

INTRODUCTION

MAPPING RELIGIOUS AND ETHICAL FAULTLINES: SEMIOTICS, AWE, ALTITUDE, AND ALGORITHM

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The Center for Religious Studies at the Bruno Kessler Foundation, by virtue of its institutional vocation and intellectual history, occupies a unique position at the epistemic thresholds of contemporary religious and ethical inquiry. Situated at the interstices of confessional, secular, and post-secular worldviews, its scholarly mission has long privileged those zones where paradigms falter, where the fabric of doctrinal coherence thins, and where new configurations of sense — ritual, metaphysical, aesthetic — emerge under the pressure of cultural and technological reconfiguration. This volume of the “Annals of Religious Studies” continues in that tradition by gathering four thematic constellations — semiotics of religion, awe, mountains, and AI ethics — each of which interrogates shifting paradigmatic terrains through the lens of their respective semiotic, affective, symbolic, and normative faultlines. Across these inquiries, semiotics is not merely a method but a conceptual wedge, a theoretical lockpick capable of prying open the hinges of disciplinary certainty and illuminating those zones where signification slips and novelty enters.

The opening section, edited by Jenny Ponzo and Massimo Leone, is devoted to the semiotics of religion itself, now an autonomous and self-reflective domain of inquiry. The essays collectively map how religious meaning emerges, circulates, and mutates across diverse cultural, historical, and media ecosystems. Articles by Andreichuk, Baron, Bernoussi, Brunet, Di Cosmo, Finol, Galofaro, and Jardim not only offer close readings of objects as diverse as Ukrainian carols, embalmed

bodies, psychedelic rites, angelic eschatologies, Marian iconographies, and Trinitarian corporealities, but also engage with meta-theoretical questions about visibility, performativity, and the scope of ethnosemiotic methodology. The section exemplifies how semiotics, in its religious inflection, functions as a diagnostic apparatus for tracking the unstable borders between matter and spirit, ritual and abstraction, visibility and sacralization. The field's vitality is thus measured not by closure but by its openness to entangled phenomena and its capacity to host transdisciplinary crossings that challenge disciplinary orthodoxies.

The second section explores awe as a liminal, affective infrastructure at the core of both paradigmatic crisis and transformation. Based on the 2024 EUARE panel "On Awe," the contributions interrogate awe not as a discrete emotion but as a culturally encoded mode of experiencing semantic undifferentiation. As argued in the section's framing text, awe functions as a psychic and cultural hinge — where perception suspends habitual frames, and affective excess renders visible the very mechanics of symbolic reconfiguration. The essays analyze phenomena ranging from quantum participatory cosmologies to digitally mediated rituals, AI-based eschatologies, and scriptural poetics of wonder. Each study shows how awe, as both semiotic and ontological disturbance, constitutes the atmospheric condition for paradigmatic slippage — what Kuhn would call rupture, and Agamben would theorize as the zone of the whatever-being. Through such slippages, awe becomes a vector of affective creativity, crucial to religious, philosophical, and cultural metamorphosis.

The third section focuses on the mountain as a symbolic and epistemic formation — no longer merely background to theological or anthropological inquiry, but a foregrounded site of cultural contestation and sacred inversion. Built around Paolo Costa's pivotal essay on "oblique sacrality," this section reconceptualizes high-altitude landscapes not only as physical thresholds but as heterotopic terrains where modern scissions — mind and nature, immanence and transcendence, figure and ground — undergo symbolic reconnection. In this perspective, the mountain functions as a sacred operator: an experiential and cognitive medium through which epiphanic rupture occurs and existential reconfiguration becomes possible. Whether approached through ecological theology,

alpine spiritualities, or post-secular phenomenologies of landscape, the mountain reveals itself as both shrine and battleground, ritual medium and critical topos. It is here that the desire for a renewed ontological consonance — between the human and the more-than-human — becomes thinkable in an age of climatic precarity.

Finally, the volume closes with a section on artificial intelligence (AI) and ethical imagination, which turns from natural elevation to algorithmic opacity. Here, AI is not simply a technological phenomenon but a semiotic and ethical horizon in which new forms of normativity, injustice, and epistemic authority are being engineered. Drawing on cutting-edge scholarship in psychiatry, medical ethics, and digital philosophy, the section addresses issues such as epistemic injustice in mental health care, the automation of moral judgment, and the colonization of affect and intimacy by predictive analytics. Through contributions that critically engage the dangers of algorithmic normativity and the need for global ethical frameworks, this section asserts that AI must not merely be a tool but a subject of spiritual and ethical scrutiny. The questions raised — about personhood, autonomy, agency, and care — demand not only applied answers but a rethinking of the semiotic grounds of moral discourse itself.

Across its four thematic axes, with the addition of a miscellaneous tryptic woven by the voices of Costa, Romano, and Taylor, this volume reaffirms the vocation of the Center for Religious Studies at FBK to operate within the *interstices* — not only conceptually, but institutionally and affectively. Whether tracking the seismic shifts in religious semiosis, exploring awe as a sensorium of ontological rupture, contemplating the mountain as hierophanic fissure, or exposing the latent ideologies of AI systems, the essays collected here show how religious and ethical reflection must increasingly inhabit faultlines. These are not zones of indecision but of creative indeterminacy, where paradigms — ethical, symbolic, technological — shudder and shift. In mapping them, the “Annals of Religious Studies” continues its commitment to fostering interdisciplinary cartographies of the sacred and the future it strains to articulate.