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SEMIOTICS OF RELIGION

SIGNS OF THE SACRED IN
HISTORY **ROBERT A. YELLE**



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Semiotics of Religion

BLOOMSBURY ADVANCES IN SEMIOTICS

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Semiotics of Religion

Signs of the Sacred in History

ROBERT A. YELLE

B L O O M S B U R Y
LONDON • NEW DELHI • NEW YORK • SYDNEY

Bloomsbury Academic

An imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

50 Bedford Square
London
WC1B 3DP
UK

175 Fifth Avenue
New York
NY 10010
USA

www.bloomsbury.com

First published 2013

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British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

EISBN: 978-1-4411-6765-1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Yelle, Robert A.

Semiotics of religion : signs of the sacred in history / Robert A. Yelle.
p. cm.—(Advances in semiotics)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-4411-4282-5—ISBN 978-1-4411-0419-9 (pbk.)—ISBN 978-1-4411-6765-1 (pdf)—ISBN 978-1-4411-7237-2 (epub)

1. Semiotics—History. 2. Religion—History. 3. Semiotics—Religious aspects. 4. Structuralism (Literary analysis) 5. Representation (Philosophy) I. Title.

P99.Y45 2012

210.1'4—dc23

2012011980

Typeset by Newgen Imaging Systems Pvt Ltd, Chennai, India
Printed and bound in India

*For my daughter, Maya Alexandria Yelle,
whose name means magic!*

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book represents a summation of my work on the semiotics of religion over the past 15 years. I recall expressing an interest in the study of symbols in my application to the History of Religions program at the University of Chicago Divinity School, where I matriculated in 1994; but my attraction to the symbols of different religious traditions long predated that, and was a central occupation of mine while a student at Harvard College in the late-1980s. Graduate study at Chicago, however, was clearly the point at which I fully embraced the “linguistic turn.” Studying Sanskrit made me keenly aware of cultural differences in theories and practices of language, and facilitated an emergence from semiotic naïveté. The faculty of the History of Religions program, particularly Wendy Doniger, continued to emphasize the importance of structuralist ideas. I have heard her tell, more than once, the story of how one ought to relate to Claude Lévi-Strauss: “It’s like the man who asked directions from a stranger on the bus. The stranger replied: ‘It’s easy to get there; just follow me and get off one stop before I do.’” Wendy of course meant to say that one ought not to push the method beyond the point at which common sense bids us take our leave.

I never got off the bus, but found myself going beyond (and before) Lévi-Strauss, into Ferdinand de Saussure, Roman Jakobson, and less well-known structuralists and semioticians. Much of this study was self-guided. Another turning-point came when I was encouraged by some graduate school friends from Sanskrit class—Spencer Leonard, Aditya Sood, and Ananya Vajpeyi—to enroll in Michael Silverstein’s class on “Language in Culture” in the Anthropology Department. Michael’s scientific approach to the study of the form and function of language was inspirational. His approach, which developed his teacher Roman Jakobson’s poetics into a theory of the pragmatic function of language, had important implications for the study of religious ritual that few scholars of religion, even in neighboring departments at the University of Chicago, had fully recognized. Michael served as one of the readers on my dissertation, which examined the poetic and rhetorical dimensions of the *mantras* or verbal formulas of Hindu *Tantra*. Some of the ideas I first learned from him—such as the concept of the “indexical icon,” and of the importance of examining metricalization or repetitive structures in ritual texts—I credit with providing the solution to the puzzle of the structure and function of mantras.

Another fortunate step in my development as a semiotician came when I arrived at the University of Toronto, where I was Mellon Postdoctoral Fellow from 2003–05. Soon after arriving, I introduced myself to Paul Bouissac, whom I knew by reputation as one of the key figures in the international study of semiotics and a founder of the Toronto Semiotic Circle. Although that group was by then inactive, Paul was busy with numerous efforts to promote the public awareness and intellectual revitalization of semiotics. I contributed to some of these endeavors, including as a speaker at a symposium on gestures that was subsequently published in the journal *Gesture*.¹ Paul enthusiastically supported younger scholars such as myself. So when I returned to Toronto in August 2010 for the International Association for the History of Religions Congress, for which I organized a panel on the semiotics of religion, I naturally asked him to be the respondent. It was over dinner later that week that Paul first proposed that I contribute the volume on the semiotics of religion for a new series he was editing. I will take this opportunity to thank him publicly for his invitation, which, as you can see, was too intriguing to refuse.

When I arrived at Toronto in fall 2003, my dissertation on mantras had just been published as a book,² and I was beginning to broaden my study of semiotics to pose historical questions—such as what had happened to the mantras I studied in my dissertation—and to examine cultural differences, especially those between traditional Hindus and British Protestants, as revealed in the colonial encounter. The end result of this research was another book which is appearing in print around the same time as this one. *The Language of Disenchantment: Protestant Literalism and Colonial Discourse in British India* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013) explores how Protestant ideas concerning language influenced British colonial attitudes toward Hinduism and proposals for the reform of that tradition. Similar to this book, *The Language of Disenchantment* attempts to combine semiotics with careful attention to the history of linguistic theories and practices, as an approach to describing both traditional religions and secular modernity.

Another influence reflected in both books, but particularly in this one, was my studies of the semiotics of law as this field intersected with religion. I had trained as a lawyer before becoming a historian of religions, and found myself drawing on my legal training to analyze rituals. Structuralist poetics helped me to appreciate the parallels in form and function between legal and religious rituals; while a study of the history of Protestant literalism, especially in Jeremy Bentham, helped me to understand the sources and motivations of the genre distinctions that segregate the language of modern law from that of poetry and ritual.³ More recently, I have come to appreciate the influence of Christian typological interpretations of the Bible on secularization, including particularly the separation of law from religion.⁴ These researches were encouraged also, in their initial phases, by the International Roundtables for the Semiotics of Law, which I attended as

a spectator while presenting at the International Association for Semiotic Studies Congress in Lyon, France, in 2004, and as a presenter the following year at McGill University, Montréal. I remember fondly conversations with Sophie Cacciaguidi-Fahy, Richard Sherwin, Anne Wagner, and other participants at the Roundtables. I collaborated with Richard later at some semiotically themed panels at the meetings of the Association for the Study of Law, Culture and the Humanities in Austin, Texas in 2005 and the Law and Society Association in Berlin in 2007.

Over the course of the years, in addition to those interlocutors noted above, my studies of semiotics have benefited from conversations with many people, including especially Peter Jackson, Jens Kreinath, Christopher Lehrich, Frank Reynolds, and Winnifred Fallers Sullivan.

Parts of this book resulted from research conducted both while at Toronto and during a year at the Illinois Program for Research in the Humanities at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign in 2005–06. My academic home since 2006 has been the Department of History at the University of Memphis. I would like to thank these institutions for their generous support. The academic life is a privilege, as well as an occupation, and I am grateful for the opportunity it has afforded me to pursue my research. Portions of the material herein were presented at these universities and also, in addition to the venues already mentioned, at the American Academy of Religion Annual Meetings, the Legal History Group at the University of Toronto Faculty of Law, Osgoode Hall Law School, and the Department of Anthropology at the University of Chicago.

Much of *The Semiotics of Religion*, including most of Chapters One and Five and all of Chapter Six, is new. Chapter One reproduces a few pages from “Law’s Trouble with Images: Fetishism and Seduction from Athens and Jerusalem to Madison Avenue,” in Anne Wagner and William Pencak, eds, *Images in Law* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2006), 267–79, reprinted by permission of Ashgate Publishing. Chapter Two incorporates portions of several previously published essays, including “Rhetorics of Law and Ritual: A Semiotic Comparison of the Law of Talion and Sympathetic Magic,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 69 (2001): 627–47, reprinted by permission of Oxford University Press; “Poetic Justice: Rhetoric in Hindu Ordeals and Legal Formulas,” *Religion* 32 (2002): 259–72, reprinted by permission of Taylor & Francis Ltd. (<http://tandf.co.uk/journals>); “Hindu Law as Performance: Ritual and Poetic Elements in *Dharmaśāstra*,” in Timothy Lubin, Donald R. Davis, Jr, and Jayanth K. Krishnan, eds, *Hinduism and Law: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 183–92, for which I thank the press; and “Semiotics,” in Michael Stausberg and Steven Engler, eds, *Handbook of Research Methods in Religious Studies* (London and New York: Routledge, 2011), 355–65, reprinted by permission of Taylor & Francis Books (UK). Chapter Three incorporates portions of “The Rhetoric of Gesture in Cross-Cultural Perspective,” in Paul Bouissac, ed., “Gesture, Ritual and Memory,” special

issue of *Gesture* 6, no. 2 (2006): 223–40, reprinted with kind permission by John Benjamins Publishing Company, Amsterdam/Philadelphia (www.benjamins.com); and “Punishing Puns: Etymology as Linguistic Ideology in Hindu and British Traditions,” in Steven E. Lindquist, ed., *Religion and Identity in South Asia and Beyond: Essays in Honor of Patrick Olivelle* (New York, London, Delhi: Anthem Press, 2010), 129–46, reprinted by permission of Anthem Press. Chapter Four incorporates, in revised form, portions of “Bentham’s Fictions: Canon and Idolatry in the Genealogy of Law,” *Yale Journal of Law & the Humanities* 17 (2005): 151–79, reprinted by permission of the journal. Chapter Five incorporates portions of “To Perform or Not to Perform?: A Theory of Ritual Performance versus Cognitive Theories of Religious Transmission,” *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 18 (2006): 372–91, reprinted by permission of Koninklijke Brill NV.

CHAPTER ONE

Semiotics beyond structuralism

Why a semiotics of religion?

Why a semiotics of religion? Why now? What can we learn from semiotics about religion, and vice versa? Any book such as this must provide persuasive answers to these questions, in response to the not unjustified skepticism lingering from prior attempts. At this time when reconstruction is badly needed in the study of religion, I aim to show that semiotics has much to offer to our understanding of both the structural and historical dimensions of religion, beyond and, in some cases, in opposition to the lessons learned from structuralism and poststructuralism a generation or two ago. Equally important is the contribution that a focus on religious phenomena can bring to reinvigorating the field of semiotics.

Semiotics is the discipline devoted to the systematic study of signs, symbols, and communication; it overlaps in its method and subject most directly with linguistics and rhetoric. A semiotic approach can contribute to the elucidation of many religious phenomena, including: the belief in a magical language; the types of signs used in magic; the prevalence of poetic devices in spells, chants, and other forms of ritual language; the law of talion (“an eye for an eye”) and other symbolic or ritualized punishments based on analogy; trials by ordeal, which often invoke the intervention of supernatural forces; the taxonomies or systems of classification deployed in the cosmologies of many religious traditions; ritual purity laws, including dietary prohibitions; not to mention myth. It is obvious that many of the phenomena traditionally grouped together under the category of religion have semiotic dimensions, even leaving aside the fact that they are forms of human expression, incorporating words, images, and symbolic actions. If communication requires, at minimum, an addresser and an addressee—one who sends the message and one who receives it—then many prototypical religious actions would appear to conform to, or rather to attempt to construct, such a relation. Both prayer and sacrifice are largely efforts to

communicate with the gods, either through words and gestures or through the destruction and translation of some object to the heavenly realm.¹ In the repeated refrain of Leviticus (King James Version), the burnt offering becomes “a sweet savour unto the Lord” as the smoke is conveyed upward. Like magic, sacrifice may depend on a certain dissimulation: although the god may be the one to whom the sacrifice is nominally addressed, the fact that the benefit of the sacrifice is distributed to the priests or congregants shows that the circuit of communication is implicitly located elsewhere. The same could be said of the rhetorical devices in many prayers, which, even if they never reach the ears of the gods to whom they are addressed, reinforce their own efficacy in the ears of the speaker and other listeners.

The very distinction between ordinary and ritual behaviors has sometimes been founded on the distinction between technical and expressive actions.² Although every cultural performance is to some degree symbolic—meaning not reducible to the purely utilitarian—in ritual behaviors the symbolism arguably predominates, to the extent that such behaviors may appear to serve no pragmatic objective. Our inability to ascribe a practical purpose to some behavior or artifact may lead to the inference that it is “ritualistic,” an epithet frequently invoked by archeologists in lieu of a better explanation. In this regard, religious objects or behaviors appear closer to the artistic or the aesthetic, with which domain they are often closely linked. Indeed, the point of some rituals—as Viktor Shklovsky claimed of literature—is to convey a sense of “estrangement,” of awe and wonder, to give pause, and to provoke reflection.³ However, unlike purely aesthetic performances, magical rituals do have a practical objective. The problem then becomes one of accounting for how magic promotes, from an insider’s perspective, the belief in its own efficacy. This is why, in Chapter Two, I present an argument for the rhetorical function of repetition and other poetic devices in such rituals.

These examples reinforce the conviction that many religious phenomena are best viewed as a form of communication or rhetoric. Although many of these phenomena have been analyzed previously as modes of semiosis or signifying processes, a number of newer theoretical approaches promise to alter substantially our understanding of these phenomena, to integrate them under a more comprehensive explanatory framework, and, above all, to introduce dimensions of nuance in keeping with our recognition of cultural and historical differences in modes of semiosis. Indeed, perhaps the most promising new direction in the semiotics of religion bears on the question of the nature of the secular that has been recognized increasingly as crucial for religious studies and related disciplines.⁴ Many religious phenomena, including myth, magic, and ritual, have arguably declined in a disenchanted modernity. Some of the greatest debates in the history of religions concerned precisely the communicative power of modes of ritual such as prayer and sacrifice. Broadly speaking, as detailed in later chapters of this book, secular modernity has rejected or severely qualified this communicative power by,

among other things, devaluing the symbol, denying the efficacy of symbolic magic, and limiting poetic repetition in certain genres of discourse. Yet the prevailing structuralist approaches to such phenomena, inasmuch as they invoke ostensibly universal principles, have proved unable to account for or even, in some cases, to acknowledge such historical differences. Counterbalancing this neglect is a recent emphasis on the need to attend to the specificities of the “linguistic” or “semiotic ideologies” of different cultures—including our own—and the ways in which these ideologies mediate semiotic practices.⁵ It is not possible to appreciate fully the communicative and rhetorical dimensions of the religious data of different cultures by applying a one-size-fits-all theory: it is necessary also to consider the philosophies and cosmologies of the sign that shape religious practices and narratives in their indigenous contexts of performance.

A quarter century ago, two distinguished scholars described the challenge confronting a prospective semiotics of religion:

The ideal text on semiotics and religious studies would use a general and crossculturally valid theory of semiosis to compare systematically distinct religious traditions in terms of their respective perception of the nature of religious semiosis. But there is, as of this writing, no theory that would permit a group of scholars to compare widely diverse traditions against one another.⁶

This description of the goals of a semiotics of religion expresses a problematic that is endemic to any science of culture. On the one hand, there needs to be a common set of principles, in terms of which we may compare and contrast different traditions so as to illuminate what is universally human and what is culturally specific. On the other hand, there must be recognition also of the way in which the “perception” of semiosis or, as it is now more commonly termed, the “semiotic ideology” of a particular culture informs, mediates, and structures its practices of communication. It is impossible to account for semiotic systems without incorporating also the dimensions of consciousness and of *poiesis* or meaning-making. Given this fact, it is still the case that there is no single accepted semiotic theory that can “square the circle” and mediate between the particular and the general. In lieu of such a theory, and as a step toward establishing a more adequate typology of semiotic systems, the present work focuses on some basic distinctions between the modes of semiosis that characterize many traditional religions and those that characterize secular modernity.

A number of features of the semiotic ideology of modernity, at least in certain European cultures and other cultures affected by them, have been influenced by earlier Christian theologies, particularly as these were transformed during and after the Protestant Reformation. The Puritan critique of “vain repetitions” in prayer, efforts to explain pagan idolatry and polytheism as an error of language, and a deepened critique of the

symbolic dimensions of the Jewish ceremonial laws were all associated with the movement that we standardly call Protestant literalism, which represented much more than an effort to read the Bible in a certain way. Protestants depicted the Crucifixion as a semiotic event that ushered in a mode of “plain speech”⁷ that replaced the figurative ceremonies of the Mosaic law and silenced the pagan oracles and their obscure pronouncements. Such mythemes contributed to the modern idea of disenchantment, meaning the banishment of miracles, mystery, and magic from the world.⁸ Disenchantment had linguistic dimensions. Poetic form was displaced in some cases, particularly but not only in prayer or liturgy, by more simplified, less ornamented forms, signaling a shift of emphasis from form to content; while the performative or magical function of discourse was subordinated in keeping with a privileging of semantics over pragmatics. These aspects of the Reformation influenced not merely those discourses we regard as religious, but also the ostensibly rational discourses of science and law, which were established in opposition to poetry, rhetoric, and myth.

Recent scholarship in religious studies and allied disciplines, much of it deeply influenced by poststructuralism, has called into question the validity of the categories of religion and the secular.⁹ While appreciating the contribution that such arguments have made to deepening the interrogation of both of these categories, and remaining skeptical in particular of our ability to distinguish the secular from earlier theological modes of thought, I do not agree fully with such critiques. A semiotic approach can contribute to defining both many of the phenomena traditionally gathered under the rubric of religion, and the category of the secular itself, understood as a particular semiotic ideology.

For example, as detailed in Chapter Two below, many spells represent an extreme form of the poetic function involving such devices as extensive repetition, rhyme, alliteration, and palindromes.¹⁰ Such performances announce themselves as acts of communication. To this extent, they depend on what we might call “semiotic recognition.” The very same features also enable the second-order definition of such semiotic events as rituals. By the same token, the relative exclusion of poetic and figurative language from certain genres of discourse, under the influence of Protestant literalism, also serves to characterize the secular as a particular semiotic ideology and mode of praxis. Unfortunately, the argument that both “religion” and the “secular” are categories without content has too often been used as an excuse to avoid the difficult work of accounting for such regularities in the structure and history of religions.

Among the semiotic dimensions of the historical process known as secularization or disenchantment are the following:

- The decline or sequestration in particular genres of densely symbolic discourses such as myth, ritual, and magic.

- The decline of a symbolic, allegorical, or typological view of the world, and the gradual ascendancy of realism, literalism, or a prosaic view of the world.
- The shift away from a conviction in the natural or nonarbitrary status of signs, or from a “magical” theory of language, and the ascendancy of the idea that the sign is arbitrary and bears no essential connection to that which it represents.
- The rise of scientific projects for the purification of language from errors, and the substitution of a perfect, rational, or universal language, as associated in particular with the Baconian movement in seventeenth-century England and its descendants.
- The decline of many modes of oral performance and the rise of a culture of the printed book, especially after the development and widespread application of movable type in European culture beginning in the fifteenth century, and subsequently around the globe.

Although it would clearly be impossible to address all of the above developments in the present essay, an effort is made to address a number of them in different chapters, and to grasp them as part of an overall transformation in semiotic ideology. The burden of this book is to demonstrate that any adequate account of the structural and historical dimensions of both religion and the secular must confront the challenge of defining both of these categories in semiotic terms. The centrality of semiosis to the self-definition of religion and the secular is evidence of the preeminently cultural status of both of these categories. However, this fact has been obscured as a result of the secular bias against symbolism and poetic performance, which has hindered inquiry into the semiotics of religion.

There are additional reasons why such historical differences in semiosis have not been investigated sufficiently. First, the insistence on the arbitrary nature of the sign, which is basic to modern semiotics, marks a break with many earlier semiotic ideologies that affirmed the naturalness of certain signs, and that consequently have been categorized as naïve and as untrustworthy guides to a science of signs. The semiotic theories of earlier cultures have been ignored except as historical curiosities. Second, the typologies of signs developed within both structuralist semiology and Peircean semiotic themselves contain no reference to the historical dimensions of signification. Whether Roman Jakobson’s dyad of “metaphor and metonymy” is in question,¹¹ or Charles Sanders Peirce’s triad of “icon, index, and symbol,”¹² these categories of relation between signifier and signified are regarded not only as exhausting the logical range of possibilities, but as ever-present alternatives for communication. The representation of such typologies as the keys to an atemporal, one-size-fits-all science of semiotics obscures the fact that different modes of sign relation have been emphasized within

different cultures, and that there have been, within this overall variety, some larger trends that allow us to characterize the semiotic ideology of modernity as distinct in some important respects from many of those that have obtained in earlier historical periods. Third, the otherwise valuable impulse of semiotics to establish itself on a scientific basis and thereby to secure recognition of its legitimacy as an independent academic discipline has led in many cases to a scientism or bias against historical and cultural approaches that has, instead of strengthening the discipline, limited its explanatory power and appeal.

The view of the semiotics of religion proposed in this book is quite different. It recognizes that any valid semiotics must attend to both the structural and historical dimensions of culture and, rather than perpetually reconfirming some predetermined theoretical model, it aims to develop a flexible theory capable of accounting for differences in semiosis. If this goal can be met, then in my view, semiotics offers the prospect of connecting the historical and anthropological sciences, while recognizing the prerogatives of each of these areas of enquiry.

A brief critical survey of some semiotic theories of religion

Over the past century and more, numerous schools of thought that embrace the label of “semiotics” or “semiology” have announced themselves, including structuralism, whether that of Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913), Roman Jakobson (1896–1982), Claude Lévi-Strauss (1908–2009), or others; poststructuralism, including that of Michel Foucault (1926–84) and Jacques Derrida (1930–2004); and the semiotics of Charles Sanders Peirce (1839–1914) and the American school of pragmatism that he helped to found. The late Thomas Sebeok (1920–2001) worked tirelessly to organize the various branches of semiotics under a single institutional rubric, and this work has been continued by others.

My own brand of semiotics draws on a number of different traditions: in particular, Jakobson’s studies of the “poetic function” of language;¹³ the synthesis between such approaches and Peircean semiotics developed by Jakobson’s student, the linguistic anthropologist Michael Silverstein, who emphasizes the pragmatic function of poetic form;¹⁴ and Webb Keane’s recent studies of the semiotic ideology of secular modernity, as revealed in the colonial encounter between Dutch Protestants and native Indonesians.¹⁵ Other influences on my approach are classical rhetoric and philosophy, and my studies of the semiotic ideologies of Hinduism and British Protestantism, in particular as these two traditions interacted in colonial India. Rather than endorsing any particular school of semiotics, I prefer an approach that draws on different schools and concepts as these prove useful. A description

of each of the different semiotic schools is omitted as unnecessary and redundant; for such a description, the interested reader may turn to several valuable works already available.¹⁶ My comments in this section do not present a comprehensive account of the different theories addressed, but are intended only to indicate some of the important differences between some well-known approaches and my own approach.

Although it may seem perverse to begin by pointing out the weaknesses of some earlier efforts toward a semiotics of religion, I believe it is necessary to clear the path before proceeding. It is always good practice to acknowledge flaws, vices, and defects so that these may be remedied effectively. Some atonement is necessary for the hubris of earlier semiotic approaches, and to respond to the not unjustified skepticism that many readers will have adopted regarding the potential of semiotics as a method.

Semiotics has promised more than it has delivered in the way of a science of culture. The truism that all culture is communicative or expressive behavior, mediated primarily though not exclusively by means of language, has been invoked in order to establish the claim of semiotics to a position of dominance among the human sciences, as a totalizing meta-discourse with universal application. Yet the more universal in pretension semiotics has become, the more detached it has become from facts on the ground. The point of much semiotic theorizing appears to be to reconfirm theoretical presuppositions, in a manner similar to medieval scholasticism, rather than to illuminate the specificities of data.¹⁷ However, any theory is only as good as the account it provides of a body of data, and must be prepared to argue its superiority against other, competing theories.

It is ironic that so many semioticians, who might be expected to have gained from their study of communication a special expertise in the practice of that art, have presented their arguments before the public in an esoteric jargon that, when it is not guilty of the sin of hermeneutic narcissism, at the very least places unnecessary barriers to the uninitiated who might otherwise benefit from the insights a semiotic approach has to offer. The use of complicated concepts and special terminology can be justified by offsetting their costs against gains in precision and comprehensiveness. In the case of many semiotic theories, however, such gains are small or not to be observed.

It may therefore come as little surprise that the discipline of semiotics, with important exceptions (some of which have been noted already), appears to be in a state of stagnation or even outright decline. One measure of this is the paucity of new, truly seminal theories that have been advanced in recent decades. Much theorizing is concerned with defending a semiotic canon, and with policing the borders of the discipline, rather than with extending the application of semiotics to novel terrain. Semiotics is a discipline that has not yet and, one fears, may never attain the promise of its youth; it is either stillborn or past its prime.

A relative measure of this decline is the condition of semiotics within religious studies. While symbolism has been a concern in the history of religions

since nineteenth-century Romanticism—and in theological traditions long before then—approaches to religion that draw on contemporary semiotic theory are a much more recent phenomenon. There was a surge of interest in semiotic methodologies within religious studies from the 1960s to the 1980s, coinciding with an efflorescence in other disciplines, particularly anthropology, where Claude Lévi-Strauss, Edmund Leach, Victor Turner, and Mary Douglas, among others, all applied structuralism to religious materials in innovative ways.¹⁸ Semiotic analysis is still being pursued in other disciplines, for example by linguistic anthropologists.¹⁹ However, following the poststructuralist critique of structuralism and a general shift of emphasis from the analysis of symbols to that of social processes, religious studies has largely moved away from explicit engagement with semiotic methodologies and questions. There are exceptions: for example, Wendy Doniger and Seth Kunin continue to use Lévi-Straussian analyses of myth,²⁰ and the emerging field of cognitive science of religion, as noted below, often addresses religious phenomena with explicitly semiotic dimensions. In addition to these applications of semiotics to the structural dimensions of religious phenomena, the past several decades have witnessed important work on the historical dimensions of the semiotics of religion, including accounts of particular semiotic traditions;²¹ of earlier projects for a perfect or universal language, which often had religious dimensions;²² of the religious aspects of the semiotic shift in early modernity and the Reformation;²³ and of the ways in which this shift informed the colonial encounter between European and non-European cultures.²⁴

Certain scholars in the cognitive science of religion have addressed issues of semiotic importance, such as ritualization—meaning the use of expressive techniques to mark the boundaries of ritual events—and modes of religious transmission.²⁵ A number of fundamental semiotic categories, including the Peircean icon and index—which, as described in Chapter Two, are based on the association of ideas through similarity and contiguity, respectively—do appear cognitive in nature, and in principle it would be a good idea to study them using the methods of cognitive science, to learn why human beings are predisposed to recognize and construct such associations. However, this needs to be done in full awareness of the embeddedness of religious praxis within emic theories or the semiotic ideologies indigenous to different cultures. The path to an accommodation between scientific and cultural approaches lies through the deeper study of anthropological and historical systems.

Despite these new developments and lingering interest in older methodologies, it nevertheless appears that semiotics has made little progress in persuading the field of religious studies as a whole of the importance of its potential contribution. This is likely for various reasons. Religious studies as a discipline was never as productive in developing new theories and applications of semiotics as were several other disciplines, including not only anthropology but also literary studies. Much of the semiotic work

done in religious studies has been derivative. Semiotics is viewed by many as an esoteric subdiscipline, now long past its prime, that has been discredited by poststructuralist and more broadly postmodern critiques.

When Alfred M. Johnson, Jr compiled *A Bibliography of Semiological and Structural Studies of Religion* in the library of the Pittsburgh Theological Seminary in 1979, his list extended to around 1,900 items, although it did not include many works in related disciplines.²⁶ There is nothing comparable to this output today. Scholars continue to produce works on the semiotic and especially the structuralist analysis of religion, some of which are of very high quality. However, the flowering of semiotic approaches to religion that occurred a few decades ago seems unlikely to return without some new impulse.

To a certain extent, this situation reflects the absorption of structuralism within religious studies.²⁷ Structuralist analyses of myth and ritual have been so widely disseminated within both anthropology and the study of religions that they are now commonplace. Such a development has been followed in turn by an equally broad dispersal and popularity of poststructuralist approaches, including Derridean deconstruction and Foucauldian discourse analysis.²⁸ It could therefore reasonably be argued from these developments that the semiotics of religion has been a success, rather than a failure.

In my view, such an argument would be mistaken. Although the lessons of structuralism and poststructuralism have indeed been learned, many of these lessons were either wrong in themselves or were misapplied, and the current state of the study of religion, no less than that of semiotics itself, reflects some of these inherent defects. Most debilitating, perhaps, has been the commonly held idea that all signs depend upon opposition or the construction of difference.²⁹ This idea has hampered investigation into the specificities of forms deployed in ritual—which often depend upon iconicity or resemblance, rather than opposition³⁰—and, at the same time, has encouraged the false view that all semiotic systems depend equally upon the same principles. The propensity to elaborate totalizing methodologies that focus on the unveiling of universal structures that are sometimes trivial or so vague as to be unfalsifiable, while also effacing cultural and historical differences, has led to certain contradictions or aporias within semiotic theory itself. If all semiotic systems are the same, then how do we account for the position of superiority of the semiotic analyst, who stands outside of, and hierarchically above, discourse?

It is now presumed, following Saussure and Lévi-Strauss, that the recognition of the arbitrariness of the sign is a scientific achievement that enabled the understanding of the ways in which human communication works around this basic condition of the lack of relation or fit between sign and referent by, primarily, imposing binary distinctions on the network of signs and, through this, on the world. The fact that many magical traditions assert the opposite of this doctrine, by maintaining a natural or divine fitness of certain signs, is on the other hand seen as a confirmation of the

difference between these naïve and more modern, scientific approaches. Yet the fact of the arbitrariness of the sign is assumed to be universal and, as such, its own historicity and genealogy rarely examined.

Lévi-Strauss's great achievement was to demonstrate that myth constitutes a specialized language in which binary structures of opposition are deployed in different registers and repeated in such a way that they convey a message that is transmitted unconsciously or subliminally. Given the ostensibly objective nature of these structures—which is what allows them, like language, to communicate across the divide separating individuals within a particular culture in the first instance—they can, in principle, also be decoded and interpreted by an analyst outside of those cultures. Lévi-Strauss's premise is that language is the model for all other semiotic systems; consequently, myth, which is already a form of language, should reflect the same techniques that language uses: the imposition of distinctions in order to produce meaning out of arbitrariness. The primary distinction is that between nature and culture, which underlies the arbitrariness of verbal and other signs as man-made products. Not only the technique but the message of myth is consistent: it articulates the irresolvable contradiction between nature and culture, which is variously policed, repressed, and acknowledged (at least implicitly) in the language of myth. The message of myth is located not in its meaning, but in its form; or rather, the distinction between form and content is obliterated from a semiotic perspective. This enabled an entirely new methodological approach to the interpretation of myth.

However, as fruitful as this approach was, it led to new problems. Not only, as has often been pointed out, is there the empirical challenge of distinguishing between structures that are truly there in the mythic narrative and structures that are merely imposed by the interpreter. The gap implied by the existence of an interpretive standpoint "outside" of myth also leads to intractable philosophical and historical difficulties. If both the technique and the message of myth are absolutely general, then how do we define the boundaries of myth to begin with, as distinguished from other modes of discourse or semiosis? If myths exemplify universal, and irresolvable, problems of the human condition, then what is the source of privilege of the scholar of myth, whose own discourse is, by implication, necessary to reconstruct the message of a myth that is not in itself sufficiently clear? If Lévi-Strauss has indeed discovered the message of myth, then is there some insufficiency in language that requires such an act of excavation, or is this defect of expressive power limited to the discourse of myth? Or do we refrain from making any such distinctions, and identify the same message in all discourses, including those of myth-maker and mythologist, the latter of which is then merely a translation into a different idiom of a message that was always already known from the beginning? Why, then, ought we bother to translate at all? Lévi-Strauss's distinction between "cold" and "hot" societies—that is, those with and without myth—simply restates

the problem of historical difference in metaphorical terms, using a binary distinction characteristic of mythic thought.³¹ If language is universal, then why isn't this true of myth, which ostensibly depends on the same procedures as language and addresses a similar problem, namely the arbitrariness of cultural institutions?

On the other hand, the dissolution of the category of myth that has been performed by a number of scholars of religion influenced by poststructuralism is equally problematic. Bruce Lincoln's masterful reappraisal of the meaning of the categories of *mythos* and *logos* in ancient Greece ends by concluding that these terms have no inherent meaning, but serve only to mark a difference between competing social groups: "myth" became a label of opprobrium for the discourse of one's opponents.³² Implicitly, Lincoln is reprising Friedrich Nietzsche's argument, in *On the Genealogy of Morals*, that such distinctions of value are both socially constructed and linguistically encoded.³³ Combining Nietzsche's earlier abolition of the distinction between "truth" and "metaphor"³⁴ with Foucault's argument for the inseparability of power and knowledge,³⁵ Lincoln offers a radical deconstruction of a genre distinction—namely, that between myth and logic—that arguably has undergirded, not only studies of myth, but Western rationalism itself.

Lincoln's impulse to criticize the patterns of discourse that sustain, by masking, such inequalities of power is laudable. Yet what can it mean to speak truth to power if there is no such thing as truth, even in a relative sense? And there had better be such a thing as truth, or what weapon do the weak have against the powerful, except dissimulation, which is precisely what Nietzsche and, now, Lincoln refuse? This discloses an inconsistency in Lincoln's position. Even in the act of abolishing the hierarchical valuation of genres, he replicates such a hierarchy, by exempting himself from the general acquiescence to rhetoric. Moreover, elsewhere in his work on religion, he has identified certain features commonly found in religious discourse as especially coercive—such as "the tyranny of taxonomies," for example³⁶—thus reintroducing the very distinction between truer and falser discourses that, in his critique of the *mythos-logos* distinction, he seeks to abolish.³⁷

A similar difficulty is found in the work of another theorist of religion, Jonathan Z. Smith, who has perhaps done more than any other scholar to call into question the validity and durability of the category of "religion" and its subcategories, which are allegedly social artifacts discursively constructed for specific purposes. When it comes to the category of magic, for example, Smith dismisses James G. Frazer's argument that this category represents a discrete genre characterized by the mistaken application of the laws of association—namely, similarity and contiguity (see Chapter Two)—and embraces Franz Steiner's demonstration that Frazer's own discourse about magic is organized according to precisely such rhetorical devices.³⁸ While this implies the falsity of Frazer's argument and, thus, the

untenability of his category of “magic,” it does not finally resolve the issue, as Smith himself continues the characterization of such rhetorical devices as fraudulent reasoning, and merely places Frazer on the side of those infected by magical thought. The implicit privilege of the scholar to remain above and beyond such rhetorical errors, while surveying the whole, is maintained; and with this, too, the apparent impossibility of avoiding such distinctions as are concretized in such categories as magic and religion.

Unacknowledged in such self-contradictory positions is our apparent inability to escape the gravity of history, in particular, our displacement from and transcendence of such genres as myth, magic, and religion. Structuralism ignores history, by rendering everything into an example of a universal pattern. Poststructuralism accomplishes the same by reducing differences to social oppositions, and with this, abolishing any meaningful sense of “before” and “after,” even when the shells of an historical narrative are provided. The structuralist privileging of the genre of myth and the poststructuralist deconstruction of the same are both neglectful of history. And even when a rigorous effort is made to deny the existence of a real distinction between religious and secular discourse, this effort is undermined by the scholar’s implicit reinscription of such a distinction, which invokes once again the specter of evolutionism and the cultural chauvinism thought to be implied therein.

Semiotic recognition

As we see from the above examples, the development of an historical view of the semiotics of religion is of vital importance for the study of religion itself, which has reached an impasse when it comes to defining both its basic categories and our mode of relation to them. Although it has often been recognized that the definition of religion and its subcategories is inextricably bound up with the history of the West, this fact has seldom been related explicitly to another fact, namely, that the same is true of the category of rhetoric. What this suggests about the possible intersection of these two categories—religion and rhetoric—has not been investigated with the degree of attention it deserves. Yet part of the promise of a semiotics of religion lies precisely on this path. As I shall argue, an emphasis on the rhetorical dimensions of religious discourse offers a partial solution to the problem of earlier semiotic theories. Certain semio-techniques or modes of rhetoric, while widely dispersed in human communication, are especially prevalent in religion and its subcategories: ritual is in many cases an extreme form of what Jakobson called the “poetic function” in which such devices as rhyme, by emphasizing the density of their own semiotic structure, promote a certain self-reflexivity or “set toward the message as such,”³⁹ a phenomenon I am calling “semiotic recognition.” This both

highlights religious discourse as an act of communication, and contributes to the transmission of its message. Religion is not *sui generis*, but inhabits a cline or continuum with other discourses, as a more densely figurative or poetic discourse. Along the same continuum, modernity has defined itself through a distancing from or transcendence of such rhetorical modes, as an “antirrhetic”⁴⁰ or polemic against myth, ritual, and the symbol. Secular modernity represents itself as an emergence from semiotic naïveté. Semiosis is therefore vital to the emergence of both of these categories—religion and modernity. Both of these categories depend on semiotic recognition, or the rise of an awareness of the processes that undergird language or communication as such.

The importance of semiotic recognition to an understanding of religion as co-emergent with the history of the West, and in particular of secular modernity, is indicated by the persistence with which the key cultural traditions that make up our genealogy have defined themselves in opposition to semiotic forms. Plato’s critique of rhetoric and myth, the ancient Israelite attack on idolatry or image-worship, and Protestant iconoclasm and anti-ritualism exemplify this process of self-definition, as do other, more recent or local complaints against the rhetoric of magical thought, the “tyranny of taxonomies,” etc. Indeed, it seems that many of our theories of the sign have developed out of this process of confronting the fact of rhetoric, specifying its principles of operation, and prescribing the bounds of their legitimate application. From this perspective, the rise of a consciousness of rhetoric appears to link several of those traditions that have been identified as “Axial,” a category that also invokes the notions of a rise of critical consciousness and the transcendence of or disembedding from a prior condition below the threshold of such awareness.⁴¹

I want to illustrate the phenomenon of semiotic recognition by revisiting the debate over rhetoric in ancient Greece, specifically the debate between Plato and Gorgias, each of whom has a claim to be one of the earliest semioticians. Gorgias of Leontini (c. 480–375 BCE) is frequently regarded as the first systematic rhetorician. He authored a well-known *Encomium of Helen* in which he defended Helen of Troy against the charge of abandoning her husband Menelaus and going to Troy with Paris. Gorgias argued that she was blameless because “by Fate’s will and gods’ wishes and Necessity’s decrees she did what she did, or by force reduced, or by words seduced, or by love induced.”⁴² The translation preserves Gorgias’s pervasive use of rhyming endings (*homoiooteleuton*). His defense proceeded by the exhaustive enumeration of alternatives: Helen was either compelled by the gods, forced by human violence (i.e. abducted and raped), persuaded by words, or seduced by the power of erotic love. Gorgias addressed each of these alternatives, and concluded in every case that Helen was blameless. There being no other alternatives, one must admit her innocence.

At a literal level, the *Helen* is a simple courtroom argument, an example of the type of forensic oratory that was central to the practice of rhetoric