The Semiotic Therapy of Religious Law

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Abstract Religion can bring about social harmony as well as social conflict. Religious law is a key element in both cases. Scholars can explain how religious law changes according to historical and socio-cultural context. They can also help reengineering prescriptions that cause social conflict. Changes in religious law can be explained according to a chronological rhetoric (certain agents cause certain changes) or according to a logical rhetoric (a change acquires its meaning in opposition to other possible changes). The two approaches are complementary, but the semiotics of religious law predominantly adopts the second one. In both cases, the explanation of how a religious law changes and the reengineering of a religious prescription are related activities. The semiotics of religious law is particularly equipped to propose alternatives for conflicting prescriptions. However, there is a difference between showing that some alternatives exist and advocating which alternatives should be taken. Whilst the latter position is similar to that of semiotic guerrilla warfare, the former rather configures the semiotics of religious law as a therapy. Semiotic guerrilla warfare stresses the need to demystify the discourse of power that subjugates individuals or groups to a certain religious law. Semiotic therapy does not focus on demystification but on reconciliation. The task of the semiotic therapy of religious law is to show that situations of social conflict generated by certain prescriptions can be decreased or eliminated by adopting alternative paths of meaning. The semiotic therapist of religious law can be effective in showing these alternatives only if some pragmatic and semantic preconditions are met: a correct involvement with the sets of religious core values at stake and an articulated analysis of the paths of meaning to which these values give rise.

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The role of religion in the contemporary world is increasingly problematic [1]. On the one hand, the symbolic resources of religious cultures are used to establish and maintain a peaceful, non-violent coexistence between different individuals and groups sharing the same environment. On the other hand though, these same symbolic resources are used to generate, perpetuate, or empower situations of violent conflict, for example between believers of different faiths or between believers and non-believers.

Among these symbolic resources, some prescribe what members of a certain religious community should or should not do. They provide a representation, embodied in a corpus of either oral traditions, written texts, or other media, of how members of a certain community should ideally behave. "Religious law" can be tentatively chosen as a label to designate these symbolic resources, the relations between them, and the practices through which these resources are produced, reproduced, and implemented [2].

Among the symbolic resources of religious cultures, religious law is particularly important in determining the problematic role of religion in the contemporary world. Religious law brings about both extraordinary social cohesion (among those who abide by the same religious prescriptions) and exceptional social division (between members of a certain religious community and individuals or groups adhering to a different faith or with no religious affiliation).

Religious law is a changing reality: symbolic resources, relations, and practices that characterize a religious law change according to the historical and socio-cultural context, even within the same religious culture. Scholars of religious and legal studies are therefore confronted with the following question: if religious law changes, what is the best way to describe and explain this change?

Moreover, if religious law is particularly important in determining the role of religion in the contemporary world, as either an agent of peaceful coexistence or violent conflict, can scholars do more than describe and explain the way in which religious law changes? Can they also use this knowledge in order to promote a particular change instead of another? Can they help "engineer" religious law? [3]

1 Chronological Rhetoric versus Logical Rhetoric

Arguments by which changes in religious law are explained generally make reference to two main "rhetorical styles". On the one hand, the way a religious law is at a certain moment of its evolution is explained with reference to the idea of time: this rhetorical style can therefore be defined as "chronological". On the other hand, the way a religious law is at a certain moment of its evolution is explained with reference to the idea of structure, i.e. of logical possibilities within a system: this rhetorical style can therefore be defined as "logical". Arguments usually do not exclusively refer to one of these two rhetorical styles but to a certain combination of both. In some methodologies chronological arguments prevail, whilst logical arguments prevail in other methodologies. Yet, to adopt a predominantly chronological methodology or a predominantly logical one is not a neutral choice, especially in view of the passage from explanation to engineering.

According to chronological rhetoric, a religious law shows a certain state at a certain time in history because this moment in time was preceded by a previous one, in which the same religious law would show a different state. The work of chronological rhetoricians consists of attempts to demonstrate that, through the intervention of certain agents, the first state was superseded by the second.

On the other hand, according to logical rhetoric, a religious law shows a certain state not in relation to a certain time in history, but in relation to its position in a matrix of logical possibilities. In other words, according to logical rhetoric a religious law is explained not in relation to a positivity that is no more (the same religious law in the past) but in relation to negativities that might be (states of the same religious law that are virtually possible given a certain matrix of possibilities). Whilst the predominant concern of chronological rhetoricians is to find out which agents cause change in a given religious law, the main concern of logical rhetoricians is to find out how to better conceive the matrix of virtual possibilities in which a religious law acquires its meaning.

Let us consider the following example: a certain religious law prescribes that no woman belonging to that religious community will be allowed to marry with a man who adheres to a different faith, and that a woman of the community who is found having a sexual relation with a non-believer must be sentenced to death. Scholars who study this prescription will have to find out (1) in which symbolic resources it is embodied (for instance, written texts, oral traditions, images, etc.); (2) what are the relations between these symbolic resources and those that embody related prescriptions (for instance, prescriptions concerning the religious conversion of a non-believer who wants to get married with a woman from the religious community); (3) how this prescription is produced, reproduced, and implemented (for instance, who has the authority to judge and sentence a woman who is accused of not abiding by the prescription).

Arguments predominantly referring to a chronological style try to explain the role of a prescription in a certain religious law by formulating hypotheses on the *origin* of the prescription. For example, they try to demonstrate that the prescription above was introduced when the religious community was a minority within a larger population adhering to a different faith; that it was introduced by religious leaders who feared that allowing women from the religious community to marry non-believers would cause the disappearance of the community itself.

Arguments predominantly referring to a logical style try to explain the role of a prescription in a certain religious law by formulating hypotheses on the *meaning* of that prescription. According to logical rhetoric, indeed, as the meaning of a word cannot be explained with reference to its etymology, so the meaning of a prescription cannot be explained with reference to its origin. As in Saussure's structural linguistics (an eminently logical point of view on language) the meaning of a word must be explained with reference to those linguistic elements that oppose it within a certain linguistic system, so the meaning of a prescription in a certain religious law must be explained in relation to those prescriptions that can virtually replace it.

For example, the meaning of the prescription above (interdiction of marriage between a woman from the religious community and an outsider) must be explained

with reference to the fact that, for instance, a similar prescription does not exist for male members of the same religious community (they can marry female outsiders); but it must be explained also with reference to the fact that, in a system of virtual possibilities regulating marriage between insiders and outsiders of a religious community, the religious law might be diametrically different. For instance, symbolic resources of the same religious culture could be used to embody a series of prescriptions interdicting marriage between male insiders and female outsiders, whilst permitting marriage between female insiders and male outsiders.

The chronological point of view on religious law, which tries to explain its prescriptions by formulating hypotheses on their origin, and the logical point of view on religious law, which does so by formulating hypotheses about their meaning, are not mutually exclusive but complementary. On the one hand, changes introduced in a religious law by certain agents must be explained as actualizations within the system of virtual possibilities in relation to which prescriptions of that religious law acquire their meaning (the history of a religious law is therefore a product of its structure). On the other hand, such system must be explained in relation to the way certain agents actualize some of its possibilities through time while leaving other possibilities in a virtual state (the structure of a religious law is therefore a product of its history).

The semiotics of religious law adopts a predominantly logical rhetoric. It studies the meaning of the prescriptions of a certain religious law by considering them as actualizations within a system of virtual possibilities. What symbolic resources are used to embody the prescriptions of a religious law? Which symbolic resources are excluded from embodying such prescriptions? Which relations obtain between these prescriptions? Which relations do not obtain between them? Which practices are adopted to produce, reproduce, and implement the prescriptions of a religious law? Which practices are not adopted?

Systems of virtual possibilities elaborated by the semiotics of religious law as hypotheses in order to explain the meaning of certain prescriptions are semiotic matrixes. For instance, explaining the meaning of a prescription in a religious law according to which women can inherit only half of what men in the same position do, implies the formulation of a semiotic matrix containing at least three virtual possibilities: (1) women and men in the same position inherit in the same way; (2) women inherit less than men; (3) women inherit more than men. Two of these virtual possibilities in the semiotic matrix remain virtual in the religious law, whilst one of them was actualized by certain agents (the identification of which is a matter of chronological rhetoric). From the semiotic point of view, the meaning of the prescription above stems exactly from the fact that possibilities (1) and (3) remain virtual, while (2) is an actuality.

A further step in the semiotic inquiry consists in understanding which symbolic resources are adopted by a religious culture in order to embody the prescription above: oral traditions, written texts, written texts that are considered as composed by a transcendent agent, etc. The meaning of the prescription will not change accordingly; however, the adoption of such or such embodiment will influence the practices through which the prescription is produced, reproduced, and implemented. The analysis of these practices is a third step in the semiotics of religious law [4].

2 Explaining Religious Law versus Engineering Religious Law

Both the chronological rhetoric and the logical one can be adopted in order not only to explain the state of a religious law at a certain moment of its evolution (either as the effect of some agents or as a possibility within a matrix), but also in order to elaborate some hypotheses on how this state might be transformed into a different one. The two approaches are not mutually exclusive but complementary: for instance, establishing which agents introduced a prescription in a religious law, according to which homosexuality must be punished by death, can be useful to understand which other agents might eliminate this prescription. Similarly, explaining the meaning of this prescription as an actualization within a matrix of possibilities immediately entails the following question: which symbolic resources can be activated in order to de-actualize a certain prescription and actualize a different one? For instance, which symbolic resources, in a given religious culture, can be used to embody a prescription according to which homosexuality is not punished but tolerated?

The arguments of both the chronological rhetoric and the logical one imply a critical point of view on religious law, as either the product of history or the manifestation of a structure. They both elaborate a meta-discourse on religious law according to which (1) religious law is intrinsically subject to changes; (2) religious law is intrinsically subject to alternatives.

Logical arguments that explain the meaning of certain prescriptions of a religious law by placing them in a semiotic matrix of virtual possibilities may emphasize the changing and relative nature of these prescriptions even more than chronological arguments do. Explaining the meaning of a prescription, its symbolic resources, its relations to other prescriptions, its practices of implementation, with reference to other symbolic resources, relations, and practices that oppose those actualized within the semiotic matrix, implicitly means comparing a religious law *as it is* with a religious law *as it might be* [3]).

Is this sufficient to say that the semiotics of religious law is intrinsically political? That its view on the structure and meaning of religious law is such that it inevitably gives rise not only to an explanation of how a religious law changes, but also to a proposal of how a religious law should change? Is there no difference between the way in which semiotics explains the logical structure of a religious law and the way in which semiotics promotes the reengineering of this structure along different lines (according to different actualizations within the same semiotic matrix)?

3 Semiotic Guerrilla Warfare versus Semiotic Therapy

Attributing an implicit political role to the semiotics of religious law reminds one of the concept of "semiotic guerrilla warfare", often invoked by Umberto Eco and other scholars especially in the 1970s and 1980s [5]. According to these semioticians, power (be it economic, political, military, cultural, gendered, etc.) often achieves its evil goals by means of a discourse that persuades its receivers that reality is different from how it actually is, by distorting certain characteristics of

reality through deceitful representations. The role of semiotic guerrilla warfare is therefore that of revealing these distortions, of unmasking these representations, by adopting a meta-language that exposes both their discrepancies with reality and their internal contradictions. According to this conception the main purpose of a semiotician of religious law would be to expose how, for instance, the same symbolic resources of a certain religious culture are used both to affirm the principle that believers must be free and to embody prescriptions that support the enslavement of non-believers.

Historically, semiotics has been used more to elaborate various kinds of persuasive discourse (in advertisement, in political propaganda, in visual communication, etc.) than to demystify it. However, this is not the most important point. The central issue is the following: does the semiotics of religious law, with its tendency to explain prescriptions as actualizations within a matrix of virtual possibilities, implicitly involve semiotic guerrilla warfare?

A useful point of departure for answering this question is Bernard Jackson's *Making Sense in Jurisprudence* [6]. Here, Jackson seems to foresee a minimalist program for the semiotics of (religious) law: "the semiotic endeavor always operates *ex post facto*: it seeks to provide an explanation of how meaning was actually created, not what meaning will or could be created" [6]. This definition of the operational modality of the semiotics of (religious) law seems to be quite different from the idea of semiotic guerrilla warfare. Given the prescription of a certain religious law, semiotics tries to understand its meaning by placing it in a semiotic matrix, where the meaning of the prescription emerges from its opposition to other possible prescriptions that are not actualized in the matrix. However, this does not imply that semiotics actually advocates the actualization of these virtualities.

For instance, the semiotics of religious law can explain the meaning of a prescription according to which an unmarried woman must ask the permission of her father before marrying, by opposing this prescription to other possibilities that are not actualized within the semiotic matrix of that religious law: for example, a prescription where permission is required from the woman's mother. Nevertheless, this does not imply that the semiotic meta-discourse advocates the actualization of this virtuality. Virtualities are evoked in order to explain the meaning of a prescription in the semiotic matrix of a religious law and not in order to replace that prescription.

However, as Jackson writes in the continuation of the passage mentioned above, this does not imply either that "the form of meaning which was actually created was the only form of meaning which could have been created in the circumstances" [6]. On the contrary, a prescription is meaningful, and can therefore be the object of a semiotic analysis only insofar as it can be replaced by another prescription that interprets the symbolic resources of a religious culture in a different way. A deterministic conception of religious law, according to which, given the symbolic resources of a religious culture, they can give rise to one, and only one, interpretation, and embody one, and only one, series of prescriptions, is contrary to the most central presuppositions of semiotics (meaning is a non-deterministic phenomenon), but is contrary also to how religious law usually works.

In no religious culture, not even in the most rigid and "fundamentalist" ones, can those who have the power to produce, reproduce, and implement the prescriptions of a religious law claim that these prescriptions are deterministically derived from the symbolic resources of that religious culture. On the contrary, interpretative techniques are developed in order to enable the passage from symbolic resources (written texts, oral tradition, sacred texts) to prescriptions, and from prescriptions to their implementation [7, 8].

As a consequence, the semiotics of religious law is likely to explain the meaning of a certain prescription by opposing it to its possible alternatives, as it is likely to explain the meaning of a certain interpretation by contrasting it with other possible interpretations; however, this is not tantamount to saying that semiotics advocates these alternative prescriptions, or these alternative interpretations. The subtle, but fundamental relation, between explaining differences and advocating them can be evoked through a comparison between the concept of semiotic guerrilla warfare, mentioned above, and the concept of semiotic therapy, proposed below.

Nutritional therapy is a particularly suitable example in order to pinpoint this relation. A religious law adopts some of the symbolic resources of a religious culture in order to produce, reproduce, and implement a series of prescriptions that represent the behavior of an ideal believer. Analogously, a gastronomic style adopts some of the edible resources of a food culture in order to produce, reproduce, and implement a series of recipes that represent the behavior of an ideal cook. Both the prescriptions of a religious law and the recipes of a gastronomic style can be explained from the point of view of a chronological rhetoric (which agents introduced fast food in Italian gastronomic styles) or from the point of view of a logical rhetoric (the meaning of fast food can be explained as an actualization within a matrix of virtual possibilities, for example as opposed to "slow food").

Let one consider now the situation of a man who develops gout and consults a nutritional therapist. On the basis of both her scientific encyclopedia and her knowledge of the man's gastronomic style, the therapist formulates the hypothesis that the man has developed gout because he eats too much meat. The therapist will therefore explain to the man that his gastronomic style is not the only one, but one of the many that are possible given the semiotic matrix of virtual possibilities in which this gastronomic style acquires its meaning. Several options will be available in order to change this style. Some of them are radical: the man can abandon his food culture and become vegetarian, so completely excluding meat from his diet. Less radical changes include the possibility to modify the presence of meat in the man's gastronomic style, for example adopting different recipes or different styles of consumption.

In any event, a fundamental difference exists between the therapist describing to the man the gastronomic alternatives from which he might wish to choose, and the therapist encouraging the man to choose one of these alternatives. The therapist is of course likely to encourage the man to choose an alternative that solves the man's problem, that is, an alternative where the consumption of meat is lower. However, this alternative can be promoted by the therapist and accepted by the man only insofar as they share the same set of core values: what matters most is having a long and painless life, and gastronomic styles must be tailored in order to achieve this

goal. The therapist adopts this view regarding life because she is professionally obliged to do so (mainstream nutritional therapists are trained to adopt this point of view), while the man demonstrates that he is inclined to adopt the same point of view by the very fact of his deciding to consult a therapist.

Nevertheless, let us consider the case of a teenager who has developed anemia. Her parents take her to consult a nutritional therapist, who finds (on the basis of both her scientific encyclopedia and an analysis of the teenager's gastronomic patterns) that the cause of the girl's anemia is her adhesion to veganism. In this case too the meaning of the teenager's meals can be explained by considering them as actualizations within a semiotic matrix of virtual possibilities, and mainly in opposition to the way her non-vegan parents prepare and consume their meals. In this case too the therapist can propose to the teenager a series of alternative paths. The most radical one will be the re-introduction of red meat in the girl's meals. Less radical alternatives will be the re-introduction of fish or eggs.

However, the case of the anemic teenager is different from the case of the man with gout. The man with gout enjoys meat, he would like to eat it as much as possible, and he is actually reluctant to eliminate this source of pleasure from his life. Yet, the value of a long and painless life is more important to him than the value of a short and hedonistic life, so he accepts consulting the therapist, acknowledging her superior scientific knowledge, and adopting some of the alternatives that are proposed by her so that he can better achieve his main goal. On the other hand, the teenager does not want a long and painless life. This is not her core value, the one that determines her worldview, her lifestyle, and, as a consequence, her gastronomic style, the way she considers some edible elements of reality as gastronomic resources, whilst other edible elements are considered by her solely as animals, and never as things that she might eat. The core value of the teenager is being able to live without killing or benefiting from the killing of other animals, not being able to have a long and painless life.

This example hopefully clarifies the difference between semiotic guerrilla warfare and semiotic therapy. In semiotic guerrilla warfare, the semiotician will try to persuade the teenager that, for instance, the real meaning of her gastronomic style does not depend on the opposition between eating animals and not eating animals, but on the opposition between eating like her parents (who happen to eat animals) and not eating like her parents. As a consequence, if the teenager does not eat meat (a behavior that is scientifically proved to be a likely cause of anemia) because she wants to oppose her parents' point of view on life, learning how to oppose this point of view through different symbolic resources (for example through words) will help the teenager to abandon her veganism.

In other words, in semiotic guerrilla warfare there is a tendency to conceive of the subject (in this case, the teenager) as a captive that semiotic guerrilleros must free with their ambushes, as a subject in constant need of demystification. In semiotic guerrilla warfare, the matrix in relation to which the subject explains the meaning of her behavior is never considered as the correct one, but one that the subject has adopted uncritically, moved by the persuasive discourse of (economic, social, political, military, parental, etc.) power. Semiotic guerrilla warfare must

therefore reframe the subject's behaviors, explain their meaning in relation to a different semiotic matrix, and propose alternatives on the basis of this reframing.

Semiotic guerrilla warfare tends to produce a discourse in which the subject is characterized as unable to understand the meaning of her behavior as lucidly as the semiotician does. From a certain point of view, this has a paradoxical result: a subject that is characterized by semiotic guerrilla warfare as in need to be freed from the persuasive discourse of power is placed in a situation where she is subjugated to a new persuasive discourse, albeit one that purports to free the subject from every subjugation [9].

Semiotic therapy does not think that the subject is unable to understand the meaning of her behaviors properly. The teenager eats how she eats for the reasons she gives: she does not want to benefit from the killing of any animal. The therapist will not encourage her to "convert", and to abandon her veganism. The therapist's duty is different.

She will explain to the teenager that out of the possible edible elements of reality (basically, everything that is organic, with the exclusion of poisonous elements) a food culture selects some gastronomic resources: some food cultures include horse-meat, for instance, whilst other resolutely exclude it. Given a certain food culture, then, and given its set of gastronomic resources, groups and individuals use them to prepare meals (according to more or less codified recipes) and to consume them (according to more of less codified rules). The therapist will also explain that gastronomic styles acquire their meaning and embody their values because they are in opposition to other gastronomic styles that embody different, and sometimes opposite core values. The most important value for those groups and individuals that include filet Stroganoff in their gastronomic styles is not the respect of animal life, but the pleasure that they get from eating meat. On the other hand, the most important value for vegans is not the pleasure that derives from eating certain gastronomic resources, nor the fact that these gastronomic resources can help individuals to have long and painless lives but the fact that no animal life has been terminated in order to provide for those gastronomic resources.

The nutritionist can be professionally trained to believe that the core value at the basis of a gastronomic style must be having a long and painless life; yet, she will not persuade the teenager to adopt the same core value. She will accept that different food cultures, and different gastronomic styles, are underlain by different sets of core values. She will accept the fact that persuading the teenager to abandon her values in order to accept those of her parents or those of the nutritionist, as semiotic guerrilla warfare would suggest, is a form of ethical imperialism, and ultimately a form of violence.

Analogously, there is a difference between explaining the prescriptions of a religious law as actualizations within a matrix of virtual possibilities and advocating the reengineering of a religious law so that the way in which it represents the ideal behavior of a community of believers might embody a different worldview and a different set of core values. For instance, let us consider the case of a religious law that imposes the payment of a tax on every non-believer who happens to live in the community under its rule. This prescription is considered by the religious community as embodied in the symbolic resources of its religious culture

(for instance, in a passage of its sacred texts), and is reproduced and implemented through practices that are considered as appropriate by the religious community (a group of religious officers that determines those who must pay the tax, how much they must pay, with what cadency, which sanction to punish transgressors with, etc.). From the semiotic point of view, this prescription acquires its meaning within a semiotic matrix, where different prescriptions might be actualized: for instance, a prescription that imposes a tax on believers only, while exempting non-believers from paying every form of religious tax, or a prescription where people pay tax not according to their religious affiliation, but according to census. Every prescription implies a different interpretation of the symbolic resources of the religious community, and refers to a different set of core values: for believers who adopt the prescription of imposing a tax on non-believers, what matters the most is to discriminate between those who are inside the religious community and those who are outside. The prescription according to which no tax is imposed on non-believers refers, on the other hand, to a different set of core values, according to which discrimination between believers and non-believers is not central, or at least must not be embodied by patterns of tax contributions.

Dealing with the prescription above, semiotic guerrilla warfare will embrace a set of core values (in this case, the value of tributary equality among members of a community) and claim that the prescription is nothing but a form of persuasive religious discourse through which an opposite set of values (in this case, the value of tributary inequality among members of a community) is maintained at the center of the community's worldview. Dealing with the same prescription, semiotic therapy might also adhere to a set of core values (which might happen to be in opposition to those the religious prescription refers to), but will not claim that those who support the prescription must be freed from the persuasive discourse of religion by the persuasive meta-discourse of semiotics. The therapist will simply show that alternative prescriptions are possible, and that alternative prescriptions refer to a different set of values.

There is, indeed, an implicit political dimension in elaborating the semiotic matrix in relation to which the meaning of the prescriptions of a religious law is explained: this elaboration is not neutral, nor is the epistemological choice itself of explaining the meaning of a prescription by adopting a structural, semiotic point of view. Yet, there is a conceptual gap between showing alternative paths that a religious law *might* take, although within a semiotic matrix that has been elaborated also in accordance with the core values of the therapist, and claiming that these alternative paths *should* be taken. The first operation is semiotic therapy, the second is semiotic guerrilla warfare. The first is ethical relativism, the second is ethical imperialism. The first does not place the meta-discourse of semiotics at a superior ethical level in relation to the discourse of religious law, the second implicitly establishes a hierarchy between the meta-discourse of semiotics and that of religious law. The first does not deny that the meta-discourse of semiotics too can be explained within a meta-semiotic matrix which refers to a set of core values the adhesion to which goes beyond rationality; the second denies the rationality of the discourse of religious law in order to affirm that of the semiotic meta-language [10].

Showing that alternative prescriptions are possible within the semiotic matrix of a religious law, clarifying the manner in which a certain way of defining the symbolic resources of a religious community, the prescriptions of its religious law, and its practices of implementation inevitably embody a set of core values, is already an important task for the semiotics of religious law and for semiotic therapy. However, what is characteristically expected from therapy is not only an explanation of how reality is in relation to how it might be, but also a transformation of reality. Can the project of transformation of a religious law be undertaken without adopting the imperialistic ethics of semiotic guerrilla warfare?

4 Semiotic Demystification versus Semiotic Reconciliation

Let one consider the example of the vegan teenager again. Here what is expected from the therapist is not that she persuades the teenager of a different set of core values, for example that endorsed by the girl's parents. The therapist must respect the fact that the core values underlying the gastronomic style of the teenager are different from those underlying the gastronomic style of her parents, or the gastronomic style endorsed by mainstream nutritional therapists. At the same time, the therapist cannot deny the fact that the teenager's gastronomic style is creating a conflict of values: her desire not to eat animals conflicts with her parents' desire to see her in good health. The aim of the therapist is therefore that of reconciliation. Not semiotic demystification, but semiotic reconciliation. The therapist must show the teenager that there is a way in which she can change her gastronomic style without betraying the core values that underlie it; at the same time, the therapist must show the teenager's parents too that such a way exists, that their daughter can remain a vegan without putting her life in danger.

The most important task of semiotic therapy is also the most difficult one. In most cases, an alternative choice within the semiotic matrix that allows for the reconciliation of conflicting sets of core values is not visible to those who adhere to these sets of values; indeed, conflict arises exactly because this conciliatory alternative is present in the semiotic matrix but is invisible to the parties in conflict. The first duty of a semiotic therapist is therefore to develop a well-articulated matrix in relation to which both actualizations and virtualities acquire their meaning. The more articulated this matrix is, the more likely it will be that the semiotic therapist finds an unexplored path within the matrix that is able to reconcile conflicting sets of core values [11].

5 Insider Semiotic Therapy versus Outsider Semiotic Therapy

Does this mean that semiotic therapists do not endorse any set of core values that could make them blind in relation to certain virtual possibilities within the (meta-) semiotic matrix in which their therapeutic discourse acquires its meaning? Does this mean that the worldview of semiotic therapists is never in conflict with that of other groups or individuals? Answering "yes" would be tantamount to re-proposing an

unlikely representation of semiotics and semioticians, one in which semiotic therapists are like superhuman creatures able to transcend conflicts of values and bring about supreme harmony where common people see only the possibility of conflict [9].

Consider, for example, the case of a semiotician who is dealing with a prescription in the religious law of a certain religious community that interdicts research on stem cells. The semiotician might favor this kind of research, and have progress in scientific knowledge among the core values of her worldview. Yet, if the attachment to this value is such that the semiotician cannot even start working at an analysis meant to bring about reconciliation between those who oppose stem cell research and those who favor it, the semiotician is not in a good position to carry on their therapeutic task. The task should be left to someone else. Otherwise, there would be a situation similar to that of a nutritional therapist who is an animal rights activist and a convinced vegan, and who is asked by the parents of a teenager to convince their daughter to give up veganism in order to eat meat.

The worldview of the semiotic therapist should not be too close to that of one of the parties in conflict. However, the worldview of the semiotic therapist should not be too different from that of the parties in conflict either. If being *super partes* is a position semiotic therapists cannot take, since they too are entangled with the actualizations of a certain semiotic matrix, a position of equidistance is indispensable in order for the semiotic therapist to carry on a project of reconciliation.

Let one consider the example of a religious law that prescribes that divorce cannot be granted to a married woman until her husband accepts to do so, even if a religious court has declared that all the conditions exist for the woman to be granted divorce. The semiotic therapist should not be too involved with potential conflicts that arise from this prescription. She should not be, for example, a woman from that community who is exactly in the situation addressed by the prescription. The therapist should also not be a conservative religious leader who claims that no changes whatsoever can be made in the law of the religious community as far as relations between wife and husband are concerned.

However, the semiotic therapist should also not be too little involved with potential conflicts that arise from the prescription either. A semiotic therapist who is seen as a complete outsider by the religious community whose law is at stake will never be able to bring about a process of reconciliation. From the point of view of the pragmatics of the semiotic therapy of religious law, the therapist should therefore be a kind of interpreter, considered by both parties in conflict as able to communicate with them [10].

The main question here is: should the semiotic therapist be situated within the religious community whose law is at stake to such a degree as to be a believer of that community? The semiotic therapist of religious law should certainly not be a disbeliever, someone who tends to despise religious cultures, their symbolic resources, their prescriptions and their practices [12]. She should be recognized as a valid interlocutor by the religious community. However, problems might arise also in the case where the semiotic therapist is too much of an insider. Take, for example, the law of a religious community X that prescribes that those who belong to the religious community Y can be enslaved by members of X. Either a complete

insider of *X* or a complete insider of *Y* will not easily be able to carry on a process of semiotic reconciliation between the sets of core values of the two religious communities.

Anyway, answering the question of how much on the inside, or how much on the outside of a religious community a semiotic therapist should be in order to carry on a process of semiotic reconciliation within the religious community or between the religious community and outside individuals or groups is impossible for the following reason: semiotic therapy cannot have as its precondition what is the result of its activity. If the members of a religious community believe that following a certain prescription is fundamental in order for them to be able to define themselves as members of that community, and if the fact that this prescription exists and is implemented generates conflicts with other sets of core values, the task of the semiotic therapist is exactly that of showing members of the religious community that they can modify the way in which the prescription is produced, reproduced and implemented so that (1) they do not cease to consider themselves as members of that community and (2) the conflict of sets of core values brought about by the prescription disappears or decreases. In other words, the semiotic therapy of religious law consists, to a certain extent, in a reengineering of beliefs. If being a believer of a religious community means embracing the idea that nothing in the symbolic resources, prescriptions, and practices of the law of that community can be changed, then a semiotic therapist cannot be a believer, since change is exactly the task of their activity. On the other hand, if being a believer of a religious community is defined in a more flexible way, not according to a discrete logic (yes or no, in or out, belief or disbelief) but according to a continuum logic, then a semiotic therapist can both be a believer of a certain religious community *and* work for some problematic elements of its culture (including the prescriptions of religious law) to change.

But what does it mean exactly to conceive of a religious culture, and specifically a religious law, according to a continuum logic? Here again the need to develop a well articulated semiotic matrix in order to explain the meaning of the prescriptions of a religious law is fundamental. A semiotic matrix is a heuristic hypothesis. The more this hypothesis takes into account all the elements of a religious culture, the more it will be suitable to help the semiotic therapist to find virtual possibilities that have not been actualized by a certain religious community, and that it would be convenient to actualize in order to solve situations of conflict and violence.

The question of how to elaborate this matrix is however another story that cannot be dealt with in the present article.

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