Exploring the *Qur'ānic* Hermeneutics of Shaykh Aḥmad Muṣṭafa Al-ʿAlāwī: Illustrating the Degrees of Understanding in the *Qur'ān*

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Abstract

This article explores the *Qur'ān*ic hermeneutics of Shaykh Al-ʿAlāwī, focusing on his interpretation of the degrees of understanding within the *Qur'ān*. The study employs a qualitative content analysis approach, grounded in hermeneutic theory, to uncover how Shaykh Al-ʿAlāwī's esoteric exegesis reveals deeper spiritual meanings of the *Qur'ān* beyond the exoteric level. Through the examination of key verses and *aḥadīth*, this article illustrates the validity and necessity of esoteric exegesis (*taʾwīl*) in Islamic scholarship. The conclusion affirms that Shaykh Al-ʿAlāwī's contributions to *tafsīr*, rooted in Sufi thought, emphasize the importance of inner reflection for achieving a complete understanding of the *Qur'ān*ic message. This article recommends that future studies further explore the application of hermeneutics in contemporary *Qur'ān*ic interpretation.

*Keywords: Qur'ān*ic hermeneutics, *tafsīr,* Shaykh Al-ʿAlāwī

1. Introduction

Shaykh Aḥmad Muṣṭafa Al-ʿAlāwī's (d. 1934 CE) hermeneutic included the inherent need for a new horizon to discover and reveal the deeper, inner meanings of the *Qur'ān* at its highest symbolic spiritual significance, breathing new life into the understanding of esoteric exegesis (Al-ʿAlāwī, 1995). The main thrust of his exegesis can be understood as bringing out the extra dimensions of Islam in greater depth and height, which can only be revealed through the *maqām* (station) of *al-iḥsān* (beautification, excellence, perfection, etc.). He argues that the *Qur'ān* has degrees of understanding and should not just be understood and interpreted on one level, stating that there is always more to uncover for those seeking spiritual elevation (Al-ʿAlāwī, 2014).

Shaykh Al-ʿAlāwī mentions one of the hermeneutic principles on *tafsīr* in his book *al-Baḥr al-Masjūr* (The Swelling Sea) (Al-ʿAlāwī, 1995). He begins by saying that "the *Qur'ān* has many facets and its wonders will never cease so that the understanding of the former generation cannot preclude the understanding of the latter" (Williams, 2014, pp. ix-x). In his explanation of this principle, he adds:

> …that which brings joy to the inner and outer vision, and that which has astounded the intellects and captivated the minds, is the Book of Allah the Almighty and oft-forgiving. It will continue to remain a ripe garden and an all-encompassing forest, to the extent that the one who interprets it would almost be adding to it were it not that, "No falsehood can approach it from any angle. (Al-ʿAlāwī, 1995, p. 30)

It is fresh and new in every age and is the same now as it ever was. Allah said, and He continues to say: "Will they not ponder and contemplate on this *Qur'ān* ?" (*Qur'ān* 4:82).

It is stated in a *ḥādīth*, [القرآن لا تنقضي عجائبه];"The marvels of the *Qur'ān* will never cease, and it has many dimensions". On the authority of Abu Dardā (may Allah be pleased with him), who says about the *Qur'ān*: "You will never comprehend all its meanings until you see the *Qur'ān* as having many facets". This is reiterated in a *ḥadīth* from Shaddai ibn Uwais and mentioned by Ibn 'Abd al-Barr (al-Suyūṭī, 1988).

What aids this *ḥadīth* is the saying of the Prophet, "Verily the *Qur'ān* has an outward (ẓāhir), an inward (bāṭin), a boundary (ḥadd) and a horizon (maṭlaʿ). This is also mentioned in the *Crown of Exegesis* (Al-ʿAlāwī, 1995). Based on this, one should not be quick to disqualify what those with knowledge of Allah say about the Book of Allah. Even if it is not fully understood by our intellect, we should deem it as one of the four facets.

From a Sufi point of view, providing literal accounts and lexical meanings and background of verses in the *Qur'ān* might be fruitful to the masses, but it does not satisfy the elite[1]. Most people are attached to the mere form of things, and not what they hold on to the inside. A major difference between the two dimensions, the law (sharīʿah) and the path (ṭarīqa) in Islam lies in the deeper comprehension of the spiritual content of the revelation, of which the Sufis have always been aware (Lings, 1975). In reality, both exoteric and esoteric approaches to *Qur'ān*ic exegesis ("interpretation of the Qur'an") should be seen as equally valid and applicable (Calder, 1993). However, it is in the exploration of the latter approach that Muslims are able to gain access to what may be termed the Divine secrets (Al-Ghazālī, 1983).

Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī (d. 1273 CE) compared the *Qur'ān* to a beautiful bride; you cannot cast her veil aside and see the beauty of her face without intimacy, without knowing her well—not just anyone can pull that veil aside (Eaton, 1983: p.80).

In *al-Minaḥ al-Quddūsiya[2]*, Shaykh Al-ʿAlāwī states that: Allah has entrusted the ẓāhir) of the *Qur'ān* to those scholars who have mastered its outside, just as He also entrusted its *bāṭin* to those [gnostics] endowed with spiritual knowledge to comprehend its inner meaning (Al-ʿAlāwī, n.d.). He describes the knowledge of the latter as the contemplative vision of the heart (baṣīrah) (Al-ʿAlāwī, n.d.).[3]

This knowledge is the fruit of direct vision (ʿayān) and unveiling (mukāshfa), not proofs (dalīl) and arguments (burhān).

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1   The "elite" here specifically implies those who pursue *ma'rifa* (gnosis) through inner purification and experiential knowledge of the Divine.

2   *Al-Minaḥ al-Quddūsiya* is a book in which Shaykh al Al-ʿAlāwī presents a purely mystical interpretation of both the doctrine and the rites.

3   *Baṣīrah* refers to the inner eye of the spiritual heart whereas baṣar refers to the external vision of the physical eye and both expressions are found in the

''And beyond the text [فثم من وراء النقل علم يدق + عن مدارك غايات العقول السليمة] lies a knowledge + too subtle for most sound minds to comprehend''(Ibn al-Fārid ,1998)

What should also be borne in mind is that there have always been in this world individuals for whom the ordinary interpretations of religion, in its dogmatic and formal appearance, do not sufficiently satisfy their intellectual and spiritual aspirations. They sense the compression of forms, religious or otherwise, and seek that which is beyond form, not because they are arrogant or unsatisfied with posthumous salvation, but because the spirit moves them to search for liberation.

It is to these people that the Shaykh Al-ʿAlāwī addresses himself. When they take up the *ṭarīqa*, such people find that religious forms themselves, far from being obstacles, help them towards their goal, which is the unveiling of the heart. The *sharīʿah* has in view the posthumous salvation of the individual, while the *ṭarīqa* has in view the liberation of the individual in this life through gnosis (*maʿrifa*). From the moment that the two facets of Islam, the exoteric and esoteric, separated in the early period of Islamic history, each took on its own teachers, methods, terminology, and perspectives. While there have been inevitable conflicts because of the incomprehensibility of esoteric Islam, there have always been reconciliations. There have even been many pious authorities of *sharīʿah* (*fuqahā*; sing. *faqīh*) who have recognized, and still do, the integrity and independence of the masters of the *ṭarīqa*. The law concerns the majority of Muslims, whereas the *ṭūrūq* (sing. *ṭarīqa*) are a limited group; but this does not mean that the *ṭarīqa* as such excludes the law. On the contrary, without the *sharīʿah* there is no *ṭarīqa*, as the greatest Sufis themselves would say (Danner & McIntosh, 1978: 13).

One of the objectives of this study is to prove the validity of the existence of esoteric exegesis and why it is needed. This article also intends to offer proof of this by examining key verses in the *Qur'ān* and Sunnah, showing that the exoteric form of the former includes an inner dimension.

2. Theoretical Framework

This study adopts the hermeneutical approach which focuses on the esoteric interpretation (*taʾwīl*) of the *Qurʾān* as explored by Shaykh Al-ʿAlāwī. Through textual analysis of key *Qurʾān*ic verses and *ḥadīth*, the study seeks to illustrate the multi-layered meanings of the *Qurʾān*, emphasizing the spiritual and symbolic dimensions inherent in the text. It draws on Sufi principles and frameworks of understanding, particularly the role of *ʾiḥsān* in accessing deeper meanings within the *Qurʾān*.

The teachings of Shaykh Al-ʿAlāwī stress the threefold nature of religion (*dīn*) as mentioned in the famous *Ḥadīth Jibrīl*[4], which reveals that the *dīn* of Islam in its totality consists of Islam, *ʾīmān* and *ʾiḥsān*.[4]

Islam is represented by one's inner and outer submission to *sharīʿah*, and *alʾīmān al-ḥaqq*(true faith), and the perfection of this faith is *ʾiḥsān*, (the excellence of worshipping Allah).[5] He authored works in each of these mainstays of the religion. However, his most important legacy is the spiritual path he founded, which emphasized knowledge of Allah (*maʿrifa*) and the invocation (*dhikr*) of the Supreme Name of Allah.

When speaking about *ʾiḥsān,* the Shaykh gives a concise and apt explanation:

> *ʾIḥsān* is the finality of what precedes it, that is to say, the finality of submission (Islam) and the finality of faith (*ʾīmān*). Therefore, is it named excellence (*ʾiḥsān*) in the sense of perfecting a thing, or being an adept at it, and whosoever has no foothold in the station of *ʾiḥsān*, his submission unto Allah comes short of the measure. (Al-ʿAlāwī, n.d.: p. 79)

It could be said that *ʾiḥsān* in reality is the essence of Islam, they are essentially one; like the butter that is hidden in the milk, which only after the churning of the milk will the butter appear. One can also not arrive at *ʾiḥsān* without first passing through the doors of *ʾīmān* and Islam.

According to Shaykh Al-ʿAlāwī, (Al-ʿAlāwī, 1995, p. 18) , the esoteric implication of the verse in the *Qurʾān* : [و أتوا البيوت من أبوابها] ''And enter your houses through the doors'' (*Qurʾān* 2:p189) alludes to first

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4   Sahih al-Bukhari, narrated from Umar bin Khattab.

5   Narrated from Umar al-Khattāb in the *Ṣaḥīḥ* of Muslim, *ḥadīth* no. 54.

comprehending the literal meaning of the *Qur'ān*, which represents the level of *sharīʿa*, thus making it clear that there can be no esoteric without the exoteric. The literal meaning of the text is like a body to the soul or a protective container for precious content; it is by virtue of this correspondence between the two interpretations, (*taʾwīl*) may occur.

Al-Ghazālī (1983) outlines in one of his hermeneutical rules that the literal meaning of the text should not be held separate from its hidden meaning. He says in *Jewels of the Qur'ān* :

> Then, know that the realities we hinted at have secrets and jewels; [but also] they have seashells, and the shell is that which appears first. Some people who reach the seashells know [only] these, while others break the shells and carefully examine the pearls [inside them]. (Al-Ghazālī, 1983, p.71)

Apart from seeing the *Qur'ān* through the eyes of Islam, *ʾīmān* and *ʾiḥsān,* the central theme of Shaykh al-ʿAlāwī's *tafsīr* is also strongly based on the *ḥadīth:*[إن للقرآن ظاهرا وباطنا وحدا ومطلعا]Verily the *Qur'ān* has an outward, an inward, a boundary and a horizon (Al-Ghazālī, 1983, p.107) .This esoteric outlook of the Shaykh has clearly influenced his *tafsīr* and his contribution to the genre in a positive way.

3. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative hermeneutic approach to explore the deeper layers of *Qur'ān*ic interpretation, focusing on the teachings of Shaykh Aḥmad Muṣṭafa al-ʿAlāwī. It aims to demonstrate how his hermeneutics unveil the degrees of understanding within the *Qur'ān* , particularly highlighting its symbolic and esoteric meanings. The research involves content analysis of primary Islamic sources, such as the *Qur'ān* and the *ḥadīth*, with a focus on key verses that Al-ʿAlāwī interpreted in his works. These texts are contextualized within his broader Sufi exegesis, emphasizing both the exoteric (*ẓāhir*) and esoteric (*bāṭin*) dimensions of the *Qur'ān*. Central to this analysis is Al-ʿAlāwī's focus on the *maqām* of *iḥsān* (excellence in worship), as detailed in his work *Al-Baḥr al-Masjūr* (Al-ʿAlāwī,1995). The study also critically engages with esoteric interpretation (*taʾwīl*) to illustrate how it complements the exoteric approach, offering a multi-layered understanding of the *Qur'ān* .

4. Discussion

In his introduction to his main work of *tafsīr*, *The Swelling Sea*, Al-ʿAlāwī (1995) arranged this work into four facets, or four different levels of interpretation. The first is the exegesis (*tafsīr*), or the general meaning of the Book of Allah. The second is extrapolation *(istimbāṭ)* where he mentions any rulings *(aḥkām)* that might be derived from the *Qur'ān* , which are on a deeper level. Thirdly, he provides an allegory *(ishārat)* according to the language of the people of Allah *(ahl Allah)*; and finally, on an even deeper esoteric level, is what he refers to as the tongue of the spirit*)*.

[قد علم كل أناس مشربهم] 'And each group of people knew their drinking place'(*Qur'ān* 2:60).

The exegesis of Shaykh Al-ʿAlāwī is certainly deserving of more prominence in the growing field of historical studies on *tafsīr* literature. Shaykh al-ʿAlāwī was a twentieth-century scholar who underwent a traditional system of education and was deeply rooted in the milieu of Algerian *Mālikī-Ash'arī* Sufi Islam. In the context of the history of *tafsīr*, the Shaykh's exegesis is a very interesting work that breaks the artificial distinction between "classical" or "traditional", and "modern" *tafsīr*. The Shaykh's doctrinal background was exclusively in classical/traditional Sufi literature (Hendricks, 2018: p.11).

The Shaykh was traditional in the true sense of the word when speaking about *Qur'ān*ic exegesis. He relied primarily on the traditions (*aḥadīth*) of the Prophet (SAW). He has also indicated that every generation will receive their own understanding of the *Qur'ān*; he clarified how its message relates differently to every generation of the *ummah*. The Shaykh clarifies this hermeneutic principle in his statement: "The proponents of the truth exist in every age". According to this principle, he writes:Ibn ʿAbd al-Barrand other eminent scholars have said when relating the words of their predecessors, "There is no statement more harmful to knowledge, scholars, and students than the claim of the one who says that the scholars of old (*al-mutaqaddimīn*) have not left anything to be said by those who came after them (*al-muta'akhirīn*). (Ibn ʿAbd al-Barr & Maḥmūd, 1975)

Indeed, this is so, since such a statement would be to deny all the generous souls and great men and women of sound intellect. Allah suffices us and

He is our best Guardian. Yet, the one who makes or believes such a claim has no basis for it other than a poor opinion of the remaining righteous believers *(al-bāqiyāt al-ṣāliḥāt)⁶*. According to the Shaykh, because of this:

> I searched the traditions (*aḥadīth*) for something more worthy of consideration. Far be it from Allah to leave the community (*ummah*) of His beloved Prophet wandering in bewilderment; it remains a community which upholds the truth and does justice in its light and judges by it.If we could only maintain a good opinion of the community of Prophet Muḥammad (SAW), this would be sufficient to prove this point, especially given that there are authentic narrations to support it as follows: Abu Umar reported on the authority of Abu Uthmān al-Khulāni that the Prophet said, 'Allah will continue to plant seeds in this religion and use them in His service.' I say that He would not plant a seed except for the useful wisdom and benefit that comes from it. (Ibn ʿAbd al-Barr & Maḥmūd, 1975)

Suyūti (1988) quotes the following *ḥadīth* in his *al-Jāmi' al-Saghīr*,

[إن الله يرسل على رأس كل مائة سنة من يجدد له دينه] 'Allah will send to this community at the beginning of every hundred years, someone to renew its religion for it.'⁷·This renewer (*mujaddid*) is not someone who follows the opinions of others, but rather takes directly from the Book of Allah and the Sunnah of His Messenger without any intermediaries; and he only makes use of what serves to renew the faith. The reader will not fail to observe the ambiguity of the language of the *ḥadīth*, and how this individual could be one or many people.

Suyūtī (1988) in *al-Jāmi' al-Saghīr* relates the following *ḥadīth*, 'Every generation of my community will have its foremost (*muqarrabūn*).' And also:

[لن تخلو الأرض من أربعين رجلا مثل خليل الرحمن فبهم تسقون و بهم تنصرون ما مات منهم أحد إلا أبدل الله مكانه أخر].

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6   The good deeds that endure forever.

7   Narrated by Abu Huraira and is sound

The earth will never be void of forty men like the Friend of the Merciful (*khalīl al-Raḥmān*). By their means will you be given rain, and by their means will you be given aid. When one of them dies, Allah substitutes another in his stead.

In general, by researching the traditions on this matter one cannot fail to find something in the community of Muḥammad to please him. The Prophet said:

> My community is like a garden tended by its owner; he weeds it, keeps its rows clear and straight, and prunes it, so that it becomes more fruitful with each passing year. It maybe that the last fruit it gives has the finest bunches and the longest stalks. By Him Who sent me with the truth, the son of Mary will surely find worthy replacements for his disciples amongst my community. (Ibn Taymiyya, n.d., p. 306)

This is related in *al-Mabāḥith al-Aṣliyyah.*The Prophet (SAW) also said: "My community is a blessed community: no one knows if the first part or the last part is better… My community is like rain, it is not known whether the first part or the last part of it is more beneficial." (Al-ʿAlāwī, 1995, p. 15)

Al-Ṭabarī narrates on the authority of Ibn Abbas that the Messenger of Allah said:

> O, how I wish I could meet my brothers! The Companions said, "O Messenger of Allah, are we not your brothers?" He said, "Of course, but they are a people that will come after you, they will have faith like your faith, and they will believe in me like you believe in me and assist me as you assist me. Oh, if only I could meet my brothers!"[8] **(**Al-ʿAlāwī, 1995: p.15)

It is related in another *ḥadīth* that Abu Jum'ah al-Anṣāri said:

> I said, "O Messenger of Allah, will there ever be any people more greatly rewarded than us, since we believe you and

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[8]   Narrated Anas Ibn Mālik, in 'Musnad of Aḥmad Ibn Ḥambal, *ḥadīth* no.32.

follow you?" He said, "And what stops you from doing so when the Messenger of Allah is amongst you, bringing you revelation directly from Heaven? But there will come a people after you who will receive the Book of Allah between two covers and they will believe in it and act upon it. Their reward shall be greater than yours. (Al-ʿAlāwī, 1995: p.15)

Now this does not mean (says the Shaykh) that the latter generations are superior to, or equal to the former generation who migrated, I would not say this. What I am saying, just as only a fool or a deluded person would deny the virtue of the early generations, likewise, only a wretched and intellectually bankrupt person would deny that this virtue still exists. Yet often it's not that such ignorant people deny its existence, but that they deny even having experienced it, since they are incapable of recognizing it in anyone. What is good in the present is often veiled by dreams from the past. Perhaps the reader might not deny that this virtue still endures but doubts that we are worthy of it. In that case, this book of mine might be of use to those who will come later, even if it does not please my contemporaries. (Al-ʿAlāwī, 1995:p.15)

Say: I ask of you no payment for it, nor am I a pretender; (*Qurʾān* 38:86)

And you will come to know the truth about it in time;(*Qurʾān* 38:88)

And the best end will be for the reverent.(*Qurʾān* 7:28)

In support of his hermeneutic approach to *tafsīr*, the Shaykh mentions a verse in the *Qurʾān* that alludes to three distinct types of worshippers whom Allah has made the inheritors of [ثم أورثنا الكتاب الذين اصطفينا من عبادنا فمنهم ظالم لنفسه و منهم مقتصد و منهم سابق بالخيرات.]

And We have bestowed this divine Book as an inheritance to such of Our servants whom We have chosen [meaning for Islam]. Amongst them are those who have wronged their souls, and amongst them are those who follow a middle course, and amongst them are some who are foremost in the exalted ranks of virtue by the permission of Allah. (*Qurʾān* 12:76)

All three categories mentioned in the above verse are amongst the safeguarded servants of Allah; however, their spiritual statuses and levels of worship are in degrees, which can be categorized into Islam, *ʾīmān* and *ʾiḥsān*.

The Shaykh gives a beautiful commentary on this verse. He says:

> As for the people of the first level, they are the Muslims in general who are safeguarded and protected from *kufr* and *shirk* through Allah's guidance. (And the phrase (*zālimun li nafsihi*) brings to mind the *ḥadīth* in which the Prophet says: [حاسبوا أنفسكم قبل أن تحاسبوا] ''Take account of yourselves (*nafs*) before account will be taken of you,'' and we can compare *muhāsaba* (self-reckoning) to the level of Islam. (Al-Alawi,1989: 66).

As for the people of the second level, they are the elect (*khaṣṣ*) and are protected from major and minor sins through their state of vigilance of Allah's witnessing over them (*murāqaba*). *Murāqaba* is the level of *ʾīmān.*

As for the people of the third level, they are the elect of the elect (*khaṣṣ al-khaṣṣ*) of the *ummah* of Muḥammad – the foremost (*as-sābiqūn*), they are safeguarded from the dangers of forgetfulness (*ghaflah*), this is the level of witnessing (*mushāhada*), for their hearts remain continuously oriented towards the Beloved, and they consider *ghaflah* as a major sin, except if distraction were to overtake them by error. The verse refers to them as *as-sābiqūn bil khairāt*. The *sābiqūn* are also referred to in the *Qurʾān* as the near ones, closest to their Lord *(al-muqarrabūn)*.

It is worth mentioning that within the Islamic ternary, the degrees of certitude (*yaqīn*), alluded to in the *Qurʾān*, can also be compared to Islam, *ʾīmān* and *ʾiḥsān*:

> ʿ*ilmul-yaqīn,* - knowledge of certitude*;*
>
> '*aynul-yaqīn* – vision of certitude;
>
> *ḥaqqul-yaqīn* – truth of certitude.

The essence of belief and worship, according to the *Qur'ān* is as a result of *yaqīn*. [واعبد ربك حتى يأتيك اليقين] "And worship your Lord until the certitude has come to you" (*Qur'ān* 15: 99).

Most people fall into one of these three categories according to their ability and capacity when it comes to worshipping Allah and understanding His message. However, the general people (ʿumūm) do not have the capacity to endure the understanding of the elect (khawāṣṣ), and the proof is that the Prophet Muḥammad (SAW) used to speak to people according to the level of their intellect. This was a quality which distinguished the Prophet (SAW) from those prophets who came before him. This is alluded to in the verse:

[واخفض جناحك للمؤمنين] And (O Muḥammad) lower your wings unto the believers" (*Qur'ān* 15:88) .The pigeon cannot fly with the eagle, so the eagle has to come down to the level of the pigeon.

For example, in the case of Nabi Isa (AS), many of his words and sayings were expressed on one level, which in most cases required explanations to the point where his disciples were unable to analyze or unravel his expressions until he himself explained it to them. Those who took these expressions in their literal sense and did not bother to search for the inner meaning would use them as proof of his divinity. However, in the case of Muḥammad (SAW), he never compelled his companions to analyze what was difficult to understand, because human intellects are at different levels. Muḥammad (SAW) was careful not to divulge anything regarding the secrets and deeper meanings of things, except among those who were worthy of understanding and of receiving such insights. All of this he did in spite of the fact that he possessed [جوامع الكلم],the ability to be concise and convey many meanings in a few words. Whilst Nabi ʿIsa (AS) and the prophets before him were sent to specific people at specific times, Prophet Muhammad (SAW) was sent with the universal message of *raḥmatan lil ʿalamīn*. The Prophet (SAW) never revealed anything which might cause confusion in the minds of humankind, or what may have seemed far-fetched to certain intellects. One of his companions once asked him, "Do I speak and relate everything I hear from you O Messenger of Allah?" To which the Prophet (SAW) replied, "Yes, except those words which are beyond the minds of the common people, lest it becomes a *fitna* for some of them". And For this reason, whatever was far-fetched for certain intellects would

not emanate from the companions, with the exception of the senior men among them who took the prudent advice of the Prophet: "*Kallim annās alā qadri 'uqūlihim*" (Speak to people according to their intellects).(Al-Bukhari, n.d.).This is the same advice which the Gnostics have followed.

From a purely syntactic perspective, the Shaykh demonstrates how the pearls of the *Qur'ān* can be discovered through the Arabic language itself.

[إنا أنزلناه قرآنا عربيا لعلكم تعقلون] "Indeed, We have revealed it [the *Qur'ān*] as a discourse in the Arabic language so that you might encompass it with your intellect"(*Qur'ān* 12: 2).

Shaykh al-ʿAlāwī interprets a much-debated verse on *qadr* (divine decree) and divine action from a linguistic perspective, presenting four different grammatical approaches. This analysis aligns with the Ashʿarite view-the main theological school of Sunni Islam-that Allah creates human actions. Simultaneously, it supports the doctrine of "pure *tawḥīd*" , [التوحيد المحض]encapsulated in the phrase "*lā fāʿila illā Allāh*" (there is no doer [in reality] but Allah) (Al-ʿAlāwī,1995).

It is the verse that says: *"Allah created you and your deeds"*(*Qur'ān* 37: 96) [و الله خلقكم و ما تعملون.]

1 -The particle ما in the above verse could be translated first as وصولة (relative pronoun – 'that'); "Allah created you and *that* which you do."

2 ما- can also be considered an استفهام (interrogative), meaning, "Allah created you, and *what* do you do?'

3ما- can have the meaning of نفى (negative particle) "Allah created you and you do *nothing*"!

4-ما could also be a مصدرية (objective noun) "Allah created you and your deeds"(*'amalakum*). However, all four approaches point to one esoteric reality, and that is [لا فاعل إلا الله]; "There is no doer but Allah."(*Qur'ān* 37: 96)

4.2 Shaykh al-ʿAlāwī's Insights on Varied Perceptions of *Ḥadīth*

Another approach to the ternary expression of Islam, ʾīmān , and ʾiḥsān is the Shaykh's interpretation of a particular *ḥadīth* when asked about its meaning. The Shaykh proposes an esoteric exegesis of the *Qur'ān* as part of this interpretation. It should be noted that the hermeneutical approach

here is esoteric and not philosophical. He was asked to interpret *a ḥadīth* describing the spiritual state of the worshipper during ritual prayer (*salāh*). The *ḥadīth* says: [صل صلاة مودع كأنك لم تصل بعدها] (*ṣalli ṣalāh tal-muwaddi'*); "When you pray make your prayer a farewell prayer as if there is no prayer after that."(Al-Ṭabarānī, 2009: p.155).

The Shaykh answered:"People are in three categories in their understanding of Allah and to each one is allotted their portion. The general people (*umūm*) do not have the capacity to endure the understanding of the elect (*khusūs*)." (Al-ʿAlāwī, 1995, p.15)

He then mentioned the verse:[و فوق كل ذي علم عليم نرفع درجات من نشاء] ''We raise to (high) degrees (of knowledge) whomever We will - but above everyone who is endowed with knowledge there is One who knows all". (*Qur'ān* 12:76)

The immediate meaning of the *ḥadīth* which is most commonly understood was not the intention of the questioner, but rather, he wanted to know the special understanding of the Gnostics on this *ḥadīth*. The Shaykh reminded the questioner that the Messenger of Allah used to speak to people according to the level of intellect. As noted, the intellects are different; the general understanding of the *ḥadīth* differs from the way the elect (*khusūs*) understand it, each according to their own ability. The Prophet (SAW) spoke in the tongue of the masses, which is reflected in the first interpretation of the *ḥadīth* which says,

> Make your prayer, O intelligent one, as if you are bidding farewell because you have no security of permanence, and it could most likely be that it is your last prayer. Place death before your eyes and intensify the perfection of your prayer. Take care of its application in every aspect, heart and soul, with tranquility, humility, and the presence of heart and with awe and consider it to be your last prayer in this world. If you become well established in this state and follow this pattern, then your prayer (*salāh*) is performed in accordance with the command of the *shari'a* and the requirements of Islam. (Al-ʿAlāwī, 1993: p.51)

This is what is generally understood as the outer meaning of the *ḥadīth*.

The second viewpoint of the *ḥadīth* is the understanding of the elect (*khusūs*). The one who occupies this state sees the Prophet (SAW) as saying, "Make your prayer a farewell prayer", meaning, bid farewell to your prayers, because the one who bids farewell to their prayer, performs it and does not hold on to it. One does not see their prayer as having any existence, because one is absent in the witnessing of its occurrence over them; that is, one does not rely on it and does not depend on it, as if one had never prayed it. This is why the Prophet said, "until it would appear as if he would never pray again after it" (Al-Ṭabarānī, 2009:p.155). Meaning, as if you see yourself having never prayed. If the possessor of this state were to be called on the day of resurrection: O you who have left the prayer, [يا تارك الصلاة] he will not contest (argue) with his soul *(nafs)* that he has any prayer (because he has bid farewell to his prayer). His absence from the prayer is because he has witnessed the One for Whom he has made the prayer. He has no attachment to the deed because he sees the deed as coming from Allah, and the ayah says; "Allah created you and your deeds." (*Qur'ān* 37:96) [و الله خلقكم و ما تعملون] and in reality this means, there is no real doer but Allah [لا فاعل إلا الله].

Al-Iskandari (d.709/1309) advises against seeking rewards for actions not directly attributed to oneself, emphasizing that the ultimate reward lies in Allah's acceptance of the deed. Elsewhere, he reflects on the value of unrecognized actions, stating that the most beneficial deeds for the heart are often those done without self-awareness and seen as insignificant."(Al-Iskandari, 1984)

Such is the one who bids farewell to their prayer. As for the one who places their prayer before their eyes, relying and depending on its outward form and its inner, they have not bid farewell to it. How can one manage to bid their prayer farewell when one is hoping to plea with it to their Lord? As if one has shown Him a favor. In the example of such a person, their prayer will never be raised from them because they are still attached to it (holding onto their deeds). Allah says, "And He raises up the righteous deed"[و العمل الصالح يرفعه] (*wal ʿamal as-ṣāliḥ yarfaʿuhu*) (*Qur'ān* 35:10). In other words, holding onto your *ṣalāh* is holding onto the deed, and holding onto the deed is like holding onto the creation and not to the Creator.

If one's prayer is taken from them and 'raised' up, one would have forgotten it, and it would become absent from them until they would deem it paltry. It is known that when a thing or object is raised, it becomes smaller, dimmer, and insignificant in appearance until it can no longer be seen. This is the special meaning of the *ḥadīth* at this level.

Then there is the third viewpoint, which is the most distinguished of all the approaches to the *ḥadīth*. The possessors of this state do not perceive themselves as being freed from their prayer, but rather see it as a prayer of union; this is also known in the expression of the Gnostics as concealment or annihilation (*fanā*). This is because the prayer is a link, or connection (*waṣlah*) between the servant and their Lord.

Whenever this union is realized, the existence of imagination disappears and the inner vision appears with the loss of the outer vision. Any prayer other than this is not considered prayer in the estimation of the Gnostics because it has not produced the abovementioned union. According to the Gnostics, the true practitioner who "bids farewell" (al-*muwaddiʿ*) is one who renounces worldly existence, leaving it behind and detaching entirely from it, expressing their devotion by saying:[إني وجهت وجهى للذي فطر السموات والأرض]"I have set my face truly and firmly towards Him Who created the heavens and the earth and never shall I give partners to Him"(*Qur'ān* 6:79).

There is a good and excellent example for him in the verse,

[سبحان الذي أسرى بعبده ليلا] "Glory be to the One Who took His servant on a journey by night",(*Qur'ān* 17:1). until he would be as Allah says, [فكان قاب قوسين أو أدنى] "coming closer, being at a distance of two bow-lengths or even nearer"(*Qur'ān* 53:9). One's arrival (at the Presence) cannot be realized except after they have bid farewell to everything. There is no objection from the branch to become attached to the root. It is because of this that the means (*wāsiṭah*) fall away, having no further need of the link. The rule in grammar says: 'when the subject (*mubtada'*) becomes the source of the predicate (*khabr*) it does not need a link (*rābiṭa*)'; as Allah says in the *Ḥadīth Qudsi*, [كنت سمعه و بصره] "I become his hearing, his seeing…until the end"(Al-Bukhārī, n.d.)[9]. This is what Gnostics consider to be true prostration (*sujūd*), anything else is rejected, and the Prophet says, "as if you will never pray again after it."

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9   see Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī, Ḥadīth No. 6502

Because the Gnostic's prayer is not detached, their *sujūd* is complete attachment; that is why it said (in a poem) by a certain Gnostic: "Since they went into *sujūd* they never came up from it, and since they arrived never did they return". The *Qur'ān* says, [[الذين هم على صلاتهم دائمون]] "Those who remain constantly in prayer"(*Qur'ān* 70:23). This prayer is the coolness of the eyes for the Prophets and the Messengers. The Prophet said: [جعلت قرة عيني في الصلاة] "The coolness of my eyes was placed in the prayer."(Al-ʿAlāwī, n.d., p. 51)

5. Conclusion

It is clear from the discussion in this article that without the esoteric dimension of *tafsīr* the holistic meaning of intellectual exegetical speculation would be incomplete. Indeed, the absence of Sufi esoteric exegesis is a virtual betrayal of the spirit of the *Qur'ān* . It is also apparent that Shaykh al-ʿAlāwī's purpose in his hermeneutical approach to the *tafsīr* of the *Qur'ān* was specifically to discover meanings relevant to the contemporary needs of our time.There is an Arabic expression that says: [على قدر الاستعداد يأتي الأستمداد] "Only in accordance with the preparation will the giving take place." The expression highlights the idea that the depth of insight one gains from the Qur'an is directly related to the effort and openness they bring to it. This is intended to illustrate Shaykh Al-ʿAlāwī's belief that true understanding of the Qur'an requires a high level of spiritual and intellectual commitment, which aligns with the article's theme on the importance of esoteric *tafsīr*.

Based on the Islamic ternary, Islam, *ʾīmān ʾīmān* and *ʾiḥsān*, there is a beautiful anecdote given by the Shaykh, in which he compares the c to a flowing river: the one who comes with a cup to the river can only take a cup's worth, and the one who comes with a tank can fill the tank, and the one who makes a canal from the river receives indefinitely. The one who came with the cup cannot say to the river, "you only gave me a cup's worth! In response, the river would say, "but you only brought me a cup!" Similarly, speaking of the levels of meaning, the *Qur'ān* says:[يسقى بماء واحد و نفضل بعضها على بعض في الأكل] "All are watered with the same water, yet some have We given preference above others in the tasting thereof" (*Qur'ān* 13:4). Similarly, in another verse: [كلا نمد هؤلاء و هؤلاء من عطاء ربك و ما كان عطاء ربك محظورا] "All do we aid, these as well as those, from the treasures of your Lord, and the treasures of your Lord are not limited"(*Qur'ān* 17:20). Each one receives in accordance, as Allah reminds us:

و لكل درجات مما عملوا] ''And the status of each one will be rewarded accordingly to what they have earned'' (*Qur'ān* 6:132).

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