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## What is a Semiotic Theory of Religion?

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Human beings constitute themselves and their relations to the world and to each other through multiple systems of signification. One species of systems of signification is that which scholars and practitioners have come to call "religion." What Roland Barthes has said about "the world" in general applies all the more specifically to religion: "the world is written through and through; signs, endlessly deferring their foundations, transforming their signifieds into new signifiers, infinitely citing one another, nowhere come to a halt" (Barthes 1977, 167-68). The never halting procession of signifieds and signifiers is the substance, the specific mode of being, of "religion." Religion is, in "essence," semiotic—the term essence is put in quotes because of the relational character of signs, a characteristic which defies the singularity of traditional notions of essence.

The twentieth century saw the development of a science of signs known as semiotics. Saussure defined semiotics (or semiology) as "a science that studies the life of signs within society" (Saussure 1959, 16). The term comes from the Greek, *semeion*, or "sign." In contrast to linguistics, which studies only language and speech, the broader question semiotics ("the science of the signifier;" Barthes 1977, 167) tries to answer is: "how does humanity give meaning to things which are not sounds?" (Barthes 1988, 179). What semiotics analyzes is not simply the meaning of a symbol, nor the act of communication for which a sign or symbol is used, but the total process of signification. Speaking about the way in which even material, utilitarian objects signify, Barthes makes this point clear:

I am giving a very strong sense to the word *signify*; we must not confuse *signify* with *communicate*: to signify means that the objects carry not only information, in which case they would communicate, but also constitute structured systems of signs, i.e., essentially systems of differences, of oppositions and of contrasts. (Barthes 1988, 180)

The relationship between an individual sign and the system to which it belongs is the key premise of semiotics and is that which differentiates it from hermeneutics or traditional exegesis. Everything can signify, but signification of any and all kinds presupposes some conventionalized "system" of meaning: "Semiotics is thus based on the assumption that insofar as human actions or productions convey meaning, insofar as they function as signs, there must be an underlying system of conventions and distinctions which makes this meaning possible" (Culler 1986, 106).

A semiotic theory of religion asks rather different questions than do traditional explanatory theories of religion. Most explanatory theories seek to explain the existence of religion: what causes humans, socially, psychologically, cognitively, to create religious ideas? Given that every instance of signification presupposes a system which makes it possible, semiotics

"de-originates" the existence of the sign, deferring it endlessly back onto the pre-existence of previous signs. So, a semiotician asks questions such as: what is the nature of this systematic, conventionalized, pre-existent material? What are its internal relations? How does it retain some sense of continuous identity through time and geographic dispersion, and yet undergo constant change? What occasions specific instances of its evocation, its application, its transformation? What are the most constant features or patterns of this activity? What are its most constant net effects?

### Religion as Structure

Using semiotic theory, the answers I propose to these questions draw upon the work of Saussure, Nietzsche, Barthes, Foucault, and Bakhtin. First, the nature of the pre-existent material, its "substance," if you will, is that of an ensemble of signifiers, i.e., religion is, *in esse*, semiotic. Second, the internal relations of this ensemble of signifiers are best understood by the structuralist concepts of *langue et parole*, language as a system and language as an act of articulation, or, again, as the relation between a paradigmatic axis (or axis of selection) and a syntagmatic axis (or axis of combination). For those unfamiliar with these terms and their theoretical import, I highly recommend either Hawkes (1977, 19-22) or Chandler (2002, 12-14). Third, the continuous identity of a religion, as well as its on-going permutations, are products of acts of interpretation, understood as the bundling and rebundling of sign-groupings. Jonathan Z. Smith has captured all three elements in his description of "sacred persistence" (to be explicated below), as a product of the relationship between a canon and a hermeneute. The "believer" as hermeneute, stands to the structured ensemble of signifiers, or canon, as a reader to a text. The "canon" itself is both product of interpretation and definer of the parameters of interpretation. Subsequent interpretations either are conservative, i.e., stay within the bounds of the received tradition, or innovative, i.e., claim to find "the real" meaning in the canon, a meaning which departs from the received interpretations. Fourth, what occasions instances of religious signification is best understood by Bakhtin's notion of the "addressivity" of all signification,<sup>1</sup> of all discourse, of all speech. Bakhtin has shown that the production of specific instances of *parole* is not sufficiently theorized by understanding it as mere choice made by a generic speaker out of a neutral plenum of lexical possibilities. It must, rather, be traced to specific scenes of the provocation of signification, of speech, of discourse. The perennial feature of the sign, which alone can explain all the instances of its iteration, then, is the "speech of the other," understood in a broad, semiotic sense. Whether hidden or manifest, whether loved or hated, whether conscious or unconscious, all religious discourse is so striated, so saturated by and with the

