

Understanding Theosemiotic: Concept and its Position

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Abstract

This manuscript explores the concept of theosemiotics, a term that signifies the intersection of semiotic theory and theological interpretation. Originating from the work of Michael L. Raposa and grounded in Charles Sander Peirce's semiotic framework, theosemiotics is presented as a means to understand religious semiotics, particularly within Islamic and Christian contexts. Through a detailed examination of its historical development, theoretical underpinnings, and potential for bridging science and religion, the manuscript highlights theosemiotics as a promising area for academic research. It argues for the relevance of theological semiotics in contemporary discussions on the integration of religious perspectives with scientific inquiry, offering a comprehensive analysis of signs in the divine context. This study contributes to the broader discourse on the role of religion in the public sphere and the ongoing dialogue between faith and reason.

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1. Theosemiotic Concept

Theosemiotics is a technical term first introduced by Michael L. Raposa. It emerged from years of elaboration, starting with its initial publication in 1981, on the philosophy of religion. By 1987, the term "theological semiotics" emerged, which extensively analyzed the philosophy within Charles Sander Peirce's semiotics.¹

Theosemiotics is essentially a developmental variant of semiotics based on Peirce's idea that *the world is full of signs*. These signs are interpreted in diverse ways through individual frameworks of thought. One of these frameworks is the complex religious mindset. Connecting semiotics with religious interpretation is a distinctive characteristic of one element

in Peirce's semiotics.²

The background of this term lies in Peirce's analysis of Christian Philosophy of Religion in terms of its literature. The study becomes intriguing as the term develops through two important aspects: a) the reconceptualization of the concept of religious semiotics from early Christian philosophers such as Augustine, Duns Scotus, and John Poinsett,³ b) the materialization and systematization of theological teachings to ground them as theological semiotics or semiotic theology (similar to terms like 'environmental theology,' 'economic theology,' and others) based on Peirce's pragmatic semiotics.⁴

Referring to the classification of 'semiotics' in terms of its definition, I can divide theosemiotics into three aspects: a) as a concept, b) as the theological signs or theosemiotics itself, and c) as a discipline. Based on the critical analysis discussed earlier regarding the use of the term 'theology' and its potential in referring to 'theological semiotics' as a means to understand the dimension of 'signs' (ayat and simiyaiya) mentioned in the revelation of the Qur'ān, we can agree on the function of the term 'theosemiotics' that I will examine here. Of course, I need to refer to the originator of this term in order to ontologically trace the concepts of 'signs' beyond Islam, one of which I found in Raposa's work on theosemiotics.

As a concept, theosemiotics can be defined as the 'philosophy of signs with the assumption that the entirety of signs will lead to the conclusion of the existence of God as its primary cause.'⁵ It explores the relationship between signs and the existence of a divine being, emphasizing that signs can provide evidence or insights into the presence of God.

Theosemiotics seeks to understand the profound connection between signs and the divine, offering a philosophical framework to analyze and interpret the significance of signs in relation to the ultimate reality of God.⁶

Returning to Peirce's main study of semiotics, that 'signs' are part of the means of reasoning or thinking. Therefore, everything can be considered a sign, pointing to another entity behind it. Lambert himself, Theosemiotics as proposed by Raposa, is synonymous with this foundation of thought. Brandon Daniel-Hughes appreciates, based on Raposa's statement: *Theosemiotic can be regarded as a scientific discipline only insofar as it is committed to fallibilism, as well as to a kind of empiricism and to a broad understanding of the experimental method. To opt for fallibilism is not suddenly to lose confidence in all of one's beliefs but rather properly to understand their origin, as well as the nature of all experience as semiosis.* This theological semiotics will become a discipline as well as an approach to examining symbolic phenomena, religious experiences, rituals, and methods of interpreting religious texts as one of its symbols.⁷

I believe that the emergence of this term occurred due to the development of systematic theology in the West. This type of theology attempts to logically organize the contents of the Bible so that they can be implemented: *Systematic theology is any study that answers the question, "what does the whole Bible teach us today?" about any given topic.*⁸ The term theology encompasses several areas of thought within the Christian discourse that are consensus-based. Starting with Biblical Theology, which explains the meaning of the Bible as the foundation for the spread of the church's mission, teachings, worship, and conduct.⁹ In line with this, Alister also presents Historical Theology as a discipline that traces the history and development of theology from the perspective of social and political influences, as well as the application of these doctrines.¹⁰ Ted Peters goes further by offering a fundamental idea about the common development of theology that must be carried out due to these social and political factors.¹¹ Based on the idea of change and development, a

discipline called 'practical theology' was eventually formulated.

Based on my assessment above, the development of theology from its basic meaning is the essence of how the religion (Christianity) and its derivatives (Catholic, Anglican, Protestant, etc.) strive to harmonize the texts in the Bible with social change through hermeneutics (as an important part of exegesis) - including in the case of Protestants, the high spirit of rationalism in determining the fate of society and religious practices beyond church dogma. In this regard, although religious communities have been formed, over time religion has become something very private and subjective, often not considered necessary to appear in the public sphere. In this context, it is quite common to see that the Bible text is not very important to memorize, and perhaps not even an integral part of worship and daily activities.

What is crucial in the text is the act of 'conveying' (mission), 'inviting' (homiletic), gathering the lost sheep, and proclaiming (Angelica) Christ's message. In this aspect, I consider theology to be a term more commonly used in formulations to allow the Bible, from all sides, to 'adapt' and evolve with the existing socio-cultural changes. The term theology is indeed often used in Indonesia. It is unclear who popularized it first, but Muslim scholars have also adopted this term to harmonize Islam and modern science. One example is when answering whether there are economic ideas in Islam; this is addressed by referring to 'economic theology'.

A critical point that I observe is the use of the term 'theology' combined with modern science - if used by non-Muslim communities, it is reasonable. Because the religious system and morality had not fully developed in the early stages of religion, and only evolved in parallel with the development of science. Since the unique nature of religion and its characteristics were understood by the Western philosophical tradition, as I mentioned above, religious messages - in this case those found in Western religious texts such as Christianity, for example - were interpreted through the 'rational' and 'logical' framework in the scholarly tradition known as 'biblical theology' as mentioned above.

In contrast, the Muslim community has had a finalized foundation from the beginning. Religious messages in the Quran, especially those containing new key concepts, were practically developed by the Prophet's companions and codified through Usul Fiqh into a field of study, namely Fiqh. Simultaneously, the companions, the Tabi'in, and their successors continued the tradition of interpreting the Qur'ān through various approaches and codified its meanings - without contradicting the Quranic revelations and Hadiths - into various literature. Even during the era of the Prophet, there were tools and means available when encountering new realities and phenomena that were emerging in society. This was accomplished through ijtihad, as can be easily found in Hadiths about ijtihad. Methodologically, many comparative fiqh books have been written in the field, one of the most comprehensive being authored by Al-Qarāfī.¹²

Furthermore, in the field of Fiqh, there is the concept of *dalīl*, which is synonymous with 'sign' or 'guidance.' In modern semantic studies, '*dalīl*' is referred to as a 'sign,' particularly in the science of *ilm dīlālah*. This is not surprising as developments in *Fiqh*, *Nahw*, Linguistics, as well as *Tafsīr* and *Ta'wīl*, occurred almost simultaneously and influenced each other accumulatively. In the history of Western Semiotics as well, which is famously associated with the term coined by Peirce as "semiotics," the concept of '*dalīl*' or 'sign' is significant "...logic in its general sense as I believe I have shown only another name for semiotic..."¹³, semiotics and logic are likened to a unified field of study, or one could even consider them kindred sciences. Compare this with various classifications of logic and its connection to semantics that were

formulated by al-Baghdādī in *al-Mu'tabar fī al-Hikmah*.¹⁴ Furthermore, various language and rhetoric experts did not operate in isolation when dealing with matters related to *balāghah*, *manṭiq*, as well as *nahw*, including semantics; for instance, the work undertaken by *al-Sakāḥī*.¹⁵

2. Theosemiotics as a Theoretical Foundation

In this draft, I will argue that the significance of teosemiotics lies in modern semiotics, particularly in the post-secularization era and the emergence of ideas integrating science and religion. Within these ideas, the emphasis is on incorporating religion as a framework for scientific development. Teosemiotics is one of the outcomes of the development of semiotic theories that intersect with religion or are based on reconceptualized religious values under religious authority.

Certainly, the idea of teosemiotics raises fundamental questions: can semiotics and theology truly integrate and develop? Moreover, what are the patterns of such development? These two questions reflect a similar movement that preceded it, namely the integration between religion and modern science. I will address these questions by critically examining the underlying aspects of this integration, namely the stagnation of conventional semiotics and the marginalization of religion in the public sphere.

We are often misled by the numerous criticisms from scientists regarding the methodologies used in religion and religious studies. This is evidenced by the emergence of Muslim academics who follow suit in criticizing the paradigms and scholarly traditions of Muslims from the past to the present. However, the critical stance that should be taken by a Muslim is to delve into the issues before criticizing them. Moreover, the intellectual tradition in Islam does not always arise from the influence of other civilizations, but rather from the revelation of the Qur' ān.

Interestingly, Muslim scholars who are considered critical often earn that label after studying and practicing the intellectual traditions in the West, but it is precisely through their contributions to deconstructing Islamic thought that they are deemed critical. They go as far as criticizing the established revelation as a source of epistemology. This seems to follow the Western tradition of questioning their own sources of epistemology. The development of philosophy of science in the West tends to involve dialectical and analytical criticism. One aspect of rejecting one paradigm in favor of another is driven by the methodological consistency employed by scientists themselves. We can see that "methodological consistency" can be equated with textualism. Methodological differences also imply differences in values embraced by the scientists.¹⁶

One interesting observation we can draw from the concept of "paradigm" in the West is that paradigms within this context constantly negate each other and develop integratively and dialectically. A clear example is the negation between empiricism and rationalism, which was later integrated by Kant's critical philosophy. Following the Kantian era, paradigms further polarized into positivism, post-positivism, and others. As a result, theories embraced by a particular paradigm tend to be rejected by other paradigms. This holds true even in the realm of research methodology, where qualitative paradigms often differ from quantitative paradigms.¹⁷ In the Western context, the term "paradigm" is used to refer to the religious diversity of philosophical thinking within a discipline. Kuhn himself, besides using the term "paradigm," also

refers to it as a 'theoretical matrix.'¹⁸

Kuhn further concludes that each paradigm tends to contest with other paradigms, especially when a paradigm reaches a point of anomaly. This is why there is a plethora of paradigms in the Western context. Throughout the changes in the discourse of philosophy of science, new paradigms emerge as a means of discovering new scientific theories.¹⁹ Moreover, the discourse of paradigms in the Western context has a distinct character at its core, namely the vision of reality and truth.

This, I would say, is different from the concept of paradigms in Islam. Although not a commonly used term among Muslim scholars, it has been occasionally employed as a counterpart to '*madzhab*' (school of thought), encompassing both matters of creed (*aqidah*) and jurisprudence (*fiqh*). Some Muslim scholars have used the term "paradigm" to refer to a counterpart of '*madzhab*', such as Shoaib Ahmad Malik, who mentioned that the thinking of Imam Ghazālī tends to align with the Ash'arī paradigm.²⁰ Similarly, Mahdi Golparvar-Roozbahani described the thoughts of Mullā Ṣadrā as a paradigm within the realm of Iranian Islamic philosophy.²¹ It seems that what is often referred to as "paradigm" in the Western context is merely a level of distinction that can, at times, change within a specific worldview.

In the context of philosophy of communication, the study inevitably involves discussions on the reality and truth of what is known as communication itself. One fundamental aspect is that Islam teaches the rejection of falsehood, as frequently found in the Qur'ān and Hadith, exemplified by the narration '*wa jādilkum bi allatī hiya ahsan*' (and argue with them in a way that is best). Additionally, commandments such as the prohibition of lying and communicating rudely to parents demonstrate the distinctive values of Islam that form the foundation of the Islamic scholarly paradigm.

Furthermore, the issues categorized as "paradigmatic" within Western communication discourse primarily stem from the concept of "freedom of speech" supported by relativism of values, suggesting that matters of value are solely socio-cultural agreements. In this regard, various narratives in the West are considered equally valid, including the practices of 'language games' and 'philosophical games' as mentioned earlier.

As a result, rejecting a theory in the Western context has become a common occurrence and tends to happen simultaneously, sometimes without significant implications on other aspects. In contrast, rejecting a theory in Islam carries a sense of permanence and impermanence, whereby such rejection can be seen as leading to error if the theory is tied to the eternal truth within Islam. The convergence of paradigms in the Western society and its comparison with Islam can be depicted as follows:

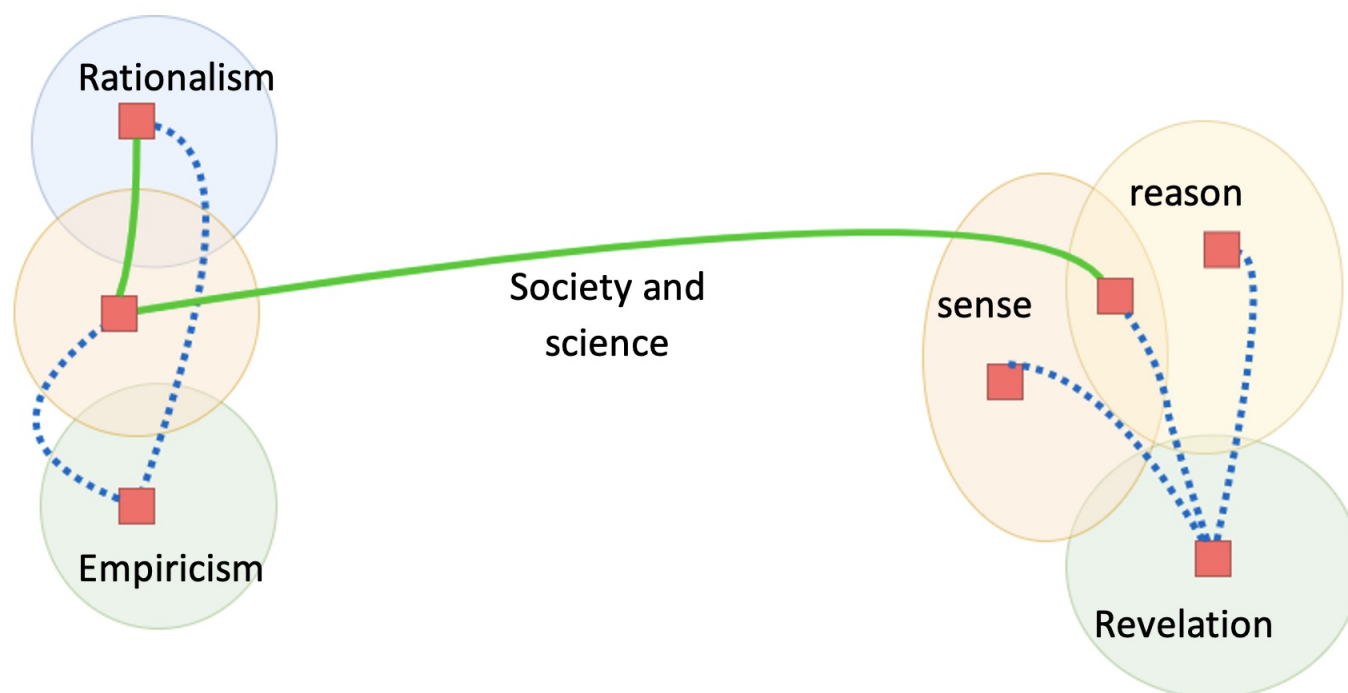


Figure 2. The illustration of epistemology, society, and social interaction. I shall succinctly illustrate that the relationship between 'society and science' in Islamic and Western civilizations may appear ontologically similar. Humans employ and utilize scientific products, as well as engage in scientific work based on their capacity for reason and sensory perception. However, in the West, there is no revelation as an epistemological source that guides these sensory perceptions and reason, as there is in Islam. It is due to this intrinsic element that al-Attās is justified in referring to 'divergent worldviews' as a distinguishing feature between these two scientific traditions.

Based on Kuhn's thesis on paradigms mentioned above, I argue that when religion, particularly in the Western context, criticizes science, it can be interpreted as the presence of 'anomalies' in the development of science. As I mentioned earlier about 'systematic theology,' in that field, they also developed a 'systematic theological research program' as a means to avoid falsification of the Bible. This was in response to the history of Biblical Criticism,²² – which eventually led to the denial of its authority. The end result, I believe, is a synthesis of rationalism and empiricism in research based on religion and science.

This is quite understandable because the social dynamics of religion in the West have always been divided into two poles: fundamentalism and liberalism. This reflects the existence of political parties there, namely, the Democrats and the Republicans. I believe that this is one of the reasons why religious trends there are often only divided into two categories: liberal or fundamentalist. Moreover, since the post-Renaissance era, polarization has occurred because of the 'radical' movement that aims to restore religious authority to the Bible itself, rather than in the hands of the pope through generations.²³ The reality of religion in the West, in terms of religious authority, has indeed been 'restored' to social agreements in order for the religion to 'develop in an up-to-date manner' in line with advancements in knowledge and social changes.²⁴

Additionally, terms like 'moderate'-'puritan' and 'radical'-'reformist' were also imported into Indonesia to justify the existence of such movements within Islam. This resulted in classifications and polarizations when it came to viewing 'Islamic

teachings' or 'practiced Islam,' or even specific aspects of Islam for general justification. Therefore, it is not surprising to witness people struggling to define Islam and turning to Western studies. This is partly due to the limited command of the Arabic language, which is the language of Islam, as well as comprehensive knowledge of its intellectual tradition. The ease of access to Western theories, study materials, and research funding makes it more convenient for scholars to access and use Western theories to examine Muslim societies through a Western sociological paradigm, including in the field of communication. Western scholars indeed view the Arabic language, including the language of the Qur'ān, as if it were 'the language of the conventional ideology,' much like in the Church tradition in the 17th to 19th centuries.²⁵

I contend that the root of this issue essentially lies in the perspective used to philosophically view Islam. Some consider it from a historical perspective, while others are more concerned with theories about pre-Islamic civilizations that contributed to the advancement of Islam. Some view Islam more as a cultural product that sociologically occurs spontaneously, simply a process of social-political dialectics that unfolds from one era to another. This context also includes the field of communication science, whose development occurs 'naturally' due to human communication needs. It is only later that the concepts of signs and symbols as communication media evolve. However, in Islam, we recognize revelation as the epistemological source that shapes a worldview—or more precisely, Islam's vision of reality and truth in a particular field of knowledge, as well as the connection between revelation and reason, rather than dichotomizing the two.

Still within the context of communication, the idea of secularization is not always accepted as something I referred to as 'taken for granted' above. Recently, there has been a growing movement of criticism against secularization in the West from Christian religious circles. One of these movements is the emergence of religious currents that combine philosophical thought, such as Ian G. Barbour, Holmes Rolston, and others. This movement is known for its efforts to integrate religion and science. This development is accompanied by the emergence of scholars who explore the theological aspects of specific disciplines. Various terms have emerged as a result, such as *theology of economy*²⁶, *economics theology*²⁷, *eco-theology*²⁸ or *environmental theology*²⁹, and others. In the field of communication, one term that has emerged is 'theosemiotic'.

If theosemiotics is one of the new perspectives in the study of semiotics and communication, how do we employ this theosemiotic framework in research? I personally discovered that since all theosemiotics became a proposition formulated by Raposa in 1989, to this day, the theosemiotic framework has not been used to examine any phenomena in research. This is because this framework does not yet have any rigid mathematical formulations. In this regard, Raposa emphasizes the use of hermeneutics and semiotics as its foundation. Therefore, I can say that research from a theosemiotic perspective falls into the 'interpretive' category - as research of the 'symbolic interaction' type is categorized by Blumer.³⁰ Denzin also agrees with Blumer, and furthermore, he includes 'epiphany' as part of the interpretative reasoning in the study of religious phenomena and experiences.³¹

Additionally, semiotics is practically used to present research data, through diagrams, graphs, or other designs in the form of symbols - especially indexes - that map the research data into a specific form. At this level, semiotics certainly becomes a kind of tool in science.³² In conducting research from a theological semiotic (theosemiotic) perspective, the methodology has already been formulated by Raposa himself in his works on Theosemiotic³³ and "Peirce Philosophy of

Religion,"³⁴ inspired by Peirce, who states that the '*entire universe is perfused with sign.*'³⁵ Furthermore, Peirce's argument about the existence of God is closer to cosmological arguments.³⁶

Certainly, I see a convergence in the concept of 'signs' as part of cosmological arguments, which are also present in Islam. In this regard, the term theosemiotics I use as an approach in this draft does not have the same meaning as mentioned above. Theosemiotics - if there is any 'semiotics' in Islam - does not use hermeneutics and semiotics, but rather relies on interpretation and ta'wīl schemes as a means of seeking meaning. As in both the Qur'ān and hadith, it is very easy to find justifications that 'everything in the heavens and on earth is a sign.' Another fundamental difference is that in other religions, 'God' is represented and realized as a symbol that can change in terms of its physical illustration.³⁷

In Islam, Allah is at the center of everything. The meaning of the word Allah was renewed with the descent of the Qur'ān, changing its meaning from the pre-Islamic understanding as 'the name of one of the gods' to the belief in the one and only God. Furthermore, His attributes and names are explained in the Qur'ān and hadith. Thus, the concept of God in Islam is not like the God in systematic theology, as mentioned above. Due to the perfection of this concept in Islam, Muslim scholars and philosophers no longer redefine these key concepts. Concepts such as God, humans, the universe, *Taqdīr* (Divine Decree), and others. If there are developments, there are only two possibilities: a) genuine development, based on clear epistemological foundations, which is referred to as *ijtihād*. b) innovation (*bid'ah*), which is usually considered deviating. The first is categorized as such because it adheres to the principles of faith (*aqīdah*) and Islamic law (*sharīa*), while the second is best avoided. This categorization has been in place from the era of the Imams of jurisprudence (*aimmat al-madzāhib*) to the present day,³⁸ including figures like Imam Shāṭibī,³⁹ Ibn Rajab,⁴⁰ Yūsuf al-Qaradhāwī,⁴¹ and contemporary scholars.⁴²

Footnotes

¹ Raposa, "Peirce's Theological Semiotic."

² Michael L Raposa, "A Brief History of Theosemiotic: From Scotus through Peirce and Beyond," in *The Varieties of Transcendence* (Fordham University Press, 2016), 143–44.

³ Raposa, 143–45.

⁴ Raposa, 147–49.

⁵ Sparks, "Theosemiotics: The Study of the Action of Divine Signs," 2008.

⁶ Ochs, "Theosemiotics and Pragmatism."

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⁸ Wayne A. Grudem, *Bible Doctrine: Essential Teachings of the Christian Faith* (Zondervan Academic, 2014), 17.

- ⁹ Owen C. Thomas and Ellen K. Wondra, *Introduction to Theology* (Church Publishing, Inc., 2002), 17.
- ¹⁰ Alister E. McGrath, *Historical Theology: An Introduction to the History of Christian Thought* (John Wiley & Sons, 2022), 128, 134, 266.
- ¹¹ Ted Peters, *Science, Theology, and Ethics* (Routledge, 2017), 67, 84.
- ¹² Aḥmad ibn Idrīs Al-Qarāfī, *Anwār Al-Burūq Fī Anwā' al-Furūq* (Beirut: Mansyurat Muhammad Ali Baidhun, Dar al-Kutub al 'ilmiyah, 1998), vol. 2, pp. 105–8; vol. 4, pp. 48–50.
- ¹³ Charles Sanders Peirce and Justus Buchler, "Logic as Semiotic: The Theory of Signs," *Philosophical Writings of Peirce* (New York: Dover Publications, 1955), 1902, 101.
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- ¹⁸ William Bechtel, "Philosophy of Science: An Overview for Cognitive Science," 2013, 52.
- ¹⁹ Bechtel, 53, 61.
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- ²² Nancey Murphy, *Theology in the Age of Scientific Reasoning* (Cornell University Press, 1993), 94–95.
- ²³ Peter L. Berger, "A Sociological View of the Secularization of Theology," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 6, no. 1 (1967): 3–16.
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- ²⁵ Peter Lake, *Moderate Puritans and the Elizabethan Church* (Cambridge University Press, 2004), 290–92.

²⁶ Its term, explained by John H. Erickson as the ortodoxical aspect of economics. He is an Eastern Orthodox American scholar, with specialization in the areas of Orthodox canon law and church history. From 2002 until 2007, he served as the Dean of Saint Vladimir's Orthodox Theological Seminary in the United States. Ton Veerkamp was born in 1933 in Amsterdam, The Netherlands. He studied philosophy in Nijmegen, The Netherlands, completing a Ph.L. in Theology in Maastricht and in New York, at the Union Theological Seminary, an S.T.L. He was advisor to foreign students at the Technical University, Berlin. John H. Erickson, "Sacramental Economy in Recent Roman Catholic Thought," *Jurist* 48 (1988): 653; Ton Veerkamp, "Neoliberalism and Reclaiming a Theology of Economy," *International Review of Mission* 97, no. 386-387 (2008): 198–209; Andrew Francis, *Oikos: God's Big Word for a Small Planet: A Theology of Economy, Ecology, and Ecumeny* (Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2017); Gregory Williams, "Suorum Operum Potestas: Works, Virtues, and the Theology of Economy," *New Blackfriars* 101, no. 1095 (2020): 558–84.

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³³ Raposa, *Theosemiotic: Religion, Reading, and the Gift of Meaning*

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