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## Semiotics of Religion

Jenny Ponzo

**Summary.** Abstract: This paper provides an overview of the main research lines developed in the 2000s in Italy in the field of the semiotics of religion, with a focus on the studies carried out at the University of Turin, where religious cultures have provided fertile ground for semiotic reflection in the last few decades. This contribution **therefore** takes into consideration the texts, signs, and practices that have been the subject of analysis (sacred texts, artworks, material culture, communication strategies, interpretative styles, and rituals) and the related methodologies, as well as the concepts and categories most frequently discussed and **utilised**, such as the notions of transcendence, mediation, and secularization.

**Keywords.** Religion, Sacred, Transcendence, Secularization, Ritual.

**Zusammenfassung.** Abstract: Dieser Beitrag gibt einen Überblick über die wichtigsten Forschungslinien, die in den 2000er Jahren in Italien auf dem Gebiet der Semiotik der Religion entwickelt wurden, mit einem Schwerpunkt auf den an der Universität Turin durchgeführten Studien, in denen religiöse Kulturen in den letzten Jahrzehnten einen fruchtbaren Boden für semiotische Reflexion geschaffen haben. Dieser Beitrag berücksichtigt daher die Texte, Zeichen und Praktiken, die Gegenstand der Analyse waren (heilige Texte, Kunstwerke, materielle Kultur, Kommunikationsstrategien, Interpretationsstile und Rituale) und die damit verbundenen Methoden sowie die am häufigsten diskutierten und verwendeten Konzepte und Kategorien, wie die **Vorstellung von** Transzendenz, Mediation und Säkularisierung.

**Schlüsselwörter.** Religion, Heilig, Transzendenz, Säkularisierung, Ritual.

### Introduction

In the last few decades, Italian scholarship has contributed significantly to the field commonly known as the “semiotics of religion”.<sup>1</sup> In particular, the semiotics of religious cultures has been a prominent research line for the

semiotics group working at the University of Turin.<sup>2</sup> In what follows, I will sketch an overview of the Italian research into religious cultures by focusing on the texts, signs, practices, and communicative styles that have been the subject of analysis, as well as the concepts and categories most frequently discussed and **utilised**.

## 1. Sacred texts

The semiotic study of sacred texts, and the Bible in particular, was one of the first lines of inquiry to determine the international development of the semiotics of religion.<sup>3</sup> In Italy, semiotic analyses of sacred texts are often directed at pointing out the features of specific semiotic ideologies that can be detected in the Scriptures. In particular, over the course of the 2000s Ugo Volli has extensively studied the Torah and formulated a specific approach to the semiotic study of the Bible which he proposes in the Premise of his book *Domande alla Torah* (2012a). This **approach**

[...] has by no means the ambition to explain or comment on the Bible [...]. Its main goal is to show to the Western reader that there is a thought or, we could say, a philosophy of the Torah (both an implicit thought in the biblical text and a thought that takes this as its subject of reflection), to practice this thought in its interrogative dimension, which Western philosophy and the Jewish tradition from the Talmud onwards share: to ask questions of the Torah [...]. It intends to do so [...] by using the tools of semiotics [...], especially by inquiring into this tradition's self-understanding, the way in which the same tradition that produced the books of the Bible has understood its meaning. This entails an encounter between the culture of Jewish commentary – which dates back at least two millennia – and one of the most contemporary of the human sciences... (Volli 2012a: 11–12, my translation).

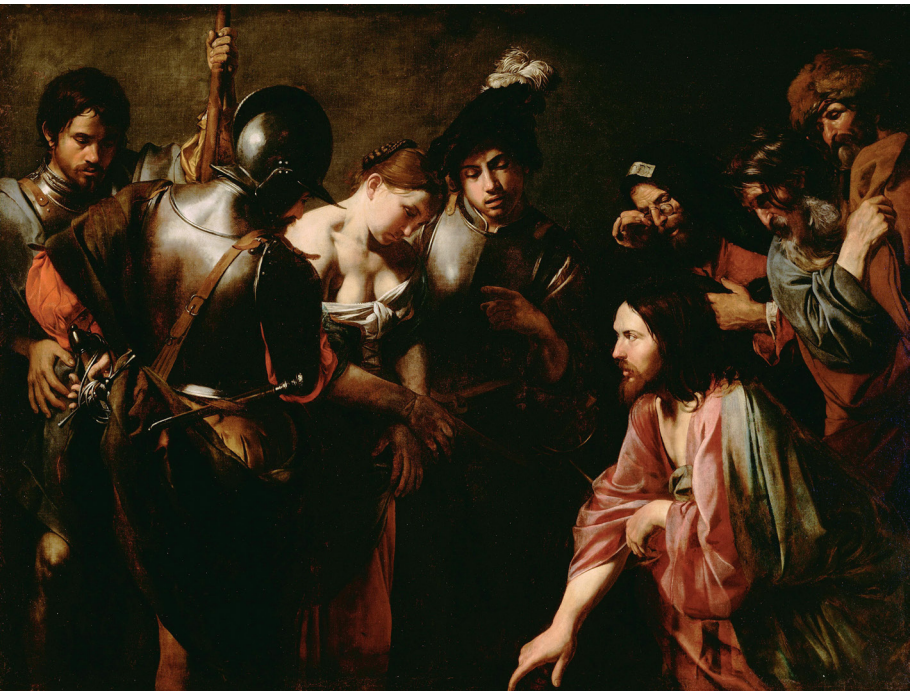
Volli therefore proposes studying the Scriptures in relation to specific cultural contexts and with increasing attention to the comparative study of their **interpretations**. This focus on the study of interpretative models is prominent in Volli's latest monograph, significantly entitled *Il resto è interpretazione* (2019), the Premise of which reads:

[...] in the long term of the *semiosphere*, the text lives and communicates according to interpretative models that decide how their sense should be understood. And this is the task of a semiotics of the *Scriptures*: understanding how and why the texts have been interpreted according to certain patterns and, hence, to deduce a grammar of the interpretation *inside that culture* (Volli 2019: 15, my translation).

These theoretical premises are concretely applied in works such as Volli (2008a), which **analyses** the verses of the *Exodus* (3:1–18, 6:3–7, 34:6–7) addressing the direct enunciation of the names of the divine. Starting from the Scriptures, Volli reconstructs “the implicit theory of the names in the

Torah” (Volli 2008a: 29) and Hebrew culture more broadly. *Exodus* 3 is also at the **centre** of the linguistic, semiotic and philosophical investigation in Volli (2017), a volume that points out the paradoxical aspectuality of God’s eternity and identity (both “imperfect and progressive”) in Jewish culture.<sup>4</sup>

Massimo Leone has also developed this method in several publications. His approach in this kind of research is **characterised** by taking into consideration not only the exegetic literature and general cultural context, but also iconography. For instance, Leone (2021) proposes a new interpretation of the famous *Pericope of the Adulteress* (*John* 8:6–8) in which Jesus traces mysterious signs on the ground. Leone compares similar customs found in several cultures, such as Greek and Arab ones, and **analyses** the iconography of this **Pericope** (for instance, Valentin de Boulogne’s *Jesus and the adulterous woman*, Fig. 12). He then concludes that **Jesus’s** gesture corresponds not to writing but to **unwriting** fundamentalist and intolerant law. Leone interprets Jesus’s action of doodling as a semi-symbolic system in which the traditional written Law is replaced by a form of non-verbal contract which grants a more immediate relationship with transcend-



**Fig. 2:** Valentin de Boulogne, *Jesus and the adulterous woman*, 1620, oil on canvas, 167 × 221.3 cm, Los Angeles, Paul Getty Museum. Public Domain.

ence. The meaning of mysterious signs is also the subject of Leone (2013a), which focuses on the graffiti mentioned in *Daniel* 5: Leone looks into Talmudic and later Jewish interpretations, comparing them with Christian interpretations and iconography from the Middle Ages to modernity as well as

with intertextual transpositions. He concludes that all these interpretations and re-mediations of the story meet the specific semiotic and aesthetic needs of a community but, at the same time, they also share a common narrative kernel (condemning the arbitrary use of power). As these brief glimpses clearly indicate, this approach also makes possible an intercultural comparison that limits the risks of ethnocentrism so common in the field of religious studies.

Apart from the Bible, another kind of text connected to the religious sphere<sup>5</sup> which has been the subject of research is myth. Guido Ferraro, especially in his book *Il linguaggio del mito* (first published in 1979, new edition released in 2001), offers a critical reading of the classic studies of folklore and myth and proposes a number of case studies from disparate cultures, including the South-American Bororo and Matakó. An articulated theoretical-methodological discussion of the semiotic study of myth can also be found in Volli (2015a).

## 2. The arts

As mentioned above, Leone has carried out extensive research into religious iconography. Leone (2020a) claims that images are fundamental to understanding religious cultures, even those images that negate and forbid iconic representations of the sacred. Indeed, Leone is particularly interested in the limits and paradoxes of religious visual texts. For instance, Leone (2015a, 2016c) explores the paradoxical iconography of Christian iconoclasm in the missionary encounter that is expressed in the motif of “saints smashing idols”; Leone and Finol (2021) **analyse** the trifacial representations of the Christian Trinity (especially by the Pictorial School of Cuzco) as a way of offering a visual representation capable of resolving the logical contradictions of the Christian mystery; and Leone (2013b) looks into the imaginary of the soul by comparing Greek models of visual representation of *psyché* embodied in a number of beings (such as birds and butterflies), the Jewish idea of vital breath, which negates any iconic representation, and the Christian theology of the soul, which tries to combine both its depiction and its irrepresentability.<sup>6</sup> This interest in the issue of the thresholds of representability is also displayed by other authors studying religious images, such as Maria Giulia Dondero and Omar Calabrese, who have made key **contributions** to this field, in particular with their works on the representation of the sacred in photographic images (Dondero 2007, 2008a, 2008b) and on the Christian iconography of passion and death (Calabrese 1991).<sup>7</sup>

Another significant research line focuses on religious themes in literature. For instance, Leone has studied the dynamics of religious conversion in a corpus of chivalric poems (Leone 2014d), as well as Goethe’s poems devoted to Hāfez read through the idea of interreligious “aesthetic hospitality” (Leone 2010a).<sup>8</sup> Ponzio (2019a) focuses instead on recurring religious

themes in Italian contemporary novels published after the Second Vatican Council. She outlines, for instance, clashing semiotic ideologies concerning the origins of language, the semiotic features of the literary representations of rituals<sup>9</sup>, and recurring thematic roles (concerning e.g. the figure of the saint and the pope).<sup>10</sup>

Cinema has also been the object of scholarly attention; for example, Leone (2014e) **analyses** the representation of religion in *Amour* by Michael Haneke, and Leone (2005) compares Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* and Pier Paolo Pasolini's *The Gospel According to Saint Matthew*.<sup>11</sup>

### 3. Material culture

Italian semioticians have also conducted studies about objects, **artefacts** and sensorial perceptions. Regarding objects, extensive research has been carried out about the veil. Starting from the Greimasian idea of *envelopment*, the semiotic, cultural, aesthetic, socio-political, and anthropological implications of veiling have been explored in reference to a number of case studies from different religious cultures (especially Muslim, Christian and Jewish) and chronological periods, and through a plurality of media, from sacred texts and exegetic literature (Leone 2012b) to cinema (Leone 2016a) and photography (Leone 2020b: **chapter 4**).<sup>12</sup> Besides considering the veil as a device for the **semiotification** and cultural construction of the human body (Leone 2010b), the mechanism of wrapping has also been explored in relation to other objects, especially relics. A particularly significant example of this line of inquiry is Leone's study of reliquaries: Leone claims that, while coverings often aim to bestow an erotic aura on their contents (this is the case e.g. of books and the packaging of merchandise), the main goal of the reliquary is to point towards transcendence by attenuating the indexical value of the relic that would otherwise risk triggering idolatry and fetishism. To do so, reliquaries use visual and verbal signs that mediate the gaze of the observer, thus contextualizing the relic inside an aesthetic text and surrounding it with meaning (Leone 2014f).

Further studies about aspects of material culture have been **centred** on the (re-)codification of sacred space. For instance, Pozzo (2022 forthcoming) focuses on semiotic issues related to the re-use of deconsecrated churches, especially in contemporary Italy, Pozzo (2020) studies the relationship between theology and architectural theories in the Renaissance, Leone (2013d) reflects on the relationship between ascetic practice and space emptiness and **fullness** in the construction of sacred space and the pertinence of the materials out of which religious space is formed for the efficacy of religious practices, and Pozzo (2020b) **proposes** a semiotic analysis of ex voto with particular attention to their spatial organization (Pozzo claims that the ex voto surrounding a sacred icon form an *archive* of collective memories, although in present times these archives are becoming ever more **de-contextualised** and **musealised**, with significant conse-



quences for their meaning). In-depth studies of material culture have also been proposed by Rambelli (2007, 1999) in relation to Japanese Buddhism.

Attention has also been devoted to the codification of sensuous perceptions. Leone (2012c) proposes a “sensuous semio-geography” understood as a method for studying the articulation of religious belonging through signs involving all the senses, such as sight (e.g. architecture, clothing) and hearing. Leone focuses on the latter and, more specifically, the *soundscapes* characterising different religious groups in multicultural cities and their related intercultural relationships, while Leone (2012d) focuses on taste, showing the impact that the introduction of chocolate from America had on Italian dietary habits and collective passions and its repercussions on theological debate, in particular Italians’ resistance to Jansenist rigor. Ponzo (2020c, 2021a forthcoming) focuses instead on smell in a semiotic analysis of the Catholic idea of *osmogensis*, a charisma or divine gift characterising many saints and consisting in the capacity to emanate celestial perfumes. In Catholic imagery, these perfumes are imagined as a halo surrounding the saint and lingering in the places through which they have passed as well as on the objects they have touched. Indexes of the saints’ spiritual essence, these perfumes can be considered the olfactive equivalent of visual manifestations such as the nimbus and aura, manifestations that many cultures depict as visible and colored.

#### 4. Rituals and practices

A further subject of study is represented by rituals and religious practices in general. A useful introduction to the semiotic approach to worship is provided by Volli (2012b), while a variety of essays have been devoted to specific case studies. Leone, for instance, has proposed a semiotic discussion of religious processions in the Catholic tradition, showing how processions enlarge the sphere of sacred space thanks to the formation of collective agency, thereby carrying transcendence outside the ordinary boundaries of places of worship (Leone 2014g, 2011a).<sup>13</sup> Buddhist practices have been studied by Ferraro (2012), for instance, showing how the ritual of “Tranquility and Insight” brings about a temporal suspension of the linguistic and conceptual faculties that are ordinarily used as a form of mediation between us and the world, the inside and the outside; by Garofalo (2019) as part of an inquiry into anthropopoiesis in two Japanese Buddhist currents, and by Stano (2012), looking into the ways in which the Buddhist tradition of the food offering to the Buddha is changing in the contemporary age.<sup>14</sup> Food practices are moreover studied in Leone (2015c), a comparative investigation of practice of chewing in Jewish and Christian cultures, and in Leone (2013e), about practices of fasting in Jainism.<sup>15</sup> The study of Japanese religious traditions from a semio-anthropological and ethnographic perspective has been pursued in particular by Tatsuma Padoan in extensive research into the semiotics of ritual space and pilgrimage (see e.g. Padoan 2022

forthcoming, 2021, 2018, Padoan and Sedda 2018).

Another research line in this field consists in the analysis of religious practices related to digital media. For example, Leone (2014h) – from mainly a theoretical-methodological and philosophical perspective – explores the influence of the progressive **de-materialisation** of interpersonal relationships brought about by the evolution of the media on religious practices and ideas, while Leone (2011b) and Dos Santos (2020) present analyses of specific case studies concerning religious experiences in virtual reality.<sup>16</sup>

## 5. Communicative strategies and styles

A considerable body of research has been devoted to inquiry into the communicative strategies and styles adopted by religious groups and individuals. Concerning strategies for communicating with the deity, several works explore the semiotic features of prayer. Volli (2012b, 2015b), for example, explains the meaning of the Jewish word and practice of *tefillah*, a kind of reflexive prayer entailing **acceptance** of divine will, rather than a request aimed at influencing God's will to bring it more in line with human interests. Leone (2012e), after offering general remarks about the semiotic philosophy of prayer, focuses on the Christian tradition of the rosary. Prayer and repetition are also at the core of the litanic genre examined by Ponzo, Galofaro and Marino (2020).<sup>17</sup> A further type of divine invocation, glossolalia, is the subject of an in-depth semiotic and historical analysis by Alessandra Pozzo (2013) and is also taken into consideration by Leone (2014b: 551–562, 2008) and, transversally, by Ponzo (2019b).

The latter **analyses** apologetic literature issued **by** exponents of the Conservative Evangelical movement on one hand, and Charismatics on the other, to respectively condemn and promote the practice of glossolalia. Ponzo (2019b) shows that the argumentation of the two groups is based on the same New Testament verses, but that these verses are interpreted in different ways and according to different semiotic ideologies to **legitimise** the group's opposite positions. Communication strategies in interreligious dialogue are also the subject of various studies by Leone. For instance, Leone (2018a) proposes a typology of the changes in religious signs in circumstances of persecution and censorship and focuses on the strategies enacted by the *Kakure Kirishitan*, the Japanese Christians persecuted by authorities in the Modern period; Leone (2011c) looks into the verbal and visual strategies of enculturation of 16th-century Franciscan missionaries; and Leone (2019, 2017) reflects on the problem of the symbolic presence of the **Other** in pluralistic societies.<sup>18</sup>

A further important branch of studies carried out by Leone concerns extremism. The study of the rhetorical strategies (in both verbal and visual texts) and **the** use of media in the framework of fundamentalist propaganda<sup>19</sup> is at the **centre** of a semiotic approach that is significant, not only in theoretical-methodological and cultural terms, but also by virtue of mode-



ling social engagement, in that it provides a critical perspective with which to oppose religious extremism and violence and think about the socio-cultural premises that might lead to the peaceful coexistence of different traditions in contemporary pluralistic societies. The main premise for such a goal is exquisitely semiotic: Leone (2016d) argues that preserving shared codes and heuristic parameters that limit the proliferation of possible interpretations is the necessary condition for ensuring social cohesion and even the capacity to use language, the capacity that most **characterises** human beings. Semiotics according to this perspective forms the connective tissue between different approaches, as Leone claims in one of his main publications about jihadist propaganda:

An interdisciplinary approach composed of history and anthropology of religion, cultural and media studies, religious and visual studies, security studies and law, with cultural semiotics and rhetoric acting as interdisciplinary sinews among them, is [...] proposed to develop a common protocol in order to collect present-day jihadist propaganda materials, analyze them through interdisciplinary methodology, and compare and contrast them with texts, messages, and media of violent confessional persuasion in other historical epochs, sociocultural contexts, and religious traditions (Leone 2015e: 2).

In a philosophical discussion drawing on the thought of Luigi Pareyson, Emmanuel Lévinas and Hans Urs von Balthasar, Leone (2018c) claims that spiritual life has an aesthetic and formative nature and that transcendence manifests as transparency, revelation, and light shining through the veil of language and communication. This conceptual foundation, according to Leone, leads to the rejection of evil as an aesthetic and the search for the revelation of transcendence in the face of the Other, which mirrors the absolute.

## 6. Transcendence and Mediation

Leone (2011d) suggests that the capacity to imagine the infinite and transcendence is a distinctive feature of human beings and that religions provide grammars that regulate the imagination of the infinite. A focus on the concept of transcendence and the ways in which it is mediated through signs is at the core of many works, starting with the Supplement to **volume 2** of *Signs and Society* edited by Massimo Leone and Richard Parmentier (2014). In the opening article, the two authors **analyse** ancient Egyptian sacred statues and the Medieval Eucharist as metasemiotic texts **channel-ling** transcendence through materiality.<sup>20</sup> Volli (2014a, 2021) identifies a similar metasemiotic function attributed to angels in the Bible and Jewish culture. The most recent contribution to this reflection on transcendence is the volume edited by Yelle and Ponzio (eds. 2021) that proposes to overcome the **scepticism** surrounding this term as a result of its being abused

in the field of philosophy and religious studies and to instead consider transcendence a transversal human idea, the comprehension of which is fundamental for understanding religion, as declared in the introduction:

It is not only possible but necessary to recuperate this category for a properly anthropocentric study of religion and culture. Indeed, without some such category as Transcendence, we declare that it would be impossible to account for the dimensions of human experience, **ex-pression**, and behavior that are commonly labeled as religious (Yelle and Ponzo eds. 2021: 1).

The dialectics between mediation and immediacy is instead the focus of the volume by Ponzo, Yelle and Leone (eds. 2021), drawing on the idea that

**most religious cultures conceive places and moments where the barrier between immanence and transcendence is suddenly abolished, thus allowing apparently immediate and unmediated contact between them”, but that they also “tend to structure spiritual immediacy into ritualized formulas, which are not exceptional any longer to the extent that they can be shared by a community and handed down by a tradition (Ponzo, Yelle and Leone eds. 2021: 4).**

The apparently immediate experience of transcendence is actually the subject of numerous works carried out in the 2000s. The most extensive of these is Leone’s book about annunciations, which charts the ways in which human beings in different times have believed that they have received divine revelation and narrated this experience (Leone 2014j), and the issue of *Lexia* devoted to ecstasy (Leone ed. 2014a) in which Volli, for instance, focuses on the tension between ineffable mystical experience and the need to narrate it in culturally codified ways (Volli 2014b).<sup>21</sup> Leone (2009d) argues that the capacity to presentify an absence – or to provide a concrete representation of something abstract – is a feature shared by both religion and language. **Consequently**, Leone proposes a structural comparison between them based on applying linguistic and semiotic theories to religion, especially in relation to themes connected to interreligious communication and translation.

A further research line concerning narrations of a specific spiritual experience that posits the encounter with transcendence, namely religious conversion, has also been developed by Leone. In particular, Leone (2004) proposes the idea of vertigo to define the **destabilisation** of the **Self** in its encounter with religion, an encounter that causes a radical change. Leone thus studies religious conversion as a story,

**which converted people constantly recount to themselves in order to consolidate their identity and eliminate the feeling of vertigo which seizes everyone who has lost one’s own spiritual equilibrium (Leone 2004: xii).**

## 7. Law and exemplarity

One significant and original branch of inquiry developed in Italy, and Turin in particular, is research at the intersection of the semiotics of religion and the semiotics of law. General themes addressed in this field include the impact of technologies on religion and law, ideas of authoriality in religious legal systems, and the sacred foundation and liturgical features of the Western institutional order, respectively the subjects of a volume edited by Leone, Patrícia Branco, Nadirsyah Hosen, and Richard Mohr (eds. 2018), an issue of the *International Journal for the Semiotics of Law* edited by Leone (ed. 2013f)<sup>22</sup>, and several works by Paolo Heritier, in particular Heritier (2013). Moreover, Leone (2010c, 2013g) also develops the above-mentioned idea of semio-geography in studying legal controversies about places of worship (and other issues of cohabitation) in multicultural cities. One of the reasons for the difficulty of pluralist coexistence is the scarcity of semiotic resources (for instance, in terms of codes, channels, and audience): this assertion leads Leone (2009b) to borrow the idea of “sustainability” as used in discourses about ecology and apply it to cultures. Evaluating the sustainability of religious cultures in pluralist contexts constitutes a further possible social application of semiotics and one which, according to Leone (2009c), can also have a “therapeutic” effect on religious law, by using a semiotic approach to intervene in situations of social tension and, in so doing, suggesting new and alternative meanings to the ones causing today’s interreligious clashes.<sup>23</sup>

Another research line in the field of the semiotics of religious law is represented by studies of the Catholic regulation of sainthood and **canonisation** procedures. Ponzo (2020d) argues that, even though exemplary figures channeling models of **behaviour** meet a universal human need, the peculiarity of Catholicism consists in its formulation of a normative apparatus defining what constitutes sainthood and under what rules it can be officially recognized. This latter recognition is based on a unique judicial procedure, the cause for **canonisation**, which is similar to a post-mortem trial.<sup>24</sup> Saints as models of lived perfection and the related notions of exemplarity and **figurativisation** of norms are studied in particular in the research project *NeMoSancti: New Models of Sanctity in Italy (1960s–2010s) – A Semiotic Analysis of Norms, Causes of Saints, Hagiography, and Narratives*.<sup>25</sup> Further studies concerning the worldview and codes conveyed by key religious figures are Traini (2015, 2017) about the construction of **Jesus’s** figure and message by Paul of Tarsus and later interpreters, and Ponzo (2020e) about the representation of the Virgin Mary in the intercultural discourse between **Christians** and Muslims.<sup>26</sup>

## Conclusion

Beside its cultural and social relevance, another significant aspect of the study of religious discourses and phenomena is that they can serve as

touchstones in two different ways. On the one hand, religious communication has specific features, the study of which is useful for testing general semiotic theories and understanding them from different angles, including in relation to ideas and methodologies formulated in other disciplines. For instance, Ferraro (2015: 228–234) analyses a Tibetan-Buddhist myth to challenge the indiscriminated application of formalist and structuralist schemes for the analysis of narratives produced by different cultures; Leone (2018d) shows the reciprocal influence between Peirce and Suzuki, who spread Zen culture in western countries; and Ferraro (2008) inquiries into the relationship between the idea of sign and that of the sacred in Durkheim's thought. Furthermore, the study of religious phenomena leads scholars to develop innovative methodologies and concepts such as the above-mentioned idea of semio-geography proposed by Leone or the theo-semiotics proposed by Leone and Finol (2021) as the study of the various manifestations of the divine in discourses, stories, rituals, actors, spaces and times.

On the other hand, the study of religions can also shed light on trends involving the broader semiosphere. This aspect is clearly visible in research on the phenomenon known as “secularisation”, namely the exportation of religious models outside the traditional religious sphere. For instance, Stano (2012) and Volli (2002) have applied the category of “cult” to explain facets of food consumption and offering and to talk about television, Leone (2011e) has highlighted the similarity between rituals and routines (stemming from their repetitive and unchangeable structure and supposed transcendental origin, thus shaping the sense of belonging), while Ponzo (ed. 2018) presents essays applying the idea of martyrdom to cases located both inside and outside its original religious contexts.<sup>27</sup>

It is reasonable to **hypothesise** that, over the next few years, research in the field of the semiotics of religion will continue to delve into semiotic ideologies from a comparative perspective, the semiotic issues at the basis of interreligious clashes and their possible solutions, interpretative and communicative strategies **characterising** past and present religious cultures, the changes in the religious experience brought about by the increasing use of digital media, AI and virtual reality, and the adoption of religious models on the part of **secularised** cultures. Research in all of these areas meets a shared need for knowledge in an age in which **secularisation**, extremism, religious revivals, new religiosities, and consolidated **and / or** updated traditions coexist in ever-more pluralist communities.

## Notes

- 1 For a broad overview of this field, its origins and currents, see Leone (2022 *forthcoming*). Exponents of the Turin semiotics group are cautious in using the expression “semiotics of religion” due to the difficulty of defining what constitutes “religion” and the undesirable connotations, prejudices and ethnocentrism associated with that word; for an in-depth reflection on this subject, see this interview with Ugo

Volli: (URL: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JzIggLFxxkM&list=PLSTiiR\\_8LfD-KQBkA8iGF6dNlv4mwEmE85&index=3](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JzIggLFxxkM&list=PLSTiiR_8LfD-KQBkA8iGF6dNlv4mwEmE85&index=3), retrieved **DAY, MONTH, YEAR**).

- 2 A chair in semiotics was introduced at the University of Turin in 1969 and assigned to D'Arco Silvio Avalle, followed by Gian Paolo Caprettini in 1974. Ugo Volli, chair of semiotics between 2000 and 2019, founded CIRCe, the Interdepartmental Research Center on Communication and, together with Massimo Leone (currently the chair of semiotics at the University of Turin), he renewed and relaunched the international semiotics journal *Lexia*. During its history to date, Italian semiotics has produced several valuable works that fall under the umbrella of the semiotics of religion – for instance Caprettini (1974) – but this paper only sketches the main research lines developed in the last twenty years in Turin, with references to the broader Italian semiotic milieu, without pretensions of exhaustivity. Some attention is also devoted to the work of Italian authors who are currently carrying out their research abroad.
- 3 In particular, starting from the 1960s, a field of biblical semiotics was developed in Lyon by the members of the CADIR. In relation to this field see Bertetti (2004), who is currently also editing an anthology of texts from the Lyon school.
- 4 Further examples: Volli (2011a, 2008b, 2010). See also the analysis of the biblical theme of the *confusion linguarum* in Eco (1993: chapter 1).
- 5 For a critical reflection about the possibility of connecting the (western) ideas of sacredness and belief to other cultures' myths, see Ferraro (1979: 15).
- 6 Further research on religious iconography can be found in Leone 2014c, 2013c). On the "semiotics of the soul" see especially the monumental work Leone (2012g).
- 7 See also Marino (2020) and Fabbri (2000) about the Turin Shroud, which Catholics venerate as bearing the print of Jesus's body, and Traini (2016) about God's concealing in the Book of Esther and in the episode of Jacob's fight against the angel narrated in the Genesis. On the representation of Jesus's pain and death, see also Eco (2007: chapter 2).
- 8 On the contrary, on issues of interreligious translatability, see Fabbri (2003: 85–102).
- 9 On which see also Ponzo (2020a, 2017).
- 10 On which see also Ponzo and Ferraro (2018).
- 11 Further cinematographic case studies can be found in Surace (2018) and Leone (2016a). See also Fumagalli (2011) about religious themes in Italian TV series.
- 12 On the veil, see also Leone (2016b, 2009a, 2007, 2020b: chapter IV), Volli (2016), Stano (2010).
- 13 See also Leone (2015b) about the ambivalent attitude of Christianity towards game, analysed through the gamification theory.
- 14 Stano (2012) and Ferraro (2012) are collected in a monographic issue of *Lexia* devoted to "Worship" (Leone ed. 2012a).
- 15 Further reflections about fasting, with a focus on the Christian tradition, can be found in Pozzo (2021) and Ponzo (2021b). See also Migliore (2021) about the complex semi-symbolic relationship between good and bad taste on the one hand and good and evil from a moral perspective on the other hand.
- 16 See also Petrini (2021) regarding virtual religious practices during the pandemic.
- 17 For further semiotic reflections on the litanies, see also Galofaro (2020, 2018), Galofaro and Kubas (2016).

- 18 Further research in the field of communicative strategies and styles concern: prophetic discourse (Volli 2011b); the encyclopedias of saints and martyrologies as genres **systematising** knowledge about saints according to different gnoseological premises (Ponzo and Marino 2021); and the liturgical and linguistic reform of the Roman Catholic Mass (Ponzo 2019c). The essays collected in the volumes edited by Dusi and Marrone (eds. 2008) and Lorusso and Peverini (eds. 2017) represent further significant contributions to the study of religious discourse across different traditions and media.
- 19 See Leone (2018b, 2014i) regarding jihadist propaganda. Leone (2015d), which presents essays by many prominent Italian scholars, instead proposes a typology of the reactions and opinions following the **terrorist** attack on Charlie Hebdo (January 2015) expressed in social media, and Leone (2012f) a discussion of the idea of authoriality that **characterises** fundamentalism. Paolo Fabbri has likewise taken a stance on ISIS and extremism in several academic and divulgative publications about Islamic extremism, see e.g. Fabbri (2014).
- 20 See also the above-mentioned work on reliquaries (Leone 2014h).
- 21 On mystical literature, see also Luciano (2011).
- 22 In this issue, I would cite Volli's contribution about the authoriality of Jewish Law (Volli 2013).
- 23 A further work developing the semiotics of religious law is Leone 2010 (d).
- 24 See also Ponzo (2021c) and Turco (2021) for an approach to the **canonisation** procedure that also takes into consideration gender issues, in particular in relation to the theme of motherhood.
- 25 NeMoSancti is a research project carried out at the University of Turin, **Principal Investigator** is Jenny Ponzo. It studies how models of sanctity have changed after the Second Vatican Council. To this end, it applies a pioneering methodology based on semiotic theory to a wide corpus of normative, judicial, and narrative texts. This project has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (grant agreement No 757314). For more information and a publications list, see [nemo-sancti.eu](http://nemo-sancti.eu).
- 26 See also Paolo Fabbri's discussion about different types of "maestro" (master, **teacher**) and associated ways of conveying knowledge (Marrone 2016).
- 27 See also Volli (1997) for a broad reflection about fetishism, Ponzo (2019a: 121–161, 2019d, 2020f) and Marino (2021) about **secularised** models of sanctity, Ponzo (2017) about the similarity between religious and civil processions, Ponzo (2021d) about the similarity between religious and artistic epiphanies, Padoan (2012) about railway policies and ritual aesthetics in today's Japan.

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

























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### Image source

Fig. 2. Valentin de Boulogne, *Jesus and the adulterous woman*, 1620, oil on canvas, 167 × 221.3 cm, Los Angeles, Paul Getty Museum. Public Domain

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