

INTRODUCTION: NEW INSIGHTS INTO THE SEMIOTICS OF RELIGION

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This issue of “*Annali di Studi Religiosi*” is dedicated to the semiotics of religion. This field of study has conquered its own place in the varied landscape of semiotics and has attained an advanced level of development, evidenced by the fact that it has reached what Lotman (2000) would call the level of self-description. Indeed, in the 2010s and 2020s several works have provided definitions, overviews and critical reflections on the “semiotics of religion”⁽¹⁾. At the same time, the development of this subject area is also due to a constant dialogue with other disciplines, in particular with linguistics, ethnography and anthropology, as well as with religious studies⁽²⁾.

In this spirit, this issue brings together articles by international scholars who make a valuable contribution to this field of knowledge. They examine religious questions from different traditions, perspectives and methods and thus bear witness to the diversity, richness and vitality of the semiotics of religion.

Nadiia Andreichuk questions the classical pragmatist approach of Peirce and Morris and the concept of semiosis through a particular case study provided by traditional Ukrainian Christmas carols. Starting from an etymological interpretation of the word “carol”, the analysis provides a reflection on this genre of ritual discourse. The result is a refined taxonomy in which the levels and dimensions of the semiosis of

(1) See in particular Leone (2022 and 2025); Ponzo (2022); Ponzo, Yelle and Leone (2021), Yelle (2013).

(2) A key contribution in this sense comes from the so-called Chicago School, see in particular the works by Michael Silverstein, Webb Keane, and Robert Yelle.

Ukrainian Christmas carols are considered at the perceptual level (code dimension), the referential level (information dimension) and the evaluative level (cultural dimension).

Giustina Baron examines the dynamics of visibility in connection with the embalming of Lenin's body. The leader's corpse was the subject of an experimental preservation process that kept the body in an extraordinarily similar and flexible state by replacing organic matter with artificial matter. The nature of this process was known only to the political elite, who built an aura of sacrality around the corpse and used Lenin's legacy to maintain and extend their sovereignty. Both the corpse and the *figure* of Lenin thus undergo a similar transformation, which involves their sacralization on the one hand, but also their alteration and replacement on the other, ultimately becoming a functional figurativization of the Leninist party itself.

Mohamed Bernoussi, who has made important contributions to the semiotic study of Muslim culture⁽³⁾, presents here an analysis of two fascinating figures of this culture, namely Nakir and Munkar, two angels who are believed to accompany every faithful at the moment of their death, one collecting the good deeds committed during lifetime and the other the bad ones, thus judging whether the person is destined for paradise or hell. The author proposes a historical reconstruction of the discourse on these figures in the sacred texts and then considers their role in the broader framework of Muslim eschatology, showing how the judgement of these angels has elements of unpredictability, since it can be disturbed by the intervention of evil, embodied by the cursed angel Ibliss, and is above all subordinate to the Deity, whose will is mysterious and omnipotent.

Luca Brunet deals with the different practices and interpretations related to hallucinogenic substances, from the traditional Mesoamerican cultures to the contemporary Western context. The comparison between these different cultures and the related encyclopedias leads the author to emphasize the continuing link between the sacredness and transcendence associated with religious experience and the idea of therapy and healing. If such a link was evident in traditional cultures, Brunet hypothesizes that it is also crucial today within the processes of re-enchantment.

(3) Just to mention some recent examples, see Bernoussi (2025 and 2023).

Antonio Pio Di Cosmo presents a study of the face of the Black Madonnas enquiring the complex semiotic tensions in which their iconography is placed over time. In particular, a tension arises between the biological or physical aspect — which entails the representation of the Madonna according to a certain physiognomy or certain “phenotypes”, as the author suggests — and the spiritual aspect — namely the fact that this human figure also represents sacredness and transcendence. According to Di Cosmo, semiotics, especially in conjunction with neuroscience and art history, offers a particularly fruitful approach to this topic.

José Enrique Finol is best known in semiotics for his theories on the relationship between body and meaning, in particular for the concept of the “corposphere” (Finol 2017). The latter also found its first application in the field of the semiotics in a reflection on the Trinity (Finol and Leone 2021). In this article, the concept of corposphere is further explored in relation to a case study on the corpse of Pope Formosus. The analysis problematizes the relationship between the concepts of body and corpse and the conditions that determine their segnic or anti-segmic character. Various sources are used for this purpose: on the one hand, those relating to the process of which the papal corpse was the subject, and on the other, an artistic source (a painting).

Francesco Galofaro relates the semiotic study of religious phenomena with the specific methodology of ethnosemiotics, which combines semiotics and ethnography. Drawing on his many years of experience in this field, Galofaro addresses a crucial methodological problem that he has recently researched (Galofaro 2024), namely the question of the observable, and considers it from the particular perspective of the semiotics of religion. He proposes a reflection on the difficulty of reconciling the complexity of reality and the limits of the point of view adopted by the observer, focusing on the case study of the observation of the Orthodox liturgy of Vespers.

Marilia Jardim proposes a kind of metatheoretical reflection by examining the deep cosmological presuppositions underlying two of the best-known concepts of semiotic theory and methodology, namely Greimas’s semiotic square and Lotman’s semiosphere. Jardim explores the mathematical, geometrical and esoteric relationships between the square and the circle, the planar and the spherical, claiming that these

dimensions are closely connected and interdependent. These considerations lead the author to the conclusion that religious studies can make a contribution to semiotics, not only in relation to specific subjects of study, but also as a critical stance that provides useful insights for (re) considering semiotic theories and methods.

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