



Soteriological Semiotics within the Qur'an

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Abstract

Allah states within the Qur'an "We will show them Our signs on the horizons and within themselves, until verily they know that this is the Truth" (41: 53). This paper will take a twofold and interrelated approach to this verse, providing a commentary on this verse and, in doing so, draw out a hermeneutic tool that can be applied to the Qur'an as a whole. In order to understand this verse and highlight one particular hermeneutical approach, key elements within the verse will need to be examined, such as "Our," the "signs," "the horizons," "within themselves," and "the Truth." The aim of exploring these elements is to show how a particular understanding of their combination highlights the correlation between the showing of the signs and the individual knowing the relationship between the signs and the Truth. It is suggested that the process of showing, coupled with the subsequent knowing, makes possible the elucidation of a hermeneutic tool that will here be called soteriological semiotics. Through a tentative description of soteriological semiotics, it will be shown that, in taking account of the signs and the individual's reception of them, this hermeneutic tool can provide a framework for examining the method of communication from the Creator to the creation.

Keywords

Soteriological semiotics, *tawhid*, soteriology, hermeneutics, Qur'an

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Introduction

The Qur'an is a comprehensive and complex text. As the Word of God, the covers of the Qur'an will not be closed, meaning that humanity must continually approach it with fresh eyes to understand the nourishment that this text provides. In order to grasp the continuing renewal of meaning, hermeneutical tools are needed that take into account the changing circumstances of humanity as a whole and the distinctive perspective of each and every individual in particular. It is suggested that in exploring the verse "We will show them Our signs on the horizons and within themselves, until verily they know that this is the Truth" (41: 53), and the elements it details, that such a tool can be elucidated, which, in turn, can then be applied with a broader scope to provide further insight into the Qur'anic text. The aim of exploring these elements is to tentatively describe what will here be called soteriological semiotics, a hermeneutic tool that, in taking account of the signs and the individual's reception of them, can provide a framework for examining the method of communication from the Creator to the creation.

Aim and Scope

The aim of this work is to draw out a hermeneutic tool that will here be called soteriological semiotics. This is not to suggest that this approach has not been used previously. Rather, as examples below illustrate, while this tool has at times been utilised, it has not been made explicit. Illustrating the full extent of the previously implicit uses of soteriological semiotics would take us too far afield and it is for this reason that the examples have been limited.

The tools utilised for understanding the Qur'an have undergone significant developments over the past 1400 years. Some of the earliest recorded examples of commentary on the Qur'an exist within early hadith collections containing "numerous reports about Companions or Successors being asked about the interpretation of specific verses, in which both legal and lexical matters are mentioned."¹ Within the earliest commentaries "the text is made more comprehensible not by paraphrasing, but by adding words" where there additions, or commentary, "serve to identify the referents of the verbs and pronouns in the text."² At this stage of commentary, metaphorical interpretation "usually serves the purpose of avoiding anthropomorphic readings of the text."³ As Arabic grammatology developed attempts to understand

1 Kees Versteegh, "Early Qur'anic Exegesis: From Textual Interpretation to Linguistic Analysis" in *The Oxford Handbook of Qur'anic Studies*, ed. Mustafa Shah and Muhammad Abdel Haleem (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 634.

2 Versteegh, "Early Qur'anic Exegesis," 639.

3 Versteegh, "Early Qur'anic Exegesis," 639.

the Qur'an diversified and "either tried to explain lexical and linguistic issues of the scripture or explained the historical context of the revelation of a verse."⁴ Recent developments within the world have led to developing ways in which to understand the Qur'an in light of these developments. In surveying modern *tafsir* trends, it has been suggested that, despite a diversity of forms and developments, there is a common intention, as has been stated "from textualism to contextualism, modernism to feminism, scientism to socio-political and thematic interpretations, the underpinning of these modern *tafsir* trends is how to appropriately respond to prevailing diverse geopolitical, sociocultural and technological issues in this advancing world."⁵ Soteriological semiotics, as seen below, does not attempt to encroach on these traditional and modern hermeneutic tools for apprehending the Qur'an. Rather, soteriological semiotics can be utilised in conjunction with other attempts to understand the meanings of the Qur'an.

With a plethora of Qur'anic commentaries available, the Qur'an has shown itself to be a versatile text with regard to commentary. This, in part, is due to versatility of the language of revelation, Arabic, for "given the polysemy of Arabic vocabularies, rigorous commitment to the words of the revelation does not exclude but, on the contrary, it implies a multiplicity of interpretations."⁶ The Arabic language itself allows for the possibility of symbolic interpretations of the Qur'an and this "has actually existed since the early time of Islam."⁷ Within symbolic interpretations "it is common to use polysemic characteristics of the words, as well as metaphors to widen the semantic horizon."⁸ A result of this is that "a set of signs replaces another in order to create a new semantic context."⁹ Utilising signs as signifiers from Allah, soteriological semiotics would be placed within the *ishari* or *ta'wil* category of hermeneutic tools. With regard to the former, "Arabic lexicons tell us that the verb *ashara*, which its noun derives, literally means to point to or to give a sign,"¹⁰ meaning in the sense used here that the signs are from Allah and point

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- 4 Maryam Musharraf, "A Study of the Sufi Interpretation of Qur'an and the Theory of Hermeneutic," *al-Bayan Journal* 11 (2013): 34.
 - 5 Amer Ali, "A Brief Review of Classical and Modern *Tafsir* Trends and the Role of Modern *Tafsir* in Contemporary Islamic Thought," *Australian Journal of Islamic Studies* 3 (2018): 45 – 46.
 - 6 Syamsuddin Arif, "Ibn 'Arabi and the Ambiguous Verses of the Quran: Beyond the Letter and Pure Reason," *Dinika* 4 (2019): 236.
 - 7 Recep Dogan, *Usul al-Tafsir: The Sciences and Methodology of the Qur'an* (Clifton: Tughra Books, 2014), 298.
 - 8 Musharraf, "A Study of the Sufi Interpretation," 39.
 - 9 Musharraf, "A Study of the Sufi Interpretation," 41.
 - 10 Syamsuddin Arif, "Ibn 'Arabi and the Ambiguous Verses of the Quran: Beyond the Letter and Pure Reason," *Dinika* 4 (2019): 237.

to Allah. With regard to the latter, it has been understood as meaning both to take something back to its *awwal*, that is, beginning or origin: hence to take or to follow symbols back to the origin they symbolize¹¹ and as originating “from *awala* which means returning to the end of the matter.”¹² This dual notion of *ta’wil* relating to both the beginning and end of each symbol is fitting given the Qur’an states “He is the First and the Last, the Evident and the Hidden and He has full knowledge of all things” (57: 3). Whether a symbol is traced back to its origin or its end, in both instances, when taken to the full extent, the result is the signs arise from Allah and point to Allah. Delving into existing debates regarding the validity of these hermeneutic tools with regard to the Qur’an would take the subject matter too far afield, rather the intent is to highlight soteriological semiotics as a tool that utilises the polysemic characteristics of words to widen the semantic horizon.

This is not to suggest that such methods for understanding the Qur’an are undisputed. It is suggested that this is because it “is not a matter of science and scientific principles, which may be acquired and then used.”¹³ Yet, it has been suggested that utilising such hermeneutic tools are “permissible and constitute good findings” if “there is no disagreement with the plain meaning of the verse,” “it is a sound meaning in itself,” “in the wording there is some indication towards it,” and “there are close connections between it and the plain meaning.”¹⁴ Soteriological semiotics, as a tool informing the individual about their relationship with Allah, would undermine its own purpose if it voided these conditions and, as a result, maintains a necessity for adhering to Islamic Law and the performance of all Islamic duties.

Discussion on “Our Signs”

Traditional Qur’anic commentaries on the signs “on the horizons and within themselves” lean towards strictly physical interpretations of this verse. Ibn ‘Abbas states that this verse refers to “the ruined remains of the nations who came before” and of “illnesses, pains, misfortunes and other things.”¹⁵ The *Tafsir al-Jalalayn* mentions “the regions of the heavens and the earth,” “the luminous [celestial] bodies,” the “vegetation and trees,” and “exquisite craftsmanship.”¹⁶ Ibn Kathir

11 Abdurrahman Habil, “Traditional Esoteric Commentaries on the Quran” in *Islamic Spirituality: Foundations*, ed. Seyyed Hossein Nasr (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1987), 25.

12 Berman Ali Dehghan Mongabadi, Sara Naderi and Ahmad Zeinali, “Symbolism in Tafsir Attributed to Ibn Arabi,” *Journal of Islamic Studies and Culture* 4 (2016): 156.

13 Ahmad Von Denffer, *Ulum al-Qur’an: An Introduction to the Sciences of the Qur’an* (Kuala Lumpur: A. S. Noordeen, 1983), 134.

14 Denffer, *Ulum al-Qur’an*, 134.

15 Ibn Abbas, *Tafsir Ibn Abbas*, trans. Mokrane Guezzou (Louisville: Fons Vitae, 2008), 638.

16 Jalal al-Din al-Suyuti and Jalal al-Din al-Mahalli, *Tafsir Al-Jalalayn*, trans. Feras Hamza (Louisville: Fons Vitae, 2008), 459.

states that this verse refers to “the advent of Islam over various regions” and “may also be that what is meant here is man and his physical composition.”¹⁷ While there is some distinction between the signs “on the horizons” and those signs “within themselves,” common amongst these commentaries is the focus on these “signs” as physical entities. al-Tustari does venture beyond a strictly physical interpretation in stating that this verse refers to death in both the general meaning of “the death of the physical body” and the specific meaning of “the death of the lusts of the lower self (*shahawat al-nafs*).”¹⁸ However, it is not specified within al-Tustari’s text how these “signs” are indicative of death. While acknowledging the importance of such commentaries, and without discounting that these physical entities are a factor, it is possible to make a case that this verse indicates more than the purely physical, as detailed in the above interpreters.

The signs this verse highlights are those “on the horizons” and those “within themselves.” If both referents are strictly physical signs, then repetition would not be necessary nor would distinguishing between these two types of signs. The “horizons,” being external to the human being, includes all physical signs within creation, which can be taken to also include any physical ailments that the human experiences as “all of creation is, of course, an interconnected whole, created by and entirely dependent on God.”¹⁹ “Within themselves,” in order to differentiate these signs from the former, can then be seen to encompass non-physical signs experienced by the human being, namely their states (*ahwal*) and stations (*maqamat*) and is often referred to within traditional texts as being located within the heart, for “the term ‘heart’ (*qalb*) is a comprehensive term and necessarily includes [in its meaning] all the interior stations (*maqamat al-batin*).”²⁰ Given that Allah states that these are “Our signs,” indicates that, despite their differentiation, their purpose is to bring about a place of knowing, for the individual to arrive at the realisation “that this is the Truth.” The source of these signs is one, namely Allah, and the receptivity of these signs occurs to and within the individual. As the locus of receiving these signs is the individual, it is possible to understand the differentiation of these signs as being between internal experience and external perception.

17 Ibn Kathir, *Tafsir Ibn Kathir* (Riyadh: Darussalam, 2003), Vol. 8 558-59.

18 Sahl b. ‘Abd Allah al-Tustari, *Tafsir al-Tustari*, trans. Annabel Keeler (Louisville: Fons Vitae, 2011), 178-79.

19 Mostafa Al-Badawi, *Man & the Universe: An Islamic Perspective* (Swansea: Awakening Publications, 2010), 3.

20 Hakim al-Tirmithi, *Treatise on the Heart*, trans Nicholas Heer in *Three Early Sufi Texts* (Louisville: Fons Vitae, 2003), 11.

The Reception of “Our Signs”

The verse states that the culmination of the showing of the signs will continue “until verily they know that this is the Truth,” highlighting that there is an important causal relationship between the showing of the signs and knowing the Truth. The showing of “Our signs” requires that there be a perceiver receptive to the perception. The use of the word “horizons” has a twofold impact on this. Firstly, the use of the plural, “horizons,” indicates a multiplicity of possible perceptions within the world. This could be taken as an indication that the showing of “Our signs” is not merely one of sight, but includes all senses. Secondly, the horizon is commonly taken as the furthest that an individual can see, so the “horizons” could be taken as an indication that the showing of “Our signs” encompasses all the senses to their limits. This experiential approach to the verse can be seen to enter into a phenomenological approach to Islam generally and the Qur’an in particular. While traditional phenomenological approaches to Islam abound,²¹ there has been little recent study of it. “From the earliest times, human beings have been impressed and often overawed by the phenomena of nature which they observe from day to day in their environment”²² and it can be seen that there are a multiplicity of Qur’anic verses that play on this constancy of perception and familiarity of the physical environment in order to shift the individual’s external perception from a passive showing into an active knowing. While it would take the discussion too far afield, it is relevant to mention instances such as lightning as an example of Allah’s might (30:24), the camel as an example of Allah’s creative power (88: 17), or even the example of a gnat as an indicator towards the Truth (2: 26), amongst others, are dramatically changed from passive external perception to actively knowing that awe of the external world. This is indicative of something greater than itself which the individual accesses through the plurality of the senses, extending as far as their senses perceive. Furthermore, the individual is directed from the Qur’anic text to the world, to experience it with an active knowing that these signs are indicative of “the Truth.”

In delving into the signs “on the horizons,” it is equally important to note what, if any, impact these have on the signs “within themselves.” The plurality of “within themselves” can be seen to be indicative of the differing internal experiences, distinct to each individual. As the metaphysics of Allah’s Oneness (*tawhid*) “accepts no

21 Ibn ‘Arabi dedicates a chapter in the *Futuhat al-Makkiyya* to those saints who have been given the gifts of particular senses. From the perspective advocated for here, it could be said that the gifts described by Ibn ‘Arabi highlight a particular type of dominance in terms of the showing to these saints.

22 Annemarie Schimmel, *Deciphering the Signs of God: A Phenomenological Approach to Islam* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), 2.

absolutes other than the Essence of the Real,” within the world of the contingently existent creations “what is accepted from one point of view may have to be denied from a second point of view” as individuals are only able to access a partial perspective.²³ Two individuals may experience what can be colloquially called the same event, though their interpretation of it may differ according to their physical location in relation to the event, their individual beliefs, and the emotions that the event triggers. For example, the death of a person may be viewed as a tragedy by some and a mercy by others. While this may appear self-evident, it is important because the plurality of selves mentioned within this verse can be seen to take into account the differing perceptions and experiences of each individual.

If the site of being shown and knowing is located in the individual, then it becomes necessary to examine the source of these signs. The Qur'an states that these are “Our signs.” The plurality of “Our,” as opposed to the singularity of Allah or My, makes it necessary to look into Islamic cosmography, showing that while all of creation is from Allah, the writing of the universe is a result of the operation of Allah's Names, Attributes, and Acts. On this, it has been said that “the most perfect contemplation of the Divine Activities” is to see “God as the author of their movement and their rest, all action being abstracted from the creature and attributed to God alone.”²⁴ A reason for this is that in the affirmation of Allah's Oneness “declaring God one means that one perceives that all things are manifest through God.”²⁵ An example of this can be seen in the statement “do not stretch out your hand to take from creatures unless you see that the Giver (*al-Mu'ti*) amongst them is your Lord,”²⁶ indicating that all of creation acts by virtue of the Divine Names. The use of “Our” encompasses all of the Divine Names without exclusion as “all the divine names are equal in greatness without distinction in rank, since they are attributable to God in His words, while being neither Him nor anything other than Him.”²⁷ From this it is possible to understand that the “Our” in “Our signs” refers to the totality of the Divine Names.

23 William C. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), 28-29.

24 'Abd al-Karim al-Jili, *Universal Man*, trans. Titus Burckhardt (Lahore: Suhail Academy, 2000), 35.

25 Laury Silvers, *A Soaring Minaret: Abu Bakr al-Wasiti and the Rise of Baghdadi Sufism* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2010), 61.

26 Ibn 'Ata' Allah, *Sufi Aphorisms*, trans. Victor Danner (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1973), 50.

27 Nader el-Bizri, “God: Essence and Attributes” in *The Cambridge Companion to Classical Islamic Theology*, ed. Tim Winter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 127.

The Function of “Our Signs”

The verse states that the function of being shown the signs is to “know that this is the Truth.” Ibn ‘Abbas states that this “Truth” is to know “what the Prophet says to them is true,”²⁸ as does Ibn Kathir,²⁹ while *Tafsir al-Jalalayn* mentions that it refers to the Qur’an being “revealed by God.”³⁰ Without denying these interpretations, it is possible to contrast the previous plurals, that is “horizons,” “themselves,” “Our,” and “signs,” with the singularity of “the Truth.” This singular, placed as it is after a list of plurals, is perhaps indicative of Allah’s Oneness (*tawhid*), of which the individual is required to affirm through bearing witness to the testimony of faith “there is no god but Allah,” which marks the entry into Islam. Seen in this light, this interplay between several plurals and one singular within this verse is indicative of the relationship between unity and multiplicity. “God as the All-merciful breathes out while speaking, and the words that take form in His Breath are the existent things of the cosmos”³¹ and in this there is the enacting of the Divine Names, Attributes, and Acts. Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah acknowledges this in stating “He is the one who presented the knowledge of Himself (*ta’arruf*) to you,”³² indicating that what knowledge the individual has of Allah arrives to the individual from Allah through creation. The multiplicity of creation is dependent on Allah for their existence and this can be seen in this verse by the singularity of “the Truth” indicated to by the plurality of existence.

The ontological reality of Allah’s Oneness is accepted as a given. Yet, the individual’s perception of this varies. Knowing “the Truth,” which is the intended function of the signs, can be seen to entail an epistemological shift from taking multiplicity as an end in itself to realising that it is through multiplicity that the individual’s awareness of their inherent ontological embodiment of Unity is possible. Ibn ‘Arabi states that “the signs are not themselves objects of meaning: it is what they point to.”³³ The “signs” point beyond themselves and can be considered metaphorical, in the etymological sense of the word, in that they ferry across meaning. The indication within, or meaning of, the “signs” is that Allah is “the one who is manifest through everything ... the one who is manifest in everything ... the Manifest to everything.”³⁴ It could be further stated “the natural world is a book with

28 Ibn ‘Abbas, *Tafsir*, 638.

29 Ibn Kathir, *Tafsir*, 559.

30 al-Suyuti and al-Mahalli, *Tafsir*, 549.

31 Chittick, *Sufi Path*, 34.

32 Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, *Aphorisms*, 24.

33 Ibn ‘Arabi, *Species and Kinds in the Universe*, trans. Eric Winkel (Create Space, 2016), 16.

34 Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, *Aphorisms*, 26.

knowledge, but that knowledge is not evident merely from the physical phenomena; they are nothing but signs, the meaning of which can be understood by those who are equipped with proper knowledge, wisdom and spiritual discernment.”³⁵ Yet, this is not apparent to the majority of individuals because they treat creation as an end-in-itself, halting the ferry. Despite the ontological reality of Allah’s Oneness (*tawhid*), this is often not reflected in the individual’s epistemology. The disjunction between the individual’s epistemology of multiplicity and Allah’s Oneness can be seen as limiting the knowing of “the Truth” from “Our signs.”

In order to bring about the epistemological shift for affirming Allah’s Oneness, it becomes necessary to develop a hermeneutical tool that assists in transforming the showing of “Our signs” into a knowing of “the Truth.” The necessity of this arises because “the Real (*al-Haqq*) is not veiled from you” while “it is you who are veiled from seeing It.”³⁶ With regard to this epistemological shift,³⁷ all of creation is seen to be “signs,” akin to the Qur’an being a book of signs (*ayat*), whose function is to inform the intellect possessing creations of their relationship with the Creator. Regarding this, Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah states

*by the existence of His created things (athar), He points to the existence of His Names (asma’), and by the existence of His Names, He points to the immutability of His Qualities (awsaf), and by the existence of His Qualities, He points to the reality of His Essence (dhat).*³⁸

“Creation only has reality inasmuch as God stands through it,”³⁹ such that all of creation, the Names, Acts, and Attributes are taken as indicators, pointing to the Divine Essence. On this Abd al-Qadir al-Jilani stated “He would be known in this material world through His attributes manifested in His creation.”⁴⁰ The hermeneutical tool whose aim is to bring about the epistemological shift that allows for an understanding of the indicators will here be called soteriological semiotics.

35 Abdul Kabir Hussain Solihu, “An Axiological Dimension of Qur’anic Epistemology,” *Ilorin Journal of Religious Studies* 4 (2014): 27 – 28.

36 Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, *Aphorisms*, 29.

37 It is important here to understand that we are not suggesting that there is an ontological shift, as this would open us up to accusations of *hulul*, *ittihad*, and the like. Rather, it is being said that “the Truth” stays the same while the individual’s “knowing” shifts.

38 Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, *Aphorisms*, 58.

39 Silvers, *Soaring Minaret*, 93.

40 Abd al-Qadir al-Jilani, *The Secret of Secrets*, trans. Tosun Bayrak al-Jerrahi al-Halveti (Delhi: Muslim Media), 53.

Defining Soteriological Semiotics

Soteriological semiotics can be seen to be a method for transforming the showing of “Our signs” into the knowing of “the Truth.” Soteriological semiotics is

*a study of semiotics in that it examines creation in such a way as to determine ‘the mode in which they signify the God’ and it is soteriological in that this study of symbols aims to bring about the perception and embodiment of the metaphysics of tawhid.*⁴¹

In this sense, soteriological semiotics is, in a way, a hermeneutics of affirming Allah’s Oneness (*tawhid*). It takes all signs to be signifiers from Allah and the signified to be Allah. Ibn ‘Arabi states “God has anchored to each sensory form a spirit of meaning dimension” because the “form is what we call the ‘bridge toward the inward’.”⁴² If this is accepted then it must be asked what the individual is to do with this knowledge and how such knowledge can be utilised. An answer to this can be gleaned from the testimony of faith “there is no god but Allah.” This testimony involves “rejecting all polytheistic attempts to ascribe divinity to other beings and things”⁴³ and can be understood as an ontological statement, describing the reality of what there is. It can also be understood as an epistemological statement, describing the point to which the individual’s knowing must reach. In understanding it in the latter sense, it can be read as an indication to which the multiplicity of things point and the position of the individual with regard to the affirmation of Allah’s Oneness, for “if you want to know your standing with Him, look at where He has made you abide now.”⁴⁴ Soteriological semiotics is seen to be a hermeneutic tool which understands all of creation as being signs from Allah, whose function is to act as a method of communication from Creator to the individual in order for the latter to be able to know the degree to which they affirm Allah’s Oneness (*tawhid*).

The signs “on the horizons and within themselves” can be understood through their similitude. In order to understand this it is necessary to understand the uniquely personal and individualistic nature of the individual’s awareness of their embodiment of Oneness. “The term ‘similitude’ refers to the fact that these normally invisible realities appear in an equivalent form in the visible world”⁴⁵ and this is experienced differently according to the individual. For instance, Ibrahim Niasse, in commenting

41 Abu Bakr Sirajuddin Cook, *Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, Muslim Sufi Saint and Gift of Heaven* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2017), 166.

42 Ibn ‘Arabi, *Mysteries of Charity*, trans. Eric Winkel (Create Space, 2016), 28.

43 Victor Danner, “Shahadah” in *The Inner Journey: Views from the Islamic Tradition*, ed. William C. Chittick (Sandpoint: Morning Light Press, 2007), 208.

44 Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, *Aphorisms*, 35.

45 Mostafa al-Badawi, *Higher Reality: Manifestations of the Unseen* (United Kingdom: Islamic Village Publishing, 2016), 2.

on verses from *Sura al-Baqara*, connects the passages regarding the disbelievers and those regarding darkness and the night. The similitude here is apparent through the comment “*kufr* (disbelief) linguistically means concealment and covering,”⁴⁶ two qualities shared by darkness and night, which conceal that which can be seen with light and during the day, just as disbelief attempts to cover the truth. Just as the night encroaches from “the horizons” and the ensuing darkness conceals the clear path, disbelief too encroaches from “within themselves” and acts like darkness in concealing the straight path (*sirat al-mustaqim*). In this there is a distinction between form and meaning and an understanding of form as that which ferries meaning. The ferrying of meaning is a key aspect of soteriological semiotics.

While circumstances differ amongst individuals, this does not mean that soteriological semiotics falls into a form of relativism. In acknowledging the differing circumstances of each individual, there are some common signposts which allow for the continual realignment of the individual’s awareness. For instance, Abu’l Abbas al-Mursi stated

*There are four times in which the servant will find himself, of which there is no fifth: blessing, affliction, obedience, and disobedience. In each of these times, there is an aspect of servanthood which the Truth requires of you by virtue of His lordship. If it is a time of obedience, your path is to bear witness to God’s grace, since it is He who has guided you into this obedience and has made it possible for you. If it is a time of disobedience, your path is to seek God’s forgiveness and repent. If it is a time of blessing, your path is to give thanks, which means for your heart to rejoice in God. If it is a time of affliction, your path is to be content with God’s decree and to endure patiently.*⁴⁷

From this it can be seen that while the circumstances of the individuals differ, their states can always be aligned to one of these four times. Furthermore, while the particulars of the path will differ amongst individuals, their intended goal, in accordance with what is required, is the same. In like manner, the statement that “one of the signs of relying on one’s own deeds is the loss of hope when a downfall occurs”⁴⁸ does not touch on the particulars of what such a deed may be, which is particular to the individual. The sense of self-reliance becomes a shared sign and is an indication of what such a response means with regard to turning away from reliance on Allah and affirmation of His Oneness. Soteriological semiotics avoids being reduced to a form of relativism due to the constancy of its goal, namely to constantly realign the individual in their epistemological affirmation of Allah’s Oneness (*tawhid*).

46 Ibrahim Niasse al-Kawlakhi al-Tijani, *In the Meadows of Tafsiir for the Noble Qur’an*, trans. Moctar Boubakar (Atlanta: Fayda Books, 2014), 82.

47 Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, *The Subtle Blessings in the Lives of Abu al-Abbas al-Mursi & His Master Abu al-Hasan*, trans. Nancy Roberts (Louisville: Fons Vitae, 2005), 251.

48 Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, *Aphorisms*, 23.

That these “signs” encompass the totality of an individual’s internal experience and external perception means that there is a constant reminder from Allah in all multiplicity of Unity. In the various postures in prayer it is possible to see that “the worshipper’s physical body has acted out the variety of relationships between Creator and creation.”⁴⁹ Fasting is “apart from the rest of the worship rituals” in that it “is a forgoing, not a doing, and negating likeness” such that “the co-relation between fasting and God is strengthened.”⁵⁰ The laws with regard to the taxable wealth can be understood to apply to the wealth of knowledge an individual possess, such that it could be said “the knowledges of the unseen and the gnoses of taste have no tax due upon them except upon that which is ripe at the time or that which is nearly ripe.”⁵¹ During the pilgrimage, the *ihram* can be seen as indicative of the individual unstitched from creation and dependent on Allah. Whether the reader agrees with these interpretations, or has other views, is not at issue with regard to these examples. Rather, in showing that such examples exist and are possible highlights that soteriological semiotics is and has been, in a sense, a reality without a name within the Islamic tradition.

Limitations

Given the intensely personal nature of soteriological semiotics, it must be acknowledged that it functions within certain limits. These limits are stated within the verse itself “until verily they know that this is the Truth.” That the goal is realisation and affirmation of “the Truth” negates anything that leans towards an abrogation of the revealed law (*shari’a*) or anything that may result in antinomian views. The importance of this has been acknowledged by al-Junayd, in his statement “our knowledge must be controlled by conformity with the Qur’an and the Sunna,”⁵² and Abu’l Hassan al-Shadhili, in stating

*if your mystical unveiling (kashf) diverges from the Qur’an and Sunna, hold fast to these two and take no notice of your unveiling; tell yourself that the Qur’an and Sunna is guaranteed by God Most High, which is not the case with the unveiling inspiration and mystical perceptions.*⁵³

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- 49 Gai Eaton, “Perfecting the Mirror” in *The Inner Journey: Views from the Islamic Tradition*, ed. William C. Chittick (Sandpoint: Morning Light Press, 2007), 197.
- 50 Ibn ‘Arabi, *Mysteries of the Fast*, trans. Eric Winkel (Create Space, 2016), 14.
- 51 Ahmad al-‘Alawi, *Knowledge of God*, trans. ‘Abd al-Kabir al-Munawarra and ‘Abd as-Sabur al-Ustadh (Norwich: Diwan Press, 1981), 282.
- 52 Muhammad A. H. Ansari, “The Doctrine of One Actor: Junayd’s View of Tawhid,” *The Muslim World* 73 (1983): 36.
- 53 Al-Sha’rani quoted by Pierre Lory, “Al-Shadhili,” in *The Encyclopedia of Islam*, New Edition (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1997), vol. IX, 171.

The Qur'an and the Sunna are the guide posts used to judge that which is gained through soteriological semiotics. If this was not so, then soteriological semiotics would not be able to bring about the necessary epistemological shift within the individual for the affirmation of Allah's Oneness (*tawhid*). For soteriological semiotics to bring about an affirmation of Allah's Oneness, a stable foundation within the Qur'an and Sunna is indispensable.

Another point that should be highlighted is that soteriological semiotics involves the receptivity of the individual rather than an active process of acquisition. There is a constancy with which "We will show them our signs" and the inability to transition from showing to knowing can be seen in Qur'anic references to those individuals "who have hearts with which they fail to grasp the truth, and eyes with which they fail to see, and ears with which they fail to hear" (7: 179). While the signs abound, their reception and subsequent knowing is not always apparent. The individual actively seeking to "know that this is the Truth" cannot merely engage with creation for, as Ibn 'Ata' Allah states, "if created entities do lead [us] to God, they do so not out of some capacity which they possess in and of themselves ... for nothing can lead to Him but His own divinity."⁵⁴ The receptivity to, rather than the active pursuit of, "Our signs" is evident in Ibn 'Ata' Allah's question "how can created entities bring about the knowledge of Him when He is the One who has brought about knowledge of them?"⁵⁵ Ibn 'Ata' Allah can be understood to be stating that it is only through Allah that the individual is aware of the secondary causes so the individual should be equally receptive to Allah for knowing, in as far as possible, the relationship between the primary and secondary causes, between the Creator and creation. This does not mean that the individual resigns themselves to inactivity, rather the active pursuit of the affirmation of the metaphysics of Allah's Oneness (*tawhid*) provides space for the individual to increase their receptivity.

Conclusion

Soteriological semiotics can be a valuable hermeneutic tool. It is apparent through an examination of the elements within the Qur'anic verse "We will show them Our signs on the horizons and within themselves, until verily they know that this is the Truth" (41: 53) and can be seen to have been utilised within the Islamic tradition without having been made explicit. Giving name to this tool is useful in that it highlights prior use while foregrounding it for further utilisation. Two benefits that result from making soteriological semiotics explicit are that a) its application to traditional texts can open a deeper level of analysis and appreciation and b) it

54 Ibn 'Ata' Allah, *The Subtle Blessings*, 54.

55 Ibn 'Ata' Allah, *The Subtle Blessings*, 54.

can provide a basis from which the individual can deepen their awareness and embodiment of the *tawhidic* ontology. Based on Qur'anic principles, soteriological semiotics aims towards reorienting the individual's epistemological apprehension of multiplicity towards an affirmation of the ontological reality of Allah's Oneness (*tawhid*). This aim, however, is bound by certain limits found within the Qur'an and Sunna. Divorced from these limits, soteriological semiotics may result in an abrogation of the revealed law (*shari'a*) or antinomian views, an antithesis of affirming Allah's Oneness. Avoiding this requires an understanding of both the Qur'an and the Sunna. If kept within its limits, soteriological semiotics is able to be utilised to bring about an epistemological shift within the individual towards an increased affirmation of the ontological reality of Allah's Oneness.

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