

# THE "SEMIOTIC" ENTERPRISE OF IAN R. NETTON : A Deconstructionist Approach of Islamic Thought ?<sup>1</sup>

Roxanne Marcotte

## Abstrak

Tulisan ini mengkaji penerapan pendekatan semiotik terhadap pemikiran Islam yang dilakukan oleh Ian Richard Netton dalam bukunya *Allāh Transcendent* (1994). Seperti halnya Arkoun, Netton mengusulkan suatu anjakan baru untuk melihat pemikiran Islam, khususnya pemaknaan filosofis terhadap konsep-konsep teologinya melalui penggunaan suatu metode yang merupakan campuran dari teori-teori strukturalis dan semiotik moderen guna menyibak beberapa struktur filsafat dan teologi Islam Zaman Tengah.

Karena keterbatasan ruang, tulisan ini tidak menjabaki semua pengarang Muslim yang pemikirannya dikaji oleh Netton melalui pendekatan semiotik. Tinjauan tulisan ini terfokus pada analisis semiotik Netton terhadap tradisi iluminasionis Suhrawardi. Dalam tulisan ini ditunjukkan beberapa kesulitan pendekatan semiotik Netton. Misalnya ia meminjam secara amat tidak kritis konsep-konsep dan idea-idea dari sumber yang luas sejak dari pendekatan Levi-Strauss dalam antropologi, pendekatan Saussure dalam linguistik hingga pendekatan Barthes dan Eco dalam semiotik. Konsep-konsep pinjaman ini tersebar dalam berbagai bagian karya Netton tanpa adanya perhatian untuk melakukan suatu elaborasi terpadu mengenai konsep-konsep ini pada bagian pendahuluan karya tersebut. Tidak ada suatu analisis tajam mengenai apa yang membentuk semiotik itu. Ketika berhadapan dengan terma "tanda" (*sign*) Netton mengusulkan suatu pengertian cukup longgar yang mencakup beberapa definisi yang dikemukakan oleh tokoh-tokoh mulai dari Aristoteles, St. Thomas Aquinas sampai kepada Saussure, Peirce, Eco dan lain-lain. Akibatnya pembaca tidak memperoleh kesan mengenai adanya pengolahan teoritis mengenai batasan "tanda" (*sign*) yang ia terima atau mengenai penyelidikan

kan analitis tentang fungsinya. Secara umum orang bisa terkejut atas sedikitnya kontribusi yang ditawarkan Netton dalam kajian semiotiknya terhadap pemikiran Suhrawardi. Ia tidak membawakan suatu informasi baru mengenai pengaruh Zoroasterian dalam karya-karya Suhrawardi dan tidak menyumbangkan suatu pandangan berbeda dari kajian-kajian tradisional tentang tokoh iluminasionis ini yang telah dikemukakan oleh tokoh-tokoh seperti Henri Corbin dan Seyyid Hossein Nasr. Dari sini orang dapat mempertanyakan apakah studi Netton telah mencapai harapan-harapan yang diusulkannya sendiri dalam projek semiotiknya?

## ملخص

تتناقش هذه المقالة المقاربة السيميائية التي طبقها أيان ريتشارد نيتتون في دراسته للفكر الإسلامي في كتاب له بعنوان "الله المتعالي" (Allah) (Trancendent) [١٩٩٤]. اقترح نيتتون، كما فعل أركون، منهجية جديدة لرؤية الفكر الإسلامي خاصة الترجمة الفلسفية لمفاهيمه اللاهوتية عن طريق استخدام منهج هو مزيج من النظريات البنيوية والسيميائية الحديثة للكشف عن بعض بنى الفلسفة واللاهوت الإسلاميين في العصور الوسطى.

نظر الضيق المكان لم تدرس هذه الكتابة جميع المؤلفين الذين حلل نيتتون أفكارهم سيميائياً، بل ركزت على التحليلات السيميائية التي قام بها لتراث السهروردي الإشراقي. أشار المؤلف فيها إلى المشاكل والصعوبات التي تواجهها منهجية نيتتون السيميائية، فمثلاً استعار، استعارة غير نقدية، مفاهيم وأفكاراً من مصادر واسعة بدء من مقارنة ليفي-ستراوس في الأنثروبولوجيا، ومقاربة ساوشور في الألسنيات وانتهاء إلى مقارنة بارثس وإيكو في السيميائية وهذه المفاهيم المستعارة منتشرة في جملة مواضع من كتابه دون أن يولي الاهتمام بمعالجة هذه المفاهيم في مقدمة كتابه. ليس هناك تحليل دقيق لما يشكل



السيميوطيقا وعندما واجه المصطلح "علامة" (*sign*) اقترح مفهومًا فضفاضًا يحتوي عدة تعريفات تقدم بها الشخصيات من أمثال أرسطو والقديس توماس الأكويني حتى ساوشور و بيرس وإيكو وغيرهم وبناء على هذا فإن القارئ لا يجد انطباعًا عن وجود تطوير نظري لحد "علامة" (*sign*) الذي يتبناه ويختاره نيتتون أو عن دراسة تحليلية لوظيفتها. وعلى العموم فللقارئ أن يستغرب قلة الإسهام الذي قدمه نيتتون في دراسته السيميائية لفكر السهروردي، فهو لم يأت بمعلومات جديدة عن التأثيرات الزرادشتية في كتابات السهروردي ولا قدم رؤية مختلفة عن الدراسات التقليدية عن شيخ الإشراق هذا التي قام بها الرجال أمثال هنري كوربين وسيد حسين نصر. من هنا لكل أحد أن يتساءل عن ما إذا كانت دراسة نيتتون قد حققت الآمال والرجاء التي علقها هو على مشروعه السيميائي.

LANGUAGE is the essence of human communication to which linguistic analyses are to be applied in order to uncover its hidden structures. Language is, all at once, *formator* of thought, instrument of social interaction, and propagator of meaning. Linguistic analyses, however complex they might be, have become a quite sophisticated academic discipline. It is within this broad perspective that semiotics finds its place. Semiotics, broadly defined, e.g., by Umberto Eco, would be the general theory able to explain every case of "sign-function" in terms of the underlying systems of elements mutually correlated by one, or more codes; furthermore, semiotics should take into account, on the one hand, a theory of codes, and, on the other, a theory of "sign-production". One of the problems for semiotic analyses is the elaboration of typology of signs that could apply to all types of signifying elements, and, correlatively, the elaboration of a typology of models of "sign-production."<sup>2</sup> Meaning within this process occurs under certain conditions, i.e., when "on the basis of an underlying rule-something actually presented to the perception of

the addressee *stands for* something else, there is *signification*."<sup>3</sup> The most simple example one could provide is that of medical "semiosis," or of the interpretation of the "signs" undertaken during the diagnosis of a particular disease. Semioticians, like Eco, in addition to see "signification" almost everywhere and in everything, have tried to make the "sign" the center of human interaction, such that "every act of communication to or between human beings [... *presupposes a signification system as its necessary condition*."<sup>4</sup>

A mention must be made of the founders, not of modern semiotics to whom the credit would naturally have to be attributed to Ferdinand de Saussure and Charles S. Peirce,<sup>5</sup> have to their Greek ancestors, the Stoics who were the first to distinguish between the signifier, the signified (*lekton*), and the real object.<sup>6</sup> The term semiotics is, indeed, derived from the Greek *semeiotikos*, i.e., signs. Nowadays, plans for a general theory of semiotics are proposed, e.g., by semioticians like Eco who considers that its object is, "everything that, on the grounds of a previously established social convention, can be taken as *something standing for something else*. [...] the interpretation by an interpreter, which would seem to characterize a sign, must be understood as *the possible* interpretation by a *possible* interpreter."<sup>7</sup> Consequently, the object of such a general theory of semiotics would cover a very vast "semiotic" field.<sup>8</sup>

How relevant could such an approach be for the study of Islamic culture and its literary production and, more specifically, Islamic thought? It will suffice to mention here the Qur'ān- the venerated text. Its inimitable character - as the work of God - makes it the ultimate object of interpretation; its untranslatability opens venues for its re-interpretation. Furthermore, a text which has been recited for almost fourteen centuries - the foremost example is the compulsory recitation of the *Fātiḥah*, i.e., the opening *Sūrah* of the Qur'ān, during the five daily prayers of Muslims, offers infinite venues of interpretations. However, the same venues of interpretation are also opened by the entire literary productions of the Islamic world, well beyond the latter text.

The purpose of this paper is not to elaborate a semiotic theory (as this would be a task well beyond our abilities and pretensions), but, rather, its purpose is more modest and consists in an appraisal of Ian Richard Netton's application of such a "semiotic" approach to Islamic thought.



## I - Netton : The Structure of Semiosis

In a work entitled *Allah Transcendent* (1994), Netton -like Arkoun- proposes a new way to look at Islamic thought and, in this particular work, at the philosophical rendering of its theological concepts.<sup>9</sup> On the whole, he states that he will use a method which is a mixture of modern structuralist and semiotic theories in order to "illuminate" some of the structures of medieval Islamic philosophy and theology.<sup>10</sup> This is an ambitious program. In fact, an in-depth study of the role of semiotics (along with structuralism) would presumably contain an account of the essential principles at the heart of this method. However, we will limit ourselves to some of the difficulties that can be raised with what Netton calls his "semiotic" approach.

From the outset of his work, he asserts that he will use "structuralist insights," first, to "highlight a basic theme of alienation." but more important, for our purpose, to ultimately "lead to a theory of semiotics."<sup>11</sup> First, it must be mentioned that the basic features of his "structuralist insights," i.e., their different concepts and ideas, are borrowed in a very uncritical manner from structuralist theories, and these range from Levi-Strauss's approach in anthropology, to Saussure's approach in linguistics, and Barthes and Eco's approaches in semiotics. Most of these borrowed concepts and ideas are scattered throughout his work, and there is a lack of concern to set all his principles in the opening chapter of his work.<sup>12</sup> Although it is beyond the scope of this paper to tackle the structuralist concepts he uses, it should be noted that these are important elements of his "semiotic" re-interpretations of Islamic thought.

The first major difficulty Netton's "semiotic" approach encounters is the absence of a well-thought out definition of what constitutes semiotics. Without such a conceptual framework it is difficult to see how his project to "lead to a theory of semiotics" could effectively be undertaken. Tackling the world of the "sign," he has to elaborate a definition of what should constitute, while avoiding the pitfalls which he himself raises, i.e., that signs may indeed be "hopelessly plural."<sup>13</sup> Thus, he proposes that the term "sign" be used loosely enough so as to embrace several definitions ranging from those of Aristotle, St. Thomas Aquinas, to those of Saussure, Peirce, Eco, and so on.<sup>14</sup> In his review of the respective definitions of a sign given by each of these thinkers, one does not get a sense of any theoretical elaboration regarding the definition of a sign he will adopt, or,



more importantly, of on analytical investigation of its functions. Hence, this collection of definitions appears to be offered as some sort of proof for the existence of a semiotic tradition. However, for an account of landmark of the semiotic development, he is conspicuously silent of the foremost semioticians of ancient Greece, i.e., Stoic, who, contrary to Aristotle mentioned by Netton, actually developed a theory of signs. Furthermore, he rejects intricate distinction's such as those made by Peirce although they are at the heart of studies in modern semiotic - in order to adopt a more comprehensive type of definition of what constitutes a sign.<sup>15</sup> Then, he introduces a single unit word, a "theologeme." Briefly, this neologism is comprised of a basic *seme*, i.e., a basic element which carries meaning or possesses a "signification," and of a theological element to be highlighted; the theologeme is to refer to a signifying unit to be isolated.<sup>16</sup> In modern philosophical works, one often talks of "philosophemes" to refer to philosophical notions or concepts. Does this, however, transform them into "signs," reducing notions and concepts to mere indicators standing for what they actually represent?

## II - A Semiotic Analysis of *Ishrāqī* Theosophy

It is not possible to survey all the authors to whom Netton applies his semiotic approach. For the purpose of this paper, one example will be ample: his analysis and interpretation of the works of Suhrawardī. It is in the section entitled "Suhrawardian Semiosis and the Structure of Reality According to Ibn al-'Arabī" that he proposes his semiotic interpretation of the *Ishrāqī* tradition.<sup>17</sup> We are told that semiotic will, along with structuralism, be used as a tool to "illuminate" the "intentions" of Suhrawardī. Hence, his approach will consist of finding out what the text "betrays" of the hidden meanings of the "signs."<sup>18</sup> For this purpose, he calls upon two types of theologemes which he seeks to isolate and identify within the works of Suhrawardī: (i) e.g., the negative theologemes, such as the apophatic, or "*via negativa*" type of approach to god's nature; these negative theologemes are outweighed by (ii) positive theologemes, such as "the motif of Light."<sup>19</sup> In the works of Suhrawardī, these are found to be "signs" expressing a concentration of Light and Darkness, as two contrasting opposites. Pure Light corresponds to God, while the presence of an adulterated Light corresponds to the level of human beings.<sup>20</sup> This opposition of Light and Darkness, while it is interpreted by Netton as "signs" of Suhrawardī's attitude toward god's existence, it does not offer



any insight into the philosophical implications of this type of ontology and especially into the whole philosophical debate that was generated because of this primacy of Light with regards to its ontological status.<sup>21</sup> It is not clear why the "positive" aspect of the "motif of Light" as a theologeme could not, rather, be a "negative" one in order to express the aspect of Darkness or, for that matter, be a "neutral" theologeme capable of encompassing the spectrum that is delimited by the Light / Darkness apposition.

But what are these theologemes? Netton explains that the function of a theologeme is to be a "sign" that tries to indicate the reality of God, adding that they constitute elements of the Plotinian, the Christian, or the Qur'anic models, or paradigms.<sup>22</sup> A list of what Netton considers theologemes contains such things as "divine unity," "unknowability of God," "absolute transcendence of God," "knowable aspect of God," "God's *Glory*," the "Light vocabulary" i.e. God vied in Light. "God's Knowledge" "resurrection," and "Allāh as *wājib al-wujūd*." Others are said to be theologemes of "simplicity," or of "transcendence," such as "immutability, individuality, indenfinability, immateriality."<sup>23</sup> Besides, he considers such thing as "God as Light of Lights," among the "basic theological concepts."<sup>24</sup> In addition, he asserts that the term theologeme *signification*.<sup>25</sup> It would seem that these theologemes are, in fact, theological concepts such as those already mentioned. Ultimately, his theologemes would be reducible to their theological components. This would seem to be one of the shortcomings of the definition of a theologeme which, he states, is intended to cover "far more than simply a doctrine, dogma, or concepts."<sup>26</sup>

He then goes on to apply his semiotically inspired approach to uncover the meanings of the "signs" represented by the foreign elements in Suhrawardi's thought. He discovers in the presence of the Zoroastrian names which Suhrawardi, ascribes to the Light elements of his ontology that:

"such names signal to the world at large that al-Suhrawardi intends to link his angelology [i.e. his theory of angels] both to a broad cultural past, beyond the purely Islamic, as well as of a contemporary mystical tradition which, again, clearly transcends the rigidly Islamic."<sup>27</sup>

However innovative his reformulation of the existence of such foreign elements may be, the results are far from being novel or enlighten-

ing. More than fifty years ago, in a work entitled *Les motifs zoroastriens dans la philosophie de Suhrawardī*, Henry Corbin devoted a whole section to the question of Suhrawardī's angelology and its Zoroastrian influence (i.e., Mazdean angelology).<sup>28</sup> Netton who usually does a great job at collecting and gathering tremendous relevant studies on the subjects about which he writes, is conspicuously silent about this particular work of Corbin. In addition to other studies by Henry Corbin regarding the mystical and gnostic elements found in Suhrawardī's works, Sayyed Hossein Nasr has also devoted some studies on the same topic.<sup>29</sup> Notwithstanding this fact, it is not clear what Netton's semiotically inspired interpretation adds to our knowledge of the introduction of foreign elements into the thought of Suhrawardī. It does however provide a more *en vogue* account, using ideas from different social sciences.

More interestingly, there is another article by Netton in which he analyses the philosophy of Suhrawardī in semiotic terms. This is a short text entitled "The Neoplatonic Substrate of Suhrawardī's Philosophy of Illumination. *Falsafa* as *Tasawwuf*" in which he, again, proclaims to use the same structuralist and semiotic analyses.<sup>30</sup> First, he begins with a structuralist approach referring to Levi-Strauss to study the "myth" of martyrdom in the life of Suhrawardī, side by side with the "myth" of Neoplatonism. It is noteworthy that this is an interpretation not found in his "Suhrawardīan Semiosis" already mentioned. More importantly, this is followed by a semiotic approach which, he notes, is a method more than anything else, but which can apply to anything and everything!<sup>31</sup> This is an unfortunate assertion, because, if it does indeed apply to anything and everything without having proper theoretical foundations, which seems to be the case of Netton's semiotic enterprise, then, it can quite easily lead to anything and everything in terms of the results it could yield.

For Netton, in the Islamic context, the example of a signifying text par excellence is the Qur'ān for which there exists a real possibility for a "semiotic of the Qur'ān." He mentions that it is a text that makes multiple allusions to "signs," or "*ayāt*," leaving the reader under the impression that this is all there is to it. This is, in our view, a rather weak argument for semioticity of the Qur'ān and seem to indicate how serious Netton is committed to the semiotic approach he proposes in his book. The semantic exploitation of such a rich text was, in fact, previously undertaken with very interesting results by Toshihiko Izutsu. He is, we



think, the first scholar who has attempted a serious implementation of the insights of linguistics and its analytical tools to the study of Islamic thought from the perspective of semantics (although not from the perspective of semiotics). This was done in two of his most notorious studies on the Qur'ānic *Weltanschauung* (world-view), entitled *God and Man in the Koran* (1964) and *Ethico-Religious concepts in the Koran* (1966).<sup>32</sup> A more ambitious project regarding the use of the linguistic approach applied to the Qur'ān is, in our view, the one announced by Muhammad Arkoun, in his *Lectures du Coran* (1982). He proposes to integrate all the tools developed by the social sciences in order to study the Islamic culture, and to incorporate them into his proposed synchronic, diachronic, as well as his anthropological and philosophical perspective.<sup>33</sup>

A semiotic analysis of Suhrawardī's *Ḥikmat al-Ishraq* [*The Oriental Wisdom*]<sup>34</sup> is possible for Netton because "signs" can be found in such mystico-philosophical works, just as they can be found in the Qur'ān.<sup>35</sup> The guiding question of his inquiry is what "are the 'signs' of *falsafa* and *tasawwuf* in this work of Suhrawardī?"<sup>36</sup> For the purpose of analysis, he goes on to try to pin point the characteristic "signs" belonging to the development of philosophy and Sufism within Islam. At this point, he proposes this new opposition between *falsafa* and *tasawwuf*. It is noteworthy, that the intricate developments about the theologeme, or even of the "Qur'ānic Creator Paradigm" which he had developed at length in his book for the purpose of his semiotic analysis are here disregarded and replaced by these two new opposite "signs." Referring, on the one hand, to Roger Arnaldez's article on *falsafa*,<sup>37</sup> and, on the other hand, to Annemarie Schimmel's *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*,<sup>38</sup> he adopts an opposition between "reason" and "love." He asserts that what has been isolated are two distinct "motifs," i.e., "the sign of *reason* in *falsafa* and the sign of *love* in *tasawwuf*."<sup>39</sup>

Signs, which were understood in the light of their theological perspective, such as was the case with his neologism of theologeme, now reach such a state of generality in their comprehensiveness that they can encompass these two "motifs;" however, this opposition - reason and love - is not unknown within more traditional analysis of Islamic thought. Netton takes this simplified opposition between reason and love - which we are to understand as an opposition between philosophy and mysticism - to have existed in medieval Islam, as a debate quite similar to the debate between reason and revelation. Furthermore, this opposition is to be

found in Suhrawardī's work in which, he asserts, "the key technical philosophical terminology of reason acts as a *vehicle* for the 'signs' of *tasawwuf*."<sup>40</sup> Hence, he interprets Suhrawardī's work as representing a replacement of the philosophical structure by a mystical structure. Obviously, this replacement has been uncovered through the use of this pair of opposites, i.e., reason and love, as some sort of semiotic indicators, i.e., signs. This opposition, however, can not, by itself, explain the place, the role, and the function of the philosophical and the mystical structure in the works of Suhrawardī, and these are, it seems, the more fundamental problems to be resolved. The adoption of such a self-evident distinction does not offer any solution to these more essential, albeit neglected matters. This dichotomy does not succeed in uncovering what the semiotic approach seeks to uncover which is, according to Netton, the "underlying set of assumptions, beliefs, prejudices, and feelings" that Suhrawardī articulated, either "consciously or unconsciously, within a particular textual structure or framework of words."<sup>41</sup> Here, we are provided with an almost hermeneutical definition of semiotics.

### III - The Semiotic Project of Netton

As way of conclusion, we may say that it is undeniable that Netton has nourished his thought with the writings of many of the central figures of Modern western thought. Unfortunately, his attempt at rethinking Islamic philosophy and theology in terms of a semiotic approach is hindered by a lack of focus in his attempt to elaborate a structural and semantic methodology. It is already a tremendous task to try to incorporate insights coming from structuralism; however, the task become almost impossible when one seeks, in addition, to incorporate elements of linguistics and semiotics. Unfortunately, it is our understanding that, in spite of all these efforts, there has not been an attempt to lay down the foundations of a fruitful semiotic theory which would be applied to Islamic thought and, in particular, to its philosophy and its theology. Instead, Netton is satisfied with borrowing most of his concepts and ideas - as ill-assorted elements - from linguistics and semiotics, and incorporating them in what was announced as a semiotics.

In addition, if we look at the results to which his semiotic approach - and this is ultimately the crucial test - leads when applied to the thought of Suhrawardī, then, we are surprised to discover how little it has to offer. First, it does not advance any novel information regarding the



Zoroastrian influences present in Suhrawardī's works. Second, it does not add anything different from the more traditional accounts of Suhrawardī's philosophy such as those of Henry Corbin and Seyyed Hossein Nasr. No new information seems to be uncovered with his "semiotic" interpretation of the Suhrawardian texts. Accordingly, one has to ask if Netton's approach has fulfilled the expectations that his own semiotic program was suppose to accomplish?

It should be added that Netton's proposed semiotic approach can, as a method, be intrinsically polemical when applied to religious texts, i.e., Islamic texts - whether they be strictly religious or philosophical. There are some who would like to question the use of the semiotic - as well as the structuralist - approach for the study of Islamic culture as a whole, and its intellectual production. Their critics view the predicament facing those who attempt to use these methods as a possible disassociation of Islamic thought from the "truth" and the "sacred," and of a reduction of Islamic culture to texts in perpetual need of reinterpretations. Hence, the fears of the critics is the advent of a lost of transcendence and the ensuing plague of modern times, i.e., nihilism. Lost of religious values and of religiosity as a whole is what is at stake. A comforting note for the critics is the fact that, maybe, semiotics, just like structuralism, post-structuralism, and deconstructionism, is but a fad of our times...

Another objection that can be addressed to the semiotic approach, and linguistics in general, is the seeming lack of historical perspective to which it seems to be committed. It is true that, e.g., in the case of a linguistic analysis of the Qur'ān there would not be any great consideration for context, e.g., the *asbāb al-nuzul* of the different verses of the Qur'ān, or the *asbāb al-wurud* of the different Hadith, now part of the Sunnah. However, some surprising linguistic phenomena, in light of its historical developments, can be uncovered, not in terms of events, but in terms of its structural developments, as testified by the analysis of certain terms found in this Holy Book. This was, it seems, one of the interesting results provided by Toshihiko Izutsu's linguistic analyses of the Qur'ān. He was able to identify ethical terms that existed in pre-Islamic Arabian society and which found their way into the Qur'ān in which their meanings were preserved.<sup>42</sup> In addition, it seems almost superfluous to note that once Islam was adopted by Muslims, the meaning of many existing *terms en vogue* in pre-Islamic times were redefined and incorporated into the new emerging Islamic world-view. The same holds true, for that matter, of any

writer who seeks to integrate various sources, or ideas as was the case with Suhrawardi.

Finally, it should be emphasized that the purpose of this paper was not to criticize the use of semiotics or, for that matter, structuralism, or any other method developed in the fields of social sciences, for the study of Islamic culture, in general, and Islamic thought -i.e., philosophy, theology or, for that matter, sufism - in particular. It is believed, just as Netton, Arkoun, and others have proposed, that scholars should and must be free to use any method they deem able to illuminate, in some way or another, the subject under discussion, whether it be philosophy, sexuality, or modern Islamic ideologies.<sup>43</sup> It is only as a result of such efforts that life will partially be brought back to the infinite "voices" hidden behind and beyond the texts - written and spoken. However, simple and random borrowings of analytical tools, methods, constructions, and structure without proper critical perspectives regarding all the latter, can never be a substitute for sound theoretical elaboration.

### End Notes

<sup>1</sup> A shorter version of this paper was presented to the International Conference on "The Methodological Problems in the Study of Religion" organized by I.C.M.I. (Muslim Intellectuals Society of Indonesia) of America, held in Montreal, Quebec (Feb. 21-3, 1997).

<sup>2</sup> Umberto Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976), 4,33-4.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>5</sup> Charles Sanders Peirce, *Textes fondamentaux de semiotique* (Paris: Meridiens-Klincksieck, 1987; cf. Idem, *Ecrit sur le signe* (Paris: Seuil, 1978); cf. Idem, *Collected Papers*, 8 vols., (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1931-58); cf. Ferdinand de Saussure, *Cours de linguistique generale*, 5th ed., (1916: Payot, 1955).

<sup>6</sup> Alain Rey, *Theories du signe et du sens. Lectures I* (Paris: Editions Klincksieck, 1973), 29-44; cf. J. M. Rist, *Stoic Philosophy* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 133-72.

<sup>7</sup> Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics*, 16.

<sup>8</sup> It covers such diverse phenomena as zoosemiotics, olfactory signs, tactile communication, codes of taste, paralinguistics, medical semiotics, kinesics and proxemics (gestures), musical codes, formalized languages, written languages, unknown alphabets, secret codes, natural languages, visual communication, systems of objects, plot structure, text theory, cultural codes, aesthetic texts, and mass communication, see *Ibid.*, 9-14.



<sup>9</sup> Ian Richard Netton, *Allāh Transcendent, Studies in the Structure and Semiotics of Islamic Philosophy, Theology and Cosmology* (1989; Richmond, Surrey: Curzon Press, 1994), 17.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>12</sup> For e.g., three key ideas which are taken from Piaget's general work on structuralism - the ideas of the wholeness, of transformation, and of self-regulation - are introduced in the section dealing with a semiotic redefinition of al-Kindi's philosophy, see Netton, *Allāh Transcendent*, 72-4; cf. Jean Piaget, *Structuralism*, trans. and ed. Chaniñah Maschler, (French ed., 1968; London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1971), 7-16.

<sup>13</sup> Netton, *Allāh Transcendent*, 288.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 78-9.

<sup>15</sup> Umberto Eco takes the Saussurian distinction between signifier (sign-vehicle) and signified (Sign-function), in addition to the Peircian tripartite distinction (between the symbols, the indices and the icons), in order to propose his own definition of the sign, see Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics*, 4-16.

<sup>16</sup> Here is how he defines it: "A theologeme [...] is to be defined briefly as a basic unit of theological discourse which can also function as a sign according to any of the above mentioned definitions of sign [i.e., Aristotle, St. Thomas Aquinas, and so on]. [...] It is a single unit, and may be positive or negative. [...] that can convey and embrace when necessary far more than simple doctrine, dogma, or concept, though it will frequently be used for all three at various times," see Netton, *Allāh Transcendent*, 79-80.

<sup>17</sup> Hossein Ziai, *Knowledge and Illumination* (Atlanta, Georgia: Scholars Press, 1990); and Mehdi Amin Razavi, *Suhrawardi and the School of Illumination* (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon Press, 1997).

<sup>18</sup> Netton, *Allāh Transcendent*, 79-80.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 301-2.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 300-1.

<sup>21</sup> Although he does stress that Light in the work of Suhrawardi must be conceived ontologically, he does not discuss the problems it raises for later commentators, e.g., Mulla Sadra who criticized his primacy on essence, i.e., of Light, opposing it to his own primacy on existence. For a more philosophically stimulating discussion regarding the primacy of existence versus the primacy of essence, see Ziai, *Knowledge and Illumination*, 166-71.

<sup>22</sup> Netton, *Allāh Transcendent*, 80, 132, 135.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 132, 237, 240, 241, 329, 331.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 302.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 133.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 301.

<sup>28</sup> Henry Corbin, *Les motifs zoroastriens dans la philosophie de Sohrawardi, Shaykh-of-Ishraq*, preface M. Pouré. Davoud. (Teheran: Editions du Courrier, 1946), 14-36.

<sup>29</sup> Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Three Muslim Sages Avicenna Suhrawardi Ibn 'Arabi* (Delmar, NY: Caravan Books, 1969), 52-82; cf. Henry Corbin, *Sohrawardi et les pla-*

*toniciens de Perse*, vol. II, in Henry Corbin, *En Islam iranien*, 4 vols., (Paris: Gallimard, 1971).

<sup>30</sup> Ian R. Netton, "The Neoplatonic Substrate of Suhrawardi's Philosophy of Illumination, *Falsafa as Tasawwuf*", chap. in idem, *Seek Knowledge Thought and Travel in the House of Islam* (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon Press, 1996), 43-58.

<sup>31</sup> Netton affirms Barthes statement that "everything signifies," see Netton, *Allāh Transcendent*, 135; cf. Idem, "The Neoplatonic Substrate," 46.

<sup>32</sup> Toshihiko Izutsu, *God and Man in the Koran. Semantic of the Koranic Weltanschauung* (Tokyo: Keio Institute of Cultural and Linguistic Studies, 1964), and Idem, *Ethico-Religious Concepts in the Koran* (Montreal: Institute of Islamic Studies, McGill University Press, 1966).

<sup>33</sup> Mohammad Arkoun, *Lectures du Coran* (Paris: Maisonneuve et Larose, 1982), XVI, XXIX.

<sup>34</sup> This translation is preferred to what has been known through some translations as the *Philosophy of Illumination*, we adopt the same title offered by Henry Corbin's translation of this work, see Suhrawardi, *Le livre de la sagesse orientale (Kitab Hikmat al-Ishraq)*, trans. and notes Henry Corbin, ed. and intro. Christian Jambet, (Paris: Verdier, 1986).

<sup>35</sup> Netton, "The Neoplatonic Substrate," 46.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>37</sup> Roger Arnaldez's article on *falsafa* (in the *Encyclopedia of Islam*), new ed., ed., B. Lewis, Ch. Pellat, J. Schacht, (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1960-), vol., II (1965).

<sup>38</sup> Annemarie Schimmel's *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1975).

<sup>39</sup> Netton, "The Neoplatonic Substrate," 49.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>42</sup> See Izutsu, *Ethico-Religious Concepts in the Koran*.

<sup>43</sup> Netton, *Allāh Transcendent*, 17; cf. Arkoun, *Lectures du Coran*, VI.