as historians who assume this type of linear temporality in their histories of Islam. Ibid, 523.

[32] Ibid., 542-544.

time: pasts that can be repeated, futures lived in the present, and Islams that begin with the pre-corporeal prophetic light of Muhammad descending into the loins of an Adam freshly given flesh. If pegged to the linear time of hegemonic narratives of Islam, the Roshaniyya represent a blip in which local practices formed a temporary "hybrid" with Islam before giving way to the preordained Islamization of the Afghans.[33] Critically, this conception of Islam's single, linear timeline reinforces (and relies upon) what Mahmood calls a "secular conception of temporality" characterized by "the positivity of events as they occur in linear time."[34] There is, in other words, an entanglement of secular approaches to history and specific, sectarian visions of Islam.

Ethnicity, tribe, "Islamic history"—such are the mountains marking the landscapes of our scholarship. The Qur'an hints that even the might of mountains may be an illusion: "A day when the earth and the mountains will tremble, and the mountains become heaps of flowing sand."[35] And as Walter Benjamin suggests, even a "weak messianism" can interrupt the natural(ized) order of things.[36]

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[33] This seems to be Andreyev's position on the matter. Sergei Andreyev, "The Rawshaniyya." More generally, Jay Trimingham was an influential proponent of a model of Sufi history in which the Sufis operated as a vanguard of Islamization due to the (seemingly unique) Sufi ability to adapt to local cultures, use vernacular languages, and synthesize other religions with the tenets of mystical Islam. More recent works on the history of Sufism have justifiably critiqued the rigidity of Trimingham's historical periodization and his reliance upon broad and determinative characterizations of Sufis. Though Trimingham's work has largely been rejected, there are some significant continuities between his model and contemporary analyses of Sufi history. Richard Eaton's work, for instance, significantly nuances the conclusions of Trimingham by offering a much more sophisticated description of the role played by Sufis in bridging "Islam" and indigenous non-Muslim populations. Consider Eaton's work and the work of Nile Green for more discussion of this issue. Richard M. Eaton, *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); Nile Green, *Sufism: A Global History* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012).

[34] Saba Mahmood, Religious Difference in a Secular Age: A Minority Report (Princeton University Press, 2015), 195–207, esp. 197.

[35] Qur'an 73:14. AJ Arberry's translation.

[36] Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 255.

In contrast to the mountains, we find the radical contingency that messianic thinking acknowledges—the cessation and rupture promised by the messiah which dwells in the weak, often failed, reclamation of the past in the present. This is a fragile project in which the "past flits by" and is "seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again."[37] Benjamin continues: "For every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably." As Giorgio Agamben insists, the messianic is not the future promise of transformation but is the relationship between our "time of the end" and the pasts we reclaim and fulfill in those fragile, flitting moments.[38] The result is a messianic "tiny displacement" in which "everything will be as it is now, just a little different."[39] This tiny displacement does not "refer simply to real circumstances, in the sense that the nose of the blessed one will become a littler shorter... or that the dog outside will stop barking." For Agamben, the "tiny displacement does not refer to the state of things, but to their sense and their limits."[40] The tiny displacement of the messianic rests in an "imperceptible trembling of the finite" that makes the limits—the categories, frames, words that we hang upon our objects of study—indeterminate and mobile.

Bayazid's project involved the (re)articulation of the Qur'an and a (re)living of Muhammad's prophetic career. Though the Mughals defeated the Roshaniyya, the texts of the

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[37] Ibid.

[38] Giorgio Agamben, *The Time That Remains*.

[39] Giorgio Agamben introduces his discussion of messianic "tiny displacement" through reference to a "well-known parable" that was told by Walter Benjamin ("who heard it from Gershom Scholem") to Ernst Bloch, "who in turn transcribed it in *Spuren*." Agamben *then* relates Benjamin's own version of the story, implicity revealing the "tiny displacement" that occurs between Benjamin's and Bloch's versions of Scholem's Hassidic parable. Agamben presents Benjamin's story in this manner: The *Hassidim* tell a story about the world to come that says everything there will be just as it is here. Just as our room is now, so it will be in the world to come; where our baby sleeps now, there too it will sleep in the other world. And the clothes we wear in this world, those too we will wear there. Everything will be as it is now, just a little different." Agamben, *The Coming Community*, 53.

[40] Agamben, *The Coming Community*, 54.

Roshaniyya nevertheless demonstrate tiny displacements which can result in a transubstantiation of our own historical vision. To follow Agamben and Benjamin, we might say that the messianic is an act of historical recognition and historiographical hesitation that questions the determinacy of our own tools of analysis; the messianic is an awareness of an interruptive and rapturous repetition that—with a finite trembling—suspends the naturalized order of a "linear" Islamic history and the determinacy of tribe and ethnicity. It is a relationship of exposing the present to the past, a posture of humility to *what could have been different*.

As Bayazid dreamt of a scrap of paper with the "Greatest Name" of God written upon it, so the Roshaniyya grasped at the scraps of the past and pursued in them a shimmering articulation of divine language born by their very own tongues trained by *dhikr* recitations. The Roshaniyya, therefore, practiced a "weak messianism" not because Bayazid was (or was not) a failed messiah; rather theirs was a weak messianism that involved a historical and linguistic fulfillment of the past. Through its trembling, the ostensibly fixed and singular moment of God's revelation to Muhammad became unmoored in time, cracked away from the seventh century, and left open to reclamation through the ambiguity of its temporal limits.

What happens to those mountains of ethnicity, tribe, and "Islamic history" when we lend our imaginations over to the Roshaniyya's messianism? We find a history of Islam that does not unfold in "empty, homogenous" time as a scroll being unraveled with linear inevitability. For the Roshaniyya, Islam did not emanate outwards from seventh-century Mecca, and they do not find themselves on some frontier between the local and the Islamic. The phenomena of seventh-century Mecca became the phenomena of the sixteenth-century Afghan highlands— and they were rendered such through the *dhikr* remembrances and Qur'anic rhymes of Bayazid Ansari.

This is not a perspective that accords with the common histories of Islam nor with some of the common practices in the discipline of history more generally. The historical "problem" posed by the Roshaniyya is both a theoretical and practical one—and Kathryn Gin Lum's recent article on the "historyless heathen" in American historiography captures the stakes of this issue. As I read Gin Lum's work, she is suggesting that there is an affinity between the *form* of common U.S. American habits of history writing (from the eighteenth century until the contemporary period) and *ideologies* of providence, expansionism, liberalism, and the rugged individuals who dragged the wild into history in the name of God and nation. When "change over time" defines *what* the discipline of history studies, Gin Lum suggests that this concords with (and perhaps serves) the ways in which American settlers and Protestant missionaries understood their work of civilizing: witness the baptism in history of the Hawaiian heathen *changed* into the Christian farmworker. As Gin Lum suggests, the affinity between such a providentialist historical ideology and the formal contours of the discipline of history often masks their continued (accidental?) alignment. Or, to give an example from the context of this book, we might say this: There are Mughal chronicles that write about the Roshaniyya in year-by-year chronological fashion—thereby reiterating an ever-growing temporal distance between the prophetic past and the present horizon—and rely upon "Afghan ethnicity" in explaining the Roshaniyya. For many scholars, these chronicles resemble historical sources in a way that the Roshaniyya texts of doppelganger saints and tetralingual revelations do not. That *resemblance*, however, hides that these Mughal chronicles themselves were often texts of messianic unveiling—displays of the divine emperor Akbar that held no less power than a war elephant.

So how can we better balance these sources, all of which are efforts to shape and mold the past despite their different rhythms and timescapes? I am not insisting that we adopt the

Roshaniyya's vision of time, history, and language as our own model for narrating Islamic history. Rather, the point is to maintain the tension between mountains and messiahs so that the hidden metaphysics of our world and our time become clearer. Roshani worlds will shake free of easy interpretative efforts as messiahs turn some of our hermeneutic mountains to dust, and it will become clear that the mountains of our scholarship could have been different.[41] As Shahzad Bashir has argued, the past of Islam is "a matter forever in the process of being made and unmade through the agency of the authors who invoke it in specific sociohistorical circumstances."[42]

Revelation and Its Practice (A Note on the Vernacular)

Though it is difficult to prove definitively, the Roshaniyya's *The Best Exposition* is often described as the first text using Pashto as a written language—and, thus, the Roshaniyya have been cast as central to a process of vernacularization.[43] Etymologically, "vernacular" suggests a space of the home and domesticity, and literary "vernacularization" involves a process by which the shared, public space of the written word comes to include the everyday life of the home. Scholars such as Farina Mir, Sheldon Pollock, Anne Murphy, and Christian Novetzke have offered different models for understanding the process of vernacularization in South

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[41] For a recent discussion of how the conception of history as "change over time" serves expansionist, colonial, Christian purposes in the nineteenth-century United States (and thus how our history writing is always a religious project at some level), consider: Kathryn Gin Lum, "The Historyless Heathen and the Stagnating Pagan: History as Non-Native Category?", *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation*, Vol. 28, Issue 1, *73*.

[42] Shahzad Bashir. "Everlasting Doubt: Uncertainty in Islamic Representations of the Past." *Archiv für Religionsgeschichte* 20, no. 1 (2018): 26.

[43] Sergei Andreyev, "Pashto Literature: The Classical Period," in *Oral Literature of Iranian Languages: Kurdish, Pashto, Balochi, Ossetic, Persian and Tajik: Companion Volume II: History of Persian Literature A, Volume 18*, by Philip G. Kreyenbroek (London: I.B. Tauris, 2010), 89–113. For another survey of Pashto literature, consider V.V. Kushev, "The Dawn of Pashtun Linguistics: Early Grammatical and Lexicographical Works and Their Manuscripts," *Manuscripta Orientalia 7*, no. 2 (2001): 3–9.

Asia whereby the unquestioned dominance of Sanskrit and Persian gave way to more diverse, multi-lingual, local and regional literary cultures.[44] Was it a matter of regional princes and governors sponsoring new literatures for their own political distinction? Or did vernacularization represent a larger shift in the gravitational center of society towards the political and cultural importance of everyday life? Or, as some scholars have suggested with the Roshaniyya use of Pashto, was vernacularization the result of an emergent ethnic self-consciousness?[45]

To varying degrees, these models hinge on an idea of *Pashtuns* (or Afghans, as premodern sources prefer) using *Pashto*, whether those Afghans were princes, mystics, or cyphers of ethnic identity.[46] But are we sure Pashto is a language of the Pashtuns? We might instinctually answer in the affirmative, but, as will explored throughout this book (with special attention in chapter four), this is not the answer that we find in the literature of the Roshaniyya. Pashto is *God's* language in these sources—or, more accurately, Pashto is *part* of God's language. If we accept these first emergences of Pashto as vernacularization, then the Roshaniyya do not conceive of vernacularization as an expansion of literature to include more voices and more communities. In these texts, we find vernacularization as an exclusionary process that raises Roshani language to divine status through the use of Pashto in concert with other linguistic practices.

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[44] Farina Mir, *The Social Space of Language: Vernacular Culture in British Colonial Punjab* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010); Anne Murphy, "Writing Punjabi Across Borders," in *South Asian History and Culture.* 9, 1 (2018): 68-91; Sheldon Pollock, *The Language of the Gods in the World of Men: Sanskrit, Culture, and Power in Premodern India.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006; Christian Novetzke, *The Quotidian Revolution* (Columbia 2016).

[45] Andreyev, "Pashto Literature."

[46] For an incisive discussion of the (assumed) link between ethnic identity and vernacularization, consider: Judith T. Irvine and Susan Gal, "Language Ideology and Linguistic Differentiation," in *Regimes of Language: Ideologies, Polities, and Identities*, ed. Paul V. Kroskrity (Santa Fe, N.M.: School of American Research Press, 2000).

Pashto is part of a repertoire of techniques to close the gap between God's language and the language of humans. Revelation—God's language—becomes a matter of practice, discipline, and performance. As chapter two will examine, *∂hikr* practices (and the writing about *∂hikr*-practices) are tools for linguistic divinization. The Roshaniyya's approach to revelation as something to be achieved and practiced departs sharply from the images of "mad messiahs" struck by lightning bolts of divine inspiration.[47] Bayazid's revelation was a matter of training the tongue, and thus it was not confined to Bayazid alone—as will be examined in the poetry of Mulla Arzani. Vernacularization, in this case, was bound up with messiahs and apocalypses and revelations. Given that this book includes the first non-Pashto analysis of Mulla Arzani's poetry (and select translations), it affords a chance to see different patterns of vernacularization in South Asia.

It is here, again, that Roshani revelation offers another instance of a "weak messianism." When we gaze through the literature of the Roshaniyya onto vernacularization in the Islamic world at large, the presumption of Arabic's privileged and sanctified place is not to be found. There is a slight trembling in the order of things as the Roshaniyya offer an alternative understanding of Islam and language. To more capably articulate the Roshani imagination and use of language, I rely upon the concept of semiotic ideology, as the next section explains.

Between Us and the Roshaniyya (A Note on Method)

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[47] The idea that those preaching on the apocalypse or claiming to be the messiah are mad is, surprisingly, a widely held hermeneutic assumption. For instance, consider the general approach taken by Landes (in an otherwise fascinating book) that we need to explain the appeal of apocalyptically minded despite their apparent tendency to be consistently and stubbornly "wrong." Richard Landes, *Heaven on Earth: The Varieties of the Millennial Experience* (Oxford University Press, 2011).

According to the stories of *The Book of States*, as Bayazid transformed his tongue into an instrument of God's language, the revelation he uttered was not his alone. Revelation and worship preceded Bayazid's own utterances. Mountains, rivers, trees, musical instruments, and even the flesh of his own body praised God with the ineffable "greatest name" (*ism-i a'zam*), beckoning Bayazid's words to join the songs of revelation echoing around him. More than a charming passage in the hagiography of Bayazid, this story offers us a glimpse of how the Roshaniyya imagined words and language as sutured to the very stuff of the world. Language worked *not* by pointing beyond itself, as if a linguistic world hovered above our material one or as if signifiers skim virtually and arbitrarily upon the thicker realities of the signified. Rather, the Roshaniyya practices of language and revelation suggest that they imagined words as working metonymically: the "work" of words was to be parts connected to wholes. The entire Roshani cosmos was saturated with communicative meaning, and so Bayazid's dreams, songs, and verses were continuous with the universe itself. Bayazid did not speak "about" the world; he sang with the world.

We can label this imagination of language as the *semiotic ideology* of the Roshaniyya. In this section, I discuss the reasoning behind this book's focus on semiotic ideology and, more generally, questions of language, and I argue that these are valuable entry points into our attempt to understand the Roshaniyya. Before that, however, it is worth pausing and asking: who is this "us" and this "we" that I invoke?

Imagine that these words that you're reading were spray-painted on a brick wall or tattooed on a body. Or, better yet, that they were whispered in your ear by your mother or father when you were a child—or that each and every sentence of this book were delivered in rhyming verse. The words in front of you are not whispered, tattooed, etched, painted, or anything of the like, of course. Likely they are black ink stamped upon a white page, or

perhaps they are a play of light created on a laptop screen. In such cases, we are dealing with a medium that seeks to obscure its own materiality.[48] And if I am deft enough, my rhetoric will have similar effect: in most of this book, I seek to remove myself from your encounter with the story of the Roshaniyya and the academic arguments carried therein. There is something self-effacing and self-denying about the words that connect us, as should be clearer when *these* words before you are contrasted with loving whispers and graffiti. As recent works in the philosophy and anthropology of language have suggested, this approach to language is not simply the way of the world; rather, it is a stance taken towards language that emerges from a host of contingent and intersecting projects. This self-effacing language of black ink on white page and of a tone of academic detachment enables certain types of relationships to the world and forecloses other relationships. This particular language *here* before you is particularly well-suited to facilitating a relationship of subject to object. I know the world, capture that knowing with my clear words, and convey that knowledge to you through these words without interference. That we reckon this to be possible suggests that we not only share some cultural background; this possibility is also *created* by the very way we communicate in form, style, and material. In other words, the "we" that I invoke is a "we" that emerges—at least in part—from the characteristics of the language that marks our communication, however one-sided.

Dragged in the wake of our shared language (black and white, as it is, and full of the tics of twenty-first century American academic prose), there are a host of ethical, ontological, epistemological, and even theological stakes and valorizations. This draws near to what Webb

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[48] For further discussion of this, consider: Giorgio Agamben, *The Fire and the Tale* (Stanford 2017), 107-108.

Keane means by *semiotic ideology*.[49] Keane intends something quite simple by semiotic ideologies: they are the modes of a culture's communication in practice and as ideally imagined.[50] How do we, in a particular semiotic ideology, understand the functioning of language and signs? And in what ways do we valorize certain communicative practices and semiotic forms over others? Keane's project draws into relief the formation and effect of an instrumentalist semiotic ideology that has become naturalized in a modern, liberal era. As Keane writes, "The modern West is a world in which representation produces the effect of there being a world of objects that exist external to it, and of subjects that stand outside the world, which is made available for them by means of those representations."[51] We typically approach language as an arbitrary set of symbols open to instrumental use, and this comes laden with presumptions about what counts as subjectivity, sincerity, and truth. The semio-ontological distinction between world and representation that characterizes modern semiotic ideology has specific roots in Protestant anxieties about Catholic ritual, according to Keane—and Keane's work traces the development and consolidation of these Protestant concerns for fetishes and material signs in colonial encounters and conflicts.[52]

Beyond this genealogy of modern semiotic ideologies, Keane's conclusion is a simple but striking one: language is irrevocably shot through with moral stakes and norms. Language is always a matter of distributing who has agency and who and what deserves recognition as

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[49] Webb Keane, Christian Moderns: Freedom and Fetish in the Mission Encounter (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

[50] Ibid., 21.

[51] Ibid., 11.

[52] For more on the enduring Protestantism of it all, consider: Robert A. Orsi, *History and Presence* (Harvard University Press, 2016).

subject or object.[53] Even before we consider rhetoric or semantic meaning, the materiality of this book makes an ethical claim through black ink and white paper—or the digital buzz of a screen—and implicitly establishes a preference for an instrumentalist stance to a world of objects distinct from *me,* the subject. The intimacy of a whisper, the brute form of a painted wall, narrative structures, rhyme—these become distractions according to the epistemological and moral stance that *this* language is taking (a stance adopted with regret).

Keane is certainly not the first to explore this line of thinking, even if I find his account and his lexicon particularly compelling.[54] As other scholars have demonstrated, questions similar to semiotic ideology are a fruitful set of questions to gain some analytical leverage on tensions, paradoxes, and exclusions of modernity and secularism. Saba Mahmood, for instance, has examined the inability of contemporary liberal commentators to understand the affective force of blasphemous comments on the Prophet Muhammad.[55] Karmen MacKendrick has meditated on the importance of voice—of the sonic waves produced by contracting and relaxing vocal cords—to philosophical and theological discourses in the medieval Christian tradition.[56] Rowan Williams has described the way that the "edges of language" seem to hint at metaphysical commitments, no matter to what use our language is brought.[57] In a different vein, Noah Salomon's ethnography of Sudan gives sustained

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[53] As Ann Stoler has argued, cultures enact different function ontologies so that the heft of *being* is something witnessed, encountered, ascribed, and *spoken* according to particular regimes of knowing. Put differently, the naturalization of the Roshaniyya as Afghan is something that happened and something that was achieved. In the historical functional ontologies of Europe and American scholarship, ethnicity becomes a natural part of the world. Consider: Ann Laura Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2010), 4ff.

[54] For an excellent work that also adopts Keane's inquiry as a starting point of sorts, see: Matthew Engelke, *A Problem of Presence* (University of California Press, 2007).

[55] Saba Mahmood, "Religious Reason and Secular Affect" in *Is Critique Secular?* (Fordham 2013).

[56] Karmen MacKendrick, *The Matter of Voice: Sensual Soundings* (Oxford University Press, 2016).

[57] Rowan Williams, The Edge of Words: God and the Habits of Language (London: Bloomsbury Continuum, 2014).

attention to the importance of aesthetics in projects of state-making, suggesting that aesthetic acts are not a separate or *superficial* concern relative to other semiotic acts of organizing the world.[58] And Charles Taylor has discussed in great detail the failures of current linguistic ideologies (culminating in Ferdinand de Saussure's philosophy but rooted in the works of Hobbes, Locke, and Condillac)—failures to account for the "constitutive" aspect of language.[59] In Taylor's perspective, language does not merely represent the world; in diverse ways, it is ceaselessly shaping the world.

These constitutive, affective, ethical, embodied, material dimensions of language are often shunted aside as we inhabit a world shaped by a hegemonic semiotic ideology that idealizes language at its most instrumental, transparent, and arbitrary—as free-floating signs that do not get caught in the muck of the world. Indeed, as Keane describes, Calvinist missionaries in nineteenth-century Indonesia deemed the improper valorization of words and prayer books as fetishism.[60] The words of modernity are meant to do their work and then dissolve; to linger on them is to slip into enchantment.

So what of the Roshaniyya? As we will see, the literature of the Roshaniyya evinces a persistent consciousness of its linguistic nature. At times, it is explicitly metalinguistic: letters are revealed, *dhikr* phrases are exchanged, acts of communication and speaking are discussed, and creation beckons with a voice. At other times, this linguistic reflexivity characterizes the structure of a Roshani text. The frequent use of chiasmus to structure the conversations of Bayazid and God, for instance, models how an idealized conversation should unfold; other lessons are presented as if a child were questioning a parent. Given the centrality of language

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[58] Noah Salomon, *For Love of the Prophet* (Princeton, 2016).

[59] Charles Taylor, *The Language Animal* (Harvard University Press, 2016), chap. 4.

[60] Keane, *Christian Moderns*, 87ff.

about language (or metalinguistics) in the literature of the Roshaniyya, these texts are sites for the expression, performance, and constitution of semiotic ideology.

There are ways in which the semiotic ideology of the Roshaniyya resonates with the alternative approaches to language that the aforementioned scholars uncover within the folds of our modern world. Mahmood's attention to the non-semantic, communicative work of the body, for instance, compares to the non-semantic communicative work of some Roshani texts.[61] Without equating the semiotic ideologies of the Roshaniyya with these comparative examples, contemporary thinkers nevertheless offer us a vocabulary for naming the attitudes and potentialities that we find in Roshani imaginations of language. With particular regularity, I find the works of Giorgio Agamben to be useful in providing the lexical next-step in describing what we see in Roshani texts.[62] Though Agamben's fame rests with his incisive critiques of the violent and brutal exclusionary power that rests at the center of the current world order, much of his work attends with remarkable intimacy to the ethical lives made possible or foreclosed by our language use.[63] This "literary Agamben," as William Watkin has described him, roots his political and social philosophies in what he takes to be the consequences of rhyme, meter, stanza, timbre, and so on—the "material qualities" of

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[61] Saba Mahmood, "Rehearsed Spontaneity and the Conventionality of Ritual: Disciplines of Salat," *American Ethnologist* 28, no. 4 (2001): 843.

[62] Agamben's works are numerous, overlapping, evolving, and—in my opinion—best read as discrete "performances" rather than as a collective description of a single philosophy. Among the works that I draw upon most frequently are: *Infancy and History* (Verso, 1993); *Language and Death* (University of Minnesota, 2006); *Means Without Ends* (University of Minnesota, 2000); *The Coming Community* (University of Minnesota, 1990); *The Sacrament of Language: An Archaeology of the Oath* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010); *The Time That Remains: A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans,* (Stanford University Press, 2005).

[63] William Watkin explores the centrality of language, literature, and poetry to Agamben's political philosophy in: William Watkin, *The Literary Agamben,* (Continuum, 2010).

language.[64] Throughout this book, we will turn to Agamben to help us find the words to describe Roshani texts that similarly braid together social possibilities and linguistic forms.

More importantly, Keane, Agamben, Mahmood and others attune us to a particular obstacle that we face as we turn to the semiotic ideology of the Roshaniyya. Given the investments of our semiotic ideology (constantly being willed into effect through communicative practices such as this book), it is easy to think of the affective, material, or ethical weight of language as an *addition*—as something draped on top of the representative function that is centered in our instrumentalist approach to language.[65] Importantly, the semiotic ideology of the "modern West" (as described by Keane) reiterates and works in concert with the ideological work of the category of "religion" in modern Euro-American societies. As "religion" has emerged in the modern era as a conceptual category with preference to certain ways of "being religious" (loosely: white, Protestant-secular, not-too-poor, patriarchal, colonial, capitalist),[66] so too has the Saussurean semiotic ideology of contemporary Euro-American societies given preference to certain ways of being. How we

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[64] Watkin, *The Literary Agamben*, 195.

[65] Bruno Latour's analysis of the "modern" production of scientific regimes of knowledge is a necessary complement to Taylor and Keane's discussion of instrumentalist semiotics. To borrow Latour's terminology, we might say that an instrumentalist semiotic ideology "sorts" signifiers and that which is signified into distinct "ontological zones." Signifiers possess a hollowed-out, arbitrary ontology. This "sorting" of ontologies—or "purification," as Latour would say—is a central feature of the project to convince ourselves that we are modern. Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), especially 10–11.

[66] The analysis of the category of "religion"—and how this category is central to projects of modernity, secularism, capitalism, and white supremacy among other phenomena—is a rich and growing line of inquiry within the academic study of religion. Some exceptional works in the field include: Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions: Or, How European Universalism Was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005); Brent Nongbri, *Before Religion* (Yale 2015); Tisa Wenger, *We Have a Religion: The 1920s Pueblo Indian Dance Controversy and American Religious Freedom (*Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009); John Lardas Modern, *Secularism in Antebellum America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011). Less work has been conducted on this issue as it pertains to the study of Islam and religion in Central and South Asia, though some notable exceptions include: Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst, *Indian Muslim Minorities and the 1857 Rebellion* (I.B. Tauris, 2017); Cemil Aydin, *The Idea of the Muslim World* (Harvard, 2017); and Shahab Ahmed, *What Is Islam?: The Importance of Being Islamic* (Princeton ; Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2015).

communicate and how we imagine the workings of our communication is inherently raced, gendered, sexed, and classed.[67] The hegemonic semiotic ideology of modernity, however, is one predicated on its own disavowal, its own obliteration—a denial of this racing, gendering, and so on. Our aesthetic is the aesthetic of no-aesthetic: black ink and white paper intended to let us forget that our communicating carries matter, form, color, heat, time, weight, and shape.[68] As such, it is always shaped with preference towards certain ways of being and certain performances of personhood—and this is especially true when language seeks to hide its own materiality. As we approach the language of the Roshaniyya, therefore, we are not describing *their religious language* with a language that is free of moral and metaphysical commitments. Rather, we must admit the tension between the visions of the world inherent to *this language* and the worlds constituted by the words of the Roshaniyya. It is this gap, however, that renders the story of the Roshaniyya into a story in which we too are cast as actors and shapers of the narrative as it unfolds. When Second Mary understands the words of Second Jesus' *dhikr* to be nourishment and offers her body in all its impermanence to the *dhikr;* and when the Roshaniyya of this Tu'i village imagine these events to be a linguistic act in which God's word has folded the time of the End into their present moment; and when, even further, stories of this village, these narrated repetitions of Mary and Jesus, and the revelatory Pashto, Persian, Arabic, and Hindawi written by Bayazid circulate and constitute the messianic sainthood of Bayazid Ansari—it is then that we see that our habits of

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[67] For all of the richness of Charles Taylor's recent work on the philosophy of language, this is an area of inquiry that is sorely missing in *The Language Animal*. For consideration of these issues, see (among many others); Toril Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics* (Routledge, 1985); Judith T. Irvine and Susan Gal, "Language ideology and linguistic differentiation," in *Linguistic anthropology: A reader*, edited by Alessandro Duranti (Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 402-434. The other essays in Duranti's edited anthology (*Linguistic Anthropology*) are also excellent entry-points into this topic.

[68] Keane, *Christian Moderns*, 41.

representation and language-use cannot skate across these historical events free of its own metaphysical conceptions. This is a sticky process and one in which we find our own relationship to language (as used and conceived) implicated.[69]

All of this is to ask that we place a wager on the value of *semiotic ideology* for the study of the Roshaniyya and their interlocutors. This is our entry point into understanding the intense debate spurred by the Roshani pursuit for God's language because this was, as I argue, a debate primarily concerned with the capacity of language and its saturation with the divine. An attention to semiotic ideology does not simply mirror the projects and anxieties of the Roshaniyya; it is a valuable means to understanding a host of other ontological, ethical, and cosmological commitments dragged in the wake of imagining language. And as suggested above (and argued in greater detail by Charles Taylor), language constitutes ways of relating to other people and the world. Through the semiotic ideology of the Roshaniyya, we gain a sense of the sociality and sense of belonging that they idealized and *performed* through their language. *How* they wrote tells us *who* they strove to be—and, perhaps, were.

The theoretical challenge before us lies in understanding the communities of belonging that emerge from Roshani and from the dim glimpses of Roshani social formations found in their use and imagination of language. This require a recursive process: interpreting Roshani texts to find their metapragmatic implications (that is, embedded instructions of how a text "should" be read), theorizing how the Roshani imagine language, and then asking how this

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[69] Or, as Stephan Palmié might put it, we are dealing with a "porous membrane" in which scholars and the "objects" of their study collectively interface to jointly contribute to "the cooking of history." Stephan Palmié, *The Cooking of History: How Not to Study Afro-Cuban Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), especially 259-262.

imagination of language should inform interpretations of Roshani texts.[70] We can only do this successfully in light of our reflection on our own semiotic ideology, even though this aspect of reflection and theorization will remain largely in the background of this book. Through this process, we can, however dimly, began to understand "the Roshaniyya" even if "we" only hold books and manuscripts in our hands.

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So what does a "failed" messiah and his followers have to teach us? The Roshaniyya offer us a rarely-told history of Afghans and Afghanistan, and this is a history that sheds light on an early modern moment in which religious imaginations throughout South and Central Asia and across "religious" difference were animated by semiotic dreams and apocalyptic pursuits of God in language. As disputed, condemned, and later remembered, the history of the Roshaniyya is also one in which we see the workings of imperial logics by which *ethnicity* and *vernacular*—*Afghan* and *Pashto*—become the conceptual categories of containing messianic experimentation to a parochial, localized space. In this way, the story of the Roshaniyya's practice of revelation transforms into a story of the production of an image of Afghan timelessness and isolation.

The failed messiah also teaches something of our own habits of language, however secular, modern, and distant we may imagine our language to be from the seething semio-theologies of the Roshaniyya. Through an encounter with the words of the Roshaniyya, we can let our semiotic ideologies be dragged into the light. The story of Bayazid and his

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[70] "Metapragmatics" is a term typically associated with the linguistic anthropology of Michael Silverstein. See: Silverstein, Michael. "Metapragmatic discourse and metapragmatic function" in *Reflexive Language: Reported Speech and Metapragmatics*, edited by John Lucy et al. (Cambridge, 1993) 33-58. The hermeneutic process being described is—as is likely clear—deeply resonant with the process described by Hans-Georg Gadamer. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, Reprint edition (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013).

revelation offers a glimpse of some past that flits by and reminds us that we do not possess the words of others nor the imaginations from which they emerge.[71]

A Brief Outline

As noted, our story is of an attempt to speak the word of God—and the new formations of literature, violence, history, and ethnicity that followed in the wake of this effort. We begin in chapter one with the life of our main actor, Bayazid Ansari, and how that life may or may not enter the gaze we call history. The hagiography of Bayazid, known as *The Book of States*, offers stories of a Bayazid whose blessedness emerges from the way his body and his dreams scatter and fragment. Paradoxically, his power emerges from his dissolution. The following chapters (two and three) then turn fully to the practice of revelation and its achievement, tracing the *dhikr* performances that transform a human tongue into a vehicle for divine language. Chapter two examines the architecture of the Roshani Sufi path and the importance of *dhikr* practice in guiding disciples up a spiritual hierarchy that culminates in being a blessed, revelatory "wretch." Chapter three turns directly to *The Best Exposition*: the multilingual imitation of the Qur'an that inaugurates Pashto literature and earned the Roshaniyya the condemnation of Sunni theologians. What does it mean to inscribe the very voice of God? The next chapters (four and five) turn to the aftermath and the inheritances that the Roshaniyya left behind to both devotees and critics. In chapter four, we compare the Pashto poetry of a Roshani disciple named Mulla Arzani to the Pashto prose of an anti-Roshani polemicist named Akhund Darweza. In many regards, it is Arzani and Akhund

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[71] "Language does not abolish the all-important distance between bodies; on the contrary, by affirming the always unfinished character of converse or exchange, it acknowledges the non-negotiable diversity of bodies, and gives us a clue to the ethical basis of recognizing the other as never to be possessed." Williams, *The Edge of Words*, 117.

Darweza—the poet and the polemicist—who consolidate the lurching, inchoate Pashto of

Bayazid Ansari. Chapter five stays with Akhund Darweza, a figure whose importance in

Afghan religiosity is difficult to overstate. In his response to the Roshaniyya (who he deemed

the very worst of heretics), Akhund Darweza wrote an genealogy of the Afghans. In rejecting

the heresies of a false messiah, why does Akhund Darweza find it useful to tell a story of

Afghan descent from King Saul? In what ways do ethnicity and orthodoxy intersect?

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Singing with the Mountains is the story of a community of Sufis, orphans, widows, nomads,

menial laborers, and itinerant poets who gathered around a pursuit of the very language of

God. In their efforts, they drew upon a transregional repertoire of cultural and religious

practices and cosmologies: Persianate concepts of sainthood, lettrist notions of a world built

from letters, Qur'anic vocabularies, and Mughal forms of sovereignty among much else. The

resultant practices and literatures of the Roshaniyya were unpredictable. As the Gerald

Manley Hopkins verse that began this chapter suggested, "O the mind, mind has mountains."

There are vaster, wilder, "no-man-fathomed" topographies to Islam, South Asia, and Afghan

identity than we've ever dared map in the English-language academy. Hopkins poem,

however, is not a poem on the thrilling expanses of the mind. It is a poem of death and

despair. As the concluding sestet reads:

> O the mind, mind has mountains; cliffs of fall
> Frightful, sheer, no-man-fathomed. Hold them cheap
> May who ne'er hung there. Nor does long our small
> Durance deal with that steep or deep. Here! Creep,
> Wretch, under a comfort serves in a whirlwind: all
> Life death does end and each day dies with sleep.[72]

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[72] Gerald Manley Hopkins, 'No Worst, There is None' in *Gerard Manley Hopkins: The Major Works* (Oxford 2009) 167.

There is a darkness to the story of the people of light. Mughal generals stacked their skulls in towers along the Khyber as a reminder of Mughal power. British scholars read their history as proof of the inborn recalcitrance of Sufi masters to the civilizing project and as emblems of inherent Afghan unruliness. This judgment of Afghans as eternally wild and violent has carried over into American imperial discourses. The cliffs of fall frightful and sheer endure.

There are other curious resonance in this poem with the Roshaniyya, however. In teaching about the fragility of life and the human dependence on God's ceaseless creative and communicative presence, Bayazid quotes a verse from the Qur'an, "He is the one who reaps you at night."[73] As Bayazid explains, each day dies with sleep—but each morning God resurrects all the world anew. Moreover, as we will see, the highest stage of spiritual advancement is that of becoming the *miskin*, the "wretch." It is the wretch whose tongue most fully speaks the whirlwind powers of God.

I am not suggesting that Hopkins's harrowing poem on depression and futility is truly a hymn to the power of God. Rather, as we lend our minds to the Roshaniyya, we see find an imagination of language in which words have power, might, material weight, and meaning that endure beyond their speaker's intention or their propositional signification. Words slip their contexts and sink into the world in unpredictable ways: "wretch" and "death of sleep" offer new resonances when filtered through the revelations of this premodern band of Sufis. To examine the Roshaniyya—I hope—is to learn how little we possess of the past and how fully it cannot be fixed with our monographs. There is a chance that our own words slip their contexts and that new ways of understanding the history of religion in Afghanistan become possible.

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[73] Qur'an 6:60