

ELEMENTS OF A SEMIOTIC THEORY OF RELIGION

TIM MURPHY

This work is a synopsis of an argument for a semiotic approach to theorizing religion. The central argument combines Jonathan Z. Smith's notion of "sacred persistence" as the dynamic relationship between a canon and a hermeneute with the work of Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Mikhail Bakhtin. The argument is that religion is a process of on-going semiotic construction and displacement wherein heremeneutes select paradigmatic elements to form syntagmatic combinations. One of the aspects of this process of selection and combination is what Bakhtin refers to as "the speech of the other". Often, though not always, this element of religious semiotica takes the form of an agon, or contest. This work draws upon Foucault and Nietzsche to supplement Smith's and Bakhtin's notion of the production of religious speech/interpretations by further theorizing the concept of the agon. It is argued that this approach is an advance upon both essentialist phenomenological approaches and inductive, explanatory approaches. Religion, it is claimed, is best understood on the model of language, and by means of analogous approaches used in the study of language and language behaviors.

Introduction

Throughout its history, the study of religion has invested the notion of origins and stories of origins, primordial or historical, religious or scholarly, factual or legendary, phylogenetic or ontogenetic, with tremendous revelatory power (see Eliade 1959, 1969; Masuzawa 1993). Scholars of religion have sought and sought again for some fundamental explanation of the totality of a phenomenon, its meaning, its *raison d'être*, or its place within a system of purposes or functions, in the stories religions tell of its coming-to-be or in the scholar's analysis of its coming-to-be.

Under the force of intellectual and theoretical shifts,¹ a semiotic

¹ The choices of theoretical constructs here represent an attempt to avoid the pitfalls of several typical approaches to the theorization of religion. The first pitfall I have tried to avoid is that of mentalism. Such terms as "mind", i.e., as in "the Buddhist mind", or "worldview", or "belief system", "structures of consciousness",

theory of religion, the preamble only of which I propose to develop in this article, does not seek the origins of a phenomenon, religious or otherwise, but rather traces out the scenes of its transformations. In all the stories of origin, particularly ontogenetic stories, theorists have ignored a basic fact: the presence of a reality anterior to the individu-

“religious consciousness”, etc., have proven to be too vague to be theoretically useful. Furthermore, as religious systems pre-exist individual minds, or even collective generations, it is not possible to explain the former on the basis of the latter. Rejection of this kind of mentalism has had a startling (for some) entailment. It has meant that individual acts and states of consciousness and experience are neither the starting point nor end point for a theory of religion. Consciousness, in fact, is neither a relevant theoretical construct nor an object of analysis. “What consciousness does on its own is of no consequence”, said the young Marx. There are two reasons for this. First, as noted above, consciousness is neither cause nor interesting effect of what religion is or does. The issue is signification, not the awareness of signification; the issue is the rules which govern meaningfulness, not the ontogenetic appropriation of these rules; the issue is how things mean, not how they come to mean for a particular person or group. Second, the category “consciousness” is no less a theoretical construct than are such categories as “signification”, “religion”, or “system”. David Hoy (1991) has given an excellent rendition of its history; “consciousness” amounts either to a technical term in modern, Western subject-centered philosophy or to a cherished ideological element of bourgeois civilization. In either case, its pride of place has decisively been dethroned; in that sense, if in no other, we are in a new era. Finally, mentalism is abandoned simply in virtue of experimental curiosity. If we do not use the traditional concepts of consciousness, agency, belief, etc., how will this change our theoretical understanding of religion? What will we gain from such a suspension? After all, we know full well what mentalism does for our theoretical understanding of religion: that has been orthodoxy since the inception of a science of religion. We have, in short, had over a century of mentalism in the study of religion. It is time that we tried out other models.

The other pitfall that this theory avoids is what may loosely be called “societism”. This position could also, *mutatis mutandis*, be called “culturalism”. This is the theoretical view which, wittingly or not, attributes agency to society or to culture. There are two versions of this: expressivism and functionalism. Expressivism is the view that “society projects/creates/sustains images”. Peter Berger’s *The Sacred Canopy* is a classic example of this, a view whose origins go back to Marx’s theory of ideology and Hegel’s theory of *Geist*. The suspect notion is that collectivities somehow create expressions, projections, or the like. This is tantamount to the attribution of agency to fictional entities—there is no such “thing” as society or culture, to which we may attribute agency. “Society” does nothing; it is nothing more and nothing less than a contingent ensemble of relations. The concept of a system, in the semiological sense, avoids this problem. Functionalism is subject to a similar fallacy. The idea that a belief or practice has a function in relation to a larger totality assumes a kind of unity to that totality which is no longer fully credible. Such an assumption amounts, again, to a reification of the object “society”. I follow Laclau and Mouffe in their deconstruction of the reified notions of social agency and their reconstruction of these notions as the production, dissemination, consumption, and contestation of a series of articulations in Foucault’s sense of the term.

al's coming-to-be.² Or, in larger formations of myths or religions, the presence of anterior conditions, namely some a priori idea of what a creation story, a response to a religious symbol, or a divine being must look like: in short, a whole repertoire of cultural meanings, a taxonomy, which pre-exists the act of creation. The question "creation of what?", in a real sense *precedes* the act of creation, however novel, and forms the conditions for the possibility of its being this, that, or something else. In short, the world of culture confronts us as a social objectivity,³ just as the language we speak was *there* before we ever spoke it.

From a semiotic point of view the situation of the origin, again of any particular cultural or religious datum, is precisely analogous to that of genres as described by Tzvetan Todorov:

Where do genres come from? Quite simply from other genres. A new genre is always the transformation of an earlier one, or of several: by inversion, by displacement, by combination⁴ ... There has never been a literature without genres; it is a system in constant transformation, and historically speaking the question of origins cannot be separated from the terrain of the genres themselves. Saussure noted that "the problem of the origin of language is not a different problem from that of its transformation." As Humboldt had already observed: "When we speak of primitive languages, we employ such designations only because of our ignorance of their earlier constituents." (Todorov 1990: 15)

Religions, then, "originate" by transforming, combining, or even inverting pre-existing cultural materials. "Syncretistic religion" is a re-

² The ontogenic story is not without theoretical dividends. However, from a semiotic point of view, we are telling the same story, that of the of pre-existing cultural material, but from the subject's point of view, looking, as it were, from the inside out, rather than, in macro analysis, from the outside in. We are analyzing the subject's entry into a symbolic order, in other words. This issue is dealt with in Murphy 2001: chap. 8.

³ One of the great confusions in the human sciences stems from the failure to distinguish between natural objectivities and social objectivities. These two realms are simply not of the same order. Unlike a natural objectivity, a social objectivity is always to some degree (the amount being a matter of continual controversy) constituted by acts of participation and/or observation. As language exists through speech acts, yet before them, the social is objective, yet only invoked by acts of participation, of which observation is one.

⁴ The various strategies of such acts of transformation are ripe fodder for analysis. The collection of historical instances of such acts, the formation of a catalogue of their types, and an analysis of their formal properties would be of great service to the science of religion. Murphy 2001: chap. 6 and 8 take a preliminary stab at this problem.

dundant term. The degree of “exogamous” versus “endogamous” materials, as understood by adherents—or scholars; on this kind of point, the two camps are often in conflict—will, of course, vary greatly. But that religions constitute variations upon pre-existing materials is a point borne out both by empirical analysis and theoretical reasoning.

Consequently, *the key datum for the study of religion is this body of pre-existent material*. The question of origin is changed from the asking after the cause of its coming-into-being to asking after the conditions which brought about acts of transformation, dissemination, incorporation, contestation, or preservation of this pre-existent material. In light of this reconception of the origination of religious materials, the questions a theory of religion must ask are: What is the nature of this pre-existent material? What are its internal relations? How does it retain some sense of continuous identity over time (and place), and yet undergo constant change? What occasions specific instances of its evocation, its application, its transformation? These are the questions which this article will pursue.

In brief, the answers I give to these questions are:

(1) 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.⁵

(2) The internal relations of this ensemble of signifiers are best

⁵ If I were to offer a definition of “religion” it would something along the following lines: religion is a practice of semiotic construction and displacement. Members of the profession will quickly point out that this definition lacks a *specificum differentium* by which we can distinguish religion from any other form of semiotic activity. That is because there is no such thing. Religion, as a category, does not admit of such a clear differentiation. While many in the profession bemoan this fact, I do not, for three reasons. It is in the nature of such cultural objects not to be distinct on the model of logic. As Nietzsche pointed out: “only that which has no history can be defined”. Besides this, I do not believe that categories refer, they stipulate. Robert Baird (1971) is right in this, even if his account of that stipulative activity is incomplete. Finally, religion is not a unique kind of activity, but only a more aggressively symbolic form of a very basic and ordinary human activity, namely, interpretation. Thus I use the term “religion” in a purely conventional sense (as if there were others): to designate that which the practitioners of the science of religion have historically studied as religion. This is not so much a definition of a substance in the world nor the deployment of a technical term as a name for a research tradition and its associated body of data. I have nothing to say about whatever “religion” (or religion) may be beyond that. It is this research tradition and its body of data alone about which I wish to theorize. Others may believe they have more direct access to religion, and perhaps they do. I do not.

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 and a syntagmatic axis (on these terms and their theoretical import see Hawkes 1977: 19-22).

(3) The continuous identity of a religion, as well as its on-going permutations, are products of acts of interpretation.⁶ Jonathan Z. Smith (1982) captures 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.

(4) To all of this we must add Bakhtin’s notion of the “addressivity” of all signification, of all discourse, of all speech (Bakhtin 1994: 74-80, 103-112; for a discussion of Bakhtin’s “dialogism” see Berger 1995: 35-36; and Holquist 1990: 14-66). The production of specific instances of *parole* is not sufficiently theorized by assuming “the little freedom through which the subject makes them present” (Lacan), i.e., by understanding it as mere choice made by a generic speaker out of a neutral plenum of lexical possibilities. We must, rather, trace out specific scenes of the provocation of signification, of speech, of discourse. Bakhtin is exactly correct, I believe, in his claim that the perennial feature of the sign, which alone can explain all the instances of its iteration, 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 speech of

⁶ To some, this may seem overly simplistic. But there is no reason to assume that a common human activity should be elaborately complex. On the other hand, those scholars familiar with medieval Catholic allegory, Talmudic commentary, Kabbala, Islamic *Sharia*, Ifa divination, or divination using the *I Ching*, know that, although the basic concepts of interpretive practice are simple enough for nearly any human being to put into practice, it is also possible to elaborate them to unbelievable degrees of complexity. This process is also the way in which religious specialists are created, or, more generically, exoteric versus esoteric strata of traditions are created and sustained.

the other, that the semiotician of religion must define it as “the *constitutive* other”. The incredible variety of ways in which the other is present in a system or an instance of signification, most often, in forms (or strategies?) of absence, is as necessary a corollary to acts of signification as is syntagm to paradigm or hermeneute to canon. As such, the theoretical delineation of this constitutive other is a core element in a semiotic theory of religion, not something added on in an incidental fashion.

What I propose, then, is to mesh Jonathan Z. Smith’s concept of the canon-hermeneute⁷ relationship, the structuralist concept of paradigm and syntagm, and Bakhtin’s concept of the structural addressivity of signification. Taken together, these form the core elements of a semiotic theory of religion as I understand it.

Canon and paradigm

In an article entitled “Sacred persistence: Toward a redescription of canon”, Jonathan Z. Smith argues that the fundamental operation of religion lives, as it were, in the interplay between a canon of signs and a hermeneute who “applies” the given canonical elements to particular circumstances. This dynamic, yet bounded process defines the concept of a religious tradition without resort to problematic substantialistic or essentialist notions of historical continuity (for a history of these notions and their role in the study of religion, see Murphy 1999). Smith frames the problem thus:

I should like to reflect further on the notion of canon as a way of exploring the proposition that sacrality persists insofar as there are communities which are persistent in applying their limited body of tradition; that sacred persistence...is primarily exegesis; that, if there is anything distinctive about religion as a human activity, it is a matter of degree rather than kind, what might be described as the extremity of its enterprise for exegetical totalization. (J. Z. Smith 1982: 44)

The persistence of a tradition is created by a simple, yet tensely paradoxical and precarious combination of fixed and mutable ele-

⁷ Smith himself suggests the isomorphism between *langue/parole* and canon/hermeneute: “a canon cannot exist without a tradition and an interpreter. That is to say, without the public lexicon (*langue*) and the explicit engagement in application (*parole*), the closure of canon would be impossible ...[and] in each instance the strategy seems to be the same. The process of arbitrary limitation and of overcoming limitation through ingenuity recurs” (Smith 1982: 49-50).

ments. The fixed element is the canon, i.e., that body of semiotic material issuing from a perhaps anonymous past, which confronts the moment of the present as a limit, as a voice determining its boundaries by pointing to its fate, naming the fate of both past and present as perpetuations of the same, and so of past futures, and therefore of future futures. As Bakhtin notes, unlike the words of the everyday, the word of the canon,

is located in a distant zone, organically connected with a past that is felt to be hierarchically higher. It is, so to speak, the word of the fathers. Its authority was already acknowledged in the past. It is a prior discourse. It is therefore not a question of choosing it from among other possible discourses that are equal. It is given (it sounds) in lofty spheres, not those of familiar contact. Its language is a special (as it were, hieratic) language. It can be profaned. It is akin to taboo, i.e., a name that must not be taken in vain. (Bakhtin 1994: 78)

According to Smith, this fixity of the canon, and its consequent distantiation from the everyday, is off-set by the mutability inherent in the on-going acts of appropriation of its circumscribed body of material in, for, and to, the ever-expanding and changing circumstances of the present—with its necessary proximity to the everyday.

I would like to reframe the discussion of the canon/hermeneute relationship in the terms of structuralist semiotics. Without claiming perfect isomorphism, it nevertheless can be said with some confidence that the canon stands in relation to the hermeneute in very much the same way the field of association, or paradigm, stands in relation to the combinatory process, or syntagm. Put another way: the canon is the lexicon of a language, the sum of possible resources for making sentences out of words, while the activity of the hermeneute, that is, the activity of interpretation, is the act of combining words into sentences. In the encompassing definition of language, both are essential: a “language” *is* just its vocabulary and its rules of grammar, i.e., its rules for the combination of words. Similarly, a religion is both its canon and its interpretation of that canon.

The link between the structuralist language for language and Smith’s language for religion can be made, first, by reviewing the basic axiom of structuralism, namely, that “in language there are only differences. Even more important: a difference generally implies positive terms between which the difference is set up; but in language there are only differences without positive terms” (Saussure 1959:

120).⁸ Consequently, “a particular word is like the center of a constellation; it is the point of convergence [and, we may add, of divergence] of an indefinite number of co-ordinate terms” (Saussure 1959: 126). Semiotic elements—words in a language, images in an iconography, gestures in a ritualology—do not have meaning in and of themselves. They only mean in relation to other elements. The set of elements which make a given element have a given meaning is the paradigm, or associative field, for that element. Changing the “surrounding” elements of a particular element will change the meaning of that element. The internal structure of the elements of a canon will be formed by the various relations each element has, *or can have*, with the others. It is in this respect we can say that religion is a “system”: “Religion, from this approach, ‘is a system of interdependent terms in which the value of each term results solely from the simultaneous presence of the others’” (Penner 1989: 189, quoting Saussure 1959: 114). It is a “system” or “structure” only in that the elements (concepts, images, etc.) which constitute it are defined in relation to one another. There is no mystery behind the meanings of “system” or “structure”; it is important that these notions not be reified.

The solitary element of a canon, then, is, in a sense, deficient, or defined by a lack: it must look out of itself for its meanings. By the same token and for the same reason, it is also characterized by a surplus of meaning, or, overdetermination. This is because “a word can always evoke everything that can be associated with it in one way or another” (Saussure 1959: 126). The scholar trying to understand any individual element of a religion (and, *mutatis mutandis*, a “culture”) is faced with the problem of delimiting a series of paradigmatic, or associative fields, from a rambling, often incongruent series of such fields, because, again, “terms in an associative family occur neither in fixed numbers nor in a definite order ... we are unable to predict the number of words that the memory [or, better, convention] will suggest or the order in which they will appear” (Saussure 1959: 126); “there are as many associative series as there are diverse relations” (Saussure 1959: 125). This is the point which Derrida makes about *différance*: “the signified concept is never present in and of itself, in a sufficient presence that would refer only to itself ... every concept is

⁸ Cf. Saussure 1959: 121: “In language, as in any semiological system, whatever distinguishes one sign from another *constitutes* it. Difference makes character just as it makes value and the unit.” (emphasis added)

inscribed in a chain or in a system within which it refers to the other, to other concepts, by means of the systematic play of differences” (Derrida 1982b: 11). Exegesis of the totality of a canon, then, is an impossibility, *not* due to logistical considerations, but due to *structural* considerations.

Syntagm and hermeneute

Also, and more importantly, every element of the canon can, must, and *will*, given enough instances of its deployment, take on multiple meanings. The structural *lack* in the sign leads to its structural *over-determination*, i.e., the fact that “[e]very sign, linguistic or nonlinguistic, spoken or written ... can be cited, put between quotation marks; thereby it can break with every given context, and engender infinitely new contexts in an absolutely nonsaturatable fashion. This does not suppose that the mark is valid outside its context, but on the contrary that there are only contexts without any center of absolute anchoring” (Derrida 1982a: 320).

From this perspective, it is the definition of the hermeneute, that he, she, or it (a possibility we cannot *preclude*)⁹ is that office or person which connects the canonical elements both to themselves and to the world at large. An interpretation is, by definition, a second text. Consequently, to interpret is to form a syntagm, or to combine two elements together, to put into conjunction one term with another, thereby claiming that this conjunction is what this element or instance means. To interpret is also, often simultaneously, to extract an element from a given associative field and graft it onto a particular person, event, thing—there is no limit to what a canonical paradigmatic may be applied. The very act of closure, therefore, creates a new and dramatic possibility:

This formal requirement [of closure] generates a corollary. Where there is a canon, it is possible to predict the necessary occurrence of a hermeneute, of an interpreter whose task it is continually to extend the domain of the closed canon over everything that is known or everything that exists without altering the canon in the process. It is with the canon

⁹ I think of the hermeneute on the model of the Roman distinction between an office and a person. “The heremeneute” is an office, a social objectivity, always already there, which is filled and carried out by particular persons, some better, some worse, and so forth.

and its hermeneute that we encounter the necessary obsession with exegetical totalization. (J. Z. Smith 1982: 48)

The perpetuity of the canon, or at least the appearance of such perpetuity, forms one pole of the dynamic of continuity of a religious tradition. Adaptation *via* interpretation forms the other pole.

With regard to the concept of origin, discussed above, here again the singularity of that moment is lost: heremeneute is both cause and effect of canon; canon is both cause and effect of hermeneute. As we can imagine no time when there were human beings not enveloped, as it were, by an ensemble of signifiers, we cannot properly imagine a hermeneute who does not stand before—in both senses of the term—a canon.

My understanding of the heremeneute as syntagm-maker (!) differs in a potentially interesting way from Saussure's explication of the syntagm. He argues that, while there is significant restriction of play in the formation of a syntagm or a sentence, there is complete, or near complete, freedom in the combination of sentences. It seems fairly clear, at least *prima facie*, that this is not the case with the majority of instances of religious "statements". The rules for the proper combination of elements are part of *both* the syntagmatic and paradigmatic axes, or adhere and constitute *both* the canon and the legitimacy of its interpretations. Heretics, that is, those who form illicit syntagms, are always possible, but by definition they are *derivative* of the rules which govern the order of the proper. Though it admits of incredible degrees of variation on this point, the play of the hermeneute is more circumscribed than that of the "ordinary" language user.

The bridge between canon and heremeneute can be articulated by the twin theoretical constructs of code and text. If the notion of canon connotes a bounded field, the notion of the code connotes a permeable membrane across which the micro-discourses of local flavor may enter and exit a broader religious system. Roland Barthes has described the code as

a perspective of quotations, a mirage of structures; we know only its departures and returns; the units which have resulted from it (those we inventory) are themselves, always, ventures out of the text, the mark, the sign of a virtual digression toward the remainder of a catalogue; they are so many fragments of something that has always been *already* read, seen, done, experienced; the code is the wake of that already. (Barthes 1974: 20)

If the canon declares, at least in its own view, the code merely alludes. The multiplicity of codes surrounding both the canon and heremeneute, speaking the names of each without ever referring to them, color, guide, and nuance the heremeneute's selection and emphasis of canonical elements and genres of objects of its application. The code is local, particular, and most often invisible; the canon is universal, timeless, and very vocal about its own canonicity. Consequently, although the canon would seem the more powerful of the two, by its immediacy and silence, the code can, at times, invisibly master the canon.

The code, in turn, is a braid of connotations, of anonymous "sayings", understandings, the always-already known and said, or the flavor within and around that which in a culture passes for conventional wisdom. It is a whole army of "small" yet powerful meanings, meanings which have the effect of blending terms of valuation with terms of description. To call a pistol a "gat" is to evoke a whole series of values, stock experiences, images, memories, in short, an entire repertoire of cultural meanings unavailable in the official sources (the dictionary) but, nevertheless, widely disseminated and known.

Code, connotation, and text come together in the following way:

The grouping of codes, as they enter into the work, into the movement of the reading, constitute a braid (text, fabric, braid: the same thing); each thread, each code, is a voice; these braided—or braiding—voices form the writing: when it is alone, the voice does no labor, transforms nothing: it expresses; but as soon as the hand intervenes to gather and intertwine the inert threads, there is labor, there is transformation. (Barthes 1974: 160)¹⁰

The essential plurality of the text undermines any notion of its singular authorship, redaction, or reduction to a specific social or cultural milieu. It does not matter whether the text was composed by a single author or redacted by an unknown number of redactors: the plurality of the text is structural, not an artifice of design.

Canon begot heremeneute, heremeneute "feeds" on code, code is saturated with connotation, connotation and code congeal to form text, and then, "in the fullness of time", text becomes canon.

¹⁰ A particular text comes into being as an ensemble of discourses, as "a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture" (Barthes 1977: 146). The specific text then, is *parole* to the *langue* of discourse.

Signs of, signs for, the other

As noted above, it is theoretically imperative to move beyond a simple description of the relationship between canon and hermeneute, or between the paradigmatic and syntagmatic axes of language. Neither of these avenues of analysis can account for a very basic fact: the reason for speaking (writing, acting, gesturing, interpreting, or any species of signification). What causes, or at least occasions (I would argue that there is no difference *here*) an instance of signification? Looking *outside* the enunciation, for a cause both anterior and external to it, the possible sources for its provocation are too myriad for there to be any kind of theorization at this crucial juncture—and, indeed, the nontheorizable factor of contingency looms large at precisely this point. The best we could do is come up with a catalogue of the kinds of reasons for such an act. However, if we examine the structure of the enunciation itself, it is at least arguable that prior enunciations form the immediate, if often extremely implicit, occasion/cause for any and all enunciations.

Because such an analysis is immanent to the structure of enunciation as such, the prospects for theorizing the occasion/cause of enunciation *as such* are very good. As immanent, it is always “there”, even when suppressed. Although no *a priori* concept of the content of the enunciative other should be maintained, and every specific instance of enunciation must be empirically substantiated, it is possible to talk about the general structure of the enunciation.

“An essential (constitutive) marker of the utterance [or enunciation] is its quality of being directed to someone, its addressivity” (Bakhtin 1994: 87). Like the structure of the sign in Saussure’s paradigmatic axis of language, the enunciation’s meaning is never self-contained. Or, conversely, every enunciation is, socially, a syntagm in relation to a previous enunciation. It can only mean as an address.

As address, an enunciation is saturated with temporality, i.e., lives every in-between other moments of enunciation. Looking to the immediate moment of an enunciation’s past, it is clear that “every utterance must be regarded primarily as a *response* to preceding utterances of the given sphere (we understand the word ‘response’ here in the broadest sense)” (Bakhtin 1994: 85). Looking to the immediate moment subsequent to the enunciation, we see that it is “oriented toward a future answer-word: it provokes an answer, anticipates it, and structures itself in the answer’s direction. Forming itself in an

atmosphere of the already spoken, the word is at the same time determined by that which has not yet been said but which is needed and in fact anticipated by the answering word" (Bakhtin 1994: 76). Every mark, every sign, every symbol, every text, then, bears the impress of both moments of time as a structuring component. The enunciation replies and anticipates a reply; essentially Janus-faced, it looks in both directions of time at once.

The enunciation, then, has as its necessary corollary an addressee. But this addressee may take many forms; it "can be an immediate participant-interlocutor ... and it can also be an indefinite, unconcretized *other*" (Bakhtin 1994: 87). Given this basic structure, we can postulate some generic forms of addressivity, of relations between address and addressee. For instance, the addressive structure of the sign marks a relationship both of alterity and of commonality between addressor and addressee: alterity, since any act of signification presupposes "twoness", and this necessarily entails the nonidentity of addressor and addressee; commonality, because the enunciation assumes the possibility of communication (even if incorrectly so). But alterity and commonality admit of a very wide variety of degree, so these two features may each form a pole of a spectrum of the relationship between addressor and addressee. As noted above, the addressee may also be very specific or it may be completely generic (such as the material in a time capsule). These two features, then, form another spectrum for analysis. Finally, the addressee of an enunciation may be very clearly present or it may be completely absent, at least in any direct, manifest form. Such concepts may serve the researcher as a both guides and goals, that is, as things to look for and reasons to look for them.

Although it is perhaps somewhat overemphasized in contemporary theory, it is without question that one of the most important forms of the relationship between religious address, or enunciation, and its addressee is that of antagonism, or, more precisely, an *agon*, or contest, a contest of meanings. Perhaps the most startling description of the agonistics of all semiosis is Nietzsche's famous statement on the nature of interpretation. He describes interpretation as follows:

[W]hatever exists, having somehow come into being, is again and again reinterpreted [*überlegen*] to new ends, confiscated [in *Beschlag genommen*], transformed [*umgebildet*], and redirected [*umgerichtet*] by some power superior to it; all events in the organic world are a *ruling over* [*Überwältigen*], a *becoming master* [*Herrwerden*], and all ruling over and becoming master

involves a fresh interpretation, a rearrangement [*Zurechtmachen*] through which any previous “meaning” and “purpose” are necessarily obscured or even obliterated. (Nietzsche 1967: 77)

The phrase, *in Beschlag nehmen*, usually translated as “confiscation”, best defines Nietzsche’s understanding of interpretation as a form or process of identity formation. The English word comes from the Latin, *com* (together) and *fuscus* (basket), or, by extension, treasury. The obvious implication is the taking of something into the treasury. The verb *nehmen* (to take) implies an active sense of taking, grasping, or even seizure. The preposition “in” further suggests the figurative *relocation* of the something into some other kind of enframing structure. The phrase *in Beschlag nehmen* then suggests a violent seizing upon something, as in the violent transport of a thing from one place or setting into another. In military terms, the phrase is used for an order to requisition something; in nautical terms, it means to seize something off another ship, as in a naval blockade, or “search and seizure” of contraband. Hayden White has nicely rendered the term as “retroactive confiscations” (White 1973: 363).

Foucault’s gloss on this term is very much in accord with the general sense of Nietzsche’s description of the agonistic processes of identity formation when he describes “interpretation” as the “violent or surreptitious appropriation of a system of rules, which in itself has no essential meaning, in order to impose a direction” (Foucault 1984: 86). The sense of reversal, the use of “rules”, or guidelines, all in the act of a violent appropriation and imposition, captures nicely the subtlety and sophistication often manifest in “wars of interpretations”—or, the interpretation of wars.

Just as the enunciation presupposes an addressee, resistance is constitutive of the agon. As Foucault points out,

emergence designates a place of confrontation, but not as a closed field offering the spectacle of a struggle among equals. Rather, as Nietzsche demonstrates in his analysis of good and evil, it is a “non-place,” a pure distance, which indicates that the adversaries do not belong to a common space. Consequently, no one is responsible for an emergence; no one can glory in it, since it always occurs in the interstice. (Foucault 1984: 84-5)¹¹

¹¹ Cf. Nietzsche 1967: 77-78: “The evolution of a ‘thing’ ... [is] but succession of more or less profound, more or less mutually independent processes of subduing [*Überwältigungsprozessen*], plus the resistances they encounter, the attempts at transformation for the purposes of defense and reaction, and the results of successful counteractions [*Gegenaktionen*].”

As such, meaning is not simply produced by one side dominating the other, but in the interstice as a product of the overall conflict, confrontation, encounter. There are always two terms to an enunciation, and the relation between them can, at any time, be reversed.

In this way, the very constitution of a canon, a tradition, and a tradition of interpretation, can be the compressed, congealed, and concealed of numerous contests, each of which vies as a silent or silenced voice, to name the meaning of the whole. And so, “the entire history of a ‘thing,’ an organ, a custom can in this way be a continuous sign-chain of ever new interpretations and rearrangements whose causes do not even have to be related to one another but, on the contrary, in some cases succeed and alternate with one another in a purely chance fashion” (Nietzsche 1967: 77). As the interplay of address and addressee, there can be no laws, no determinism, in the history of a canon, of a religion, of anything whose substance is semiotic. One can only trace out the varying and various scenes of these contests.

A quick example of the agonistic definition of fundamental, even constitutive religious elements, from ancient India and Persia. These two powerful cultures grew up side by side, separated only by the mountain ranges of contemporary Afghanistan. One way in which their intercultural contact is indicated is by the names each gives for classes of spiritual beings:

In the pre-Vedic Iranian period, *Asuras* were a class of deities alongside the *devas*. In Iran the *Asuras* won an ascendancy (cf. Ahura Mazda) while the *devas* became known as demons. In India the reverse occurred. The *devas* were the deities, and since the *asuras* were their enemies, they became demons. In the earlier part of the Vedas, *asuras* are favorable and the term is applied to Varuna. Later in the *Yajurveda* and the *Atharvaveda* they become enemies of the gods and are lowered to the level of demons. (Baird and Bloom 1971: 14)

It would be hard to understand the very meaning of the word “god” here other than as the product of a long, probably bitter, semiotic agon. By any scientific norm of the process, it would be impossible to give a strict definition of either *asura* or *deva*, since “only that which has no history can be defined”. In a very real way, each is just its history, and this history is clearly not the history of integral substance, “deity”, “culture”, or “religion”, but the history of a dynamic interaction, even enmity.

Area of application

It is an appropriate *aspiration* of a theory to aim at an all-embracing account of its delineated field of phenomena. The ubiquity of *semeia*, of symbolic behavior, “the sheer semioticity of the world” (Holquist 1990: 49), suggests that a semiotic theory stands a real chance at such scope. Whether it forms an all-embracing theory or not, what is clear is that such a theoretical framework is very useful for the elucidation of the textual practices of both religionists and scholars of religion. However, my feeling is that all that has been said can, *mutatis mutandis*, be applied to specific areas studies such as religious architecture, iconography, ritual, and even disciplinary practices such as prayer, mediation, yoga, sweat lodges, vision quests, and the like.

The application and/or extension of these theoretical elements to specific area studies is, of course, the work of specialists, and I leave such work to them, both in “raw” application, as well as in the reflexive modification of those elements which is an inescapable (and welcomed) result of such application.

As for myself, I wish to pursue the use of these elements in the study of the history of Christian theological discourse. I accept the assumptions of structuralist poetics¹² that discourses form relatively autonomous spheres of sign-systems, and, that they move, as it were, between specific texts. As *langue* is to *parole*, specific texts manifest an historical discourse, or many historical discourses to a greater or lesser degree. The semiologist’s job is to delineate the common, inter-textual discourses with historical and linguistic specificity. Once the diachronic exegesis of a discourse, or a “braid” of discourses is delimited, then the semiotician must analyze the internal structure of each particular braid of discourse. Finally, the semiotician must trace out the effects of the movement of an object of discourse between specific, bounded discursive formations, making an a priori assumption *neither* of continuity *nor* of complete difference, but analyzing the specific structuring events in each movement, and consequently, the specific effects of specific discourses. We must ask, Does the same signifier mean the same thing in each of the various scenes of its deployment? Does it mean the same thing when moved from one

¹² For a brilliant and highly accessible account of structuralist poetics, see Todorov (1991). For a theoretical description of the nature of discourse and its application to the study of religion, see Murphy (2000).

ensemble of signifiers to an other ensemble of signifiers? What is counted by and between each as sameness or difference? Or, in more concrete form, is the signifier “Christ” the same in each of its iterations? How is the signifier “Christ”¹³ structured similarly or differently in, say, classic christological formulas, in Protestant scholasticism, in Hegelian *Religionsphilosophie*, or in late nineteenth-century *Kulturprotestantismus*?

For the trajectory of my own research, I propose to *re*-cover the well-trodden ground of Protestant philosophical theology of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (i.e., the familiar line from Schleiermacher and Hegel to Tillich and Taylor), asking the questions: What is the *langue* of which these texts are instances of *parole*? What discursive continuities “bleed”, as it were, out of and into the material boundaries of these books?¹⁴ What is this meta-discourse? What are its internal relations? Its structural or enframing maneuvers, its strategies, its complicities, its systematic inclusions and exclusions? How does it structure its objects? What are the scenes of its appropriation? Its elisions? Its permutations? Its contestations?

I want to do this in a chronological, expository study of the major figures in theology, *Religionsphilosophie*, and *Religionswissenschaft* who were instrumental in developing and transforming the category “religion”, from the late eighteenth century to the early twentieth century. For a variety of reasons, and to no small extent because of European colonialism, the problem of “religion” became a central theme of nineteenth-century German thought. What is the essence of religion? How is Christianity related to “the religions”? What is the relationship between Christianity’s claim to a special revelation and the religions? What are the respective places of “religion” and Christianity in the taxonomy and narrative of Spirit? Taken together, these questions and their answers form a discourse about religion which is a central problematic in the theological reflection of this period.

¹³ Or, the “syntagmatic solidarity” “Jesus is the Christ”, or, more simply, “Jesus Christ”.

¹⁴ See Foucault (1972: 23) on the *concept* of the book: “The frontiers of a book are never clear-cut: beyond the title, the first lines, and the last full stop, beyond its internal configurations and its autonomous form, it is caught up in a system of references to other books, other texts, other sentences: it is a node within a network ... The book is not simply the object that one holds in one’s hands ... it indicates itself, it constructs itself, only on the basis of a complex field of discourse.”

Furthermore, from the perspective of colonial discourse theory it is possible to recontextualize this strand of historical-theological discourse. When read against the background of the problem of colonialism, Liberal theology's nearly obsessive quest to rationally and scientifically establish "*das Wesen des Christentums*" can be seen as a permutation of colonial discourse. The colonized Other forms the constitutive Other of this discourse. In its efforts to establish the essence of religion generally, and the essence of Christianity in relation to religion, we find repeated the same kind of hierarchical and Euro-centric constructs found elsewhere in the structures of colonial discourse.

Not only does this allow us to rethink the structure of this discourse, the heuristic of colonialism allows us to rethink the history of this period. This is not insignificant for the subsequent history of theology, for even though twentieth-century theology felt itself to have overcome the biases of the nineteenth century, it did so only on the basis of theological revisions, not on the basis of an analysis of the nature of colonial discourse (at least not until the very *end* of the twentieth century). Nor is it inconsequential for the field of Religious Studies as a whole. Given the historical and discursive connections between Protestant Liberalism and early *Religionswissenschaft*, and of both to the phenomenological methods which were once so prominent in the study of religion, it is at least arguable that the category "religion" as used in field of Religious Studies today, is itself a product of this same colonial discourse.

Once this is done for a particular historical segment of Christian discourse, I hope, towards the end of my career, either in a developmental or temporal sense, to do with the structure of Christian discourse something like what Roland Barthes did with fashion in his book, *The Fashion System* (1990), that is, try to lay out, in very concrete terms, the specific structures of the internal relations of that discourse. What I believe we have to gain from this is an insight into how this religion *works*, that is, not just its doctrines, but the underlying processes of its *production of meanings*. By extrapolation, this can, of course, be applied to any and all religions.

Conclusion

A question which the reader has perhaps been wanting to ask must, by way of both anticipation and conclusion, be answered: “Does not everything you have said apply to semiotics itself, even to your own text?” And of course it *does*. The description of the relation between a canon of signs and an interpretive language which “speaks” that canon, and the description of that relationship in a third text, *replicates precisely the same structural relationship*. The text of theory is not situated higher in an ontological hierarchy, nor can its language be divorced, as in Plato, from the specificity of its linguistic effects, allowing it to become a master language which looks down upon other languages from above. Rather, the situation between object-language and meta-language, between interpreter and interpreter of interpretation, is the same as James Clifford has said of the text of ethnography: “A scientific ethnography normally establishes a privileged allegorical register it identifies as ‘theory,’ ‘interpretation,’ or ‘explanation.’ But once all meaningful levels in a text, including theories and interpretations, are recognized as allegorical, it becomes difficult to view one of them as privileged, accounting for the rest” (Clifford 1986: 103).

Department of Religious Studies
 University of Alabama
 Tuscaloosa, AL 35487-0264
 USA

References

- Baird, Robert D. (1971). *Category Formation in the History of Religions*. The Hague: Mouton.
- Baird, Robert and Alfred Bloom (1971). *Indian and Far Eastern Religious Traditions*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Bakhtin, Mikhail (1994). *The Bakhtin Reader*. Pam Morris (ed.). London: Edward Arnold.
- Barthes, Roland (1973). *Elements of Semiology*. Annette Lavers and Colin Smith (trans.). New York: Hill & Wang.
- (1974). *S/Z*. R. Miller (trans.). New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux.
- (1990). *The Fashion System*. Matthew Ward and Richard Howard (trans.). Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Berger, Arthur Asa (1995). *Cultural Criticism: A Primer of Key Concepts*. Thousand Oakes, CA: Sage Publications.
- Berger, Peter (1967). *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion*. New York: Doubleday (Anchor Books).

- Clifford, James (1986). On ethnographic allegory. In James Clifford and George Marcus (eds), *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Derrida, Jacques (1982a). Signature event context. In *Margins of Philosophy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- (1982b). Différance. In *Margins of Philosophy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Eliade, Mircea (1959). *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*. Willard Trask (trans.). New York: Harcourt, Brace & World.
- (1969). The quest for the 'origins' of religion. In *The Quest: History and Meaning in Religion*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Foucault, Michel (1972). *The Archaeology of Knowledge and The Discourse On Language*. A. M. Sheridan Smith (trans.). New York: Pantheon.
- (1984). Nietzsche, genealogy, history. In *The Foucault Reader*. Paul Rabinow (ed.). New York: Pantheon.
- Hawkes, Terrence (1977). *Structuralism and Semiotics*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Holquist, Michael (1990). *Dialogism: Bakhtin and His World*. New York: Routledge.
- Hoy, David Couzens (1991). A history of consciousness: From Kant and Hegel to Derrida and Foucault. *History of the Human Sciences* 4(2).
- Laclau, Ernesto and Chantal Mouffe (1985). *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*. London: Verso.
- Masuzawa, Tomoko (1993). In *Search of Dreamtime: the Quest for the Origin of Religion*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Murphy, Tim (1999). The concept of *Entwicklung* in German *Religionswissenschaft*: Before and after Darwin. *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 11: 8-23.
- (2000). Discourse. In Willi Braun and Russell T. McCutcheon (eds), *Guide to the Study of Religion*. London: Cassell.
- (2001). *Nietzsche, Metaphor, Religion*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich (1967). *On the Genealogy of Morals: A Polemic*. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (trans.). New York: Vintage.
- Penner, Hans (1989). *Impasse and Resolution: A Critique of the Study of Religion*. (Toronto Series in Religion.) New York: Peter Lang.
- de Saussure, Ferdinand (1959). *Course in General Linguistics*. Wade Baskin (trans.). New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Smith, Jonathan Z. (1982). Sacred persistence: Towards a redescription of canon. In *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Todorov, Tzvetan (1981). *Introduction to Poetics*. Richard Howard (trans.) (Theory and History of Literature, 1.) Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- (1990). *Genres in Discourse*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- White, Hayden (1973). *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.