

Introduction: Religion in the semiosphere

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As the “symbolic species” humans are creatures of *logos* – a Greek notion carrying deep meaning, and most often translated as ‘The Word’. ‘Logos’ itself serves as the etymological root of ‘logic’ that is meant to be at the foundation of all that physically exists. Behind this word lies the central notion that at the core of the universe there is ultimately a rational and ordered affair that the mind is capable of perceiving, albeit in a limited fashion. Chaos then is secondary to the more fundamental ground of reality. In addition to this claim, and in particular to humanity itself – as a subset of the whole – it could certainly be argued that a clear distinction between humanity and all other species is its symbiotic relationship with the written word. A relationship that forms the basis of a *Homo Textus*. The etymological root of the word ‘text’ itself has stemmed from the mind of the 1st-century educator Quintilian. He utilized the Latin word signifying fabric to discuss the interweaving of symbolic words to compose one aesthetic whole.

The genius of the work of Juri Lotman was bringing life back to the text. This was by bringing the connected web of static symbols back into the realm of space and time, ‘The Word’ made flesh. This gave the web of symbols composing the text – and the semiosphere as the text-of-texts – geographic boundaries, as well as temporal points of death and resurrection. In Lotmanian terms: geographic boundaries define the distinction between the *centre and periphery* of cultural meaning; and time is marked by *cultural explosions*. The text – and the culture it composes – then is not a static object that is limited to the scientific vision of linguist Ferdinand de Saussure who sought the ‘universal langue’ behind the ‘contextual parole’, and the synchronic static word without the diachronic dynamic word. Instead, Lotman’s vision of the text was one of a living, dynamic, organic whole that is continually evolving.

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While Lotman grasped culture at this fundamental level, he did not focus much of his own academic attention on arguably the central corpus of texts of culture historically: the religious text. It was with this space in mind that three panels on religion and semiotics were composed at the Congress on Juri Lotman's Semiosphere held between the 25th and 28th of February 2022 at the Universities of Tallinn and Tartu to celebrate his centenary. The present special issue of *Sign Systems Studies* is an extension of the work that began in those discussions.

The multipart panels were intended to be a platform for presenting and discussing papers related explicitly to the topic of religion with reference to the legacy of Juri Lotman. This is because Lotman's works belong among the classics of 20th-century semiotics. His published materials arguably represent a unified and distinct paradigm or approach to semiotics in the theoretical space where currently the most influential trajectories are inspired by the legacies of Charles Sanders Peirce and Ferdinand de Saussure. The context of studying and reflecting on religions – where an engagement with Lotman's work has taken place less than evoking Peirce and Saussure – mirrors this state of affairs. In particular, Lotman's later oeuvre has received little attention in the fields of the scientific, theological and philosophical study of religion. This is at least partly due to the fact that Lotman's work has had delayed availability in English.

Monographs such as *Universe of the Mind: A Semiotic Theory of Culture* (2000[1990]), *The Unpredictable Workings of Culture* (Lotman 2013[1990–1992]), *Culture and Explosion* (Lotman 2009[1992]) and numerous articles published in *Culture, Memory and History: Essays in Cultural Semiotics* (Lotman 2019) as well as *Culture and Communication: Signs in Flux. An Anthology of Major and Lesser-Known Works* (Lotman 2020) are still waiting to be discovered and evaluated for their possible significance to the research and thinking related with the field of religions. Remo Gramigna has compiled an accessible bibliography of Juri Lotman's works in English in *The Companion to Juri Lotman: A Semiotic Theory of Culture* (Gramigna 2022) for those who would like to explore further. Arguably, Lotman's semiotics of culture opens up a view on religion that underscores the value and relevance of different disciplinary approaches to religion and highlights their dialogue as a never-ending task.

Papers were welcomed from scholars in the fields of semiotics, religious studies, theology, philosophy, and cultural studies on topics related to religion. The papers were expected to involve an explicit reference to the intellectual legacy of Juri Lotman in the sense of exploring, demonstrating or questioning its significance for the research on and thinking about religion in the 21st century. From this collection of scholars who presented on these panels the present work was drawn.

Within this issue religious texts in the Lotmanian sense – and their religious and cultural signs – find themselves once again at centre stage through the lens of the “universe of Juri Lotman’s mind”. The primary focus is therefore on the dynamic nature of these texts: in their semiotic spatiality; in their physical re-enactments through rituals and modes of being; and in the meaning generation that occurs by translation of chaos into order at the periphery of their respective semiospheres. Several papers in this work capture this dynamicity in the figure of Mary – the mother of Christ – who is argued to be the figure that helps translate a chaotic world into the world of logos moving new knowledge from the periphery towards the centre. Mary, as a symbol of faith in the Catholic tradition, has often served as a lightning rod in finding distinctions between Catholicism and Protestantism. However, the work of psychoanalyst Carl Jung – who was himself the son of a Protestant pastor – saw the figure of Mary as a correction of the static model of the Trinity into the dynamic and living model of the Quaternity that undergirds a dynamic wholeness. This is of course only one possible interpretation.

This volume will be bookended by the works of the co-editors of this volume: Thomas-Andreas Pöder and Matthew Kalkman. These two articles seek to capture the broader conceptual lens of *Religion in the Semiosphere*, around which the remainder of the volume will focus on illuminating relevant particular phenomena and specific case studies. Detailed introductions to each of the articles can be found in the abstracts that commence each work. The work of the volume itself will be structured around the three key aforementioned areas of dynamicity: semiotic spatiality; multimodal theories of semiotic embodiment and communication; and meaning generation through a Lotmanian frame. A concluding look will suggest one possible frame for seeing how semiosis can play a connecting role through these various themes.

The section of this work devoted to issues relating to semiotic space looks both horizontally and vertically, both towards the borders, horizons and peripheries as well as to the heavens. This spatiality is grasped by looking at the ‘outside’, the role of Mary, and decoloniality, highlighting the role of the border in both its key aspects: how the periphery serves both as the point where binary oppositions break down, as well as a region where order – in the examples involving Mary – starts the process of being re-established. The section devoted to embodiment delves into the multimodal aspect of semiotics that go beyond words alone, as well as the imaginative embodiment of others through the merging of identity in absorbing the perspective of those captured in the “biography”. Ultimately, the section of this work devoted to reinterpretation and meaning generation highlights those mechanisms of the semiosphere that enable novel knowledge

generation through the production of new texts – drawn from examples of the apocrypha, Bulgarian literature and culture, as well as through the role of Mary as a semantic operator. A concluding look will suggest one possible viewpoint of connecting these themes through the process of semiosis itself.

Last but not least, we would like to extend our gratitude to the participants of the three panels, and to those who are authors of the present articles – as well as to the peer reviewers of these works. We would like to thank Kalevi Kull, the previous editor-in-chief of *Sign Systems Studies* who welcomed the idea of a special issue on Religion in the Semiosphere. We would like to express gratitude to the entire editorial team of SSS, with a special mention of Ene-Reet Soovik and Ott Puumeister, and to the University of Tartu Press.

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