

Seventh Conference of the Nordic Association for Semiotic Studies

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Session on the SEMIOTICS OF RELIGIOUS BELIEVING

Moderator: Massimo Leone, Department of Philosophy, University of Torino

CALL FOR PAPERS

What can semiotics say about religious believing?

In structural semiotics, believing is usually defined as a subject's adhesion to a statement implying a cognitive act characterized by the modal category of certitude. Believing is therefore considered as the denomination, in the natural language, of the epistemic category.

Given such definition, structural semiotics thus far has tackled the issue of believing from the following points of view:

- 1) the analysis of the ways in which texts of different kinds articulate and manifest the epistemic category;
- 2) the analysis of the ways in which the dialectics between persuasion (encouraging someone to believe) and believing (accepting such encouragement) is articulated and manifested in several kinds of texts.

For structural semiotics, indeed, what matters is not the biological and cognitive processes through which believing takes place in one's mind but the semiotic processes through which believing is signified and communicated in one's culture, as well as promoted through signification and communication. For instance, structural semiotics is not interested in the physics, chemistry, biology, and cognitive structure of Augustine's mind but in his *Confessions*, in the ways they narrate the passage from disbelief to belief, as well as in the ways in which they encourage potential readers to do the same.

However, there is a big problem with this approach. Many of our beliefs, and probably most of them, are never signified or communicated to anyone but ourselves. On the one hand, as Greimas and Courtés already pointed out in their *Dictionnaire*, the issue of believing does not concern only the axis of 'real' communication, but also that of the 'imaginary' one, the axis of 'interiorized discourse'. On the other hand, the same issue concerns also those beliefs that, although never signified nor communicated through neither real nor imaginary communication, constitute the underpinning structure of signified and communicated beliefs.

Should semiotics limit itself to the study of externalized believing, or is there a way semiotics can inquire into the nature of the interiorized discourse of believing too, and even into the nature of those beliefs that 'we do not even communicate to ourselves'?

This question is particularly urgent in scholarship about religious believing. In the last decades, numbers of studies have suggested the possibility to locate religious believing not only in

exteriorized forms of signification and communication (signs, texts, cultures, all typical objects of inquiry for structural semiotics) but also in interiorized forms of signification and communication, or even below the threshold of semiosis itself: religious believing would be related to a certain cognitive structure, to a certain neurophysiology, to a certain neurobiology, or even in the physics and the chemistry of genetic processes.

Needless to say, such attempts to hardwire religious believing have often been received with contempt by most humanities, including non-cognitive semiotics. At the same time, approaches about religious believing traditionally developed by the humanities are met with the same response in cognitive studies and neurosciences.

The first objective of the session is to encourage replacing mutual contempt with mutual curiosity. What can structural semiotics and the other humanities learn from new 'hard' approaches about religious believing? What can cognitive studies and neurosciences learn from 'soft' approaches? Is there a way to bridge the gap between what religious believing is in signs, texts, and cultures and what it is in brains and minds?

The session particularly welcomes proposals on the following topics:

- 1) Perspectives from semiotic studies about religious believing in general and about the dialectics it holds with specific systems of religious beliefs in particular, no matter what the semiotic approach involved (Peircean semiotics, structural semiotics, cultural semiotics, phenomenological semiotics, cognitive semiotics, biosemiotics, and so on and so forth);
- 2) Perspectives from cognitive studies and neurosciences about religious believing in general and about the dialectics it holds with specific systems of religious beliefs;
- 3) Comparative studies focusing on several 'soft' and 'hard' perspectives;
- 4) Comparative studies, from the point of view of semiotics and/or cognitive studies, about the relation between religious believing and other forms of believing, including the role of believing in the domain of science;
- 5) Theoretical ideas and experimental projects about bridging the gap between the semiotics of (religious) believing and the cognitive studies on (religious) believing.

Proposals (max 500 words) should be sent to massimo.leone@unito.it and NASS2011@semiotik.lu.se by **January 10, 2010**.