

# The `Aql-Naql Theory of Human Symbols and the Making of Cultural Sociology

*Mahmoud Dhaouadi*

## **Abstract**

This paper uses both reason (`aql) and Qur'an-based knowledge (*naql*) to establish my `Aql-Naql Theory of Human Symbols (ANTHS) and explain its relevance to the formulation of cultural sociology. In it, I argue that human individuals are by nature users of human symbols, based upon the following five observations/concepts: (1) the process of the human body's growth and maturation is very slow when compared to that of other living beings; (2) humans have a longer lifespan than many other species; (3) the human race has a dominant role in running this world; (4) humans are distinct due to their use of human symbols (HS), which comprise spoken and written language, thought, religion, knowledge/science, laws, myths, cultural values and norms, and so on; and (5) human identity is made up of two parts, the physical body and human symbols, and is thus fully dualistic.

This theory explains that human symbols (4) play a principal role in enabling humanity to occupy the central place in the world (3) as well as in the making of features 1, 2, and 5. The person's slow bodily growth and maturation are explained by the fact that humanity's global growth and maturation involve

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Mahmoud Dhaouadi, a sociologist at the University of Tunis, Tunisia, earned his Ph.D. in sociology at the University of Montreal, Canada. He is the author of *Globalization of the Other Underdevelopment: Third World Cultural Identities* (2002); *New Explorations Into the Making of Ibn Khaldun's Umran Mind* (1997); *Toward Islamic Sociology of Cultural Symbols* (1996); and many other studies, articles, and book reviews in Arabic, English, and French.

two fronts: those of the body and of human symbols. While the growth and maturation of non-human species is unidimensional (the body), those of their human counterparts are bidimensional (the body and human symbols). The human ability to think and reason (*`aql*) gives credit to human symbols' centrality to the human identity. The Qur'an also stresses these symbols' core importance for human identity. As a classical Islamic method, this essay will show that the use of *`aql* and *naql* in the process of knowledge making makes a major contribution to the development of cultural sociology.

## The Theory and Its Purpose

This essay attempts to put forward a new cultural theory: the *`Aql-Naql* Theory of Human Symbols (ANTHS).<sup>1</sup> I have deliberately chosen the terms *`aql* (human reasoning) and *naql* (Qur'anic knowledge), because when used together they stress the combined use of both sources in seeking to understand human symbols and their complex nature.

My main thesis is that humans are by nature symbolic beings, before being social beings, and thus have at their very deep central core a set of human symbols that radically distinguish them from all other living species. The basic human symbols in question are spoken and written language, thought, religion, knowledge/science, laws, myths, cultural values and norms. In other words, my theory states that this set of symbols occupies the very center of the human identity, which is, in my view, made of the body and human symbols.

Due to this assumed centrality, the impact of these symbols on human beings is expected to be of a global nature. That is, their effects are not limited only to their influence on individual and collective behaviors, but extend as well to their input on the human biophysiological makeup (the body). Consequently, any serious analysis of human political, psychological, economic, and cultural affairs must give first priority to these symbols' impact. As such, they should be considered the crucial central basis of human nature itself.<sup>2</sup> Thus this theory should also qualify as a transdisciplinary general theory, for it is meant to be used at the same time among and across disciplines as well as beyond every single discipline. Its ultimate goal is twofold: to offer a sound understanding of human affairs and to show the unity of human knowledge.<sup>3</sup>

## The ANTHS Theory and Cultural Sociology

The ANTHS theory belongs to cultural sociology and not to the sociology of culture, for just like cultural sociology it considers culture to be an independent and central variable in human identity and society. It is something “hard,” not “soft,” that plays a very significant role for individual behaviors and the social dynamics of human societies and civilizations. According to proponents of cultural sociology, therefore, social scientists must study culture within a “strong program,” as opposed to a “weak program” in their theoretical and empirical research.<sup>4</sup> In other words, strong program-oriented sociologists consider culture to be an independent variable that must be the focus of study, whereas weak program-oriented sociologists regard it as a dependent variable.<sup>5</sup> This has not been so in western sociology from its beginnings.

Pre-1960 theorists of culture like Max Weber, Emile Durkheim, Karl Marx, Talcott Parsons, C. Wright Mills, communists, fascists, and others are known to have viewed the importance of culture from a weak program perspective, for they assigned only minor importance to it in their analyses.<sup>6</sup> The Birmingham School, Pierre Bourdieu, Michel Foucault, and proponents of the theory of production and consumption of culture have not done any better: they have adopted a weak program perspective. All things considered, this trend continues to dominate sociological studies of culture,<sup>7</sup> even though the strong program of cultural sociology has been gaining more attention (especially among American sociologists) since the birth of the so-called “cultural turn” in the late 1990s.<sup>8</sup>

There is, however, a wide consensus that American anthropologist Clifford Geertz has launched the strong program for the study of culture. The two axioms of this program are: the autonomy of culture and the cultural textuality of social life. That is, culture is social life’s internal text. In my ANTHS theory, I have adopted a very strong program as regards culture’s importance in the study of human beings and their societies. This may be considered an *eastern* contribution to the formulation of both cultural sociology and the above-mentioned cultural turn that has seriously challenged the meta-theoretical assumptions of many classical schools of thought.

The weak program that most sociologists have adopted can be explained, in part, by what Alain Touraine considers to be their negligence toward focusing on social actors due to their tendency to be interested in studying systems like those found in industrial and capitalist societies. He argues that contem-

porary thought has minimized the subjective side of social actors, just as Marx, Sigmund Freud, and Friedrich Nietzsche did.<sup>9</sup>

Without studying human symbols and culture as fundamental dimensions of human subjectivity, there can hardly be any strong program of sociological analysis of culture. As will be detailed below, my ANTHS theory starts its scientific explorations into the world of humans and their societies by first considering human social actors as strong human symbol users by nature. Thus my approach requires a detailed description of the human symbols system, which is provided below and about which sociologists have remained silent. As such, my perspective on the study of culture differs from that of most sociologists. I begin my study from within: culture as a distinct basic feature of human nature. Whereas sociologists study culture as external collective patterns in societies and civilizations, my approach consists of two dimensions: (1) social actors are strong human symbol users by nature, and thus the internal and external nature of the entire human symbol system needs to be understood and (2) my *`aql*-oriented perspective explains these symbols' impact on the dynamics of social actors and their societies.

Touraine stresses the importance of social scientists combining the social system and the social actors in their analyses in order to understand and explain social action in society: "It is neither excessive nor paradoxical to say that the idea of society is a major obstacle which bothers the development of social sciences because they are based on the separation and even the opposition between the system and the social actors, while the idea of society implies their direct link."<sup>10</sup>

## **Cultural Sociology as a Core Discipline**

According to this *`aql* (human reason) analysis, human symbols are central to human identity and are a distinctive feature of the human race. Given this, they should be considered a first-class source and reference for those social scientists who are attempting to understand, explain, and theorize about individual behavior as well as the social dynamics of human societies and civilizations.

There is, therefore, a strong reason for sociologists to establish, promote, and defend the legitimacy of cultural sociology, because this discipline makes great use of the basic human foundations, namely, human symbols, to understand human behavior and a given society's dynamics. Unlike other

branches of sociology, which often deal with peripheral issues as regards humans and their societies, cultural sociology addresses and focuses its attention upon those most fundamental elements without which neither human beings nor their societies could come into existence as distinct and leading features in this world. Based on this, cultural sociology is qualified to be seen as the core discipline not only in sociology, but also in all other social science fields.

### **The Missing Internal Nature of Culture**

Many consider Lyn Spillman's *Cultural Sociology* a reference on the subject.<sup>11</sup> For her, "cultural sociology is about meaning-making. Cultural sociologists investigate how meaning-making happens."<sup>12</sup> The book consists of papers and essays written by major sociologists and anthropologists on culture. Her introduction and notes on each paper and essay do not mention the contributors' interest in what I call the internal/hidden nature of cultural elements and cultural symbols. This is also true of Diana Crane's *The Sociology of Culture*.<sup>13</sup> For their part, the famous cultural sociologists J. Alexander and P. Smith hardly mention culture's subjective, hidden transcendental, and spiritual dimensions.<sup>14</sup> But this is far from surprising, given the marginal interest in culture among both the founders of sociology as well as the prominent sociologists of the twentieth century, as indicated above. Thus their general silence on the study of culture's internal nature is the expected norm.

The following questions arise: What do we mean here by culture's "internal nature"? Is culture a material or a spiritual part of human beings? Does it have any metaphysical/transcendental features? Do cultural elements have a long lifespan and a very strong impact on individual human behavior and the dynamics of human societies and civilizations? The answers to such questions are dealt with below in order to underline a profile of the human symbol system's and culture's internal anatomy.

The lack of studies on culture's internal nature is true of Spillman's comments on some very famous scholars in the landscape of culture, among them Ruth Benedict, Edward Shils, Clifford Geertz, and Pierre Bourdieu. None of them, as well as other cited authors in the book, has given first priority to this area of culture, for their focus has been on culture's external side. This is also true of *The Sociology of Culture*, and of the chapter contributed by Smith and Alexander.<sup>15</sup> In addition, this is consistent with the spirit as well as the methodology of Positivism, which was strongly advocated by Auguste Comte, the founder of western sociology.

A few basic books on culture also testify to this silence, among them *The Concept of Culture*,<sup>16</sup> *Culture*,<sup>17</sup> and *La notion de culture dans les sciences sociales*,<sup>18</sup> for they hardly speak about culture's internal nature, let alone analyze and discuss it. This is no surprise, for some anthropologists often have only a vague idea of what culture is. Ralph Linton, for example, asks "Is culture real?" or "Does it exist?"<sup>19</sup> For Radcliffe-Brown, *culture* is a word that designates no concrete reality but only an abstraction – and a very vague abstraction at that. M. E. Spiro takes a similar position.<sup>20</sup>

The legitimate question now is this: How can sociologists and social scientists study culture in a meaningful way as regards its core place in human society and provide sound interpretations of cultures or derive solid insights on the meaning-making process if they do not first have a strong understanding of its internal nature and its impact on the actions of social actors?

As mentioned earlier, the domination of the Positivist and the Behaviorist perspectives should help explain social scientists' great reservations and skepticism toward culture's internal dimensions and, subsequently, its deep latent and hidden nature. The profound impact of excluding or marginalizing the recognition of, and thus the study and understanding of, culture's internal nature has led, on the one hand, to a later coming of both the sociology of culture and cultural sociology and, on the other hand, to a rather wide weakness in many predictions, theories, and paradigms produced by contemporary social scientists. The increasing interest, especially among American sociologists, in these two types of sociology may promote sociology's credibility in the West and, consequently, in the East.

## **Basic Observations and the Formulation of the ANTHS Theory**

The new ANTHS theory, which does not exist in my *Toward Islamic Sociology of Cultural Symbols* (1996) or in the conventional social science literature, is based on a set of five observations and concepts:

- (1) The process of a human being's bodily growth and maturation is very slow when compared with those of other living beings. For instance, humans usually begin to walk at the age of one year, while animals may walk within few hours or days after their birth;
- (2) Humans generally have a longer lifespan than most other species;
- (3) The human race has a dominant role in the administration, management, and control of this world;

- (4) Humans are privileged by the human symbols system: spoken and written language, thought, religion, knowledge/science, laws, myths, cultural values and norms, and similar factors; and
- (5) The ANTHS theory posits that human identity is made up of two parts, the body and human symbols, and thus is dualistic in nature. In religion and philosophy, this is often referred to as an identity made of body and soul.

While devising my theory, I contacted *Scientific American* and asked specifically for an explanation of why the human body grows and matures so slowly. One year later, the editor replied. Ignoring my question, he advised me to search for possible answers on websites dealing with anthropology.

Given this non-answer to my question I felt compelled, in my capacity as a researcher, to look for a potential explanatory hypothesis: the human body's slow growth and maturation could be accounted for by assuming that human global growth and maturation involve two fronts: the body and human symbols. In short, the growth and maturation of non-human species are unidimensional (body) due to their lack of human symbols in the most complex human sense of the term. In contrast, the growth and maturation of humans are bidimensional, for they involve two levels: those of the body and of human symbols. Thus, my theory's hypothesis considers this two-level process to be behind the slow human bodily growth and maturation. This assumption is based on the following logic: the rapid bodily growth and maturation among non-human species is assumed to be due to their unidimensional/body processes of growth and maturation, while the slow bodily growth and maturation among humans is due to the fact that they go through two processes of growth and maturation. Logically, it takes longer to accomplish two processes than one. In other words, the processes of human bodily growth and maturation are slowed down, so to speak, because humans are involved in a second process of growth and maturation, which is represented by human symbols.

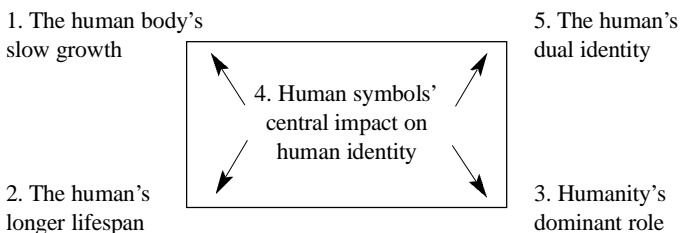
Furthermore, the growth and maturation of human symbols appear to be, by their own nature, slower than the human body's processes of growth and maturation, which only reach their peak when the person is in his/her twenties.<sup>21</sup> Some features of human symbols reach their higher and highest stages of growth and maturation much later. For instance, human beings could hardly reach the peak of growth and maturation in the fields of thought, religious experience and knowledge, and science before the age of

forty. This gives a stronger legitimacy to their need for a longer lifespan, as shown in Illustration 1 below. In other words, the longer human lifespan could be seen as the outcome of two factors: the slow pace of bodily growth and maturation and the apparent innate tendency of human symbols to grow and mature slowly.

The fact that the human body's growth and maturation peak when the person is in his/her twenties also helps explain two features of human life: athletes often retire after they reach the age of twenty-five or so, and on the intellectual/thought level, humans can hardly manifest mature thinking before their twenties. This could be explained as follows: once humans have, so to speak, finished the business of bodily growth and maturation, they can concentrate more on the development and maturation of their human symbols. This could also explain why real high-level scientific theories and intellectually complex thoughts do not usually see the light before their theorists reach the age of forty.

The following illustration depicts human symbols' centrality to human identity. This gives a degree of legitimacy to my theory, which stipulates that humans are by nature cultural symbolic beings. In other words, these symbols are at the core of the human race's identity because they strongly influence and determine the remaining four distinctive human features (1, 2, 3, and 5), as shown in Illustration 1. This makes my ANTHS a very strong program culture-oriented theory. Since human symbols and culture are central to this theory's epistemology, its explanatory perspective and theorizing about human behavior and the social dynamics of human societies are only natural. This theory, therefore, should qualify to be an avant-garde theory for today's emerging cultural sociology.<sup>22</sup> As stated above, my theory is fully new in its conceptualization, theorizing vision, and understanding and explanation of human phenomena.

### Illustration 1





This centrality of human symbols to the human entity leads to the emergence of my new concept, which is rather opposed to Howard Wilson's theory of sociobiology. I call this new concept "culturo-biology," for it signifies that human symbols have an implicit determinant impact on the given design of the human body, which grows and matures very slowly. It is assumed here that the slow bodily process in question is made so in order to meet the need of human symbols for a longer human lifespan so that they can be fully developed, grown, and matured. This is obviously consistent with the idea of the mind's (human symbols) assumed influence over matter or that of the psychological over the organic in humans.<sup>23</sup>

## Transcendental Dimensions

My attempt to deepen the understanding of the profound nature of human symbols has led me to discover other new dimensions that are hardly outlined, let alone analyzed and discussed, in modern social science literature. Most of these new dimensions are not present in my previous writings, including my *Toward Islamic Sociology of Cultural Symbols*. These new features are expected to enrich and, thus, enhance the outlook of cultural sociology. The new features in question are:

(1) Human symbols have neither weight nor volume in the material sense of the word. That is, they have a non-material, transcendental, and spiritual nature. Positivist social scientists are likely to find the use of such terms as *weight* and *volume* rather strange when dealing with human symbols and culture. Nonetheless, fair objectivity strongly permits the usage of such terms and gives them a great deal of meaning. It is sufficient to raise a few issues in this context to make the point:

Why do letters and documents sent by fax and e-mail reach their destinations so much faster than those mailed by regular or even express mail? Based upon the concepts of no weight and no volume, the processes of faxing and e-mailing letters and documents eliminates the factors of weight and volume. In other words, doing so liberates the sent items from their material parameters (weight and volume) and, as such, returns the human symbols, so to speak, to their initial natural state of having neither weight nor volume. This explanation is much clearer and more precise than accounting for this phenomenon by discussing the differences between the laws of the material and cultural realms.

Given the absolute innate absence of weight and volume in the natural essence of the human symbol system, one can also understand why human

symbols can move at unbelievable speeds through both time and space. This lack of material weight and volume may also help to explain how one can put an enormous amount of written material on a few small electronic flash drives, which also have almost no weight or volume. This is possible because human symbols, in this case words, have by their very nature no volume or weight and thus hardly need a huge material space in which they can be contained. In philosophical and religious terms, these symbols belong to the spiritual and non-material world of human beings and have their own special characteristics and laws by which they abide and which, ultimately, make them different from the material world, which has both weight and volume.

The extremely rapid speed of sound is another frequently cited example. This could be explained by the fact that spoken words, whether transmitted over short or long distances, have no weight or volume in their natural state. Consequently, the spoken word is naturally predisposed to move with extreme speed, according to the ANTHS theory being developed and elaborated in this essay.

(2) Given their non-material and transcendental nature, human symbols suffer no reduction when we give from them to others. For instance, when we donate \$50 to a charity our capital is reduced. But the situation is quite different if we give part of our thought or ideas, knowledge or science, teach our languages, or spread our religious beliefs and cultural symbols among them.

(3) Human symbols have a longer lifespan throughout time. Ideas, religious beliefs, and cultural values and norms have the potential to survive for semi-eternity. Written and spoken languages play a fundamental role in both formulating human symbols and ensuring their longer lifespan, because the ANTHS theory considers language to be the “mother” of all human symbols. In other words, the system of human symbols and culture could hardly exist in the absence of human language, at least in its spoken form. As such, one can argue that human language has the potential to eternalize anything that impacts all human symbols and makes them qualified to be spiritual and transcendental (non-material) in their very nature.

The present new outlook on the long lifespan of human symbols helps explain the phenomena of the so-called eternal human thought of philosophers, scientists, scholars, and religious thinkers since time immemorial. Their thoughts’ potential eternity can be accounted for first by the use of spoken and written languages that have the eternalizing seal, and second by the fact that human thought belongs to the transcendental universe of human

symbols. This argument will be strengthened later by my explanation of the *naqli* perspective on these symbols.

(4) Human symbols can charge humans with fantastic, strong energy potentials that enable them to meet and overcome great challenges. Throughout human history, cultural values like freedom, equality, and justice have imbued human individuals, groups, and larger communities with a great power that defies the enormous material power of their adversary. For example, the successful struggles of many Third World countries during the twentieth century to wrest their independence from western colonial occupation is a valid illustration of the imposing role of human symbols in liberating colonized societies, even though they were both militarily and materially weaker than their western occupiers.

In comparison with my approach to studying the nature of human symbols, it is fair to say that modern social sciences hardly bring up the “transcendental/spiritual dimensions of human symbols/culture.” There is a continuing widespread silence on these symbols’ very important dimensions, despite sociologists’ increasing interest today in cultural sociology, as outlined above.

## **Language and the Emergence of Human Culture**

Based on the outlook of the ANTHS theory it is quite legitimate to look for the origin of human culture, because this is what distinguishes the human race from all other species. Human spoken and written language appears to be the most likely human factor behind the emergence of the phenomenon of human symbols/culture. It is hard to imagine the existence of other elements in this system (e.g., religion, science, and thought) without the presence at least of human spoken language. This is why I consider language as the mother of all human symbols.

Given the central role of spoken and written languages in the birth as well as in the making of the human symbol system/culture, as defined by anthropologists and sociologists in particular, it is appropriate to endorse the widely cited description of those philosophers and social thinkers who have described humanity as a speaking animal. As such, human language is not only the source upon which the emergence of human culture depends, but it is also at the origin of humanity’s domination of all other living species through its sophisticated and complex cultural system.

In spite of language’s centrality to human identity and, consequently, to the emergence of the human symbol/culture system, the most famous anthro-

polological definition of culture nonetheless makes no explicit mention of language as being a central and basic element of culture, let alone the major cause for human culture's emergence and subsequent progress.

The debate over culture's origin remains ongoing by contemporary social scientists. Although there are small differences among them, there is a consensus that language is the first determining factor for the emergence of human culture.<sup>24</sup>

In 1871, British anthropologist Edward Bernard Tylor defined culture as follows: "Culture or civilization ... is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society." His classical definition remains implicitly silent on language, even though it is the constituting and founding element/force of culture itself, as already stated. In other words, the relation between language and culture is organic. It is fair to say that Tylor's definition is not fully adequate because it neglects to clearly include language as both a part of and a founding component of the crystallization of the human symbol/culture system's emergence.<sup>25</sup>

## **The Qur'an's Strong Program of Culture**

Having elaborated upon my *`aql* (human reasoning) research as regards the formulation of the ANTHS theory, I now turn to its *naql* (the Qur'an) component to articulate its *`aql-naql* synthesis. As shown above, the *`aql* approach belongs to cultural sociology, which considers human symbols/culture to be an independent variable. According to L. Semashko, J. Alexander sees the classical period (pre-1960) of sociologists as the period of the weak program in the social theory of culture. This period includes "the sociologies of Weber, Durkheim, Marx, Mills and others as well as Communists and Fascists."<sup>26</sup> Alexander believes that the weak program still dominates the modern (post-1960) period, as manifested in the works of the Birmingham School, Bourdieu, Foucault, and the theory of "the production and consumption of culture."<sup>27</sup>

As mentioned above, Geertz changed the place of culture in the perspectives of modern social sciences.<sup>28</sup> For him, culture has its own autonomy and human societies are similar to texts, where the reading of their meanings is very central. Alexander believes that the cultural sociologists' recognition of culture's autonomy is "the single most important quality of a strong program."<sup>29</sup>

My presented *`aql* analysis of human symbols' centrality to human identity and Geertz's are also endorsed by the Islamic perspective found in the Qur'an. Internal and insightful reading and interpretation of the Qur'anic text lead to the discovery that the Muslim holy book indeed has a strong program as regards culture, for it considers humans as profoundly human symbol beings – cultural symbolic beings.

In order to identify the nature of human symbols/culture as well as their importance to the identity of the human agent in the Qur'anic outlook, the best reference is the Qur'an itself, for many of its verses speak with clarity about human nature. I have chosen only two verses that fully describe the basic components of human nature: "Behold! Your Lord said to the angels: 'I am about to create man from sounding clay, from mud molded into shape. When I have fashioned him (in due proportion) and breathed into him of My spirit, fall down in obeisance to him'" (15:28-29). Human nature, according to these two verses, is dualistic in nature, for Adam is made from clay and the divine breathed spirit (hereinafter "spirit").

As to which component is more important in the formation of human nature and thus human identity, a good internal and logical interpretation of these two verses allows one to assert that the Qur'an gives more importance to the spirit, since the angels were ordered to prostrate immediately after, and not before, the divine spirit was breathed into Adam. Their prostration is seen as a symbolic sign of respect to this new divinely privileged creature, for no other species received this spirit. The Qur'anic position in favor of human nature's spiritual dimension is a fundamental permanent principle that runs throughout the Qur'an, for we are told again and again in its verses that human individuals, groups, communities, societies, and civilizations can achieve excellence only when their spirit dominates the materialistic (clay) side of their human nature.

The interpretation of these verses' meaning has been a major concern for Muslims ever since their revelation. I have chosen a very limited sample of Qur'anic interpreters (*mufasssirun*) who wrote either in Arabic or English. Fakhr al-Din al-Razi (d. 1210) and Ahmad al-Ansari al-Qurtubi (d. circa 1293) are two well known Qur'anic interpreters. There are also two widely used Arabic-language interpretations by Sayyid Qutb (d. 1966) and Muhammad al-Tahir ibn Ashur (d. 1973), as well as two famous English-language interpretations, each of which is considered a highly credible reference by English-speaking Muslims: those of Abdullah Yusuf Ali (d. 1973) and Muhammad Asad (d. 1992).

Al-Razi interpreted "spirit" (*ruh*) as a wind that can be breathed in and stated that real knowledge of it is not accessible to humans.<sup>30</sup> Al-Qurtubi's

interpretation is not very different, for he considers the spirit to be like a wind and to be a gentle entity.<sup>31</sup> Sayyid Qutb speaks of the spirit as the breath that has enabled humanity to transcend its material (clay) makeup and reach for the spiritual horizon, where hearts and minds are in action.<sup>32</sup> Ibn Ashur sees the divine breath breathed into Adam as a symbol of humanity's greatness in the eyes of God.<sup>33</sup>

Yusuf Ali gives the following meaning: "the breathing of Allah's spirit into man, i.e., the faculty of God-like knowledge and will which, if rightly used, would give man superiority over other creatures."<sup>34</sup> Asad interprets the divine spirit as "God's 'breathing of His spirit' into man is obviously a metaphor for His endowing him with life and consciousness: that is, with a soul."<sup>35</sup>

These six interpretations are generally vague when it comes to the spirit's specific nature. Yusuf Ali's interpretation is perhaps the most tangible one, for he defined it as a God-like knowledge and will that were given only to humanity. This interpretation attempts to avoid becoming entangled in the vagueness and generality reflected in the other interpretations. In other words, his interpretation of spirit as "God-like knowledge and will" invested in humanity could constitute one step toward helping to identify more concretely and precisely the specific identity of its very nature.

This would require that the spirit be operational (put in tangible indicators) in social science terminology. The term *operational* is used in modern social sciences to mean that social scientists should attempt to make vague phenomena and ideas more tangible – quantifiable and measurable if at all possible – so that the vague phenomena and ideas in question become operational and empirically manageable.

The process of making things operational is certainly inspired by the epistemology of modern western science and knowledge, which relies heavily on its understanding and explanation of phenomena that have identifiable, quantitative, and measurable variables and causes. The degree of success in this process varies from one category of phenomena to the other. For instance, it is harder to make the so-called subjective phenomena (e.g., personal feelings and opinions) operational than the objective ones out there in the external world. Nevertheless, efforts must be made to identify as concretely as possible the hidden dimensions of vague phenomena.

As pointed out earlier, the meaning of spirit given by the six interpreters remains rather vague. There is, therefore, a need to develop some sort of methodology that helps avoid the use of vague and general labels that do not lead one to a closer and more tangible understanding of the spirit's nature. In order to dissipate the obscurity surrounding its nature, those elements that

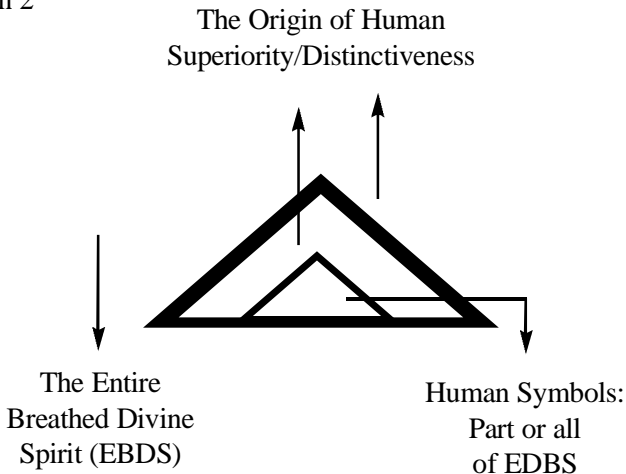
really distinguish human beings and make them superior to all other species need to be identified in both objective and tangible terms.

As mentioned earlier, human symbols (e.g., language, thought, beliefs, science/knowledge, cultural norms and values, laws, and so on) are what distinguish humans from all other species. The two verses referred to above also speak explicitly of humanity's distinct and prestigious status among all other creatures, including the angels, whom God ordered to prostrate to Adam immediately after (and not before) He breathed some of His divine breath into him. This appears to be why humanity is accorded the central place on this planet.

Thus, humanity's objective reasoning analysis (*`aql*) and the Qur'anic revealed text (*naql*) concur on humanity's superiority. While the former relates it to humanity's unique human symbols, the latter explains its distinct status by means of the spirit breathed into each person. Thus there is a strong agreement between the two perspectives. The Qur'an consistently attributes to humanity distinct superiority over all other living species due to its human symbols/culture. In other words, both approaches point to the crucial role of human symbols in causing humanity's superiority/distinctiveness.

In the Qur'an perspective, however, this spirit may have a broader meaning than the human symbols per se. In fact, this broader meaning would cover everything that distinguishes humans from non-humans. Illustration 2, below, shows the kind of overlapping that exists between human symbols and the spirit. It remains to be emphasized here that human symbols are the spirit's key tangible factor.

Illustration 2



So far, my operational analysis of human symbols has clarified the spirit's broader nature. In my interpretation, the latter must include these symbols – and perhaps even more than them. With this, the spirit's identity is no longer as obscure as it was in the six previously cited Qur'anic interpretations. Thus, in these two verses *ruh* must first mean human symbols. This implies that their divine nature can explain the potential eternity of the thought devised by philosophers, social thinkers, scientists, and others since, according to my conceptualization of *`aql*, human thought is part of these symbols. We have also seen that it has a metaphysical divine origin according to the Qur'anic outlook. As a result, it is strongly eligible for a long life-span or even for eternity.

All things considered, I see eye-to-eye with Zaghul al-Najjar, who argues that the Qur'an's interpreters need credible modern scientific knowledge to convey the right meanings of its verses for both natural and social sciences.<sup>36</sup>

The above interpretation of the two Qur'anic verses makes it clear that the sacred text has a very strong program as regards culture since humanity's unique mastership of the world comes from the spirit/human symbols/culture. In other words, these symbols are both central to the identity of human agents and are independent variables. Their global impact on human biology (see Illustration 1), the behaviors of individuals, and the dynamics of human societies and civilizations is very great. This gives a strong legitimacy to the much-needed pressing work on cultural sociology and should bring about serious reform in sociology, which has neglected culture's fundamental role as an independent variable in making sociology a rigorous and reliable system of knowledge of credible understanding and explanation of phenomena through the use of a valid methodology and sociological theory.

This essay's use of *`aql* (human analytical reasoning) and *naql* (the Qur'anic verses) show that human symbols are central to the identities of human agents. The classical-era educated Muslim's mind combined *`aql* and *naql* in its efforts to create and establish trustworthy knowledge and science. From the Islamic perspective, such a mind is an ideal type of mind as far as securing credible and exhaustive knowledge and science, particularly in the realms of a culture's ethics, moral values, and norms. Ibn Khaldun is a good example of a classical-era scholar who fully used the *`aql-naql* mind in his *Al-Muqaddimah*.<sup>37</sup>

It could be argued that the *`aql-naql* mind is compatible with research findings on the causes of innovation and creativity as regards the ideas, concepts, and theories found in the various social sciences. In their *L'innovation*



*dans les sciences sociales: la marginalité créatrice*,<sup>38</sup> Mattei Dogan and Robert Pahre have shown that when social scientists go beyond their frontiers of specialization and interact with marginal/neighborly disciplines (hybridization), their chances for coming up with innovative and new creative ideas, concepts, and theories become greater. In the context of this essay, their findings have two major implications:

1. Support for recent and present calls for interdisciplinarity, since social and psychological phenomena in particular are influenced by a multitude of factors. Thus satisfactory understanding and explanation require the input of many branches of science and knowledge.
2. The call for hybridization is indirectly in line with the Islamic view of human knowledge/science. Islamic epistemology stresses the importance of the unity of human knowledge, for its founding source is the one unique God: Allah. Given these unifying divine roots, all branches of human knowledge/science can ultimately constitute only unity.

Based on Dogan and Pahre's thesis, the use of the *`aql-naql* method has led me to put forward new and innovative ideas, insights, and concepts, such as the centrality of human symbols to human identity, human symbols' transcendental dimensions, spirit/human symbols, human symbols' longer life-span, the dualistic human identity (body and human symbols), and the human symbols' rapid mobility in space and time. The interpretation of *ruh* (spirit) as human symbols or more has enriched our understanding of these symbols' many features that contemporary social sciences hardly raise, let alone incorporate, in their thought.

## **Applying the ANTHS Theory**

Due to the extreme centrality of the cultural symbolic system/human symbols at the core of the identities of human individuals, groups, societies, and civilizations, it is appropriate to apply this theory in the analysis and understanding of a number of phenomena and issues related to human societies and civilizations. Briefly, I restrict myself here to analyzing the widely debated dialogue/clash of civilizations. I wish to focus now on the potential for such an undertaking between the West and the Muslim world.

Based on ANTHS's concepts and assumptions, it can be argued that the West is less predisposed than the Muslim world for a civilizational dialogue.<sup>39</sup> Consequently, it may be considered the major source of Huntington's so-called clash of civilizations. This theory reaches a different

conclusion than that of Huntington's set of ideas. On the one hand, my thesis is based on the assumption that common cultures (e.g., languages, religious beliefs, and cultural values) among peoples, societies, nations, and civilizations are essential factors that encourage and facilitate mutual contact and dialogue. Therefore, the lack or absence of a common culture among humans discourages and hampers such contact and dialogue, thereby creating conditions that may favor tension and conflict. I will explain how the widespread knowledge of western languages, knowledge/science, cultural values, and familiarity with Christian beliefs among Muslims motivate them to desire contact and dialogue with westerners and their civilization.

The above thesis on the importance of shared cultural elements for civilizational dialogue is based on my basic research observations and findings. As shown in the ANTHS theory, humans are by nature cultural symbolic beings. That is, cultures represent the core identities of individuals and their societies and civilizations. I reached this conclusion as a result of my *`aql*-based analysis of the nature of human symbols, as displayed particularly in Illustration 1.

The ANTHS theory helps put the issue of civilizational dialogue or clash into perspective. First, based on human symbols' centrality to human identity, I believe it is more appropriate to use *culture* instead of *civilization* when analyzing the issue of dialogue among contemporary peoples, societies, and civilizations. I say this because culture is the basic founding force of a given civilization and the decisive force in determining and encouraging/discouraging dialogue. Therefore, it is more accurate to speak of a "cultural" dialogue/clash rather than a "civilizational" dialogue/clash.

Since the end of the twentieth century, many books and articles have been published on this subject, and numerous seminars, colloquiums, and congresses have been held all over the world. The success of cultural/civilizational dialogue could hardly crystallize and be fruitful without dialogue among the cultures of human civilizations, because human symbols/cultures represent the core identities of human individuals and their societies and civilizations.

Given that languages are, according to my theory's assumptions, the essential creating force of human cultures, it is quite legitimate to consider peoples' learning of each other languages as a practical and effective way to facilitate the process of dialogue between the concerned parties whose civilisations wish to dialogue.<sup>40</sup> However, today the world's advanced and developing countries are not equal as regards the learning scale of each other's

language(s). On the one hand, at least some large social groups in the South/Third World know fairly well some western languages, especially English and French, which are the most widespread and used western languages in the Third World. On the other hand, the absolute majority of social groups and classes in the West's advanced societies do not have even a limited knowledge of the Third World's languages.

This situation is also true of the state of language(s)/knowledge between the West and the Muslim world. Calls in favour of a dialogue among them are becoming stronger, especially since 9/11. From my theory's point of view, the West is less ready and skilled linguistically, and thus culturally, to enter into a serious and wide ranging dialogue with the Muslim world. In general, westerners do not know any of the major Muslim languages: Arabic, Farsi, Turkish, and Urdu. This situation lays the groundwork, almost inevitably, for the West's widespread ignorance of Muslim cultures and societies.<sup>41</sup> This can hardly encourage and enable its inhabitants to participate in a wide grassroots dialogue with the Muslim world.

In this regard Americans may be considered, in both linguistic and cultural terms, less predisposed for dialogue with other cultures because they are more handicapped by their widespread ignorance of foreign languages than most of the advanced European societies. In my own terms they are massively illiterate when it comes to foreign language(s), which discourages them from entering into dialogue with others. This may be one of the reasons that helps explain why the slogan of the "clash of civilizations" came from the American culture as opposed to the European one.

In contrast, Muslim societies contain many people who possess a wide and genuine knowledge of western cultures due to the widespread knowledge and usage of English and French acquired under colonialism and after, especially among the elites and the middle and higher classes. As such, based on my theory's assumptions, the desire for cultural/ civilizational dialogue cannot be equal between the advanced western societies and the Muslim peoples because the latter's greater knowledge of western languages and cultures enables them to have a greater motivation and aspiration to welcome and favor mutual dialogue than their western counterparts.

The Muslim world also scores better than the West on the religious scale of knowledge. Muslims consider Moses and Jesus to be God's prophets and messengers. The belief in other prophets and messengers throughout the ages who were sent before Muhammad is a fundamental component of the Muslim faith. Consequently, they see Christians and Jews as "People of the Book." On the other hand, Judaism and Christianity do not preach to

their followers that they should believe in Islam and that Muhammad as its prophet and messenger. In other words, the West shows a great ignorance of the Muslim world's languages, religions, and cultures. Social psychologists would strongly point out that such ignorance of other peoples' cultures constitutes a major source for the display of various prejudices, stereotypical attitudes, and widespread false accusations against them.<sup>42</sup>

Furthermore, the West remains the world's dominant power. Certainly, these factors have the tendency to reinforce each other in order to establish an inferior image of Muslims and a superior image of westerners.

According to the ANTHS theory, the people of the West at large find it more difficult, both linguistically and religiously, than their Muslim counterparts to really engage in a fair grassroots dialogue with the Muslim world. As such, it is far from adequately prepared to advocate, in a spontaneous and motivated manner, an open and sincere dialogue with the Muslim world with all respect and equality.

Huntington's thesis hardly mentions the importance of the presence or absence of linguistic and religious factors in making a dialogue or a clash of civilizations.<sup>43</sup> As shown, these factors point out that the Muslim world has a greater desire and willingness to engage in a fair dialogue with the West. Furthermore, his theoretical assumptions display a great deal of prejudice and misunderstanding not only toward Muslim civilization, but also toward Chinese civilization. Such an attitude surely does not help establish credible mature knowledge. His view lacks the full presence of a neutral and objective spirit in advancing his clash of civilizations theory. Consequently, he cannot easily claim to be one of those who have sincerely committed themselves to real science as their true vocation.

## Conclusion

The thesis of my ANTHS theory offers a number of new ideas and concepts to the social sciences. For instance, it strongly argues that humans are profoundly *homo symbolicus* – great users of human symbols – which is rarely underlined in modern social sciences due to their frequent use of such terms as *homo socio-logicus*, *homo oeconomicus*, and *homo politicus* to describe humanity. I emphasize that this shortcoming undermines these disciplines' credibility when it comes to formulating well-grounded concepts and theories.

There is also a transparent newness both in my *`aql* (see Illustration 1) and *naql* (see Illustration 2) interpretations of the nature of human symbols.

These new insights on the symbols' nature have led to the birth and good standing of the ANTHS theory. As such, it is highly qualified to be considered as a cultural theory that can explain various human phenomena from the human body's slow growth and maturation to a dialogue/clash of human cultures/civilizations. This `aql/naql synthesis approach lends support to the idea of the Islamization of knowledge, which ultimately means devising a reliable correspondence/matching between the findings of `aql and those of naql.

My theory's emphasis on the centrality of human symbols to human identity and, consequently, their impact on human action in single and collective human affairs, make ANTHS a very legitimate analytical tool for the discipline of cultural sociology, which considers culture to be an independent variable of great weight and influence on individual and social collective human affairs. As such, the ANTHS framework can only enhance and promote the chance for the solid growth and development of cultural sociology.

## Endnotes

1. In this essay I use *human symbols* instead of *cultural symbols*, which I have used before in my own writings, because the former eliminates the vagueness that may be found in the word *cultural*. I believe this change is in order because some recent studies in social sciences use *culture* in regard to animals. Consequently, for better transparency I have replaced *cultural* with *human* to mean refer to those symbols that distinguish humanity from all other living species (viz., spoken and written language, thought, knowledge/science, religion, myths, laws, and cultural values and norms).
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