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ROBERT A. YELLE, *The semiotics of religion: Signs of the sacred in history*.
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In *The semiotics of religion: Signs of the sacred in history*, Robert Yelle offers a broad critique of the linguistic assumptions at work in the academic study of religion. He argues that scholars of religion have overlooked the complexity of religious semiotics and the rhetorical use of systems of meaning within religious communities. In other words, by assuming the arbitrary nature of the sign, scholars give insufficient attention to the ways in which religious discourse creates and sustains an understanding of the naturalness of the sign.

This monograph draws heavily on Webb Keane's (2007) work on semiotics in non-Western cultural encounters. Keane notes that one of the difficulties of studying how ideas about language are manifest in different cultural contexts is that there is not always agreement that "words" are "radically distinct from things in the first place" (18). As a means of addressing this kind of "materiality" of language, Keane proposes the idea of "semiotic ideology" (16) in order to expand work on language ideology into other forms of communicative actions and meaning-making practices. This approach is particularly useful in the context of religious and magical rituals that rest on the belief that words, gestures, and objects used in concert can produce material effects in the world. Yelle takes seriously Keane's concept of "semiotic ideology" and uses it to explore how the materiality of language is mobilized in different kinds of religious and ritual language and practices. Yelle argues that semiotic ideologies present in religious phenomena function rhetorically, that is, religious practitioners have a reflexive awareness of the materiality of language and use this awareness to reinforce the impression of the efficacy of ritual practice. To put it another way, many types of religious discourse use the idea that language, particularly sacred language, has in some sense given meaning to the physical and spiritual world and can therefore change that world if used in the proper ritual order and form. Thus, ritual practice must be understood not simply semantically but also rhetorically. Yelle argues that semiotics, because it takes in the entire system of meaning making, ought to play a more central role in contemporary scholarship on religious practice.

Yelle's previous book on how Protestant ideologies of language shaped colonial reform of religious practices in India in many ways sets the stage for this book. In his earlier work, Yelle turns a critical gaze on Western understanding of historical master narratives of "rupture and disenchantment," emphasizing their relationship

to “earlier Christian mythological narratives” (2013:x). Yelle brings a particularly astute understanding of Hindu ideologies of language and ritual practice to his discussion of traditional Indian religious practice. He builds on this historically grounded study in his new book, confronting the claims of secular modernity and calling into question its underlying linguistic assumptions.

Yelle makes a valuable contribution to the study of “semiotic ideology” in his first book, but in the current book he suggests a more radical re-orientation for the study of religious phenomena that shifts focus from attempts to uncover the underlying cosmology of religious and magical rituals—that is, the particular “semantic or symbolic” (162) meaning of such practices—to an approach that gives closer attention to the semiotics of repetition and form in ritual. Repetition and form in ritual language is especially interesting, Yelle points out, because this use of the “poetic function” (Jakobson 1960:357) of language does not rely on the meaning given to an arbitrary sign but rather on its efficacy as predicated in theological claims and ritual contexts. To elaborate, the ritual efficacy of a sign is contingent on the repetition, and therefore the form—the phonetic and syntactic pattern—takes precedence over the referential function. This perception of efficacy is formed and sustained through semiotic ideologies that are reinforced through rhetorical performance. In the separate chapters of this ambitious book, Yelle discusses ritual poetics, rhetorical claims of the naturalness of sacred languages, assumptions about literalness and the secular, Protestant literalism, and finally, mounts a critique of the reliance on semantic meaning in the study of religion.

In Ch. 2, using Silverstein’s elaboration of Jakobson’s (1960) work on the “poetic function of language” (357), Yelle proposes a theory of ritual language based on its formal characteristics. Previous theories such as Catherine Bell’s concept of “ritualization” emphasize, according to Yelle, that rituals vary widely across cultures and use arbitrary signs that achieve meaning by social convention (24–25). Yelle takes issue with these theories and argues that certain features of ritual language—such as various kinds of repetition ranging from simple reduplication to elaborate patterns of repetition in the rhetorical figure of chiasmus, and poetic devices such as meter, alliteration, and rhyme—occur in similar forms across history and cultures. Using Charles Peirce’s concept of “the indexical icon,” Yelle lays out a series of charts that illustrate the different sorts of sign types, the reasons for correspondence of sign, and examples of each—such as various folk spells for curing illness as well as *mantras* designed to impart magical powers—in order to demonstrate the formal similarities in ritual language.

Ch. 3 argues that the notion of a natural relationship between the sign and signified is often deployed as a rhetorical strategy that reinforces religious ideologies of language. Yelle uses extended examples from various Hindu traditions to illustrate the semiotic ideology of religious linguistic practices such as Tantric mantras. The latter part of the chapter is devoted to discussing the semiotic ideology and practices of both the repertoire of bodily movement in *naïtya*, a South Asian dramatic tradition, and the more explicitly religious Tantra set of hand gestures

known as *mudras*. Both the linguistic religious practices and the gestural ones locate their efficacy in a partially lost divine past, and Yelle unpacks the way in which this past is represented as a kind of true and original version of the world that can only be partially recuperated through a limited set of phrases and gestures.

Chs. 4 and 5 investigate European theories of language and focus on how Bacon's notion of the "idols of language" became intertwined with Protestant literalism and subsequently emerged in Jeremy Bentham's criticism of structures with formal characteristics, such as alliteration and chiasmus, in legal writing. Ch. 4 concentrates on how language ideology underpins the secular, in that the secular posits a semiotic ideology freed from the trappings of religion, superstition, and linguistic idolatry: language as a clear vessel to contain ideas. Ch. 5 continues this argument, discussing how Thomas Cranmer's (1549) *Book of common prayer* "distilled a new ideal of literalism" (130) through its explicit rejection of earlier, oral traditions—for example, Roman Catholic as well as folk rituals—as mere "vain repetition" (130). Yelle takes these ideas about Protestant literalism into the realm of the performative nature of the poetic. He does so in order to set up the argument of Ch. 6, a criticism of the study of religion's privileging of the semantic functions of ritual performance. His criticism of Mary Douglas's study of dietary restrictions in the Hebrew Bible in her work, *Purity and danger* (1966/2002), contends that Douglas, by reading ritual practices as indicative of an underlying cosmology, indicates a bias in favor of semantics and thus fails to account for the pragmatic function of such laws which, Yelle argues, is to demonstrate absolute obedience to divine commands.

If we are to take seriously the notion that religious phenomena can be understood as rhetorical, Yelle suggests, then we must also understand the specific "semiotic ideologies" of the cultures that produce these phenomena. The case studies of Hindu semiotic ideologies provide a useful contrast to historical accounts of theories of language that tend to focus on European developments. More generally, however, Yelle's study of religious influences on semiotic ideology shows a strong disciplinary focus in the study of religion and thus does not take into account work on semiotics in sociolinguistics or studies in rhetoric on the relations of forms to persuasion. One drawback to using this book in teaching is that the opening chapter is quite dense and potentially confusing to students who lack a familiarity with theoretical work in semiotics and the study of religion. Yelle's willingness, however, to take religious discourse on its own terms as well as his explanations of the complex language ideologies at work in South Asian religious ritual and practice provide a valuable contribution to both the study of language and the study of religion.

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