

Mediation and Immediacy

the Semiotic Turn in the Study of Religion

an international conference

8-9-10 June 2016


**sala "Principi d'Acaja", palazzo del Rettorato
via Verdi 8, Torino, Italy**

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*Ludwig-Maximilians-University Munich
Interfaculty Program for the Study of Religion*

*University of Turin
CIRCe-Interdepartmental Centre for
Research on Communication*





*David McCracken,
"Diminish and Ascend",
Bondi Beach, Australia,
2013 (ph. by Matthew
Perkins, [flic.kr/p/h6VEP4](https://www.flickr.com/photos/h6VEP4/))
dcpq by g.marino*

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conference organizers

Prof. Massimo Leone (University of Turin)
Prof. Robert Yelle (Ludwig-Maximilians-University Munich)
Dr. Jenny Ponzio (Ludwig-Maximilians-University Munich)

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Various faculties and programs have collaborated on this conference. Conference organization has been shared by the Chair of Semiotics and Cultural Semiotics, Department of Philosophy, University of Turin, and by the Chair of Religious Studies, Interfaculty Program for Religious Studies, LMU-Munich; facilities and labor have been donated by the University of Turin; primary funding has been provided by the Chair of Religious Studies and by the Excellence Initiative at LMU-Munich.

Wednesday, June 8

9:30 Coffee and Introductions

10:00-12:00 Panel 1

Massimo Leone (University of Turin)
The doodling of Jesus, or the unwriting of the law

Peter van der Veer and Tam Ngo (Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity, Göttingen)
Spirit writing in Vietnam and China

Jenny Ponzo (Ludwig-Maximilians-University Munich)
Writing immediacy: epiphany in contemporary European fiction

12:00-13:30 Lunch

13:30-15:30 Panel 2

Patrick Eisenlohr (Georg-August-University Göttingen)
Voice and the sonic dimensions of religion: semiotic mediation and acoustic atmospheres in Mauritian Muslim devotional practices

Fred Cummins (University College Dublin)
The enactment of collective subjectivities through speaking in unison

Naomi Janowitz (University of California, Davis)
Cultures of ineffability

15:30-16:00 Coffee

16:00-18:00 Panel 3

Thomas J. Csordas (University of California, San Diego)
The somatic semiotics of demonic diagnostics

TatsumaPadoan (SOAS, University of London)
Walking the sūtra: a nonrepresentational theory of ritual

Robert Yelle (Ludwig-Maximilians-University Munich)
Returning the gift: the semiotics of ritual exchange and religious rejections of exchange

18:00-18:15 Break

18:15-19:15 Keynote

Ann Taves (University of California, Santa Barbara)
Biosemitotics and the mediation of seemingly unmediated experiences

20:00 Dinner

Thursday, June 9

09:30 Coffee

10:00-12:00 Panel 4

Costantino Marmo (University of Bologna)
Medieval theology and theory of signs

Volkhard Krech (Ruhr-University Bochum)
How is a religious sign composed?

Jeppe S. Jensen (University of Aarhus)
Signs of the unseen: normative cognition in the making of the social world

12:00-13:30 Lunch

13:30-15:30 Panel 5

Mohamed Bernoussi (University of Meknès)
The supremacy of the 'Quranic' sign and its impacts on Arabic Muslim culture

Courtney Handman (University of Texas at Austin)
The instable multiplicity of texts: the semiotics of Holy Spirit inspiration in Evangelical Bible translation

Christopher Lehigh (Boston, MA)
The absolute sacred: semiotics, religion, and western art music

15:30-16:00 Coffee

16:00-18:00 Panel 6

Daria Pezzoli-Olgati (University of Zurich)
From sign to context, from representation to multiple receptions: exploring the diffusion of religious images within culture

Annette Wilke (Westfälische Wilhelms-University Münster)
Discourses on immediacy and mediation in classical and modern Advaita Vedanta

Vincenzo Pace (University of Padua)
The other Buddha: leaving monasteries, fighting the enemy

18:00-18:15 Break

18:15-19:15 Keynote

Webb Keane (University of Michigan)
Semiotic transgression

20:00 Dinner

Friday, June 10

09:30 Coffee

10:00-12:00 Panel 7

Bernard Jackson (Liverpool Hope University)
Mediation and immediacy in the Jewish legal tradition

Richard Sherwin (New York Law School)
Post-secular jurisprudence and the visual semiotics of presence

Paolo Heritier (University of Turin)
Legal theology and communication: the meaning of Christian eschatology between immanency and transcendence in contemporary social sciences

12:00-13:30 Lunch

13:30 -15:00 Panel 8

Atsushi Okada (University of Kyoto)
Angel as intercultural medium

Ugo Volli (University of Turin)
'Ani velomalakh': angels as mediums in the Torah

15:00-15:30 Coffee

15:30 - 16:30 Keynote

Michael Silverstein (University of Chicago)
The semiotic varieties of religious experience

16:30-17:30 Round table

20:00 Dinner

Attendance is free but subject to registration.

If you wish to attend the conference, please write an e-mail to:
jenny.ponzo@uni-muenchen.de

Mohamed Bernoussi (University of Meknès)

The supremacy of the 'Quranic' sign and its impacts on the Arabic Muslim culture

In my presentation I would like to tackle a still suspended note dealing with the status of the 'Quranic' sign, and its impacts on the Arabic Muslim Culture.

To deal with this issue, I refer to Professor Khatibi, who relates the superiority of the Arabic Muslim Culture to the original supremacy of a text like that of the *Quran* over all potential texts. He explains this supremacy in a remarkably semiotic manner by saying that: "One of the secrets of the Quran is that it has transformed the letter as 'a sign' to a rhetorical argument as 'the signifier', and has 'cracked' the same sign of its message, of its enunciation, in a [remarkable] manner [so] that the Believer's listening, remains forever suspended, remote and vagabond "(Khatibi 1974: 180).

As a basis, I refer to the citation of Professor Khatibi (1974) about the supremacy of the sign to explain the concept of *Iijaaz* (Challenge) confounded, since its creation, with the *Quran*. Moreover, I will show how this notion has been institutionalized throughout the centuries (AlTabari 310 of Hegira / 922) (471 Jorjani of Al Hegira / 1078) in order to make a reinforced and absolute conception of textuality and '*Ilm*' (the Absolute Knowledge). One of the immediate consequences of *Iijaaz* is to eradicate textuality and the materiality of the 'Quranic' sign to put an end, in a quasi-definitive manner and by the same occasion, to any attempt of intertextuality, if we exclude that of Taha Hussein as it was in the last century.

The impacts of the immateriality of the 'Qur'anic' sign on the Arabic Muslim culture are enormous, and deserve to be approached with extreme seriousness, in a second time, through concrete and precise examples originating from Moroccan culture. This task will be an opportunity to make the semiotics of the religious text and the semiotics of culture 'able to dialogue'.

Thomas J. Csordas (University of California, San Diego)

The somatic semiotics of demonic diagnostics

The 21st century resurgence of exorcism in the Roman Catholic Church marks a new moment in the relation among medicine, rationality, and experience in the contemporary world. Could there be a practice more challenging to post-Enlightenment rationality than that of an exorcist, constantly facing off against an invisible preternatural enemy who by its ontological nature is more intelligent than any human adversary? A principal challenge of ethnographic research on

this phenomenon is to understand the experience of the afflicted (as well as of the exorcist and mental health professionals who consult with them). One approach to this understanding is in terms of the triadic relation among demonic “manifestations,” the afflicted person who exhibits these manifestations, and the demon who possesses the afflicted person. This triad corresponds strikingly to the Peircean semiotic relation insofar as the manifestation is a sign, the afflicted the object of that sign, and the demon its interpretant. On a methodological level, analysis along these lines highlights the point of convergence between phenomenology and semiotics.

Fred Cummins (University College Dublin)

The enactment of collective subjectivities through speaking in unison

Usually, when we think of linguistic communication, we presuppose the exchange of messages, in which each speaking turn adds novel information to the common ground of discourse. What then should we make of the copious repetition found in prayer and ritual? Who is talking to whom, with what effect? And do such “vain repetitions” lead necessarily to an atrophy of meaning, as some have suggested? Looking further afield, many of the formal characteristics of ritualised speech (repetition, rhythmicity, the beginnings of melody, synchronised gestures) are found in other situations in which collective identities are manifested, and collective sentiments are expressed. These domains include the chants of civic protesters and the tribal calls of football fans. Beyond mere repetition, the performativity of joint uttering also finds an important echo in pledges of allegiance to secular authorities.

Contemporary psychological approaches that treat of mind as a distinguished domain, unobservable and solipsistic, have entirely neglected the empirical study of speaking in unison, consigning it to the merely contingent bin of cultural practice. The origin, content, and intentionality of speech, on these received approaches, lie entombed within monadic minds, directly available only to individual subjects, and disconnected from context of any kind.

More recent embodied and enactive approaches provide a framework within which we can return to the voice and its role in the enactment of subjectivity. To understand what it is to speak, we need to undo the contemporary fixation on language as a medium-neutral, intellectual activity, and look back to the role of the voice as it has functioned over millennia, long before widespread literacy allowed texts to float freely, without being necessarily vouched for by speakers.

For the act of uttering is special. In oracles, demonic possessions, and in the antics of ventriloquists, wherever voices emanate, we perceive subjects, brought into being and sustained through the act of uttering. Looking at joint, or unison, speech, we find many kinds of empirical evidence of entanglement among

speaker/listeners (for their very roles are fused), and we can begin to make sense of the notion of the enaction of a collective subjectivity, made manifest and sustained through collective speaking. Now the repetitions appear as something other than redundant—they are the sustaining activity of a collective subject.

Patrick Eisenlohr (Georg-August-University Göttingen)

Voice and the sonic dimensions of religion: semiotic mediation and acoustic atmospheres in Mauritian Muslim devotional practices

Vocal recitation of Urdu devotional poetry in honor of the Prophet of Muhammad in Mauritius highlights the role of voice in religious mediation, transcending its discursive dimensions. In this paper I juxtapose two different analytics that can account for the effects of poetic vocal performance among Mauritian Muslims, which the latter often describe as the awakening of pious emotions through a sensation of being “touched” by the voice of a skilled reciter. One can describe this process of religious interaction in terms of Peircean semiotics, in which audible qualities of the voice align with social formations of value, with relations of indexical iconicity playing key roles for vocal sound as signs. On the other hand, we might also adopt the perspective of a phenomenology of the *Leib* or felt body, whose boundaries are different from those of a body understood in conventional terms. In the tradition of Gernot Böhme and Hermann Schmitz this leads us to the theme of sound as atmospheres, as entities proceeding from objects or persons, filling a pre-dimensional space as they encounter and intermingle with bodies that perceive them. Sound as atmosphere impacts bodies through suggestions of movement. In the example I discuss this is manifest in the sensation of being carried away. My Mauritian interlocutors often relate this sensation to the theme of traveling to Medina (the personal encounter with the Prophet), which is also a chief discursive motif of the poetry. Atmospheric appeal to the *Leib* accounts for the felt immediacy in the encounter with the Prophet so prized among my informants, but such an appeal also needs to be related to the values and narratives of the particular Islamic tradition in question. I suggest that both analytics, vocal sound as signs and atmospheres, are not just tightly interwoven. Their combination also results in a richer account of the sonic dimensions of religion.

Courtney Handman (University of Texas at Austin)

The instable multiplicity of texts: the semiotics of Holy Spirit inspiration in Evangelical Bible translation

As scholars of translation have noted, the process of translation can create the very differences it presupposes. Different speech forms may only become discrete and autonomous languages after a translation is produced. The

singularity of a biblical text, alternatively, is only realized in the process of replicating it in new forms. Bible translators working in Melanesia in the 20th century have struggled with the multiplicity of languages and texts that they have constructed. In following through different moments in a long-standing translation project in Papua New Guinea, they alternated recognition and disavowal of the singularity of the biblical texts being constructed and circulated. Moving between moments of immediate singularity and mediating multiplicities of biblical texts is the semiotic realization of what evangelical Christians themselves consider 'faithful' Holy Spirit-guided translations.

Paolo Heritier (University of Turin)

Legal theology and communication. The meaning of Christian eschatology between immanency and transcendence in contemporary social sciences

The entire tradition of the *Novissimi* in Christian theology is based on the temporal articulation of proximity and eschatological adjournment in the resurrection of Christ, as the only aspect characterizing the Christian religion, as Saint Paul explains (Corinthians 1: 15,14). On the other hand, the temporal enunciations of the link between individual resurrection and the Last Judgement at the end of time, have been historically placed as the foundations of imposing philosophical, legal and social constructions, linked to the problem of communicating the uncommunicable, the divine, the intersection between hope and actuality: it is sufficient to think of Taubes' criticism of the eschatological thinking of Marx and Kierkegaard, and his ambiguous "*Ad Carl Schmitt: Gegenstrebige Fügung*" with the political theology of Schmitt.

The article will show that the question of Christological mediation, between resurrection and parousia, raises a radical anthropological question regarding the basis of social life, and appears inescapable in view of the crisis of social bonds, the theological-juridical sacrificial question. The dilemma for those who must today take on the necessary cost for the anthropological foundation of the institutions – and through which language and which knowledge – in times of radical crisis of the model of the welfare state appears to be a central question of the theory of contemporary social sciences. Finally, in the article, we will consider some of the implications for the theory of communication, prefiguring the perspective of an affective change after the 'linguistic turn' and the 'iconic turn' in philosophy.

Bernard Jackson (Liverpool Hope University)

Mediation and immediacy in the Jewish legal tradition

I come to this issue from the viewpoint of the (non-referential) Greimassian school of semiotics, developing the work of Saussure and Hjelmslev. When we

speak of "Divine Law", we are ascribing the attributes of divinity and law (both being linguistic constructs relative to particular cultures) to particular phenomena. My focus here is not on the enunciation of divine law (entailing the semiotics of revelation), but rather its application: adjudication rather than legislation.

In a study of "Human Law and Divine Justice" in the Hebrew Bible, I have distinguished two models, which I called "monistic" and "dualistic". The former sees the human role in divine justice as integral, while the latter sees it as a delegated form of divine justice, with a degree of autonomy of its own. To an extent, this distinction may evoke that between immediacy (monistic) and mediation (dualistic). At the extremes, we may contrast direct divine justice without any human involvement (other than its perception/recognition within human discourse) on the one hand with adjudication by means of human interpretation of divinely revealed texts on the other hand. Between these two extremes, I identify also "charismatic" (human) justice and institutional divine justice. In this paper I discuss examples of each, commenting on the semiotic features which contribute to the making of their sense. Three texts deserve special attention: Abraham's attempted intervention in divine justice regarding Sodom, Solomon's judgement, and the rabbinic story of the adjudication regarding the "oven of Akhnai".

But Jewish and legal tradition is a continuing one, and the issues of the authority and interpretation of religious legal texts has become ever more acute, in part because of the complete absence of a central authority. This became particularly apparent in the context of a research project I directed, on the problem of the wife whose husband refuses to cooperate with the rabbinic court in divorce proceedings. Despite some positivist approaches to the theory of Jewish law, many traditional scholars doubt the notion that there is one objectively true answer to difficult problems within Jewish law. My own conclusion has been that the system depends far more upon trust than truth, and I believe that a semiotic approach to secular legal theory cannot avoid similar conclusions. In both secular and religious legal theory, we must recognise a distinction between decision-making on the one hand and justification on the other, though the modalities of the construction of trust may differ according to the context.

Naomi Janowitz (University of California, Davis)

Cultures of ineffability

Models of ineffability differ dramatically, despite a tendency to be read as universals. Ancient (Neo-Platonic) and modern (trauma as unspeakable) models depend on completely different notions of what is bedrock to human experiences. In the first example, Damascius (462-538 C.E.) begins his treatise *Problems and Solutions* with a chapter entitled "On the Ineffable." Drawing on Plato (non-being is ineffable) and Proclus (cause is beyond effect), Damascius

pushes the Ineffable past knowing to unknowing, critiquing his predecessors and making the Ineffable even more transcendent. Yet the Ineffable can be reached even for Damascius, as Sara Rappe explains, through self-knowledge (Ahbel-Rappe 2010). This path, and this path alone, avoids fragmentation and deceptive theories of causality. In the end, what is Ineffable is available to the thinker due to a cultural theory of the self.

In the second case, modern conceptualizations of trauma use but distort Freud's theories of trauma (neglecting in particular his theory that trauma entails retro-determination). Popular modern models characterize trauma as single-occurrence historical events that overwhelm the psychic system (Forster 2007, p. 259). According to this theory, traumas were never really experienced in the first place so they remain outside the realm of language (and "outside" the psyche of the person involved yet "inside" them). Another theory of trauma is related more closely to Freud's death wish (structural and therefore non-historical). In this case "historically-induced traumas are little more than local instances of a generalized linguistic or 'structural' predicament, in which words refer beyond themselves only by way of a 'traumatic' abruption into language of a reality that words can neither expel or properly digest (i.e. render representational)" (Forster 2007, p. 262). What is Ineffable is available due to a cultural theory of reality, with reality now located in the body instead of the Self.

Jeppe S. Jensen (University of Aarhus)

Signs of the unseen: normative cognition in the making of the social world

Semiotics and cognition are mostly considered separate realms or dimensions that have separate ontologies. Semiotics is about signs and meanings, what Karl Popper would term 'World 3' consisting of cultural objects, whereas cognition would commonly belong to 'World 2' of the mental. In recent years, theories of 'extended mind' as well as of cognitive semiotics have blurred the lines concerning what is 'inside' and what is 'outside'. Using inspirations from e.g. Michael Tomasello (psychology), John R. Searle, Andy Clark and Christina Bicchieri (philosophy) and from recent work in the cognitive sciences (Vittorio Gallese) I shall demonstrate how the 'normative cognition complex' is a unique human capability that fuses the semiotic and the cognitive in the workings of the human perception of normative information. Indeed, this is what makes society possible and so it could be considered the 'dark matter' of social life. Religious semiotics, then, may be seen as a species of cultural technology where the unseen norms become visible. Empirical examples will be presented.

Webb Keane (University of Michigan)

Semiotic transgression

From the viewpoint of the news-reading Western public, one of the more baffling features of contemporary Islamist militancy is the attack on, or on behalf of, images, things, and words. The sheer otherness of radical Islamists is displayed by what seems to be the excessive seriousness with which they take mere signs. Danish and French cartoons, Salman Rushdie's novel, manuscripts in Timbuktu, ancient Assyrian sculptures and statues of the Buddha, even the tombs of Sufi saints, provoke acts of violence that seem weirdly out of proportion to that which instigates them. In the face of all this, many in the Euro-American north take pride in their own tolerance for what is called "expression." Critics of that response, of course, easily point out that the West has its own history of similar worries and attendant episodes of violence against them. Attacks like these and the responses to them raise some fundamental questions about the nature of mediation, within, at the edges of, and beyond domains considered to be religious. This paper looks at several cases of transgression, in order to gain a comparative perspective on the powers of semiosis and its ideologies, with particular attention to the moralization of form.

Volkhard Krech (Ruhr-University Bochum)

How is a religious sign composed?

The paper argues that religion in its social shape proceeds as communication and that communication is based on chains of signs. Against the background of this conceptualization, the following question arises: How does religion differ from other ways of communication (such as in politics, law, economics, education, health, and arts)? The paper contributes to answering this question by taking a look at the composition of a religious sign as the elementary entity of religious communication. For this purpose, the threefold nature of a sign (Charles S. Peirce) as well as the systemic character of communication (Niklas Luhmann) will be taken into account. Furthermore, the societal function of religion to ultimately cope with contingency on the basis of the code immanent/transcendent will be considered.

Massimo Leone (University of Turin)

The doodling of Jesus, or the unwriting of the Law

The pericope of the adulteress is one of the most famous, quoted, and studied passages in the Gospels. In particular, reams have been written on John 8, 6-8. Interpreters, who have analyzed every detail of it, have variously concentrated on the following questions: 1) Why does Jesus write? 2) Why does he stoop to

write? 3) Why does he write on the ground? 4) Why does he write with his finger? 5) Why does he write twice? 6) Why does he write before and after the famous utterance: “He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her” (KJV)? But the question that most worried interpreters has been: What does Jesus write? The paper will tackle these questions through three moves.

First, it will dwell on practices of writing, common in several cultures, in which doodling on the ground is meant to evoke a space of distance, detachment, and even hierarchical superiority in relation to the Law. Quoted references will include Aristophanes’ *The Acharnians*, among the Greeks, and, among the Arabs, numerous instances in Abū l-Faraj al-Iṣfahānī’s *Kitāb al-aghānī* (*The Book of Songs*), Ibn Khaldun’s *Al-Muqaddima* (*Prolegomena*), and Abū al-Ḥasan’ Alī al-Mas’ūdī’s *Muruj al-dhahab* (*The Meadows of Gold and Mines of Gems*).

Second, the paper will expound on a neglected aspect of scholarship on the pericope: at least since the *Codex Egberti* (10th century), John 8, 6-8 has been transposed into a lavish iconography, which offers an articulate typology of visual interpretations of it. The paper will survey them, and focus, again, on those that iconically “read” the writing of Jesus as doodling. This extensive iconography can be categorized into three typologies. They each stem from a specific historical and cultural context and interpret the writing of Jesus in a particular way. In the first typology (*Jesus writing*), images show Jesus writing and specify the content of such writing. That is the case, for instance, of the *Codex Egberti*, a 10th-century Ottonian Evangelary, according to which Jesus wrote “*Terra terramaccusat*” (in Latin!).

In the second typology (*Jesus doodling*), images show Jesus writing and depict its traces, but do not specify its content; in most cases, they limit themselves to evoke a certain quality of writing, or its alphabet. That is the case, for instance, of Pieter Aertsen’s two renderings of the pericope (1557-58; 1559), in which Jesus clearly writes in Hebrew, although it is not clear what. The paper will point out that, especially in 17th-century Christian painting, this visual reference to the Hebrew script results from knowledge about Jewish texts and liturgy (in particular, *Sotah* 17b), circulating in Christian communities with apologetic goals.

Finally, the third typology (*Jesus pointing*) includes myriads of paintings in which Jesus writes, but the result of his writing disappears; a complex network of signs points at the gesture of Jesus’ writing, but the content of it is left blank. Such is the case of Valentin de Boulogne’s 1620 sublime depiction of the episode.

Third, the paper will conclude by proposing a general interpretive hypothesis: in many exegetic and iconographic readings of the pericope, what Jesus does is actually not writing but un-writing the fundamentalist Law through the exemplary symbolical efficacy of doodling on the ground. A semiotic reading of the corporeal, kinetic, gestural, and graphic significance of doodling in this context will be offered. It will be pointed out, in particular, that doodling (in the pericope

of the adulteress as well as in other contexts) brings about a semi-symbolic system (Hjelmslev) in which mediation of the written religious Law is deconstructed as hypocritical and replaced by a more immediate moral judgment, stemming from direct, non-verbal contact with a dimension that is construed as hierarchically superior to that of the verbal code of the Law. Such immediate contact with transcendence, as opposed to the mediated contact offered by hypocritical immanence, is figuratively rendered through the opposition between the written book and the doodling on the ground.

Costantino Marmo (University of Bologna)

Medieval theology and theory of signs

Differently from what one might think, following Peirce's and Morris's suggestions to divide semiotics into three main domains in a sort of revival of the medieval trivium, theology is the actual field where medieval semiotics was developed. In my contribution I will show various examples from the Early to Late Middle Ages in which the theologians not only worked out specific semiotics to deal with peculiar problems (such as the real presence of Christ's body in the Eucharist or the identity of three persons in the same essence, for instance), but also expressed the first attempts at a general semiotic approach to the interpretation of the Bible as well as of the world. Simon of Tournai, an almost unknown Parisian theologian of the end of the 12th century, is one of the leading characters in this story and he devised his general theory of signification well before any Master of Art in any Medieval University tried either to revive Augustine's classification of signs or to turn Aristotle's minimal remarks on word signification (at the beginning of his *De interpretatione*) into a general theory of signification (as it happened in the 13th and 14th centuries).

Atsushi Okada (University of Kyoto)

Angel as intercultural medium

This paper seeks to focus on the intercultural or inter-religious quality of angelology. Among the earliest Christian documents, some different aspects of Christ as an 'angel' are found (Angel Christology or Angelomorphic Christology). Philo of Alexandria gives meaningful considerations to the similarities among the Logos, Pneuma, and Angelos. There are some testimonies about 'stoicheiatoukosmou' as angel-like elements (Paul, 2 Col.). It is well known that in the Greek mythology some gods and goddesses presenting themselves as messengers with wings reveal an angelic quality (Eros, Thanatos, Nike, Iris etc.). It is said that these Hellenistic deities could date back to the oriental ones (Marduk, Fravaši etc.). In ancient Rome, the presence of Genius, the guiding spirit or tutelary deity of a person, family or place, was believed among the people. In

the iconographies of paleo-Christian art, there are some types of fusion between the Genii and the Judeo-Christian angels. These aspects are revived in the Renaissance art as the representations of 'putti' or 'spiritelli'. The Islamic tradition, on the other hand, has cultivated fertile imaginations of angels ('Mundus Imaginalis' by Henri Corbin). In Buddhism, Tenbu-shin (天部) seem to correspond roughly to the angelic beings. Therefore, the angelic images can be considered as the mediation not only between the sacred and the profane, or the heaven and the earth, but also between the monotheism and the polytheism, the orthodox and the heresy beyond the cultural and religious differences.

Vincenzo Pace (University of Padua)

The other Buddha: leaving monasteries, fighting the enemy

The paper deals with a new Sinhala Buddhist movement, Bodu Bala Sena (literally: Buddhist Power Force), founded in 2012 by two monks in Sri Lanka, short after the – temporary – end of the civil war (1985-2009) in the post-colonial Sinhalese State. The interest in this case study is the emergence in contemporary Buddhism of some movements that present fundamentalist features. In addition to Sri Lanka, there is a similar movement in Myanmar, led by the monk Ashin Wirathu. The common thread in these movements is the social construction of the image of the other as the enemy. In this case, it is Islam (mainly in Myanmar) and, as an alternative, the Christian churches, both Evangelical and Pentecostal.

Such construction works according to three principles: a) identifying within the large corpus of texts of the school of Theravada Buddhism a text *par excellence*, elected as the sacred text, an indubitable and inerrant narrative about the history of Sinhala Buddhism that becomes the history of a whole people; the former also works as a mirror of purity and integrity of the latter; in this way, the text becomes a religious and political hypertext; b) the conversion of symbols, signs and rituals that pertain to the monastic tradition in symbolic resources for collective action in the political and social realm; c) the definition of the other (Muslim or Christian) as a potential threat, contamination and corruption of the moral virtues of Buddhism, considered as the basis and foundation of the social bond and the legitimacy of political power.

Analysing, in particular, the Buddhist leaders' communication styles (including the use of new media), the author intends to show the importance of the process of outsourcing of religious rituals from closed monasteries (*sangha*) to the public squares in revolt. It constitutes the common ground where fundamentalist movements, beyond their historical, cultural and socio-political differences, act in the same way in the process of building the image of the other.

Tatsuma Padoan (SOAS, University of London)

Walking the Sūtra: a nonrepresentational theory of ritual

This paper intends to review some influential theories on ritual in anthropology, and to suggest new ways of conceptualising ritual discourse by using nonrepresentational theories of signification elaborated by Paris School semiotics. Various trends and schools of thought (Bloch 1989; Bell 1992; Kapferer 1980; Schechner 1988; Laidlaw and Humphrey 1994) have in different ways tried to emphasise action over meaning, performance over text, thus implicitly criticising a symbolic view of culture whose major proponent has indisputably been Clifford Geertz (1973). More recently, exponents of the so called “ontological turn” in anthropology (Henare, Holbraad, Wastell 2007; Holbraad 2012), working against a representational portrayal of ethnographic worlds, have ended up rejecting meaning *tout court*, in order to move beyond a divide between nature and society, objects and subjects, which would have characterised much of modernity (see Latour 1993).

In this paper I will argue that the critique of text and meaning, respectively found in ritual studies and in the ontological turn in anthropology, lies on a rather limited conception of ‘sense’, based on a deep-seated dichotomy between language and materiality which was first introduced by Protestant movements (Keane 2007; Bauman and Briggs 2003). I shall try here to use a more operative definition of signification and communication based on Paris School semiotics (Fontanille 2006; Perron and Collins 1989)—distinctively nonrepresentational and anti-cognitivist—in order to analyse a group of mountain ascetics in contemporary Japan that belongs to the Shugendō movement, or “The Way to Ascetic Powers”. This group proposes what I call a ‘semiotics of presence’ that overcomes a division between meaning and action—as well as transcendence and immanence—being based on the practice of a sacred Buddhist scripture inscribed in the materiality of the landscape, whose power would be activated by ritual gestures. Drawing on ethnographic data collected on fieldwork in 2008 and 2009, and more recently in 2014, I will analyse the performance of ritual invocations connected to a particular pilgrimage route—the Katsuraginijūhasshukukyōzuka, or “The Twenty-Eight Sūtra Burial Mounds” of the Katsuragi mountain range, in central Japan—involving ascetics from this group, affiliated to the Shugendō temple Tenpōrinji on the top of Mt. Kongō (1125 m). More specifically, I shall try to move towards a nonrepresentational theory of ritual based on the semiotic concept of “enunciation” (Benveniste 1973; Floch 2000; Fontanille 2006; Latour 2006). This theoretical move will allow us to understand the apparently paradoxical situation of a religious discourse that denies any transcendence of the divine, and in which the more mediation is enacted, the more immediacy is produced.

Daria Pezzoli-Olgiati (University of Zurich)

From sign to context, from representation to multiple receptions: exploring the diffusion of religious images within culture

In the contemporary society, religious symbols circulate in many different fields such as fine arts, popular culture, politics, and economy. Nevertheless, they are used and received as religious signs that, in many cases, challenge traditional religious reception. In fact, religious representation in culture often stimulates new interpretations and tradition processes within religious institutions. This paper aims at exploring the diffusion of religious signs in society from a theoretical and methodological perspective. In a critical review of semio-pragmatic procedures within cultural studies, it discusses the chances of conceiving religious mediation as a dynamic communication process. By focusing particularly on images, it explores the power of visual representation with a particular focus on reception. The theoretical and methodological approaches will be illustrated with various examples of the diffusion of a core Christian motif, the passion of Jesus, in contemporary culture.

Jenny Ponzo (Ludwig-Maximilians-University Munich)

Writing immediacy: epiphany in contemporary European fiction

In Christian tradition, “epiphany” indicates the manifestation of Christ’s incarnated divinity to the Magi. References to similar moments of sudden illumination, of “immediate” knowledge, can be found in other religious traditions, such as Hinduism and Buddhism, as well as in the history of science (e.g. Archimedes’s “Eureka!”). Epiphany is also a recurrent motif in 20th century European literature. Joyce (1944) defined it as “a sudden spiritual manifestation”, a moment of sharpened perception in which a character becomes aware of a new, deeper and astonishing meaning, changing his/her way to interpret reality and the sense of life itself. This paper will look into the techniques with which a sample of literary texts describe with words this spiritual experience and it will reflect on how the texts themselves can be considered as “media” to foster an epiphany in the reader.

Richard Sherwin (New York Law School)

Post-secular jurisprudence and the visual semiotics of presence

The challenge of authorizing the image in the visual economy of law is twofold. First, we must learn the different ethical and aesthetic registers that operate within the different visual economies of our time. This is a matter of visual literacy. It portends the ascendance of visual semiotics as a major player in the theory and practice of law. Second, we must embrace the challenge that

accompanies the exploration of non-conceptual, embodied forms of knowing as we grapple with the ontological (perhaps metaphysical) complexity of corporeal images.

Different kinds of images circulate in different visual economies – from the iconic incarnation of early modern legal emblems to the uncanny surplus of abstract expressionism and sublime forms of representation to the calculated impact of brute sensorial intensity (in horror and delight). In the ethically inflected aesthetic of post-secular jurisprudence, justice is to law as beauty is to art. As distant as an abstract expressionist canvas, as close as any neighbor, or indeed any screen on which the neighbor becomes real to us. That is where we simultaneously behold both the subject and source of law’s judgment and authority. This is how law persists, iconically, perhaps kenotically, as a shimmering corporeal image.

In the modern era, the art work may have “replace[d] the cult of the holy image.” But it is not enough to vouchsafe the visual economy of law in aesthetic terms alone. Law’s visual economy also must be linked to our ongoing commitment to justice. That commitment grows out of a renewed encounter with an interior libidinal source whose ongoing collective investment binds us to the nomos in which we live. We experience this corporeal bond in post-secular paintings, films, and video images on screens large and small.

Ann Taves (University of California, Santa Barbara)

Biosemiotics and the mediation of seemingly unmediated experiences

Semiotic accounts that remain at the level of language and culture fail to explain the sense of immediacy that subjects attempt to capture when they describe experiences as “ineffable” and claim a momentary loss of their sense of self and ordinary spatiotemporal constraints. Understanding such experiences, which the subjects view as unmediated by language until they try to describe them after the fact, illustrates the limits of a purely cultural semiotics and the importance of grounding semiotics in the biosemiotic interpretive process that constitutes minds.

Peter van der Veer and **Tam Ngo** (Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity, Göttingen)

Spirit writing in Vietnam and China

This paper is about various forms of communicating with the spirit world in Vietnam and China. It examines the connection between spirit writing and the loss of the Chinese script in the turn to the alphabet in Vietnam. It further examines the influence of Chinese and Western forms of communicating through

spirit writing with culture heroes, and nationalists politicians. Theoretically it will deal with questions of writing and orality in religious communication.

Ugo Volli (University of Turin)

“Ani velomalakh”: angels as mediums in the Torah

Also in the theological field, communication is one of the most important forms of mediation. Both in the Greek and in the Hebrew text of the Bible, the word used to denominate angels (Gr. *angelos*, Hebr. *malakh*) means “messengers”. Their first task has to be understood as communication. They are divine “media”. Beginning with the apocryphal writings of the “Old Testament”, for instance the book of Jubilees (ch. 2) and more so with the elaboration of Christian theology, Western culture has conceived angels as substantial beings, provided with a permanent existence. But this character is not supported by the Torah. On the contrary, there are many textual hints for a more ephemeral form of existence, just linked to the accomplishment of a task. From a communicative point of view, angels can be better conceived as visible manifestations of divine messages than as personal messengers: their autonomy and agency seem often denied. More than mediators, they appear as the semiotic expression of immediacy. A number of passages is discussed in this paper in order to analyze this delicate balance of mediation and theophany.

Annette Wilke (Westfälische Wilhelms-University Münster)

Discourses on immediacy and mediation in classical and modern Advaita Vedanta

The all-in-one discourse of the Advaita Vedanta, claiming non-dual oneness of self, world, and godhead, was not only a prime model of “eastern mysticism” (from Rudolf Otto to Peter Berger), but also of unmediated “mystical peak experience” in modern mysticism debates (e.g. in Aldous Huxley), vehemently opposed by those who claimed that mystical experience was always culturally and socially mediated and immediacy a sheer illusion (Katz, Penner). This paper explores the past and present insiders’ discourses that present an alternative to this debate and claim instead complex dynamics of immediacy and mediation.

Indeed, the claim of immediacy is found in the original sources (Upanisads, Sankara’s commentaries, Advaita Vedanta treatises), which talk of direct knowledge and experience (*saksat, aparoksa jnana*, etc.), the impossibility of mediation (not reached by words and thoughts) and ineffability (“not this, not that,” etc.). At the same time, however, this immediacy is grounded in mediations, i.e. features and processes of semiosis, reckoned to be absolutely necessary: the Vedic/upanisadic revelation of non-duality, i.e. the “word” as

unique “means of knowledge” (*sabda-pramana*), and a qualified teacher (*guru, acarya*) who is both a well versed scholar (*srotrya*) and himself deeply rooted in experiential non-dual knowledge (*brahmanista*). In keeping with the sacred texts, the teacher must know to communicate the non-communicable and how language is being used to go beyond language, while on the recipient’s side, there is necessity to purify the mind to become a clear mirror able to reflect the “self-luminous” pure, unlimited consciousness, which is, according to the Advaita Vedanta, not only one’s own true self, but also the self of all beings. This reflection happens, the treatises say, in an “unbroken, limitless thought form” (*akhandakara-vrtti*) which mediates the immediacy of limitless consciousness, the true self or subject which can never be objectified.

It is of interest to ask what happens to these classical semiotics of immediacy and mediation in the modern democratization of Vedantic wisdom where the original contexts (one could also speak of secondary sources of mediation), such as Brahminhood, the knowledge of Sanskrit and Veda exegesis, and a withdrawn, contemplative, mostly monastic life, are no more presupposed and where the major teaching becomes the inherent godliness as birthright of everybody. The paper shows that even in such heavy semiotic transformations, where a scholastic and highly formalized teaching tradition turns into a “subjective science of self-perfection” (Swami Chinmayananda) at least one traditional element of mediation remains: the teacher as a living embodiment and sensory form of immanent transcendence and his “living word” and charisma which ensure greater immediacy than the written letter.

Theoretically, the paper is about linguistic and non-linguistic processes of semiosis in a so-called mystical tradition, the Advaita Vedanta’s correlations with theoretical concepts of “mediation”/ “sensational forms” (Birgit Meyer) and “great transcendences” (Thomas Luckmann and Hubert Knoblauch based on A. Schütz), and the dialectics of immediacy and mediation in this tradition.

Robert Yelle (Ludwig-Maximilians-University Munich)

Returning the gift: the semiotics of ritual exchange and religious rejections of exchange

Exchange is a key mode of communication. Following Marcel Mauss’s treatment of the gift, we are accustomed to view exchange with the gods, as occurs in sacrifices of the *do ut des* model, as an attempt to sustain a cycle of reciprocity, the function of which is to mediate good will. As Claude Lévi-Strauss’s analogy between language and kinship exchange suggested, such cycles of exchange are also modes of communication. Friedrich Max Müller already highlighted the problem of communicating between human and divine as the central problem of religion, one that was addressed differently by different traditions, and that in his view received its best solution with the Christian *Logos*.

Focusing on patterns of exchange allows us to move beyond a language-centered semiotics to consider the role that reciprocity, as expressed through other types of signals, may play in creating the ties that bind. One indication of the fruitfulness of this approach is recent applications of game theory to religious behaviors. “Tit-For-Tat” expresses one common strategy that guides such behaviors. Such theoretical models may account for a range of behaviors, not limited to sacrifice, or the exchange of gifts and kin, but also extending to the blood feud, the *lex talionis*, and ideas of reward and punishment in the afterlife, so common that Herbert of Cherbury declared them to be a part of natural religion.

After describing such behaviors in semiotic terms, I take up the challenge of accounting also for those moments when *exchange is refused*: gifts are declined, the sacrifice is rejected, and the model of an afterlife based on quid-pro-quo is dismissed. Some examples are the Śramana movement in ca. 500 BCE South Asia and the Protestant Reformation. Despite their diversity, these moments appear to express in different ways the idea of immediacy, conceived as an escape from mediation. What we call “religion” is found on both sides of this divide: in mediation, in immediacy, and in their interplay.

Getting to Turin

Turin is well served by transportation links; there are several options to reach it.

By plane

Turin has its own international airport, both known as "Torino Caselle" or "Torino Sandro Pertini" (TRN), located 16 kilometers northwest of the city center. From Caselle Airport a shuttle bus will take you to the city center in about 45 minutes. The Sadem shuttle bus stops at both Torino Porta Susa and Torino Porta Nuova, the two main railway stations in Turin. A ticket costs about 6,50 € in the coffee shops near the terminal and 7€ on board. A cab ride from the airport to downtown will cost approx. € 35, depending on the destination.

A reasonable alternative is to fly to Milano-Malpensa (MPX). A shuttle bus connects Malpensa Airport to Corso Vittorio in Turin every 2 hours, taking approx. 90 minutes and costing € 20 each way.

By train

Turin is a nationally and internationally important railway junction and high-speed trains connect it to Europe and to the rest of Italy. The main railway stations are:

- **Porta Nuova** (from/to Roma, Milano, Genova, Firenze, Bologna, Venezia, France), corso Vittorio Emanuele II, 53
- **Porta Susa** (from/to Roma, Milano, Firenze, Bologna, Venezia, Spain and TGV from/to France), piazza XXVII Dicembre, 8
- **Lingotto** (intermediate stop from/to Roma, Genova, Firenze), via Pannunzio, 1
- **Stazione Dora** (from/to Turin's International Airport "Sandro Pertini", timetables in italian), Piazza Baldissera

By car

Six different motorways connect Turin to other major Italian and European cities. The main access roads to the motorway are placed at each cardinal direction of the city. Main distances from Turin:

- Aosta 110 km
- Milan 138 km
- Genova 170 km
- Bologna 332 km
- Firenze 395 km
- Venice 402 km
- Trieste 542 km
- Rome 673 km

By coach

Coaches to national and international destinations stop at the bus terminal in Corso Inghilterra and at Porta Nuova and Porta Susa railway stations.

Further information on how to get to Turin available here:
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