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# Introduction: Mediation and immediacy, a key issue for the semiotics of religion

## 1 Semiotics of religion: A point of departure

The field of semiotics of religion is wide and varied. It is however possible to distinguish within it three different types of studies. The first two types were recognized already by Patte and Volney (1986), who distinguished between studies implicitly based on a semiotic theory and studies explicitly based on a semiotic theory. The first type is composed of studies undertaken before the birth of semiotics as a modern discipline but containing reflections on the sign as applied to religion (for instance, Sigmund Freud's theories of dream interpretation [Freud 1900]). The second type produces more specific and systematic elaborations. Studies belonging to this second type aim at interpreting the anthropology and the sociology of religion, as well as theological thought, through a semiotic theory. Some of these studies were inspired by Charles Sanders Peirce, while others were inspired by the French school, which looks back to key figures such as Ferdinand de Saussure, Algirdas Greimas, and Paul Ricoeur. Exemplars of this type of study are Louis Panier, Louis Marin, and Michel de Certeau.

The third type, which contains the major number of works, includes all the studies that analyze corpora of texts, rituals, and other signs belonging to a certain religious culture with a semiotic method. Even though it is not the intention of these studies to provide a semiotic interpretation of religion, they influence or provide an empirical ground for the elaboration of the theories of the second type. Centers developing this line of research can be found in France, in Germany, in Italy, and in the U.S.<sup>1</sup> The contributions contained in this volume can be placed mainly in this third type.

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**Note:** For formal purposes, please consider section 1 of this Introduction as authored by Massimo Leone, section 1.1 as authored by Robert Yelle, and sections 1.2 and 2 as authored by Jenny Ponzo.

<sup>1</sup> The French school, and in particular the Centre pour l'Analyse du Discours Religieux (CADIR) hosted by the Catholic University of Lyon, publishes since 1975 the journal *Sémiotique et Bible*. In Germany, there was a research group led by Erhardt Güttgemans, in Italy there is a research group in semiotics of religion at the University of Turin, including Massimo Leone, Ugo Volli, and Jenny Ponzo, while in the U.S. there is a research group led by Daniel Patte.

While an earlier phase of the discipline was focused primarily on Christian religious culture, semiotic studies of other religious traditions and of interreligious issues are increasing and gaining in importance, especially in the third category of works described above. Examples are the works of Ugo Volli (2019) and Bernard Jackson (2000) on Jewish tradition, of Fabio Rambelli (2013) and Tatsu-ma Padoan (forthcoming) on Buddhism, of Robert Yelle (2003) on Hinduism, and of Massimo Leone (2014) and Mohamed Bernoussi (2018) on Islam. The semiotic ideologies<sup>2</sup> that structure religious experiences and their interpretation in different traditions constitute one of the most promising lines of research for the semiotics of religion, which in the last twenty years has taken root as a vibrant and independent branch of the wider discipline of cultural semiotics.<sup>3</sup>

Semiotics is essentially an analytical discipline. Adopting a semiotic standpoint means to renounce direct access to immediate religious experience, and to rely exclusively on mediated accounts. Of course, it is vital for the development of the semiotics of religion to maintain an interdisciplinary dialogue and a cross-cultural reflection on the patterns and ideologies of religious communication and their historical transformations. One such opportunity for an interdisciplinary dialogue between semiotics and the historical or comparative study of religion is raised by the issue of mediation. Properly understood, semiosis is nothing other than a form of mediation; while religious praxis is largely structured precisely in terms of the dialectic between mediation and immediacy.

## 1.1 The dialectic between mediation and immediacy in religion

Religion, like any other domain of culture, is mediated through symbolic forms and communicative behaviors, which allow the coordination of group conduct in ritual and the representation of the divine or of tradition as an intersubjective reality.<sup>4</sup> While many traditions hold out the promise of immediate access to

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<sup>2</sup> On the concept of semiotic ideology see Silverstein (1979); Keane (2003); Kroskrity (2003).

<sup>3</sup> For a broader description of the field of semiotics of religion, see Leone (2013).

<sup>4</sup> The growing recognition of the importance of mediation for religious traditions is signaled by, for example, Parmentier and Leone (2014), which devotes a special issue of *Signs and Society* to the theme of “Representing Transcendence”; the Social Science Research Council (U.S.) project on “New Directions in the Study of Prayer” (2011–2015): <https://www.ssrc.org/programs/component/religion-and-the-public-sphere/new-directions-in-the-study-of-prayer/> (accessed March 31, 2020); and the rise of the subfields of material religion and the aesthetics of religion, as represented by Koch and Wilkens (2019).

the divine, or to some transcendent dimension of experience, such promises depend for their realization as well on the possibility of mediation, for example through habits of discipline that inculcate special experiences or modes of connection. Zen spontaneity requires many years of practice, after all. Traditions that imagine a separation between a transcendent dimension and an immanent one are bound to posit channels of communication and exchange between these two dimensions, as in the cases of prayer and sacrifice. An understanding of these dynamics is therefore necessary even and especially when mediation is denied by a tradition in the name of the “ineffability” of the deity or of mystical experience (see Naomi Janowitz’s chapter in this volume).

The history of religions provides evidence for Friedrich Max Müller’s argument that religion is, at heart, an attempt to solve the problem of communication with the beyond, a problem made more intractable by iconoclasm and the prohibition against idolatry:

If once the idea of the Godhead is so conceived that the divine nature is totally separated from human nature, then, unless all religion becomes extinct, nothing remains for a time but the admission of intermediate beings. [...] In all parts of the world, where living beings are separated by a river, human ingenuity will devise means of communication: and among all races of men where reason has created an impassable gulf between the Divine and the Human, faith will throw its bridges, or strive to soar across on angels’ wings.<sup>5</sup>

For Müller the Protestant, it was Christianity, with its doctrines of the Incarnation and Logos, that had posed the best solution to this problem. However, we see that all traditions have grappled with this tension in their own way. Even in the most fervently iconoclastic religion, namely that of the Hebrew Bible, God needs angels to bring messages and to do his bidding on earth, as Ugo Volli shows in his chapter in this volume. Moreover, despite the biblical prohibition against representation, especially of the divine, angels have long been a theme for artistic representation in the West and elsewhere, as Atsushi Okada shows in his chapter.

The anthropologist Melford Spiro defined religion as a form of mediation, or “an institution consisting of culturally patterned interaction with culturally postulated superhuman beings” (Spiro 1966: 96; see also Alles 2000). Such interaction often takes the form of offerings, including prayers and sacrifices, which already constitute efforts to establish a circuit of communication that operates in both directions. The traditional expectation (or hope) that prayers will be an-

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<sup>5</sup> Friedrich Max Müller, “Mantissa to Leviticus,” Bodleian Ms. Eng. 2357, pp. 130–37, quoted in Yelle 2013a: 206n209.

swered, or sacrifices rewarded, depends upon the belief in such a circuit. This is the basis of the theory of sacrifice as reciprocal, a matter of mutual giving (*do ut des*). The widespread modelling of religious behavior on ordinary modes of interpersonal exchange—not only gift-giving but also commensality and dialogical speech—shows that gods are imagined and interacted with as if they were humans, even if they also belong to a higher level of being, one that transcends ordinary categories. We bow down in prayer, as the smoke of the sacrifice rises up to meet God in heaven. While the normality of such modes of interaction structures their basic form, the special circumstances (as well as dangers) of encounter with the divine require, in turn, special procedures as well as particular places “set apart” for such purposes, this being the original meaning of “sacred.” Thus we find god(s) in the wilderness, on the mountaintop, in caves, or in buildings dedicated for this purpose.

Exchange between immanence and transcendence involves signs, which are codified into hieratic languages, sacred texts, and liturgical performances. Such codification entails a dialectical movement between the desire for immediacy and the longing for mediation; this desire is never static, but dynamic and tense, being expressed in a successive attraction to one or the other pole. On the one hand, many if not most religious cultures conceive places and moments where the barrier between immanence and transcendence is suddenly abolished, thus allowing apparently immediate and unmediated contact between them; mystical rapture is the epitome of this, as diagrammed in Volkhard Krech’s chapter in this volume. On the other hand, religious cultures tend to structure spiritual immediacy into ritualized formulas, which are not exceptional any longer to the extent that they can be shared by a community and handed down by a tradition.

The dialectic between these two tendencies is not always peaceful. On the contrary, as illustrated below, certain religious conflicts can be explained as resulting from the tension produced by this dialectic. Stanley Tambiah’s concept of “ritual involution,” meaning the loss of attachment to traditional ritual forms, described this process in terms close to the concerns of semiotics (Tambiah 1985: 153, 165–66). Tambiah focused on the contribution of the formalization of communication to ritual performance, but left the explanation of revolts against formalism as a desideratum. The dialectic between mediation and immediacy provides a useful shift of perspective on this problem, as ritual involution can in many cases be interpreted as resulting from an insistence on immediacy. Enzo Pace’s chapter in this volume illustrates this dynamic in the case of the Bodu Bala Sena, a fundamentalist Buddhist movement in contemporary Sri Lanka.

This dialectic is nothing new. Arguably, it is at least as old as the tendency toward iconoclasm in ancient Israelite religion and subsequent monotheisms. However, the latest great wave of attacks against religious mediation in European civilization was associated with the Protestant Reformation, which demoted the authority of priestly intercessors, as well as of a community of worshippers or Church, in favor of the individual believer's direct engagement with scripture, and with God. Luther's doctrines of *sola scriptura*, *sola fide*, *sola gratia* (scripture alone, faith alone, grace alone) aimed to demolish the economy of exchange that had grown with the medieval Catholic Church; indulgences as well as other rituals could not purchase salvation from God, by whose grace alone we are saved. The Puritan movement went further in this regard, ushering in the developments that Max Weber famously described as the "disenchantment of the world" (see Yelle and Trein 2020). Altars were stripped, images and stained-glass windows smashed. Theologically speaking, these had all been means of access to the deity, who now removed further into the heavens, remote and inaccessible, as either the *deus absconditus* who handed down an unfathomable predestination or the absent proprietor of the world order—the Deists' "Watchmaker God." Points of access and channels of communication between this world and the next were cut off. This was evident also with respect to those practices which had previously provided the primary means of access to the deity, namely prayer and sacrifice. The Puritan critique of "vain repetitions" in prayer denied the power of petitionary prayer to persuade God (Yelle 2013a: 103–35; Yelle 2013b: 113–36)<sup>6</sup>, while Protestants from Luther onward rejected the interpretation of the Eucharist as a sacrifice, arguing instead that this was a meal shared among the congregants (Yelle 2019). While this was still a form of communication, and communion, it was located increasingly within this world, rather than being directed toward the beyond: religion became immanent rather than transcendent.

However, this process is—as stated above—a dialectic. The pendulum swings back and forth. Dissatisfied with the austerity of Puritan traditions, more emotional, immersive, or spontaneous forms of religiosity have emerged also among Protestants, such as in Pentecostalism and other charismatic movements, where the Holy Spirit continues to descend to earth, in the here and now, as evidenced by Signs and Wonders, including speaking in tongues or glossolalia (Ponzo 2019), a form of speech that, in its immediacy and unintelligibility, resists decipherment. More recently, new electronic media have become the vehicles for

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<sup>6</sup> For a contemporary reevaluation of such "vain repetitions," see Fred Cummins's chapter in this volume.

religious communication, from online churches and prayer groups to the dissemination of the Word by iPhone app. While it remains to be seen how such technologies will impact human behavior, what is certain is that, as Müller said, “faith will throw its bridges” between the human and the divine, and build a Stairway to Heaven.

## 1.2 Semiotics and the mediated nature of religious communication

So far, we have provided examples that illustrate the perennial concern of religious traditions with mediation, communication, and representation. What can the discipline of semiotics contribute to understanding these phenomena? Semiotics is generally known as the discipline devoted to the study of signs, or more precisely, of the relationship between the objects of communication and their meaning, with particular attention to the cultural as well as cognitive mediation that takes place during the codification and decoding of signs.<sup>7</sup> Given such an object of study, semiotics has a double vocation. The first is speculative in nature, and indeed semiotics is often labeled as a branch of the philosophy of language. The second is applied: semiotic analytical methods are applied to a wide variety of corpora and objects of study, among which are religious texts and practices.

Besides exploring the relation between sign and meaning and the conceptualization of this relation across different times and cultures, semiotics also tackles the issue of mediation under several other aspects which emerged clearly since the first phases of its foundation as a modern humanistic science. For instance, Ferdinand de Saussure (1916), who is considered one of the founders of the discipline, was well aware that communication is a mode of social action, namely a form of mediation between people that is basic for the construction of groups and institutions as interpersonal formations. Communication, which happens through the use of semiotic systems (e.g. verbal language and visual language), is fundamental to the building of the cultural universe in which we live and perform as agents; it is the thread that allows the formation of social webs. Based on these general premises, the *raison d'être* of semiotics resides in an elementary consideration, also underlined by Saussure: the problem of human communication is that it is not possible to transmit meaning in an immediate way. We cannot transfer an idea, a reason, a feeling directly from our head

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<sup>7</sup> For a definition of semiotics, especially in the context of religious studies, see Yelle (2016).

to our receiver's head, namely we cannot communicate telepathically. Humans have invented ingenious solutions to this problem, substituting mental objects, such as ideas, with material objects, such as words and other kinds of signs. So, we could say that one of the concerns of semiotics is to give an account of how human beings transfer material objects in substitution of mental objects so as to be understood by their community.<sup>8</sup> On the other hand, as pointed out by Charles Sanders Peirce, semiosis—i. e. the tendency to interpret reality by recognizing signs as mediating entities which “stand to somebody for something” else, according to the famous definition by Charles Sanders Peirce (1931–1958: 2.228)—is intrinsic to human nature.

The problem of the mediating nature of signs and communication is even more complex in the case of religious communication, as Webb Keane (1997: 48) writes: “By what means can we, and in what manner ought we, talk with invisible interlocutors? How can we get them to respond? How should we talk about them? By what marks do we know that some words originate from divine sources? Are these words true, fitting, efficacious or compelling in some special way?” Indeed, in many cases religious experience challenges the traditional schemes of communication. For instance, this is the case with possession and various other phenomena (such as prophecy, certain kinds of glossolalia and shamanic experiences) in which the speaker does not play the role of the “sender” as defined in the classic scheme of communication *à la* Jakobson (1966), but rather that of the “channel”, since she or he is not a subject with an autonomous agency, but only a “medium” channeling the message of a supernatural agent.<sup>9</sup> Another atypical medium in religious experience is dreams, which are believed in many cultures to open a conduit between the human world and a supernatural dimension. A good instance of this mediating characteristic of dreams can be found in Serge Sauneron's description of the religion of ancient Egypt:

According to the Egyptian, the sleeping man accesses a universe which is different from the one he usually lives in. The night is for the Egyptians a dead time of creation, a way back to the forces of chaos: the sleeping man is therefore in contact with all the beings and all the fantastic visions that haunt the uncreated world. It is a domain where the gods, invisible in their veritable shapes during the blinding light of the Egyptian day, can appear, and where the future can be revealed. During this night of sleep, sometimes the man can become sensitive to the realities that surround him, the otherworldly realities: the Egyptian word that

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<sup>8</sup> See in this respect the schemes of the speech circuit in Saussure (1916: chapter 3).

<sup>9</sup> A similar communication scheme can be found for instance in the evangelical pericope of the man possessed by a legion of demons interacting with Jesus through his body (Luke 26:33), or in the case of the Delphic Pythia, who according to Plutarch (1878 [102 CE]: § 21) reflected the messages of the god Apollo as the moon reflects the sunbeams.

indicates the “dream” derives, paradoxically for us, from the verb meaning to “stay awake” or to “wake up.” (Sauneron 1959: 19–20; trans. Jenny Ponzio)

Dreams were also a common part of the rituals of healing associated with the ancient Greek cult of Asclepius. Supposedly, dreams can constitute a medium for the transmission of higher truths from an otherworldly realm. At the same time, the messages transmitted in dreams—like those of the Delphic oracle—are notoriously difficult to decipher, and can even be deliberately misleading. Mediation always requires interpretation. And this is true also in the case of the religious traditions addressed in this volume. This is where semiotics comes in.

## 2 The structure of the volume

This volume models and promotes an interdisciplinary dialogue and cross-cultural perspective on these issues by asking prominent semioticians, historians of religion and of art, linguists, sociologists of religion, and philosophers of law to reflect from a semiotic perspective on the topic of mediation and immediacy in religious traditions. The chapters of this book can be divided into three parts.

**Part One** examines mediation and immediacy in classical religious traditions, from ancient Hebrew and early to medieval Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism. **Naomi Janowitz** points out that there are imprecise and reductive ideas about the late antique notion of ineffability, especially concerning the impossibility of naming the deity, which is based on a presumed negative or apophatic theology. Janowitz focuses in particular on Philo of Alexandria’s thought, and shows that he did not imagine an ineffable and nameless god, but used a plurality of divine names to articulate a balance between immediacy and mediation. By clarifying Philo’s divine name strategies, Janowitz contributes to the definition of a more nuanced history of the divine name and of Negative Theology in general.

Angels are widespread figures in all the Abrahamic religions, as well as in a number of folkloric and spiritual traditions. **Ugo Volli** explores the theme of the angel specifically in the Tanakh or Hebrew Bible. Drawing on communication sciences and particularly on semiotics, Volli looks into the problematic question whether angels, as described by this culture, can be considered as “media.” He examines different passages in the Bible where the relationship between angels and God is deliberately vague: sometimes angels act as agents of God, while at other times they appear indistinguishable from the deity Himself. In this case the



tension between mediation and immediacy impinges on fundamental questions of the nature and representation of the divine.

**Atsushi Okada's** contribution takes into consideration a number of verbal and visual sources to reflect on the intercultural quality of angelology. Okada explores some early Christian documents representing Christ as an angel and considers the similarity between this “angelomorphic Christology” and Greek and Roman mythology, which abound with figures of winged messengers, guiding spirits, and tutelary deities. Angel-like figures of mediators are also present in the Islamic tradition, as well as in Buddhism. Okada argues that these angelic images can be considered as mediators not only between the sacred and the profane, or heaven and earth, but also between monotheism and polytheism, or the orthodox and the heretical.

**Costantino Marmo** studies the semiotic ideology developed in the framework of medieval Catholic theology, thus reinforcing the argument according to which theologians in the Middle Ages not only worked out specific semiotics to deal with particular problems (such as the real presence of Christ's body in the Eucharist or the identity of the three persons of the Holy Trinity), but also expressed the first attempts at a general semiotic approach to the interpretation of the Bible as well as of the world. Undoubtedly, Augustine of Hippo proposed a theory and classification of signs which played a crucial role in the whole Western culture: Marmo focuses in particular on the influence of Augustinian theory on the debates over transubstantiation. Indeed, in the 9<sup>th</sup> century, a first important debate saw the opposition between theologians negating the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist (e. g. Ratamnus of Corbie) and theologians affirming this presence (e. g. Paschasius Radbertus). Marmo argues that the basic point fueling the controversy was precisely the counterposition of two different sign theories: one was derived from the traditional Augustinian idea according to which a sign is something evoking *something else* in the interpreter's mind, while the other was a new and non-Augustinian semiotic theory which, interestingly, presented the sacrament as granting an immediate access to Christ's body and blood. The latter view, however, did not find a general consensus, and in the 12<sup>th</sup> century theologians definitively abandoned it and came back to the traditional Augustinian semiotics.

**Volkhard Krech** describes out-of-body experiences as meaningful events, produced through socio-cultural communication. The narration of such ineffable experiences is allowed by the use of metaphors, which serve a necessary cognitive function by making inaccessible mental states expressible. Krech focuses in particular on the book *Das fließende Licht der Gottheit (The Flowing Light of the Godhead)* by the 13<sup>th</sup>-century German mystic Mechthild of Magdeburg, who reported a number of mystical experiences, including out-of-body ones. Krech

uses Peirce's triadic model of the sign to diagram several passages of Mechthild's account, and illustrates with precision the convergence between religious experience and processes fundamental to semiosis.

**Mohamed Bernoussi** reflects on the elaboration of the idea of the supremacy (*al I'jaaz*) of the Qur'anic sign and its impact on Arab culture. Bernoussi focuses on the thought of Abdelkebir Khatibi (1938–2009), a Moroccan literary critic, novelist and playwright who related the superiority of the Arabic Muslim culture to the original supremacy of the text of the Qur'an over all other texts. Bernoussi shows how this notion of *I'jaaz* has been institutionalized through the centuries in order to reinforce an absolute conception of textuality and knowledge, which has ironically eradicated the textuality and the materiality of the Qur'anic sign and hindered its intertextual development, with enormous consequences for Arabic Muslim culture. What emerges from Bernoussi's argumentation is that the semiotic ideology of *I'jaaz*, which tries to make the Qur'an an "immediate," universal, and absolute text, does not succeed in annihilating the capacity of the sacred text to "mediate" ever-new meanings and interpretations.

**Annette Wilke** observes that the Advaita Vedānta tradition in Hinduism, which claims the non-dual oneness of self, world, and godhead, was a prime model of Eastern wisdom and of peak experiences that fueled modern debates about mysticism. Wilke explores the discourses within the tradition that argue for a more complex dynamics of immediacy and mediation. Indeed, the claim of immediacy is found in the original sources (the Upaniṣads, Śaṅkara's commentaries, and Advaita Vedānta treatises), which claim to reveal directly a knowledge that cannot be reached by words and thoughts, and that is ineffable. At the same time, however, this immediacy is grounded in mediations, i.e. features and processes of semiosis, reckoned to be absolutely necessary: the Vedic and Upaniṣadic revelation of non-duality, i.e. the "word" as a unique means of knowledge, and a qualified teacher (*guru*, *ācārya*) who is both a well-versed scholar and himself deeply rooted in experiential non-dual knowledge (*brahma-niṣṭa*), and finally a specific mental disposition. In keeping with the sacred texts, the teacher must know how to communicate the non-communicable and how to use language in order to go beyond language, while the recipient must purify the mind to become a clear mirror able to reflect the "self-luminous" pure, unlimited consciousness, which is, according to the Advaita Vedānta, not only one's own true self, but also the self of all beings. This reflection happens in an "unbroken, limitless thought form" which mediates the immediacy of limitless consciousness, the true self or subject that can never be objectified.

**Part Two** considers the transformations in the dialectic of mediation and immediacy in certain contemporary traditions, including fictional literature and Buddhist fundamentalism.

**Jenny Ponzo** focuses on the idea of epiphany and shows how art, and more specifically literature, plays a mediating role in 20<sup>th</sup>-century accounts of conversion to Christianity. Drawing on works by Paul Claudel, Simone Weil, C.S. Lewis, Giovanni Papini, and Clemente Rebora, Ponzo identifies a sort of hermeneutical circle between artistic expression and religion: a number of writers describe both paths from poetry or aesthetic experience to religious epiphany, and conversely, paths from religious epiphany to literature. By exploring the relationship between aesthetic-artistic experience and religious conversion, as well as writers' theorizations of a direct relationship between the poetic faculty and divine inspiration and grace, Ponzo argues that a deep connection exists between "secularized" and "religious" epiphanies, and that the border between the two is actually a fine line.

**Fred Cummins** focuses on the phenomenon of repetition in prayer and ritual, a phenomenon associated especially with joint speech or simultaneous collective utterance. Such forms of mediation challenge standard models of communication that regard speech as the transmission of a discrete message from a single sender to one or more passive receivers. Cummins observes that many of the formal characteristics of ritualized speech (repetition, rhythm, the beginnings of melody, synchronized gestures) are found in other situations—such as civic protests and football cheers—in which collective identities are manifested, and collective sentiments are expressed. While many contemporary psychological approaches model the mind as disembodied, unobservable and solipsistic, more recent embodied and interactive approaches provide a framework within which we can return to the voice and its role in the enactment of collective subjectivity. To understand what it is to speak, Cummins claims, we need to reconsider the role of the voice as it has functioned over millennia, long before widespread literacy allowed texts to float freely, without necessarily being vouched for by speakers. In oracles, in demonic possessions, and in the antics of ventriloquists, wherever voices emanate, we perceive subjects who are brought into being and sustained through the act of utterance. The same is true for the collective subjectivity that emerges through the performance of joint or unison speech.

**Enzo Pace** describes a new Sinhala Buddhist movement called the Bodu Bala Sena (Buddhist Power Force) founded in 2012 by two monks in Sri Lanka. This case study is representative of the emergence in contemporary Buddhism of several movements displaying fundamentalist features. The common thread in these movements is the social construction of the image of the other (in this case Islam, in other cases Christian denominations) as the enemy. This

construction works according to three principles: first, the identification of one text within the large corpus of the school of Theravada Buddhism—namely the Mahavamsa—as sacred, an indubitable and inerrant narrative about the history of Sinhala Buddhism and even of a whole people. Secondly, the conversion of symbols, signs, and rituals that pertain to the monastic tradition as symbolic resources for collective action in the political and social realm. Thirdly, the definition of the other (Muslim or Christian) as a potential corruption of the moral virtues of Buddhism, considered as the basis of the social bond and the foundation of the legitimacy of political power. Analyzing the Buddhist leaders’ communication styles (including the use of new media), Pace shows the importance of the process of relocating religious rituals from closed monasteries (*sangha*) to the public square as a revolutionary act. In this communication system, the traditional role of the Buddhist monks is subverted, in that they play an unprecedented role as “mediators” of an ideology with contingent political and social goals.

**Part Three** focuses on the interplay between mediation and immediacy in traditions of religious law, including the Hebrew Bible, New Testament, and later Christian and even post-secular traditions, where the secret desire remains direct access to the source of law’s sacred authority. Whether this dialectic is expressed as divine vs. immanent justice, sovereign charisma vs. static tradition, or rule vs. interpretation, it structures the life of the law in a manner that connects this with religion.

**Bernard Jackson** adopts the perspective of Greimasian semiotics to explore the notions of divine law and justice in Jewish tradition. Jackson distinguishes between two extremes: an immediate, divine justice that is authored and executed by God without any human involvement; and a mediated justice, which adjudicates by means of the human interpretation of divinely revealed texts. Between these two extremes, Jackson also identifies a “charismatic” human justice and an institutionalized divine justice. He focuses on three episodes in Jewish tradition that have been particularly significant for the elaboration of justice: Abraham’s intervention in the divine judgment against Sodom, the judgment of Solomon, and the rabbinic story of the “oven of Akhnai,” where human decision-making finally triumphs over divine intervention. Jackson recognizes trust rather than truth as the basis for the functioning of both religious and secular legal systems, and draws a general distinction between decision-making and justification.

**Massimo Leone** focuses on the pericope of the adulteress (John 8:6–8), one of the most famous passages in the Gospels. A number of interpretations have been offered through the centuries about why, how, and what Jesus writes on the ground on that occasion. Offering an alternative account, Leone first draws a parallel to different cultures, including Greek and Arab, where writing

on the ground expresses a detachment from, and even an attitude of superiority toward, the received Law. Secondly, Leone surveys and comments on the rich iconography of the pericope and identifies three types of visual representations elaborated in different historical and cultural contexts, which present different interpretations of Jesus's action and of the signs he produces. Finally, Leone proposes a general interpretative key of the evangelical episode: in many exegetical and iconographic texts, what Jesus does is not writing but *un-writing* or erasing the fundamentalist Law, through the exemplary symbolical act of doodling on the ground. Leone points out that doodling brings about a semi-symbolic system in which the mediation of the written religious Law is deconstructed as hypocritical and is replaced by a more immediate moral judgment that stems from direct, non-verbal contact with a dimension that is construed as hierarchically superior to that of the verbal code of the Law. Such immediate contact with transcendence, as opposed to the mediated contact offered by hypocritical immanence, is figuratively rendered through the opposition between the written book and doodling on the ground.

**Paolo Heritier** focuses on the issue of Christological mediation between the two historical moments of the resurrection and the Parousia, and shows how this raises a radical anthropological question regarding the basis of social life. By discussing the relationship between Jacob Taubes and Carl Schmitt, as well as Taubes's criticism of the eschatological thought of Karl Marx and Søren Kierkegaard, Heritier observes that, historically, the temporal enunciations of the link between individual resurrection and the Last Judgment at the end of time have been placed as the foundation of philosophical, legal, and social constructions. Drawing especially on the eschatology of the theologian Carlo Isoardi, Heritier proposes a reasoning that moves from theology—namely, from a theory of the immediacy of the divine and more specifically from a renewed perspective on the idea of Christological mediation—to anthropology and legal theory.

**Richard Sherwin** claims that, in the history of culture, there are artworks that strike our senses with unusual forcefulness because of their anti-structural content. These artworks are of the utmost importance in that they offer us a sudden and clear consciousness of an uncanny substratum, the appearance of which obliterates conventional aesthetic codes. A similar and parallel phenomenon can be observed in the history of law. Here, too, anti-structural forces are at work. They may be found in historic representations of law's sovereignty—the source of law's ultimate authority. These sovereign images attest to an underlying economy of excess in which ineffable and unmeasurable forces vie for dominance. Sherwin connects these exceptional and anti-structural features with the idea of the sacred, which subverts both aesthetic and ethical codes in the name of a different and deeper source of authority. Starting from this premise, Sherwin

analyzes illustrative sovereign imaginaries from early to late modernity. Through a critical assessment of significant artworks, he sheds new light on the way in which post-secular culture simultaneously visualises sovereignty and the sacred as entangled sources of law's legitimacy.

Collectively, these chapters exemplify the range of intersections that connect mediation with immediacy, human with divine—and semiotics with religion. The productivity of this nexus is such that we cannot hope to exhaust it, but only to illustrate its potential. The impulse to communicate with the gods is as old as recorded history, and possibly even older. In Acts 17:23, Paul, preaching in Athens, finds an altar dedicated “to an unknown god,” and promises to reveal the identity and name of this god, which he of course says is Jesus. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, Friedrich Max Müller used the same phrase (“to an unknown god”) as the title for his translation of Rig Veda 10.121, a hymn to the god “Ka” (literally, “Who?”), which asks repeatedly, “Who is the god to whom we shall offer sacrifice?” (Müller 1891; see Yelle 2013a: 66). Although Müller tried to appropriate the Hindu hymn for Christian apologetic purposes, it is possible to read this refrain in a different way, namely as evidence that efforts at mediating with the divine—through prayer and sacrifice—are part of human nature, which will call out to gods even when it doesn't yet know what to name them.

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