Petitition and Repetition

On the Semiotic Philosophy of Prayer

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> And this conceit well imprinted in mynde,
> will kepe it from wauering in the vain thonghtes,
> and will make it more attentiue and hedefull:
> werby deuocion is soner kindled; without
> whiche prayer yeeldeth small fruit.
> <div align="right">(Bucke 1971 (1589), p. 14)</div>

> Bupsaye! Boukhwari! I pray you. I am not
> angry with you. Remain with me and let me
> sneeze. Give me sleep and let me live so that I
> can go my way, so that I can find an antelope
> in the forest and hoist it on my shoulders, so
> that I can go and kill Ndlopfou bou kene, an
> elephant. Now it is enough, oh, my nose.
> <div align="right">Bantu prayer in praise of sneezing</div>
> <div align="right">(Di Nola and O'Connor 1961, p. 11)</div>

> Prayers are the daughters of great Zeus, and
> they are lame of their feet, and wrinkled, and
> cast their eyes sidelong.
> <div align="right">(*Iliad* 9.502)</div>

ITALIAN TITLE: *Petizioni e ripetizioni: sulla filosofia semiotica della preghiera.*

ABSTRACT: The article is divided into two interconnected sections. The first seeks to characterize the semiotics of prayer and its relevance for a general semiotic anthropology of meaning. Through in–depth analyses of insights from central modern and contemporary philosophers (William James, Søren Kierkegaard, Immanuel Kant, T.R. Miles) as well as from major Christian thinkers (Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, John Calvin), three essential elements of the semiotic philosophy of prayer are discussed: "the inevitability of prayer", "the distribution of agency", and "the embodiment of language". A tendency is detected within the

history of Christianity, moving toward an increasing intellectualization of prayer that results in affirming its inevitability also beyond religion, in emphasing the reflexive self–empowerment of its agency, and in advocating the semiotic disembodiment of its language. The second section of the article exemplifies this tendency through a case–study: an inquiry, from the points of view of both cultural history and cultural semiotics, upon the rosary or other similar "praying devices". Focusing on the history and semiotic role of the rosary in Christianity, the article describes its evolution as stemming from a tension between the principles mentioned above and some opposite trends, leading toward the confessional entrenchment of prayer, the attribution of its agency to the divine addressee, and the adoption of a formulaic language based on repetition. In conclusion, the purpose of a cultural semiotics of prayer is determined in the need to understand the fine mechanisms of this dialectics and its impact on the signification patterns of religions.

1. The semiotic philosophy of prayer

The words 'prayer', 'worship', and 'ritual' denote complexly intertwined semantic fields (Kreinath, Snoek, and Stausberg 2007). They cannot be easily distinguished into separate entities nor conflated into a single unit. Such complexity increases when these or similar terms are considered in other natural languages. Furthermore, the multifarious series of phenomena to which these words refer can be studied according to a variety of approaches. The multifariousness of such a topic as 'the semiotics of worship' was clear at the outset of the series of research and publication activities that CIRCE, the Center for Interdisciplinary Research on Communication at the University of Torino, has devoted to it. It has been confirmed by the multiplicity of papers that have addressed this subject during the 2011 Early Fall School of Socio–Semiotics at Sozopol, a selection of which is published in the present collection. Each paper was characterized by a different approach and uncovered a particular facet of the complex research object.

Yet, despite the complexity of the topic and the variety of perspectives, it was evident at the inception of the research program that its multiple activities featured a common denominator: from the semiotic point of view, prayer, worship, and ritual are not interesting primarily

as religious phenomena, but as intellectual objects that encourage and facilitate reflection on a more general subject, a subject which is of essential concern for semiotics and the other humanities. The symposium has corroborated this hypothesis too: studying the semiotics of prayer, worship, and ritual leads to novel insights into a broader research area, which can be tentatively labeled as 'the general semiotic anthropology of meaning'.

The ambition of analyzing such distinctively religious entities as prayer, worship, and ritual in order to gain fresh knowledge about meaning also in non–strictly religious areas of the human predicament justified the adoption of the word "beyond" in the title of the research program: exploring the semiotics of worship "beyond religion" means not only that some of the characteristics of worship can be found in non–religious phenomena too, but also that the semiotic analysis of religious worship conduces to new interpretations of some fundamental features of the human species, language, and cultures. The semiotic analysis of religion is a conceptual laboratory in which mental experiments can be formulated in order to understand some quintessential elements of the human nature. This does not mean, of course, that the human nature is quintessentially religious — at least not in the common acceptation of the word 'religion' —, but that religion is an expression of something that, in the human nature, is quintessential.

The present article will not try to summarize the abundance of insights that have been gained during the research symposium but will deepen three of them in particular: for the moment, they can be evocatively referred to as 'the inevitability of prayer'; 'the distribution of agency'; and 'the embodiment of language'.[1] Adopting a research and presentation style that is characteristic of the present author, such vast subjects will be dealt with not only from the general and abstract point of view of a semiotic philosophy of religion (part I), but also from the particular, concrete, and nevertheless revealing point of view of a specific case–study (part II): the semiotic practice of the rosary in world religions and, in particular, in Catholic Christianity.

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1. The bibliography on prayer is vast; on the issues of the semiotic philosophy of prayer dealt with by the present article, cfr. in particular Di Nola and O'Connor 1961; Phillips 1965; Leonard 1981; Brümmer 1984; Appleton 1985; Paloma and Gallup 1991; Sweeney 2000.

More will be said later about the reasons for choosing such peculiar subject. For the instant being, the three philosophical issues at stake will be briefly enunciated through the quotation and comment of some key–authors of the philosophical and semiotic reflection on prayer, worship, and ritual. As it was pointed out earlier, these three words correspond to phenomena that are related but not identical: ritual is not only worship and worship is not only prayer, at least according to the common English semantics. However, for the sake of conciseness, from this point on the generic term 'prayer' will be used to refer to these three groups of phenomena. Hopefully, new elements for a more precise definition of their semantic fields will emerge during the article.

1.1. *Inevitability of prayer*

What does it mean, then, "inevitability of prayer"? It does not mean, it is evident, that human beings are doomed to pray — at least not if the word 'prayer' is interpreted according to its common, religious acceptation. If this was the case, the hypothesis of the "inevitability of prayer" would be immediately falsified by the evidence that a vast number of human beings show no inclination to pray. It means, on the contrary, that the particular semiotic practice designated by the term 'prayer' contains features that are essential in order to understand the human predicament, and in particular the human relation with meaning and language. Two different approaches, and as many key–authors, can introduce the semiotic idea of the "inevitability of prayer". The first approach is that of the psychological anthropology of prayer, best exemplified by William James. In a much quoted passage of the *Psychology*, the author of *The Varieties of Religious Experience* writes:

> We hear, in these days of scientific enlightenment, a great deal of discussion about the efficacy of prayer; and many reasons are given us why we should not pray, whilst others are given us why we should. But in all this very little is said of the reason why we *do* pray, which is simply that we cannot *help* praying. It seems probable that, in spite of all that "science" may do to the contrary, men will continue to pray to the end of time, unless their mental nature changes in a manner which nothing we know should lead us to expect. The impulse to pray is a necessary consequence of the fact that

whilst the innermost of the empirical selves of man is a Self of the *social* sort, it yet can find its only adequate *Socius* in an ideal world.

(James 1984 (1892), p. 172)

The density of such quotation is such that it requires a thorough analysis. In the beginning of the passage, James polemically refers to a trend of research that, at least since the Enlightenment on, has tried to scientifically test the efficacy of prayer, and in particular of that form of it that is technically defined as 'verbal petitional prayer', i.e., prayer whose main purpose is to induce a transcendent being to modify a certain state of the immanent reality according to the desiderata of the worshiper.

The first instance of such study is the research whose results the famous scientist Francis Galton published in 1872. Galton analyzed the average life expectancy of several wealthy English groups and found that members of the royal houses had the lowest average life expectancy. Given the widespread tradition of praying for royalty, Galton concluded that petitional prayer did not have any objective value, since it had no measurable statistic effect on the longevity of those prayed for (Galton 1872). As a counterexample of empirical study on the efficacy of prayer, one could mention the study conducted in the 1980s by cardiologist Randolf Byrd, of the San Francisco General Hospital. Using a sample of 393 coronary care unit patients, Byrd had 'born again' Christians pray daily for a random group of patients who did not know they were prayed for. Byrd concluded that:

> Analysis of events after entry into the study showed the prayer group had less congestive heart failure, required less diuretic and antibiotic therapy, had fewer episodes of pneumonia, had fewer cardiac arrests, and were less frequently intubated and ventilated.

(Byrd 1988, p. 829)

Methodologists would have no hard time confuting the soundness of both Galton's statistical reasoning against the value of petitionary verbal prayer and Byrd's experimental conclusions in favor of it. However, the primary purpose of these two examples is to pinpoint William James's polemical target: as he indicates it at the outset of the

abovementioned passage, the efficacy of prayer must not be studied in terms of empirical efficacy. Asking whether we should or should not pray on the basis of empirical evidence on the efficacy of prayer is meaningless, since the reasons for which human beings pray are not related to such empirical efficacy but to an 'ideal' efficacy. Human beings pray because they cannot *help* praying. In other words, there is something deeply rooted in the psychological anthropology of the human nature that pushes human beings to pray and will always do, unless such nature changes in ways that cannot be currently expected.

Nevertheless, it is evident that James too, in emphasizing the inevitability of prayer, is not referring to a simplistic, common acceptation of the word. In such case, his hypothesis too would be confuted by evidence: it is a fact that many human beings do not pray. On the contrary, James is able to assert the inevitability of prayer because he is interpreting it according to a broader acceptation: even those human beings who do not seem to pray, for instance because they do not adhere to any particular faith, in fact cannot help praying. But what is this praying that human beings are doomed to, if it is not simply the commonly religious form of it? At the end of the passage quoted above, James defines such prayer with subtle but sibylline words: "the innermost of the empirical selves of man is a Self of the *social* sort, it yet can find its only adequate *Socius* in an ideal world" (James 1984: *ibidem*).

The inner core of the human identity is a social core; that is, it is only through social relations that human beings can shape their identity. And yet, James adds, the counterpart that enables human beings to shape their identity through social relations can only be a *Socius* with a capital "s", a *Socius* of an ideal sort. What does it mean? The meaning and nature of this Socius will be clarified by a second approach, and relative quotation from a key–author, concerning the "inevitability of prayer". In another famous passage, excerpted from *The Sickness Unto Death*, Søren Kierkegaard writes:

> [. . .] But the fatalist has no God — or, what is the same thing, his god is necessity. Inasmuch as for God all things are possible, it may be said that is what God is, viz. one for whom all things are possible. The worship of the fatalist is therefore at its maximum an exclamation, and essentially it is dumbness, dumb submission, he is unable to pray. So to pray is to breathe, and possibility is for the self what oxygen is for breathing. But for possibility

alone or for necessity alone to supply the conditions for the breathing of prayer is no more possible than it is for a man to breathe oxygen alone or nitrogen alone. For in order to pray there must be a God, there must be a self plus possibility, or a self and possibility in the pregnant sense; for God *is* that all things are possible, and that all things are possible *is* God; and only the man whose being has been so shaken that he became spirit by understanding that all things are possible, only he has had dealings with God. The fact that God's will is the possible makes it possible for me to pray; if God's will is only the necessary, man is essentially as speechless as brutes.

(Kierkegaard 2008 (1849), p. 33)

The present article will not dwell on the historical and cultural contexts of its quotations. Comment on each of them would require a separate essay, if not a book. More recklessly, these quotations will be interpreted in order to construct the article's theoretical path. Like James, Kierkegaard affirms the inevitability of prayer. Like the former, the latter finds the roots of this inevitability in the depths of the human nature. Yet, while James describes such human nature psychologically, or better, through the lenses of a psychological anthropology of the human identity, Kierkegaard pinpoints the relation between the inevitability of prayer and human nature by taking two steps that will be both fundamental for the development of the present article.

The first step consists in philosophically defining the *Socius* mysteriously evoked by William James. The primary function of this ideal *Socius*, in relation to whom human beings can define the inner core of their identity, is to enable human beings to develop and cultivate the idea of possibility, or to say it better, the sentiment of potentiality. If I pray, it is because I cultivate the feeling that things might be different from the way in which they presently are. Kierkegaard's God is not necessarily the transcendent being to which believers of different faith address themselves in their prayers, but a God whose idea is much more abstract and general, and essentially coincides with the concept of potentiality. According to Kierkegaard, when I pray, I implicitly affirm my relation to transcendence meant as utmost potentiality; as a result, I also affirm that the inner core of my identity is not bound to immutable determination but to possibility of change. In other words, when I pray, I affirm the sentiment of my freedom through its relation with ideal potentiality. This is, from the

philosophical point of view of Kierkegaard, what James's *Socius* is about: it is the dialogical counterpart of the sentiment of my infinite freedom, a counterpart consisting in a symmetrical sentiment of infinite potentiality.

The second fundamental step moved by Kierkegaard is evoked in the last sentence of the abovementioned passage: "if God's will is only the necessary, man is essentially as speechless as brutes" (*ibidem*). For the purposes of the present article, the essential insight of such sentence resides in its linking the possibility of speech with that of prayer. From the point of view of common sense, and according to the usual acceptation of the word 'prayer', it is speech that enables human beings to pray. Were human beings unable to speak, that is had they no access to language, then they would be unable to pray. Yet, according to the novel perspective opened up by Kierkegaard's above quoted passage, the contrary is true: it is prayer, conceived in the abstract and philosophical terms described above, that founds the possibility of speech and the human access to language. It is only because the world could be different from what it is, and it is only because I can define the inner core of my identity in relation to such sentiment of infinite potentiality, that I am actually able to speak; that I am free to speak. Speech, and more generally, meaning, is nothing but a by–product of the dialectics between the sentiment of my infinite immanent freedom and the sentiment of my Socius's infinite transcendent potentiality. Meaning exists because things could be different from the way in which they are, and prayer is the existential arena wherein the nature of meaning is revealed to human beings through their relation with the idea of infinite potentiality.

In several articles I have tried to advocate the idea that semiotics should be conceived and defined as the discipline that studies alternatives, and that Umberto Eco's witty definition of semiotics as the discipline that studies "everything that can be used to lie" (Eco 1975, p. 17) should also be interpreted in the same direction (Leone 2011, 2012, Forthcoming A). In some recent essays of mine, moreover, I have sought to justify this claim with reference to a particular hypothesis on the evolution of the human species, and in particular of its cognition of potentiality (Leone 2011b, 2012b, 2012c, Forthcoming B). The way in which both William James and Søren Kierkegaard tackle the issue of the efficacy of prayer is conducive to a reflection in which, as it was pointed

out at the beginning of the present article, religion becomes a conceptual laboratory to explore the most fundamental features of the human nature, including human beings' capacity to conceive potentiality and freedom and, as a consequence, have access to language.

Yet, there is an aspect in the abstract way in which James and Kierkegaard pinpoint prayer as existential opening to potentiality and, therefore, language that would probably puzzle the commonsensical definition of worship. Stripped of all its theistic features, prayer in both James, Kierkegaard, and the semiotic reading of their passages seems to lose every religious content and end up resembling something like an (internal or external) verbalization of hope. What is the difference, indeed, between the sentiment of potentiality that, according to the abovementioned passages, human beings experience through prayer and a more generic sentiment of hope, conceived as emotional adhesion to the idea of a changeable reality?

1.2. *The distribution of agency*

The article will seek to answer this question by addressing the second of the areas of semiotic philosophical investigation about prayer listed above, an area tentatively labeled as "the distribution of agency" (Leone 2009 and 2009b). If prayer is philosophically and semiotically interpreted as the realization of immanent freedom through its dialogue with transcendent potentiality — both being evoked as semio–linguistic simulacra — then the agency of prayer is unevenly distributed between the two poles of this dialogue: the initiative of the worshiper is emphasized, whilst the agency of transcendence is simultaneously downplayed (Leone 2009c). In verbal petitional prayer, as conceived by James, Kierkegaard, and the semiotic exegesis of their texts, the fundamental agency of worship does not consist either in the active agency of transcendence nor in the passive agency of immanence, but in a sort of reflexive agency of worship, that is, agency that discovers its immanent freedom through the simulacral representation of a transcendent addressee construed as infinite potentiality. In other words, according to this philosophical trend, prayer does not invoke the agency of the worshiped deity, but rather the agency of the worshiper through a simulacral representation of the agency of the worshiped deity.

Such perspective does not characterize only the modern psychological, philosophical, and semiotic anthropology of prayer, but finds its roots in the conception of prayer of many world religions, including Christianity. This trend will now be exemplified through some further key–authors and quotations, predominantly in the area of the Christian theology and philosophy of prayer. Such quotations will also elucidate the broad semiotic issue of the distribution of agency in prayer and, more general, in dialogical meaning.

Among the Christian authors, Augustine is the one who initiates such trend of reflection on– and interpretation of– the agency of prayer, or at least he is the one who, as it is often the case, puts such trend in the clearest and most effective words. In a famous passage of his letter to Proba, Augustine writes:

> To us therefore, words are necessary, that by them we may be assisted in considering and observing what we ask, not as means by which we expect that God is to be either informed or moved to compliance. When, therefore, we say: 'Hallowed be thy name', we admonish ourselves to desire that his name, which is always holy, may be also among men esteemed holy [. . .]. When we say: 'Thy kingdom come', which shall certainly come whether we wish it or not, we do by these words stir up our own desires for that kingdom.
>
> (*Letter to Proba*, XI, 21; Engl. trans. NPNF I, letter CXXX, 2464)

This passage shows very clearly the way in which Augustine distributes agency in his conception of the semiotic practice of prayer. The efficacy of prayer, Augustine claims, does not consist in having the immanent agency of worshipers modify, through the words and acts of prayer, the transcendent agency of the worshiped deity. Augustine understands very well that such conception of prayer would be blasphemous, since it would depict the agency of the worshiped deity as one that yields to that of worshipers. On the contrary, according to Augustine, the agency of the deity cannot be moved to anything, since it is already perfect in its determination; however, as in James's and Kierkegaard's reading of prayer, in Augustine too, the words of worship are needed in order to bring about a reflexive self–empowerment of their agency.

Adopting the theoretical framework through which contemporary semiotics analyzes enunciation, Augustine's view on prayer could be

described as follows: the words of worshipers are not meant to induce the agency of the worshiped deity to whatsoever. On the contrary, by addressing such deity, they bring about a simulacral representation of its potential agency that, in its turn, empowers the potential agency of worshipers. With Greimas's technical lexicon, one could say that, in Augustine, prayer is always *embrayage*, it is discourse that founds its immanent agency through the fictional representation of its capacity to move a transcendent agency. It is, as was suggested earlier, freedom of the immanent self discovered through the potentiality of the transcendent Other, of the ideal *Socius*.

Augustine's view on worship returns, under different forms, throughout the entire history of the Christian thought on prayer. In the *Summa*, for instance, Thomas Aquinas writes:

> We must pray, not in order to inform God of our needs and desires, but in order to remind ourselves that in these matters we need divine assistance. [...] Prayer is not offered to God in order to change his mind, but in order to excite confidence in us. Such confidence is fostered principally by considering God's charity toward us whereby he wills our good.

> (Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 2a 2ae, 83, 2; Engl. trans. ST)

Along this trend, the transcendent agency of the worshiped deity is progressively turned into a mirror, whose only purpose is that of reflecting and magnifying the immanent agency of worshipers. At the very outset of its intellectual history, Protestant Christianity emphasizes the need for such reflexive distribution of agency. In his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, for instance, John Calvin writes:

> [The Lord taught us to pray] not so much for his sake as for ours...It is very much for our interest to be constantly supplicating him: first, that our heart might always be inflamed with a serious and ardent desire of seeking, loving, and serving him [...]; secondly, that no desire, no longing whatever, of which we are ashamed to make him the witness, may enter our minds, while we learn to place all our wishes in his sight, and thus pour out our heart before him; and, lastly, that we may be prepared to receive all his benefits with gratitude and thanksgiving, while our prayers remind us that they proceed from his hand.

> (John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, III, 20, 3; Engl. trans. ICR)

Greimasian semioticians usually distinguish between the endotaxic and the esotaxic modalization of agency. According to Greimas and Courtés,

> [...] here we designate as 'esotaxic' those modalities that are susceptible of entering in translational relations (of joining up enonciates that have different subjects) and as 'endotaxic' the simple modalities (joining subjects that are identical or in syncretism).[2]

> (Greimas and Courtés 1979, p. 89, *sub voce* "modalisation"; Engl. trans. by the author of the present article)

In esotaxic modalization, the intentional agency of a sender bestows upon a receiver the intentional agency to act, through either order (*devoir faire*, having to do) or empowerment (*pouvoir faire*, being able to do). In endotaxic modalization, on the contrary, the intentional agency of a subject bestows upon itself the intentional agency to be, through either will (*vouloir être*, wanting to be) or knowledge (*savoir être*, knowing how to be). Esotaxic and endotaxic modalizations are precisely that which, in Greimasian semiotics, brings about the subject as source of intentional agency, meant as both existential value and narrative action.

In the philosophical and theological trend inaugurated by Augustine, cultivated by Thomas Aquinas, and radicalized by John Calvin, worshipers are increasingly characterized as subjects who, by summoning through prayer the enunciational, dialogical simulacrum of their transcendent receiver — in Greimas's terms, by esotaxically modalizing the deity — are actually able to endotaxically modalize themselves. By inviting the worshiped transcendence to exert its power to act in the world, the immanent worshiper establishes its own will and knowledge to do so.

Such pattern of distribution of agency and its modalizations in the relation worshiper/worshiped reaches its most radical consequences in Kantian and post–Kantian philosophy of religion. In a passage of his *Religion within the Limits of Reason alone*, Kant writes:

2. "[...] on désigne ici comme exotaxiques les modalités susceptibles d'entrer en relations translatives (de relier des énoncés ayant des sujets distincts) et comme endotaxiques les modalités simples (reliant des sujets identiques ou en syncrétisme)".

> The disposition, accompanying all our actions, to perform these as though they were being executed in the service of God, is the *spirit of prayer* which can, and should, be present in us "without ceasing". But to clothe this wish (even though it be but inwardly) in words and formulas can, at best, possess only the value of means whereby that disposition within us may be repeatedly quickened.

> (Kant 1960 (1793), p. 181)

Two points are extremely interesting in this excerpt. First, if the trend of Christian philosophy and theology of prayer started by Augustine, continued by various pre–Reformation Christian authors, and radicalized by Protestant thinkers like Calvin, had progressively displaced the agency of prayer toward the worshiper, indicating that the essential purpose of prayer is a sort of self–reflexive existential empowerment, Kant led this trend of thought to the utmost consequences. Downplaying the role of the agency of the worshiped deity, claiming that the meaning of prayer must be found *as though* it were being executed in the service of God, Kant paved the way for the ultimate development of this trend in post–Kantian philosophy: the elimination of the transcendent, worshiped deity from prayer, the affirmation of the possibility of, and actually need for, purely immanent forms of prayer, and the elaboration of prayers without transcendent addressee. It is exactly through this theoretical movement that the polarization of agency toward its immanent addresser will end up justifying the inevitability of prayer advocated, from different points of view, by both James and Kierkegaard. Later it will be seen how the paradoxical Kantian outcome of worship without any worshiped deity is represented by the writings of famous post–Kantian psychologist of language and religion T.R. Miles.

Before that, the second interesting point in Kant's passage must be commented upon. The last sentence of such excerpt contains some fundamental remarks on the language of prayer, remarks that are nothing but a logical consequence of Kant's demythologizing perspective on worship: "But to clothe this wish (even though it be but inwardly) in words and formulas can, at best, possess only the value of means whereby that disposition within us may be repeatedly quickened" (*ibidem*). As was shown before, according to Kierkegaard, prayer, meant as dialogue between infinite transcendent potentiality and infinite imma-

nent freedom, founds the possibility of language and meaning. Kant seems to reverse such perspective, prescribing the characteristics that the language of prayer should feature in order for it to trigger the reflexive existential self–empowerment of the worshiper. According to Kant, indeed, prayer always entails a dialectic between the inner wish of the worshiper, which is what really matters according to his demythologizing interpretation of prayer, and those "words and formulas" that are nothing but the inessential coat of such wish.

It should now be clear that the trend of theological and philosophical thought that, from Augustine to Kant and beyond, magnifies the immanent agency of the worshiper to the detriment of the transcendent agency of the worshiped deity, until the paradoxical elimination of the latter in post–Kantian philosophy, is conducive not only to an affirmation of the anthropological inevitability of prayer, argued for by both James and Kierkegaard, but also to a prescriptive definition of the language of prayer.

1.3. *The Embodiment of Language*

Here is the third area of philosophical and semiotic investigation about prayer that the present paper will deal with: the embodiment of language. According to Kant, the embodiment of prayer in language, and specifically in a discursive coat of words and formulas, is unnecessary. What matters is the wish of prayer, its spirit, and the capacity of the words and formulas of prayer to perform the reflexive existential self–empowerment of the worshiper. In other words, a logical consequence of the agentive polarization of prayer toward its immanent addresser is the progressive disembodiment of the language of prayer. In order to semiotically exist, prayer needs to be signified and communicated, or to say it better, self–communicated, through a certain language, through certain codes, formulas, and words. However, Kant — and more generally the trend of thought that culminates in his writings — represents such language, codes, formulas, and words as accessory, as expressive devices that can be separated from their content so that the former appears as arbitrary and inessential, whereas the latter is shown as necessary and inevitable.

It is not hard to see how the Augustinian, Protestant, and Kantian pattern of distribution of agency may bring about a conception of

prayer advocating the disembodiment of language: with the progressive fading away of the transcendent agency of the worshiped deity, the conative function of language of prayer vanishes as well, since there is actually no addressee whose agency the discourse of prayer must move to an action whatsoever. On the contrary, the radical *embrayage* of the language of prayer, its folding back on the immanent agency of the worshiper, extols the functions of language that are centered on the addresser, that is, the emotional function, but also the poetical function, the one that essentially consists in performing a continuous rearrangement of the discursive coat of prayer.

In simpler words: since the purpose of my prayers is not to convince the deity to act according to my wishes, but to convince myself that I am acting according to the deity's wishes, what matters in the language of prayer is not to obediently adhere to the semiotic code of the deity, but to elaborate my own semiotic code, the one that best brings about the reflexive self–empowerment of my self through dialogue with an imaginary transcendent addressee. Therefore, the language of prayer turns from collective into individual, from formulaic into poetic, and in the most radical circumstances is subject to a complete disembodiment, to an interiorization that ends up in praying silence. As T.R. Miles puts it in his *Religious and the Scientific Outlook*, radicalizing the Kantian reading of prayer:

> We need not be troubled if acts of dedication and commitment involve the use of parable–language, provided, of course, that this parable–language is recognized for what it is. [. . .] Addresses to God as a person are not necessarily, therefore, to be excluded, provided we are not just simple–minded about them.
>
> (Miles 1959, p. 186)

There is a word in this passage that is particularly interesting for the purposes of the present article: "simple–minded". Worshipers should not be simple–minded, T.R. Miles suggests. After all, this invitation to avoid a simple–minded interpretation of prayer is nothing but the final outcome of a long trend of theological and philosophical thought promoting the same intellectual attitude toward prayer or, to say it more explicitly, promoting the intellectualization of prayer (Keane 2007). As was pointed out earlier, Augustine was the first one to warn

his readers about a too simple practice of prayer, and also the first one to promote a counter–intuitive interpretation of it. Then, other Christian authors, especially in the Protestant area, emphasized the same point, which was subsequently re–elaborated and radicalized by Kantian philosophy and the modern psychological and philosophical anthropology of religion.

However, after sketchily describing and analyzing the most important steps in this trend, which as was shown, promotes the ideas of the anthropological inevitability of prayer, the modal polarization of its agency toward the immanent addresser, and the disembodiment of its language, the cultural semiotician cannot help asking a very simple question, perhaps a simple–minded one: why are the opposite trends of the anthropological peculiarity of prayer, the modal polarization of its agency toward the transcendent addressee, and the embodiment of its language, considered as simple–minded? What does this simple–mindedness consist of? In other words, from the abstract meta–logical point of view of the cultural semiotician, it is evident that the trend of thought described above embodies a strong negative bias toward non–intellectual manifestations of prayer, toward forms of worship that, although extremely diffused among believers, are seen as something to be contrasted and defeated through a progressive education of worshipers to the 'real' meaning of their semiotic practice.

Nevertheless, the purpose of cultural semiotics, and in particular of the cultural semiotics of prayer, does not consist in promoting, like Augustine and other Christian thinkers, such or such interpretation of prayer (Leone Forthcoming C). It consists, on the opposite, in showing that many religious cultures are constantly traversed by a cultural tension between two opposite polarities: one that, like the intellectualizing trend that starts with Augustine and ends up in a sort of post–modern demythologizing of worship, stresses the anthropological inevitability of prayer, its humanistic nature, and the necessity for it to adopt a non–formulaic or even disembodied language in order to be effective; the other one that, like the manifestations of the so called 'popular religion' — which the former intellectualizing trend has sought to defeat — stresses, on the contrary, the anthropological peculiarity of prayer, its theistic nature, and the necessity for it to adopt a formulaic and strongly embodied language in order to be effective.

According to the first conception of prayer, we pray in order to empower our own immanent agency in the world, to the point that the addressee of our prayer becomes a fictitious simulacrum, or turns into inessential and even disappears, giving rise to a sort of secular prayer or verbalization of hope; as a consequence, according to this conception, we need to constantly reinvent the language of prayer, since its purpose is not to evoke the response of the addressee by adhering to an established code, but to voice the inner identity of the addresser by formulating a personal code. This is why prayer turns into poetry, or even into silent interior discourse.

According to the second conception of prayer, we pray in order to convince the transcendent agency of the worshipped deity to act into the world, so that the addressee of our prayer is never a fictitious simulacrum but a real persona, whose metaphysical presence escapes any attempt of demythologizing and secularization; as a consequence, according to this conception, we must not invent anything in the language of prayer, since its main purpose is not to voice the subjectivity of the addresser through the creation of a personal code, but to evoke the response, and possibly the action, of the addressee. This is why prayer turns into formula, or even into unconscious external routine.

Given such dialectic, the purpose of the cultural semiotics of prayer is twofold. First, it must emphasize that this dialectic is not Manichean, but rather a tension between two polarities separated by a continuum of infinite intermediate possibilities. The history of Christian prayer, for instance, does not feature only radical intellectualizations of this semiotic practice or simple–minded popular interpretations of it, but rather hosts a complex variety of positions between these two extreme poles. The authors mentioned by the present article do not hold all the same perspective on prayer, and some other authors, especially in the Catholic theology of prayer, constantly strive to reconcile the intellectual vision of prayer with the popular practice of it.

The second purpose of the cultural semiotics of prayer is to show the most essential dynamics of such dialectic not through the abstract hermeneutics of a series of philosophical or existential positions, but through the semiotic analysis of how such positions are embodied and signified by means of specific semiotic practices, involving the construction, circulation, and interpretation of texts of various kinds, including words, images, gestures, objects, and so on and so forth.

In its second part, then, the present article will deal with a historical and anthropological semiotics of the Christian practice of prayer known as 'the rosary'.

2. The cultural semiotics of the rosary

2.1. *The rosary as praying device*

Throughout history, and in the different socio–cultural contexts, human beings have invented not only words, images, and gestures of prayer, but also devices of worship. One of the most common ones in several world religions is usually known, at least since early modern Christianity and especially in the Catholic areas, as 'the rosary'. In reality, the rosary is only one of the several historical and cultural manifestations of a more generic praying device, whose fundamental semiotic characteristics the second part of this article will try to describe, analyze, and connect with the notes on semiotic philosophy of prayer exposed in the first part.

The essential structure of the rosary, as well as of its equivalents in other confessions, consists in a series of homogeneous elements arranged in regular succession. In its most characteristic form, such elements are beads strung on a cord or rope, but other forms of rosary also exist; for instance, a very elemental form of rosary, and probably the one that gave origin to more complex praying devices, simply consisted in a series of more or less homogeneous stones arranged in a pile. Also, praying sticks featuring a regular series of knobs or other marks have usually been assimilated to the same category of praying devices to which the rosary belongs. As regards the way in which the rosary works, one of the most effective description has been provided by Eithne Wilkins in the essay *The Rose–Garden Game: The Symbolic Background to the European Prayer–Beads*:

> A rosary is a string of knops, either knots or beads, to be touched, or moved along a string like the beads of an abacus, one by one, so that one can repeat a given prayer, invocation, religious or magical formula the prescribed number of times without having to keep count: the fingers keep count on the knops.

(Wilkins 1969, p. 25)

Although rosaries display a tremendous variety of forms, materials, number of knots or beads, and of course techniques and purposes of usage — a variety stemming from the labyrinthine history of this praying device in several world religions — a common semiotic principle underlies their functioning: rosaries bring about a parallel between the material structure of the worship device — its ordered arrangement of homologous entities, being they knops, beads, knots, or whatever other items — and the symbolical structure of worship itself. Such parallel is both syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic. By manipulating the rosary, worshipers are constantly reminded the particular syntax of utterances, interior images, and sometimes also gestures and postures they are supposed to follow in order to pray with efficacy. Moreover, each mark on the rosary both semantically signifies a particular step in the structure of worship and pragmatically prompts its semiotic execution. The rosary therefore historically develops and semiotically functions as a portable mnemonic for the execution of complex worship rituals, be they performed individually or in community.[3]

2.2. *The semiotic ideology of rosaries*

However, rosaries are also much more than a portable mnemonic device. They are also both the byproduct and the embodiment of a certain semiotic ideology of prayer (Leone 2010), a semiotic ideology that can be generally described as opposite to that evoked and analyzed in the first part of the article. The most important principles of such semiotic ideology are repetition, quantification, and sensuality. These principles are strictly intertwined but they can be separated in the framework of the semiotic analysis. They characterize the rosary as a text of culture, according to Lotman's definition of this concept,

3. Cfr. Mitchell 2009, p. 152: "We possess, in fact, an early sixteenth–century printed book called the *Chiropsalterium* (literally, "hand psalter"), which instructed readers how to use their hands as a mnemonic device for praying and meditating on the biblical psalms (the text of which had previously been committed to memory)"; cfr. Wills 2005, p. 11: "The fingers' transit along the beads, if one streaps them of fetishistic connections, can help put one in a prayerful mood [...] There is a kind of tacticle memory evoked in their use, helping recall other times of prayer. The British author Eamon Duffy [...] says that the click of rosary beads brings back childhood memories of his grandmother praying through sleepless nights, with her 'muttered preamble — This one is for Tom, for Molly, for Lily — as she launched on yet another decade'.

i.e., as a text that both incarnates and is permeated by a certain cultural logic (Lotman 1990).

The rosary incarnates a semiotic ideology of prayer meant as repetition because it is only through conceiving the discourse of worship as composed by formulae to be endlessly repeated with no or little variation that the rosary can work as a worship device.[4] In the Catholic rosary, for instance, the material structure of the beads must stand for a series of "Aves" repeated over and over again with no variation. No verbal creativity or improvisation is allowed in the practice of the rosary, because its semiotic principle precisely consists in turning worship into a mechanical procedure, into an almost automatic practice in which the agency of the worshiper is annihilated.[5]

As regards quantification, the rosary does not rely only on the possibility of repeating the same prayer all over again, but on the capacity of counting such repetitions. This is why the rosary, or other similar devices, are not only a worship mnemonic but also a counting machine. Exactly like an abacus, the rosary allows the worshiper to accumulate a certain number of prayers and to keep track of such accumulation. Rosaries bring about the accountancy of worship. [6]

Finally, the third structural characteristic of the rosary is sensuality: not only mnemonic device, and not merely counting machine, the rosary is also a material object that can be constantly manipulated and fingered, creating a semiotic resonance between the rhythm of the worshiper's body and that of prayer.[7]

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4. Cfr. Howard Patton 1927, p. 135–6: "In solving the secret of the rosary, we must take into consideration the strong impulse towards iteration in language, and especially in the language of prayer".

5. Cfr. Mitchell 2009, p. 215: "[. . .] the rosary's role as a medium of presence results not from its originality but from its repetitiveness and widespread replication. Replication is, in fact, a "critical aspect of Catholic culture". It is the principal means by which religious practices that might otherwise remain local and ethnic are globalized and come to embrace 'the universality of the supernatural', providing practitioners a means 'to participate in a worldwide community that [does] not recognize the limits of time and space'; cfr. also McDannell 1995 (and on 'material Christianity', Orsi 1996); Wilkins 1969, p. 32 defines the rosary as a "sort of prayer–wheel with a centripetal action"; cfr. Wilkins 1969, p. 78: "It is this inevitability, this organic drone, that releases the mind into detachment".

6. Cfr. Howard Patton 1927, p. 134: "Under conditions like these, an instrument for reckoning the account with God is as inevitable as the cash–register in the mercantile world".

7. Cfr. Winston–Allen 1997, p. 111: "[rosary beads] lend the devotion an added aesthetic

Repetition, quantification, and sensuality: these three features seem to represent the mirror–like counterpart of the three philosophical and theological trends described and analyzed in the first part of the article. No wonder, then, that the rosary, and other similar semiotic devices and practices, have been frequently criticized or even condemned by those religious thinkers voicing the intellectualization and demythologizing of prayer. For the mechanic repetition of verbal utterances, gestures, and sometimes postures promoted by the rosary, its capacity of counting prayers and, therefore, bestowing a quantitative value to worship, and above all its sensuality — its being strictly linked with the body — seemed to be completely at odds with an interpretation of prayer advocating, instead, its poetic creativity against any repetitive formula, its qualitative value against any quantification, and its disembodiment against any fetishistic sensuality.

If in the conception of prayer voiced by the ideological trend going from Augustine until Kantian and post–Kantian theology and philosophy of religion the uttering of prayer was the inessential arena where to shape and empower the agency of the worshiper, then in the rosary such uttering becomes the stupefying abyss where any immanent agency is lost, and an empty space is created for the submissive invocation of transcendence.[8]

2.3. *The intellectualization of the rosary*

The last part of this article will provide some historical and anthropological evidence to support not only this reading of the semiotic ideology of the rosary, but also of the numerous attempts that, espe-

dimension and a certain concreteness, even as simple as the tactile comfort of something to grasp onto in times of trouble and especially in the final hours".

8. Cfr. Wilkins 1969, p. 87: "The meaning of the word 'contemplation' lights up in its history. *Contemplatio* in classical Latin means an attentive considering, a surveying, and it relates back to a verb that is obviously ancient (the deponent *contemplor*) and which originally pertained to the language of augury, that is, to the art of divining practiced by a college of priests who especially observed the flight of birds in a *templum*, a space marked out for the purpose. The *templum*, which is also a circuit, is therefore not only what we now mean by a temple, but any enclosure made for a numinous purpose; the root is in fact the same as in the Greek *temenos*. To contemplate, then, is to mark out a space, a circle, and fix one's attention on what is within it, uniting as far as possible with the numinous forces thus concentrated".

cially in Catholic Christianity, were made in order to intellectualize it, to turn it from device of submission into instrument for the affirmation of immanent agency. In other words, it will be shown how this peculiar worship device has been transformed throughout history by its being positioned within the dialectic described in the first part of the paper.

First, some concise historical information:[9] the first mention of a worship device consisting in a string of beads occurs in India, where it was associated with the cult of Shiva. The iconography of Shiva almost systematically includes a rosary (sometimes composed of human skulls). Also his *shakti*, his female counterpart, in her aspect af Kali, is often represented with a rosary. Later, this worship device was adopted by Jainism and Buddhism. The Tibetans and the Chinese got the rosary from contact with India, and the Japanese from contact with the Chinese. Currently, different forms of rosaries are in use in all these cultural areas. It was also from contact with India that the Persians and Arabs adopted this worship device. The poet Abu Nawas, who died at the beginning of the ninth century, provides the first, ironic, mention of the rosary in the Islamic world:

> I always have rosaries hanging on my arm,
> The Koran on my breast instead of gold chains.

> (Goldhizer 1890, p. 295)

It is not clear how the rosary developed in Judeo–Christianity. According to most scholars, both the legend that the rosary would have been invented by Saint Dominic, inspired by a vision of the Virgin, as an instrument for converting the Albigensians, and the counter–legend that it would have been adopted upon contact with the Arabs during the first crusade, are not justified by any historical evidence.

According to the available historical evidence, the introduction and development of the rosary in Christianity unfolded in five steps. The

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9. The bibliography on the history of the rosary is quite vast; for a synthesis, cfr. Howard Patton 1927 and Millar 2001; on the 'rosary' in Islam, Zwemer 1930; on the Japanese *juzu*, a Buddhist praying device, similar to the Christian rosary, cfr. Hanayama 1962; cfr. also Kun–dga'–rin–chen 1986.

most primitive form of Christian rosary is mentioned in relation to the life of Paul of Thebes (c. 234 — 347), who is said to have adopted a system of pebble–shifting in order to keep track of his daily quota of 300 Paternosters. Later, the introduction of a string tying the pebbles together made this system portable. Also, knotted ropes and notched sticks were probably the first and most primitive form of worship mnemonic in Christianity. Although it is impossible to determine whether such mnemonics originated in early Christian monasticism or were imported by other religious cultures, it is evident that they fulfill a cross–cultural anthropological need, i.e., that of counting prayers repeated many times with no variation by signifying such account through a material device. Eithne Wilkins suggests that the main purpose of this technique was to create a continuous rhythm of gestures and utterances able to create a state of obnubilation immune to the notorious temptations of the desert:

> For an anchorite engaged in intense and systematic psychic effort, it was necessary to maintain stability by combining the mental exercise with some rhythmic physical movement.

(Wilkins 1969, p. 33–34)

The second important step in the development of Christian rosary took place in Irish monasticism, which adopted the rosary from Eastern desert monasticism but introduced an important novelty: the rosary was given a standard structure of 150 beads divided into three sections. The first number was meant to create a parallel between the beads and the number of the biblical Psalms, while the second was probably related with Saint Patrick's theology of trinity. Still nowadays, the Christian rosary keeps the same structure, with fifteen decades of "Aves" repeated in three section of fifty prayers each.

Originated as an ascetic worship device for mental concentration in Eastern anchoritism, and turned into Biblical mnemonic in Irish monasticism, by the year 1000 the rosary was diffused by Irish monks in monasteries of continental Europe, but in a popularized form for illiterates: for them, who unlike the Irish monks could not remember the 150 psalms by heart, the beads now stood for the same prayer, the paternoster, repeated 150 times. This is why 'paternoster' is still the name of the rosary in many languages.

In the fourth step of its history, the Christian rosary 'changes gender'. From the eleventh century on, an increasing number of Christian authors composed 'psalters' of 150 Praises to the Virgin.[10] As a consequence, Aves started to replace paternosters in the worship of the rosary. Then, from the thirteenth century on, the semiotic practice of the rosary became 'professionalized': guilds of paternosters, i.e., bead–makers, were founded everywhere in Europe, to the point that there is still a 'Paternoster row' and an 'Ave Maria Lane' in London, as well as a 'via dei Coronari' in Rome and a 'Paternoster–Gässchen' in Vienna (up to 1840), places where rosaries were fabricated (Wilkins 1969). The name 'rosary' was increasingly adopted by conflating the worship device of the beads and the Marian symbolism of the rose–garden or the rose–chaplet.

Finally, some time between 1410 and 1439, the Carthusian Dominic Prutenus composed a Psalter of fifty meditations on the life of Jesus and Mary, which became the most widespread undertext for the execution of the rosary. Analogous Psalters and booklets of rosary devotions were published everywhere in Europe. Collective recitations of the rosary became common in all corners of Christianity. The iconography of the rosary also started to develop, and by 1571 the victory of Christendom over the Turks at Lepanto was also imputed to the efficacy of this new form of worship.

The standard structure of the Christian rosary was established in this period and remained practically unchanged till nowadays: in contemporary Christianity, the rosary consists of a circular string of 169 beads, sometimes with an extra Pater–bead or two added to bring it up to 170 or 171. 150 Ave–beads (for saying the Hail Mary) are divided into decades, which are in turn separated by 14 Pater–beads (for saying the Our Father at the beginning and the Gloria at the end of each decade). The decades are then subdivided into three sections and devoted to meditation over three sets of 'Christian mysteries', institutionalized by Pius V also in the fifteenth century: the joyful, sorrowful, and glorious mysteries.

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10. Cfr. Winstow–Allen 1997, p. 136: "Already at this earliest stage the tension between ritualism and meaningful spirituality — the divide between literacy and illiteracy — was felt. Although the psalms themselves formed a beautiful and meaningful liturgy for chanting, the 150 Aves of the 'illiterate man's psalter' tended toward monotony".

This cursory glance at the history of the rosary, and in particular of the Christian one, must provide general contextual information to situate what is a fundamental cultural process in the development of such worship device, a process that makes the rosary the perfect case study for the elaboration of a cultural semiotics of prayer. As this worship device was detached from its original context of creation — Eastern desert anchoritism first, then Irish and continental monasticism — and adopted for an audience of mostly illiterate devotees, its abovementioned semiotic characteristics of repetition, quantification, and sensuality were increasingly emphasized, to the point that they attracted concern and criticism within Christianity itself. It is interesting to analyze the textual traces of such concern, especially in order to understand the theological, philosophical, and semiotic dialectic of opposite ideologies of prayer described in the first part of the article and embodied by the cultural and semiotic history of the rosary.

As regards sensuality, since the mass adoption of the rosary in the late Middle Ages, Christianity has manifested a strong tendency toward an emphasis on the materiality of the rosary, to the point that this worship device has been frequently turned into fetish or amulet. Transformed into precious jewel, endowed with scent and other sensuous characteristics, worn in inappropriate manners, and, above all, used in non strictly institutional ways, the rosary has been constantly subject to both the idiosyncratic experiments of individual believers and institutional attempts to condemn and reform them. Some examples will clarify this dialectic.

As early as 1261, the Dominicans were forbidding lay–brothers to show off by using excessively grand beads: a chapter at Orvieto forbade them *quod paternoster de ambra vel corallo. . . portent*. Later on, in the middle of the fourteenth century, an Augustinian canon of Osnabruck harshly stigmatized the fashion of wearing coral paternosters round the neck (Wilkins 1969, p. 49). The practice of scenting rosaries became also particularly diffused and equally condemned. As late as 1706 a Viennese priest mentioned the custom of attaching to rosaries little silver death's–heads filled with balsam, a particularly sensuous example of *memento mori* (*ibidem*, p. 60).

As regards repetition, those who advocated the ideology of intellectualization of worship described in the first part of the article could not but condemn the semiotic principle of the rosary, especially in its most

popular and widespread manifestations. The seventeenth–century bishop of Durham, John Cosin, for instance, objected to the practice of the rosary and, in particular, to "the service of God in an unknown tongue, the saying of a number of Ave–Marias by tale upon their chaplets, the sprinkling of themselves and the dead bodies with holy water [. . .]" (*ibid.*, p. 73).

However, it was perhaps the principle of quantification that attracted the harshest criticism, notably from Luther himself, whose copy of Marcus von Weida's rosary handbook is jotted with indignant exclamations against this worship practice: "where in the Devil do so many and various lies come from?", Luther wrote on the margin of one of the book's pages; and then again, to comment on the story of a youth who was converted by the worship of the rosary: "and thus through a stupid work he merited justification" (Winston–Allen 1997, p. 130).[11]

But against what aspect of the rosary in particular was Luther reacting, so placing himself in the trend of semiotic ideology of prayer evoked through the philosophical and theological quotations commented on in the first part of the article? The instigator of Protestant Christianity was reacting against the stockpiling of prayer, which was instrumental to their monetization,[12] and to their becoming a marketable item in the late medieval and early modern traffic of indulgences. As Anne Winston–Allen puts it in her essay *Stories of the Rose: the Making of the Rosary in the Middle Ages*,

> attempts to stockpile indulgences forced Marcus von Weida to announce in his handbook a limit to the number of rosary indulgences that could be accumulated in one day. Wealthy people hiring others to recite the rosary for them represents what is arguably the low point in the prayer's development.

> (*Ibidem*, pp. 130–1)

More abstractly, Luther was also rejecting the idea, implicit in the rosary, that the modal distribution of agency could be radically displaced toward the capacity of the worshiper to move the worshiped

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11. Cfr. also Kawerau 1917 and Thomas 1971, p. 42.

12. Cfr. Winstow–Allen 1997, p. 133: "To the degree that all language can be regarded as a medium of negotiation and exchange, the medieval rosary constitutes an interesting example of how words functioned as spiritual capital".

deity to act into the world, instead of conceiving prayer like a practice meant to reaffirm the worshipers' confidence about the predestination of their salvation.

As it was pointed out earlier, the cultural semiotics of prayer should reveal the way in which macro–semiotic ideologies — which a certain semiotic literature also labels as "forms of life" (Zilberberg 2011) — clash around the configuration of micro–semiotic practices of worship like the rosary, thus generating continuous changes in its structure and execution. However, the model of how a certain semiosphere, to say it with Lotman's terminology, brings about a text of culture and its progressive modifications, should not be overly rigid (Leone 2010b). On the one hand, it should show, for instance, how moments of tensions, such as those represented by the abovementioned reactions of Luther and other Protestant religious thinkers,[13] are often sided by moments of reconciliation, such as the attempt at elaborating an Anglican rosary,[14] or the search for a new theological interpretation

13. As well as mystical thinkers of all kind; cfr. Thomas Merton's *Contemplative Prayer*: "The contemplative [. . .] accepts the love of God in faith, in defiance of all apparent evidence. This is the necessary condition, for the mystical experience of the reality of God's presence and of his love for us. Only when we are able to 'let go' of everything within us, all desire to see, to know, to taste, and to experience the presence of God, do we truly become able to experience that presence with the overwhelming conviction and reality that revolutionize our entire inner life" (Merton 1969, p. 111). Such tensions are not an exclusivity of Christianity; cfr. Howard Patton 1927, p. 94–5: "It is, however, one of the many signs of an intellectual and spiritual awakening among Muslem people, especially those of the Near East, that the superstitious and mechanical use of the *tesbih* [as Islamic praying device, similar to the Christian rosary] is being challenged in high quarters. A Turkish weekly recently contained an article about prayer, in which it boldly took to task the Angora government for issuing an order for school children to repeat a certain Arabic prayer for thousand four hundred times. The comment of the editor, as given below in translation, shows an appreciation of the true nature of prayer: '[. . .] Besides, this prayer is ordered to be repeated four thousand and forty–four times mechanically. The desire and emotion of the soul have nothing to do with it. If the aim of the prayer is to secure divine help, it is a sin against the righteousness of God to seek divine mercy in such a way. God verily says, "Pray to me and I will answer". That is true; but He does not say, "Repeat words which you do not understand and I will give you whatever you like"'".

14. Cfr. Howard Patton 1927, p. 155–6 [about 'the Protestant rosary' invented by Dr James A. Beebe, formerly dean of the School of Theology at the Boston University]: "In making his rosary, the Protestant will draw upon all the literature of worship. The more poetic and devotional parts of the Bible take precedence over all other material, for example, Psalms 1, 8, 19 [. . .]"; interestingly, the creation of 'a Protestant rosary' coincides with a return to the biblical Psalms as undertext of the praying device.

of this worship practice in contemporary Catholicism.[15] As Nathan D. Mitchell puts it in his book *The Mystery of the Rosary: Marian Devotion and the Reinvention of Catholicism*, nineteenth–century US theologians like New York archbishop John Hugues

> had two goals in mind: one was to make it clear [...] that Catholics were good and reliable *citizens* in a religiously diverse society [...]; the other was to emphasize Catholic *distinctiveness*, especially in the matter of devotional piety [...]. The rosary responded to both goals. On one hand, it was a portable, flexible, vernacular devotion, rooted in basically biblical episodes [...], and its use could be customized to meet the conditions of Catholics who, like other Americans, had jobs to work and families to support. On the other, the stronger Marian focus of the prayer [...] made the rosary distinctively Catholic.

> (Mitchell 2009, p. 208)

3. Conclusion

The second part of this article has indicated two requirements for a cultural semiotics of prayer, worship, and ritual: the first is to analyze the way in which the dialectic between different macro–semiotic ideologies of prayer is embodied in the historical and cultural evolution of specific semiotic practices of worship; the second is to elaborate models of such embodiment that are flexibly enough to theoretically accommodate not only episodes of overt cultural conflicts but also instances of reconciliation. However, there is a third requirement that a cultural semiotics of prayer should fulfill, one that is particularly fundamental especially in the framework of the research program on the semiotics of worship "in religion and beyond". Semiotic models should be able to promote reflection on how the tension between, on the one hand, the anthropological inevitability of prayer, the modal polarization of its agency toward the addresser, and the disembodiment of its language, and, on the other hand, the specificity of devotional practice, the modal polarization of its agency toward the addressee,

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15. On attempts to 'masculinize' the rosary and 'rescue' it from kitsch, cfr. Mitchell 2009, p. 229; on the relation between (religious) kitsch and repetition, cfr. Binkley 2000 and Westerfelhaus 2007.

and the 'fetishist' embodiment of its language, can be found not only in the religious semiosphere, but also in cultural areas that are not normally thought of in religious terms. This is what the present issue of *Lexia* has sought to do, initiating a trend of reflection whose exploration is far from being concluded.

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