There is no mystery about glossolalia. Tape-recorded samples are easy to obtain and to analyze. They always turn out to be the same thing: strings of syllables, made up of sounds taken from among all those that the speaker knows, put together more or less haphazardly but which nevertheless emerge as word-like and sentence-like units because of realistic, language-like rhythm and melody. Glossolalia is indeed like language in some ways, but this is only because the speaker (unconsciously) wants it to be like language. Yet in spite of superficial similarities, glossolalia is fundamentally not language. All specimens of glossolalia that have ever been studied have produced no features that would even suggest that they reflect some kind of communicative system. This would also mean that contrary to common belief, it has never been scientifically demonstrated that xenoglossia occurs among Pentecostals: people just do not talk languages they are unfamiliar with.

Glossolalia is not a supernatural phenomenon. It is, in fact, a very natural phenomenon. It is similar to many other kinds of speech humans produce in more or less normal circumstances, in more or less normal psychological states. In fact, anybody can produce glossolalia if he is uninhibited and if he discover what the “trick” is. Both the commonplace nature of glossolalia and experiments have proven this fact. (After writing that, I had no difficulty at all in producing /trishata kunaminu, karabândki minaminu/, and I am no Pentecostal.)

Therefore there is no need to explain what causes a person to produce this form of speech. Nothing “comes over his vocal chords.” Speech as people imagine does not originate there anyway. It starts in the brain. That is where the instructions to the vocal organs come from. And when someone speaks in tongues, he is only using instructions that have lain dormant since childhood. “Finding” them and then being willing to follow them are the difficult things. So the only causes that need to be found are those that explain why a person should want to use these rules again and how he becomes willing to do so. The rest is easy.

Glossolalia is therefore not aberrant behavior, only anomalous. It is


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anomalous, because it departs from run-of-the-mill speech, not because tongue speakers are in any way abnormal.

Tongues are indeed anomalous but not extraordinary. Producing tongues is not strange; it is belief about this pseudolanguage that is. Strange, that is, from the point of view of society in general. It is this dominant society that decides what is normal — in speech or anything else. And it has judged glossolalic behavior abnormal because of the belief by certain Christians that this comes from God. Society has therefore judged a belief, not behavior nor people. Yet both the speakers and the speech are condemned.

Glossolalists are therefore not necessarily abnormal beings; it is only their belief that is not common. They are not abnormal, but they can be. There are healthy glossolalists, and there are sick ones. Being sick is not what leads to glossolalia. Nor is personality at the bottom of this belief in the supernaturality of glossolalia. There is, in fact, no evidence whatsoever to suggest — let alone prove — that glossolalists are all of a single psychological type and that this personality of theirs predisposes (some would say causes) them to speak in tongues.

One does not have to be abnormal nor of a certain psychological type to speak in tongues, but perhaps people of a certain type are attracted to the kind of religion that uses tongues. Let us not doubt the possibility of identifying such people from either a psychological or sociological point of view. This is as reasonable as it is to suppose that by-and-large a certain kind of woman becomes involved in the Women’s Liberation Movement. Knowing someone, we could say, “Yeah, I would have expected him (or her) to get involved in that.” Some things are not so obvious without rigorous analysis, of course. In any case, this does not mean that we therefore know what (inner) “force” led him to talk in tongues. The Pentecostal movement just gave him the chance to do something anybody can do.

Glossolalia is normal, not supernatural as the Pentecostal believes; it is normal, not abnormal as the man of the street believes. Two sets of belief are thus exposed for that they are — bias on the one hand and prejudice on the other. Of these two errors, the greater, in my opinion, is the latter. Both beliefs prevented us from understanding what glossolalia really was, and this was never of merely an academic interest. Some would blame the tongue speakers themselves for this attitude, because they insisted that this meaningless speech of theirs came from God. But prejudice is worse, because it never gave them a chance. Christians should at least have been kinder, and social scientists more open-minded. Both groups of people were prevented by prejudice from being what we expected them to be. Now with the understanding that we have of tongues we can hope that we shall begin to understand glossolalists better.
If glossolalia is no mystery, what can be said of it? What does it teach about religion and the place of language in religion? And what are the consequences for those who believe in this phenomenon and even for some who do not? The first question first.

Glossolalia is made of common human stuff. It is, in itself, profane. But this should come as no surprise. All religion is incarnated in man. Its dimensions are those of *homo sapiens*. (Although the believer adds another dimension, the supernatural, he cannot escape the fact that even that is mediated through the carnal. The supernatural is perceived and manifested through a physically- and culturally-bound creature.)

The material of religion is human: bread and buildings, wine and water, crosses and colors, liturgy and language. They all figure in man’s being religious and experiencing religion. They constitute the monuments to and the edifice of religion.

All the artifacts of religion — whether they be a Methodist mourner’s bench or a Catholic’s confession box — say something about what humans experience internally as “religion.” All religion expresses this experience. It is itself, in a sense, a language. Religion as language has its own “sounds” and “syllables”; its own “phrases” and “sentences”; its own “rhythm” and “melody.” And behind them is the real stuff, the “semantics,” the meaning. Without this the rest is just “nonsense.”

Religion, then, is a “sacred language” (and not the only one some would say). But it is sacred, because it expresses the sacred, not because it is sacred in itself. What sacral glow it has is reflected from its source. In itself it is of very ordinary stuff.

Language, then, is part of “sacred language.” It too is ordinary human material. Like candles and incense, pulpits and pews, it figures in all of religious experience: in sermons, prayers, spells, and song.

And like the rest of what goes into religion, language is modeled according to various needs. Like the changes of colors in a Lutheran religious year, language varies according to what a given event “says.” There is one way for praying, and another for preaching. And both of these — as well as others for different kinds of religions — are different from ordinary speech. They do not have to be different; religion could be expressed in the language of the street, but it never is.

Shamans oftentimes introduce a language of the animal spirits in their conjuring or healing ceremonies. Buddhist healers in Ceylon use different languages — Sanskrit, Pali, Malayalam, etc., — depending on whether they are addressing the demons or the audience and depending on what they are talking about. The language of Islam is Arabic and that of traditional Roman Catholicism Latin regardless of the native languages of the adherents. The Coptic religion in Ethiopia uses an archaic Semitic language, Ge’ez, that has to be learned. These are
examples of using different languages for religious purposes, but one can switch to different contemporary varieties. The language Jamaicans give their testimonies in at a pocomania service is not the ordinary creole they speak but in an approximation of elegant literary language. Pronunciation is also changed to mark the religious use of language. In one independent Christian church among the Zulu, "angel's speech" is made different by having all the l sounds changed to r. And in North America, when one woman faith healer preaches, she trills her r's (rule, road, wrote, there) in the Spanish fashion. This does not alter the content of her sermon, but she changes a "talk" into a "sermon."

These are examples of religious language, not an analysis of what religious language is. But these are enough to illustrate that religious discourse is "uncommon." And it is uncommon in very similar ways throughout the world in religions of very different kinds. In spite of these superficial differences, furthermore, it always says the same thing: "This experience is special. It's sacred."

Glossolalia is part of this world-wide inventory of varieties of religious language. It shares the same linguistic feature (being different from ordinary discourse) and the same cultural function (setting apart a religious event). It just goes farther in one direction by changing its form to destroy practically all similarity to language in its systematic, arbitrary shape. It therefore goes beyond Latin and Ge'ez which may also be unintelligible for a participant in a religious event.

Therefore glossolalia speaks. A person does say something in tongues. He is saying that he is involved in something — at a given moment in time or as part of a pattern of life — that transcends the ordinary.

In short, glossolalia is a linguistic symbol of the sacred. So it is understandable that for the charismatic movement it is a sacred symbol, a precious possession, a divine gift.

Any anthropologist will understand what has just been said, because he is practiced — as a psychologist is — in getting behind what people say to find out what they really mean. It is his business to try to find out what a particular culture means for its participants. But the glossolalist is probably unaware of this level of the meaning of tongues.

The glossolalist is more conscious of something else that tongues say. He knows in some fashion or other that they represent the presence of God. Glossolalia says, "God is here." (Just as a Gothic cathedral says, "Behold, God is majestic.") This is why a glossolalist declares that praying in tongues leads to a "heightened awareness of God's presence."

This is not to be denied outright. Whatever it may mean to feel the presence of God, we must accept that the believer senses something that is different, something extraordinary. And glossolalia has something to do with it. The Pentecostal believes that God is there because of the
linguistic miracle. We believe that it is no miracle, but we can also believe that it symbolizes God's presence. (Or, if one wants, it symbolizes the belief in the presence of God.)

Viewed in this way glossolalia is symbolic in the very way that the eucharist is symbolic. The eucharist (bread and wine for the Catholic, boiled manioc and lemonade for "Brethren" in the Central African Republic), of course, has different traditional meanings for different kinds of Christians. Disregard these for the moment. Whether the Lord's Supper is a "sacrament" for the Catholic or an "ordinance" for a Baptist, it represents the fellowship believers have with God.

In this instance—in somehow experiencing the presence of God—the glossolalist shares in a universal religious experience of one type. It is probably found in all religions in some form, but not all believers take part in everything that is comprehended by their religion. Some are satisfied with allegiance to a system, others are oriented by its explanation of life, still others enjoy most its ritual and ceremonies. But there are always at least a few for whom real religion involves personally encountering the "supernatural" in some form. It is "felt" and one is affected by this encounter. At the given moment one is not "normal" (that is, secular) but nonetheless fully normal (even without some "ecstatic" experience), and one's subsequent hours, days, or weeks are affected by this encounter. Reliving this experience becomes for many people an important goal, and religious practices are valued only if they induce and enhance it. This is what the Pentecostal calls "living in the power of God" or "being filled with the Spirit of God." It means being constantly "in touch with God."

Glossolalia therefore is an important component of personal, affective religion. Whenever a person prays in tongues, he is reminded of how close to him God really is, and he desires (consciously or unconsciously) that God will touch him to make his life different.

From all this we see that the mystery of religion is symbolized, represented, and induced by glossolalia. Like other parts of religion it marks the discontinuity between the sacred and the profane, but at the same time it functions most importantly in the feeling dimension of religion. On these two counts alone we should recognize the legitimacy and value of glossolalia, for it accomplishes two important functions in religion. And it does this without being itself any sort of mystery.

From glossolalia we get a new perspective on the nature of religion and of the place of language in it. This is what the curious but uninvolved observer of Pentecostal religion learns from this book. But what is its consequence for the glossolalist and for his non- or antiglossolalist brethren in the Christian tradition? For them, a humanistic appreciation is a luxury, because, except for tongues, they are committed to the same religion.
For some glossolalists there will be no consequence, just incredulity. They will not believe that a linguistic scientist can demonstrate the nonlinguistic, noncommunicative nature of tongues. Some will say that glossolalia is spiritual or divine communication; since its source and cause is God the Holy Spirit, it is not possible for a linguist, Christian or not, to understand this phenomenon in purely human terms. But the conclusion does not follow from the premise. Surely there is much to see without paying any attention to where glossolalia is supposed to come from. Once the speaker opens his mouth, the sounds are public property. The linguist is therefore as competent to describe this speech as a gourmet or a chemist would be to describe the mana the Children of Israel subsisted on in the wilderness and the wine Jesus made for the wedding banquet. One could at least say whether or not the wine the wedding guests drank was good.

It is no argument to say that glossolalia is divine communication, because the Pentecostal has no more idea what this is than he does of divine wine. But communication and wine are both from human experience, and we can tell — if our palates and our ears are good — if this is the real stuff. Many people are fooled by ersatz wines (even Italians who ought to know better!), just as many people are fooled by ersatz language. But belief no more changes pseudolanguage into divine language than it changes water (or ersatz wine) into wine. Belief is a powerful force: it changes many things. But among the things it cannot do is make a supernatural creation of something that is a poor imitation.

The glossolalist’s incredulity challenges the linguist’s competence, because this competence probes where he is most sensitive. But the encounter is an uneven match. We know more about language than the glossolalist does. We know enough to declare what is and what is not language. We know as much as a mathematician, who can tell the difference between a real and pseudo formula — one that looks like mathematical language but does not say anything. We do not know everything, of course. We do not know exactly what is the neurological basis for language, but we know that it is systematic and that this system is reflected in systematic arrangements in speech. The glossolalist must grant this, because one of his proofs for the existence of God is orderliness in creation. A hodge-podge of DNA produces biological nonsense as much as a hodge-podge of syllables linguistic nonsense.

Another response of glossolalists will be defiance. They will reject every rational description and explanation of glossolalia, not only my own, because these cannot account for the tremendous changes that take place in their lives in connection with this “gift.” There is no need to document these changes. Although psychologists and sociologists would like qualitative and quantitative measurements of the effects of charismatic religion, we will — waiting for this kind of information — accept testimonials as proof of the reality of some change. Not all of it is
measurable, in any case, for some of it is religious in a subjective sense. One does not measure a “deeper prayer life” in any scientific way, but devoutly religious people accept its reality as much as all of us accept the reality of happiness.

A charismatist’s religious experience can be real, revolutionary, reconstitutive. A glossolalist accepts this transformation as supernatural, that is, caused by God. If it is a dramatic change — taking place where one did not expect it or more quickly than one expected — it takes on all the more appearance of the supernatural. But none of this proves that glossolalia is supernatural. No number of “miraculous” transformations will make of glossolalia what it is not.

People with this antirational approach to religion will therefore be unaffected by my expose of glossolalia. They are like believers in the existence of Unidentified Foreign Objects that invade this planet from outer space. Because they have turned off rational argumentation, there is no talking with them.

Other Christians who are more tolerant of a scientific approach will, however, have their own questions and problems. In view of the fact that contemporary glossolalia is a simplified form of extemporaneous pseudolanguage, they will, for example, have to re-examine the Biblical texts that clearly refer to anomalous verbal behavior. For instance, did the Corinthian Christians talk “nonsense”? That depends. If we had a sample of a Corinthian’s “language” that went something like

Θόρυβος θάνυμα ρίπανα θυμί.
Νό, ρόθυνυ νάνινυ ράριθαμα μιθί.
Μαμίθι, ράρυ θάνυμα ρίμυθυ θινιμιθά

μυμαναράθα. Μαμίνα.

we would have to answer, “Yes, it is linguistically meaningless.” The reason is simple: I produced that bit of glossolalia myself by recording 12 syllables on slips of paper, throwing them up in the air, and then putting them together randomly, dividing into words according to how I felt they would sound best. (The syllables are as much those of English as they are — or could have been — of Greek or some other Mediterranean language.) This is not, of course, saying what the Corinthians really did. I do know, however, that this sample of “Greek” glossolalia is typical of tongues as we know them.

Others will wonder if this verbal phenomenon is “of God.” If they mean by that miraculous, then the answer is categorically no. Glossolalia is a perfectly human, perfectly normal (albeit anomalous) phenomenon. However, if it is charismatic religion that they question, then the answer will depend on what kinds of things they believe God does today. If God works only through people who interpret the Bible the way they do, then
they already have their only possible answer. And I will not engage them in argument over whatever position they take.

Even without condemning glossolalists, still other Christians would like an explanation as to why intelligent, sincere, deeply committed fellow believers would talk nonsense. If glossolalia is what I say it is, what causes them to do this? So we end the book where we started it.

People talk in tongues, because it is part of a movement that offers them the fulfillment of aspirations that their previous religious experience created in them. They too want to believe in God passionately, to know the delight of communion with Him, and to see Him at work in life. They see evidence of all this in members of the charismatic movement. It is intellectually satisfying, and belief is nurtured by intimate personal relations. This is why they accept the beliefs and practices of the movement. They accept tongues, too, because everything else is so attractive.

If they believe that tongues are real human languages, this is not the worst of human errors. The similarity between tongues and natural language is what misleads them. They are not victims of self-deception.

That accounts for the past. What of the future? If tongue speakers believe what I have written, they can no longer trust appearances. They will have to admit that in one instance at least Pentecostal doctrine is wrong. But this may be no tragedy, and the charismatic movement ought to be able to survive this realization, for glossolalia is only an artifact of religion, not its cause.

Many will not be convinced, but they will have my respect nonetheless. I will not be distracted by what I hear from Anglicans and Roman Catholics, Puerto Ricans and Appalachians, traditional Pentecostals and neo-Pentecostals. What I hear is nonsense; the sounds make no sense to me. But I know that what lies beyond is what counts, and that is sacred ground.

So I take off my shoes.

That too is "nonsense."
natural distinction? Does the Bible? What are adequate criteria for distinguishing the two?

3) How is the supernatural / natural distinction related to others that are often drawn; namely, God / world, divine / human, non-human / human, other worldly / this worldly, sublime / mundane, sacred / profane, sacred / secular, uncommon / common, strange / familiar, abnormal (aberrant) / normal (anomalous) unordered / ordered, dramatic / undramatic?

4) What is a miracle? How would you recognize one? What importance do miracles have for religion? for Christianity? Why? Would xenoglossia count as a miracle?

5) If Professor Samarin's exposé of the gift of tongues is correct, what implications follow for a proper understanding of the Spirit of God's other gifts today?

6) What can a Christian mean when he says in conclusion, "What I hear is nonsense; the sounds make no sense to me. But I know that what lies beyond is what counts, and that is sacred ground"?

Just as with clarity, questions are not enough, but they too may be steps forward!
The contributions that accompany my paper on glossolalia in this issue of CRUX are thoughtful and kind. Responding to them proves to be not at all difficult.

Although no one challenges the validity of my analysis of glossolalia like kalooluh makoo (which I just created for the occasion), both Dunn and Kydd contradict me by insisting that there are at least a few cases of real xenoglossia, that is, people speaking human languages of which they had no knowledge. Such events, they imply, would be incontestably supernatural. Kydd, in fact, cites two instances by way of evidence. There is no denying that they are fairly good stories. He had talked to at least some of the principals in both cases. But this is not enough to convince me. Even though one person was supposed to have known French and the other Russian, there is no way of making certain what it was they actually heard. In the final analysis, we would simply be taking their word for what they say. I would like to at least know how critical they are as observers of speech data. Even in the report, as quoted by Kydd, there is too much rhetoric for a scientific observation.

Kydd feels that my skepticism about xenoglossia is the result of a biased sample of data. He says that what we have studied is glossolalia produced for purposes of analysis. (It is quite possible that he is repeating an assertion made by F. Goodman in the paper cited by him. I have challenged this assertion elsewhere, and I have tried to explain why I believe Goodman to be incompetent in matters linguistic.) This is simply not true. Every sample of what I have labelled “Christian
glossolalia” was uttered by a person in the sincere belief that he was engaged in authentic religious experience. For example, many of my sources directed their speech as prayer to God even though they were then going to let me keep the recording of this prayer.

In only one place does Dunn address himself directly to me, suggesting that my interpretation of the account in Acts would “presumably” be that the apostles’ speech was gibberish mixed with words suggesting a foreign language. But this is not my view at all. In fact, I do not think that I have a single unambiguous interpretation. It would be easy to say that I believe that this was a case of true xenoglossia, a miracle indeed. Since I believe in miracles, this option is open to me; but somehow this position strikes me as being too easy a way out.

What bothers me about “theological” interpretations of something as commonplace as speech is the way much is made of so little. I have observed people engaged in speech in all kinds of situations — I make it my business to expose myself, in fact, to the greatest possible variety of situations — and I cannot see how Dunn, reading the same sentences I do, deduces that the apostles talked in an ecstatic manner. And since loudness is a gradient feature in speech, at what level would it become unusual? Why, in fact, is loudness a significant point in the interpretation? Loudness is culturally significant only if the cultural norm is known.

The only response to Freeman’s queries is a book, a book in fact that I thought about writing ten years ago. Perhaps I will write that book some day, and Freeman’s questions will serve me well.

But there is one question that relates to the position taken by Kydd. For that reason and because it challenges the concluding statement in my paper, which is the summary of all of my book, I must answer this question. “What,” says Freeman, “can a Christian mean when he says in conclusion, ‘What I hear is nonsense; the sounds make no sense to me. But I know what lies beyond is what counts, and that is sacred ground’”? I mean exactly that. I am simply saying that appearance is not isomorphic with reality. Like C.S. Lewis and every other Christian I assert (or believe by faith) that there is another dimension to life than the one accepted by the empiricist. Not in any religion, denomination, church, or creed is there nothing but pristine and eternal reality. Like natural language, they make an attempt to articulate that reality. The essence is the truth; the rest is “non-sense.”

This is the direction in which Kydd is going, but I am not with him where he is now. What he is now saying is that because the tongue-speaker believes in his personal relationship with God, what he utters must be supernatural. When his creed is analyzed, it turns out that he is

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only saying: "Glossolalia is supernatural because I believe that it is supernatural."

I can grant that glossolalia may have "its roots in the activity of God." This is what I call an authentic religious experience. But this does not lead me to the conclusion that God is behind glossolalia "giving form to" non-sense. God is responsible for Reality; man is responsible for Carnality. Our task is to separate one from the other.