Semiotics of imagination in religion
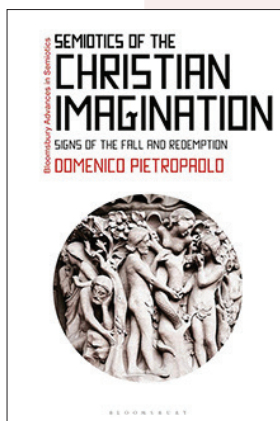
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Domenico Pietropaolo
**Semiotics of the Christian Imagination.
Signs of the Fall and Redemption**

"Semiotics of the Christian Imagination. Signs of the Fall and Redemption", published in 2021 in the series Bloomsbury Advances in Semiotics, is a masterful and beautifully written result of decades of interdisciplinary scholarship. Its author, Dominico Pietropaolo, is professor emeritus in the Department of Italian Studies at the University of Toronto with simultaneous involvement in the Center for Theater and Performance Studies, the Center for Comparative Literature and the Center for Medieval Studies. Among Pietropaolo's previous monographs are *Dante studies in the age of Vico* (Pietropaolo 1989) and *Semiotics and pragmatics of stage improvisation* (Pietropaolo 2016).

Point of departure, main issues, and the goal

The book begins with an instructive Preface (ix–x) explaining what the semiotics of the Christian imagination is. It summarizes the main investigative directions and ways of proceeding within this space, as well as makes explicit the basic presuppositions of the project. The importance of the preface as a kind of hermeneutic key offered by the author to the readers of his book is highlighted by the fact that in the book itself

Pietropaolo draws attention to the distortions in understanding caused by not taking seriously a text's prologue or dedication.

The preface starts with a straightforward definition: "The semiotics of the Christian imagination consists of [1] a repertory of signs and a logic of signification [2] through which the Christian community of faith is [3] encouraged to envision spiritual truths, [4] in accordance with conventional readings of Scripture [5] under the tutelage of the church." (ix) In my opinion the given definition is too rigorous and does not quite cover the richness and varieties of the chapters of the book. I come back to this point later. At first, I take a closer look at some of the elements of this introductory definition.

In the given definition, semiotics is presented as a function of the Christian imagination. The semiotics of the Christian imagination is therefore something that characterizes the Christian community of faith as such. Wherever there is the/a Christian community of faith, there is always Christian imagination at work, and therefore we always encounter there the semiotics of the Christian imagination as well. This means that semiotics is located here at the level of the phenomenon or phenomena to be studied. There is no Christian imagination without the semiotics of the Christian imagination. Correspondingly my first observation is that the author uses (here) the sign "semiotics" as referring to something that is implied in the Christian religion and can be made explicit via analysis. Thus, it is not introduced and explained to the reader, for example, as an academic discipline that engages in this case with the Christian imagination. To simplify: "semiotics" refers here to a sign system that is studied rather than to a somehow disciplined manner of studying it.

The Christian imagination involves, to formulate it in linguistic terms, a vocabulary and grammar. However, to Pietropaolo it is surely crucial that the constitutive elements of imagination and the logic of relating them to each other make up a structured process but are by no means only linguistic. They also belong also to other semiotic modes and dimensions of culture, like the art, music, drama etc. At the same time the focus of the author does not lie in the multimodality of Christian imagination as such, but in exploring the meaning making processes in Christian art and music, in the interpretation of the Bible and of nature (science).

The programmatic definition explains the meaning of "Christian" via reference to "the Christian community of faith." There is of course a myriad of possibilities and attempts to specify "Christian." The chosen option is solid. It is (at least at first look) a rather down to earth, descriptive, and in any case a community-oriented approach. This Christian community of faith is a community of faith because of its relation to "spiritual truths." It is telling that the Christian imagination is happening and encouraged in the context of a community of faith. What is "Christian" is specified in the first instance not via imagination of the community but via faith of the community. However, the spiritual truths believed by the community can be and are envisioned by that

community. The Christian community, so tells Pietropaolo, is encouraged to imagine, or envision the spiritual truths believed in.

The last part of the definition brings two further clarifications. It is a specifying statement about the structure of the Christian imagination, about the nomenclature of signs and the mechanism of their workings. The Christian community's envisioning of the spiritual truths is supposed to happen "in accordance with conventional readings of Scripture under the tutelage of the church." In Pietropaolo's understanding, the multimodal Christian imagination is dependent on "conventional readings of Scripture." There is a structural asymmetry: envisioning spiritual truths presupposes access to these truths via reading the Scripture. This structural asymmetry and order is valid vis-à-vis the Christian community of faith as such. It does not mean that on the level of individuals the Christian imagination is always preceded by reading the Scripture. Thus, Pietropaolo claims that the Christian imagination is something that systematically, although not always in the context of concrete biographies and life-stories of individual Christians, follows the reading of the Scripture. This is an important presupposition of Pietropaolo's view of the (semiotics of) Christian imagination.

Another presupposition is that the Christian imagination, being by definition a social or communal enterprise, is related to the conventional readings of the Christian Scripture. The importance of traditional reading is highlighted as a normative source of the Christian imagination. That means that the Christian imagination is not by necessity genuinely Christian but can correspond more or less to the community's traditional understanding of its canon. The Christian imagination can turn out be a Christian mis-imagination. The last bit of author's definition reveals the non-self-evident and rich character of author's presuppositions in approaching the Christian imagination most clearly. Namely, it is claimed that the church plays a guiding role in the process of determining the conventional reading of the Scripture in the community of faith. This way the definition describes the church as the point of orientation for the use of imagination in the Christian community of faith. The fact that in this way the church emerges as a counterpart of the community of faith signals with utmost clarity how the authors definition of "the semiotics of the Christian imagination," despite its appearance, is everything else than a universally and eternally valid statement about the Christian imagination in every place and time. It rather emerges out of a very particular space and time and is contextually bound to a particular tradition of reading and living Christianity.

The timeframe covered by the book encompasses "late medieval, Renaissance and baroque culture" (ix). Most of the material interpreted in the book comes from the 14th to 17th century, although in some chapters the author discusses examples from the 13th or the 18th century. Chapter 1 serves as a more theoretical introduction to semiotics in the sense of an explicit theorizing on sign and signification characterizes the book in

terms of its time-scope as a study of "the culture of the early modern period" (1). The preface gives no explicit hint at the geographical or cultural or confessional space. After having studied the book, it is clear the focus lies on the Italian culture. "[T]he tutelage of the church" mentioned in the definition of the Preface is implicitly at the same time a statement about the space. The semiotics of the Christian imagination is modelled in the book as the semiotics of the Roman Catholic imagination having its cultural and semiotic centre in Rome. The book is exploring (signs of) the emergence and construction of the distinct confessional consciousness, in the context of which the Council of Trent (1545–1563) and more generally the process of so-called Counter Reformation or Catholic reformation plays a crucial role. The book studies the pope- resp. Rome-centred Christian culture on the way to and in the wake of the Council of Trent. The process of differentiation and pluralization of the Christianity via the Reformation(s) builds an implicit background in the study of the semiotics of Christian Imagination in "the Catholic world" (11). The result is a highly impressive visualization and description of the workings of Catholicism culture in its "classic" shape, "of which the pontiff is the highest representative" (5).

The subtitle of the book "Signs of the Fall and Redemption" suggest the Fall and Redemption as a double focal point of the Christian imagination structuring or organizing Christianity as a world of signs. Again, the choice might at first sight appear as a way of identifying the universal basic pattern of Christianity. Although signs of the fall and redemption have played an important role in Christian imagination, these sign processes are nothing but static–as the book vividly helps to realize–and therefore only with reservation are "signs of the fall and redemption" to be generalized as the universal code of "the Christian imagination."

I understand the goal of the book to be an illumination of the workings of the Christian imagination, thereby contributing both to the understanding of the Christian religion in culture and to the understanding of culture in the light of the Christian religion (that is, as Christian culture).

Methodology, methods, and the first chapter on semiotic theory

To achieve his goal the author looks for "the semiotic strategies … to focus on the … object of contemplation"–i.e. on the aspects of the fall and redemption–"and to give that object a rhetorically and aesthetically captivating form." Thus, he investigates "the semiotic paradigms of various fields of culture" as far as they are filtering these spiritual truths and giving them material representation (ix, 1).

The book turns out to be more a case-driven analysis than a theory-centred exploration. It is divided into 10 chapters with 20 pages on average. Although the ideas of

the fall and redemption are intrinsically interrelated, chapters 2 to 5 are more related to the fall of and chapters 6–10 to the redemption of humanity. Chapter 1 is different in character as it does not analyse individual examples of semiotization of the fall and redemption but gives an overview of the authoritative theory of signs that had been "developed … in the later Middle Ages and Renaissance" (ix) for the sake of making sense of and encouraging the exercise of the Christian imagination. That ecclesiastically official sign theory emerging in particular out of the context of reflecting on and teaching about sacraments–i.e. in the framework of overcoming the consequences of the fall and gaining access to the reality of redemption–determined significantly various fields of culture that the author sees as different "semiotic paradigms" (ix, 1) or "modes of communication" (131).

If we understand methodology as a framework for identifying, selecting or constructing a method for a study of something, then the preface contains an explicit statement about the methodology as well. The author declares namely Giambattista's Vicos' (1668–1744) "philosophical principle" of "poetic logic" as informing his approach in the book (cf. viii–ix, 19–21). According to the author: contemplating on the essence of things–on their being–through theology and metaphysics "is identical" with a perceptible signification of that essence in all areas of culture by authors, playwriters, artists, compositors, performers or scientists.

"The main argument of the present book is that the structure of the Christian imagination, as displayed in its contemplation of the fall and redemption of mankind, comprises both versions of semiotics as inseparable aspects of its operation, which is always simultaneously cognitive and creative." (x) I understand the author as saying that the study of the Christian imagination demonstrates how there is no cognition (of sign) without creation (of sign). In other words: the book is presupposing a kind of creative or poetic (and therefore not-naïve) realism. Truth claims are possible because they appeal to the objectively real, to the spiritual truths. However, they are always implying creativity and subjectivity as far as the cognition of the spiritual, the sacred, or the transcendent belongs to the finite beings and is imagined in earthly forms and material.

Therefore, the author in his attempt to explicate the structure and dynamics of the Christian imagination highlights on the one hand the normative role of the church and its official metaphysical-theological teachings. In doing this, he refers to Vico's understanding of the relationship between philosophy, theology, and poetics where they are not separated by static and clear-cut borders but come together in their analogical movement between the immanence and the transcendence. Metaphysical and theological cognition goes hand in hand with poetic imagination and creativity, with perceptible signification in the arts and sciences. All fields of culture in their functioning, all creative operations of culture, follow a poetic logic or poetic semiotics in semiotizising

perceivably and materially–in short: immanently–the spiritual (metaphysical-theo-logical) truths or the transcendence. Earthly culture as a whole is a semiotization of the transcendence.

Chapter 1 on "[t]he centrality of signs in the Christian imagination" suggest un-derstanding the culture of the early modern period as interaction with the Bible and theology. Sculpture, art, music, drama, literature, and science are semiotic paradigms for "explicating fundamental passages of Scripture", for "illustrating related princi-ples of doctrine and faith" (1). This way Pietropaolo is implicitly hinting at the struc-tural dependence of the doctrine on the Scripture, but also introduces faith in the first place at the level of doctrine.

The early modern culture is characterized as being profoundly interested in the idea of imaginative representations. In the centre of this interest stands "the devel-opment of a semiotics of imagination by means of which to understand in a concrete manner, and to give material expression to, abstract principles of official doctrine per-taining to the ideas of the fall and redemption of mankind" (1). This semiotics of imag-ination is both an instrument of cognition and of expression. Imagination is related to "abstract principles of official doctrine" by being both based on it and guided by it.

Again, this structural description of the Christian imagination as concrete and doctrine as abstract and official, operates within a rather late and specific develop-ment in the understanding of the Christian teaching. It is teaching in the sense of a legally binding error-free doctrine given by the church to be believed by the people, and the corresponding concept of faith consists of willingly affirming these officially sanctioned propositions. Teaching as a proclamation of the gospel and faith as a rela-tionship of trust in the gospel would be, for example, much closer to the New Testa-ment witness and its use of these terms.

In outlining "the semiotic apparatus" through which the Christian imagination related "the world of immanence to the world of transcendence" Pietropaolo engages therefore in a close reading of sources that, as he highlights, have not usually been re-ferred to in academic accounts on history of semiotics but are nevertheless significant as they represent the officially recognized mainstream thinking on the subject.

These sources were part of the preparation of the priests who again had the task of educating their congregations, so they were able to participate in the sacraments as sacred signs and relate properly to other signs of the sacred that expressed imag-inatively the spiritual truths (of the fall of redemption). These texts on signs' nature generally and more specifically on biblical and sacred signs come from Innocentius III (1198–1216), who was one of the most famous and influential late medieval popes, as well as from Cardinal Tommaso de Vio (Cajetan), an authoritative theologian of the Renaissance who is introduced in the book as "a key figure in the development of semiotic awareness in this period." The third source is the Catechism of the Council

(Trent) that determined decisively the shape and development of Catholicism for centuries. In comparison, the next council took place not earlier than in the end of the 19th century (First Vatican Council), and its decisions continue to have a normative significance for the catholic world.

Innocentius III is an exponent of "the semiotic self-awareness of contemporary culture, of which the pontiff is the highest representative, indirectly citing only those views that he is willing to sanction with his authority" (3). Differently from Augustine the late medieval theologians, beginning with Thomas Aquinas, extended the concept of sign to cover not only sensible but nonsensible signs. Mental entities like images and ideas redirect as signs our understanding towards something other than they are–they are characterized by a signifying intentionality. In taking up this line of thought, Cajetan in reflecting on God's mode of speaking views it as happening on the one hand through external signs and therefore through senses and on the other hand through internal signs directly addressing and guiding one's intellect and imagination.

In order for it to be understandable to humans God assumes "a mode of speaking that is commensurate with the capacity of the human intellect" (7). God speaks like a human being. Pietropaolo calls it "a semiotic strategy of convergence" (7) or "communicational accommodation" (8). The signs of God's revelation are simple (cf. Roman 1:20). However, despite human's natural ability to understand and love God, recognizing and understanding God's signs can turn out to be difficult as "a result of a deliberate decision to do something reprehensible" (8). To hear and understand God a human has to be "in the right frame of mind to receive this sign." It presupposes "a special disposition", namely righteousness (8). According to Pietropaolo Cajetan considers it as "a creaturely version of communicational accommodation" (8). Wilful decision to do what is wrong inhibits communication on the human side. The most objectionable deed is a wilful ignorance of God. In short: in Cajetan's model understanding God's communication presupposes the disposition of righteousness. To understand revelation presumes having the right will to understand it.

Cajetan's approach to the interpretation of the biblical text is based on his understanding of signs and operates with a distinction between literal and spiritual meaning of the text. Biblical story uses signs for (words about) particular events, including speech events (spoken words), and thus the text of the Bible signifies on the first level literally. But these events themselves are signs for God's will and aspects of God's revelation. Thus, on the second level the biblical text signifies spiritually. The revelation–God's speaking–occurs through language but also through events that are signified in the language of biblical stories. This implies importantly that mental visualizations and images are themselves signs that direct readers to aspects of the revelation a passage is intended to convey. Pietropaolo sees in Cajetan striking similarities with the Sausserean tradition of semiotics in understanding both the signifier and the signified

as mental entities and the relationship between them and the referent as arbitrary. In Cajetan also the social dimension of sign-use is highlighted. The comprehensibility of signs is limited to the community: "signs presuppose a community of people linked by them. Nor are all the signs available to a community exclusively verbal." (10) in the book Pietropaolo comes repeatedly back to Cajetan and, by the way, indicates parallels for example between him and Saussueran semiotics (9), between him and Lotman (51), between him and Peirce (138).

Among sacred signs sacraments are special as far as they not only signify but realize or perform or enact sanctity. Sacred signs "account for most of the spiritual and cultural life of the Christian community" (16). All communities "presuppose the existence of a body of signs held in common by their members" and the Christian community is bound together and identified by the symbols that articulate the spiritual life of its members." (16) That social cohesion and spiritual affirmation is a result of "the acceptance and cultivation of the semiotic code of a common spirituality" is for the Catechism a fundamental and universally valid truth (16). Through this common (sensible) symbolism of the common spirituality can members of the Christian community–the Catholic world–learn to know God's will and can God reveal Godself to the community. Sacraments constitute the core of this symbolism because in these "semiotic rituals" coincide God's communication of grace and humans' reception of it. They are acts where God (God's grace towards human) and human (faith or trust in God's grace) meet. "The signifying process is performative in both directions, and it is in this compound performance that the sacraments enact what they signify." (16) Sacraments signify and perform grace and faith–they present what they represent.

The Catechism visualizes what is happening in the sacraments–the sanctifying, transforming touch of God in the soul–with traces of footsteps in the sand. The sanctity enacted via sacramental signs in human being signifies God's acting in the human (18). Thus: the sanctity (the faith) of a human signifies, testifies, perceives in the sacrament the invisible presence and action of God. In Peircian terminology the sacraments are a special case of indexical signs. The Cathechism imagines sacraments on the model of signs operating as signs because they involve a relationship of causal kind: sacramental signs signify because they sanctify. Pietropaolo summarizes: "[I]indexicality is without doubt the most prominent semiotic aspect of the sacramental imagination." (18) In the background stands the so-called vestiges of God-tradition: elements of creation are understood as "material traces of the causality of God." Indexical signs can materially represent a causality of which they are a result and direct our attention to it even if the cause is not sensible.

Pietropaolo's overview about the explicit reflection on signs taking place in the normative centre of the early modern culture and the results of which were systematically and widely disseminated via catechesis and preaching constitutes a background to case studies in the chapters to follow. They are intended to direct readers, provide

background information, demonstrate the high level of semiotic consciousness, and its officially sanctioned and publicly transmitted shape. However, the following chapters and their "contemplation" of concrete examples of Christian imaginative discourse in a variety of modes can by no means be reduced to a simple application of this more theoretical or abstract material. Indeed, each chapter is readable on its own by combining minute discussions of cases with more general theoretical observations, historical background information and occasionally drawing parallels to topics from recent developments in semiotics. However, together they mediate a plurimodal and multifaceted access to the early modern imaginative mind organized and guided by the operations of the signs of the fall and redemption. This relative independence is also visible from the fact that there is no chapter summarizing the results of what has happened and what has been claimed and argued for in the chapters of the book.

Overview of the main body of the book (chapter 2 to 10)

Chapter 2 on "Gendering the serpent" analyses three examples from the highly popular tradition in the Late Medieval and renaissance culture that pictures woman as an instrument of the fall of humanity, and thereby in fact demonizes femaleness. In the story from the Bible on the temptation and fall of Adam and Eve the devil or the serpent is interpreted visually as having woman's face or as having an upper body of the woman. In continuity with the antiquity, visual signs were considered as superior over verbal signs in affecting the imagination and understanding of the people. The architecture, sculpture and visual arts were used by the church as semiotic tools to communicate basics of Christian teaching and of biblical narratives.

In the book that proceeds otherwise in a descriptive mode–consistently refraining from explicit and strong evaluative judgements about the content of the Christian imaginations and of the theology and teachings supported and sanctioned by the church–Pietropaolo makes here an exception. Although sexualizing the serpent does not have any basis in the narrative of the Bible, the motive became widespread in the dominant "misogynism of art and theology" of "the Counter Reformation." "The anti-feminist" reading of the Biblical story of the fall "tacitly enjoyed the official sanction of the church" (25; cf. 166–167) and was multimodal, including the pictorial worlds of church buildings, communicated as God's word and thought.

In the chapter visual examples are selected based on the importance of their ecclesial-institutional context that lends them "the authority of the institution" and therefore "an extraordinary illocutionary force" (26). They stem from: Bologna, where there existed the most important church in Italy outside Rome; from Paris, that was a leading intellectual-spiritual centre; and from Rome. Pietropaolo interprets sculpted panels on the portals of San Petrino and Notre-Dame and Michelangelo's and Raffael's panels in Vatican.

Chapter 3 presents a very different and self-consciously non-conventional position on the issue via close reading of a commentary to the Genesis (1530) by Cajetan, a leading theological mind who already played an important role in chapter 1. Contrary to the church's tradition that had been using the Latin translation of the Bible, Cajetan takes the Hebrew text as the basis of interpretation and aims at carefully explicating its literary sense. According to his hermeneutically reflected and subtly argued reading there was physically no serpent present, and no external dialog took place between the serpent and Eve. In the passage the language is used figuratively to visualize what is happening in Eve's mind after the suggestion made internally by the devil. Serpent and dialogue are material signs of the nonmaterial mental process (48, 54, 65–66). To think there that there was a serpent, as usual by theologians and artist, is to misunderstand the literal meaning of the story. Rather, the serpent is "a metaphorical sign of evil thoughts within the soul" (64). Cajetan's hermeneutics as elaborated by Pietropaolo with its focus on the Hebrew text and on the literal sense via which "the text itself orients the reader towards its own correct interpretation" (54) bears some interesting similarities with his "antipode" Martin Luther. A significant meeting of the two had occurred in Augsburg in 1518 (Basse, Nieden 2021). Cajetan's commentary is at times extraordinary also in viewing women more positively than usual. However, as Pietropaolo notes, at times he does not let the Hebrew text of the Scripture lead his reading but his theology that reflects the social hierarchy of genders and traditional view of women's weakness making Eve a suitable candidate to fall to the temptation. Cajetan's "metaphorical serpent"–a provocation in the exegetical tradition–finds a parallel in manuscript images from the 14th–15th century depicting the scene of the narrative of the fall Adam and Eve without the serpent.

Chapter 2 and 3 deal with visual and literary depictions of the fall of Adam and Eve. But these visualizations direct a man in the presence of these depiction to see in every beautiful woman a potential seduction and an external temptation by the devil (like in chapter 2). In chapter 3 for Cajetan the temptation is internal, related to doubting about the validity of the limits, to desiring for limitless freedom. Chapter 4 about "workers of evil" deals directly with circumstances of the contemporary culture and society and analyses semiotically the phenomena of witchcraft, witch hunting and inquisition in the early modern culture.

Pietropaolo observes a hermeneutical shift in the middle of the 15th century when scholars started to read the culture of their own time back to Dante's literary text about Virgil showing soothsayers and sorcerers in *Inferno*. Literary themes in Dante became signs for and were seen in correspondence to phenomena in contemporary society. In the background lies the tropological interpretation of the Bible and the idea of types: "the expression of an idea in the text may be regarded as embodied by particular individuals or events in the present, which seem to have a similar form" (68). In the

context of rising interest in witch hunting across Europe several juridical and theological works on demonic witchcraft were published. Pietropaolo very interestingly and insightfully analyses a few passages from two pioneering authoritative and infamous works that are directly relevant for the semiotic imagination of the fall. First, a papal bull (1484) that described officially the crime of the witchcraft authorized and guided a massive investigation of suspected witches and declared all convicted ones to be the enemies of Christianity and redemption. "In the church's hideous crusade against witches, it gave the prosecution hitherto unknown support and momentum." (71) Second, *Malleus Malefecarum* [The Hammer of Witches] (1487), an "extremist" (69) handbook on which-hunting, developed a "witchcraft semiotic in the elaborated theory" (85) and played a dominant role in the early modern demonological culture up to the 17th century.

Chapter 5 on "the fall from harmony" takes as its starting point Augustine's influential interpretation of the earthly paradise as an image or a figure for the church opening up a rich field of further possible correspondences. One interesting development in the Christian imagination was to interpret the Garden of Eden as a sign for a chapel where sacred music is performed. This illustrates well how "signs are used not only to signify and communicate existing ideas but also to produce new ones" (89). The period under concern is already the baroque era where the idea of primordial harmony was very popular. Pietropaolo explores via two cases how the Christian imagination uses signs foreign to "the semiotic domain of the musical and theological code" as destabilizing and "generating parodic inversions of meaning" (90).

Despite its title "Fall from harmony", in the chapter 5 there occurs already a shift of emphasis to the topic of redemption, to the aspects of overcoming the consequences of the fall. Chapter 6 on "Passiontide Drama", the longest one in the book, goes back in time to the transitional period between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance where "many joined religious orders, practised conspicuous penance, participated actively in sacred rituals, made pilgrimages to holy places, became self-torturing mystics, and purchased indulgences, surrounding themselves with signs of the Passion and redemption from all the arts" (105). It was time where ideas like purgatory and good works or merits were in vogue.

Pietropaolo attempts to approach this Christian culture by answering the question how it understood "the issue of spiritual catharsis before dramatic re-enactments of the supreme spectacle of Christ's suffering" for the redemption of humanity (107). In the Late Middle Ages the sufferings of Prometheus and Job were typologically seen as "proleptic signs of the Passion of Christ" and this raised the question about the possibility of Christian tragedy. Pietropaolo examines a source on the Mass as the ordinary Christian tragedy that explicitly relates the theory of Greek classical tragedy and the theology of the Eucharist (109). "The achievement of consciousness of redemption, in

the here and now of the communal experience, is the intended cathartic effect of the performance." (109) The Mass, "the very heart of Christian worship" was commonly seen as "an allegorical ritual of the Passion in dramatic form", but there was debate "concerning the nature of the relationship between the enacted representation and the historical event at its origin." Although the Mass is seen as a sacred drama, its significance by far does not exhaust in tragedy but is also positive and comic (116). The rememorated suffering of Christ constitutes a condition of possibility for the salvation of the entire humanity and the dramatic form of Christianity includes Resurrection.

In addition to elaborating the mass semiotically in the paradigm of drama Pietropaolo analyses Passion plays. In their cathartic aim these have to be interpreted in relation to the function of the Mass in the redemption of the humanity. He "identif[ies] the principal signs involved in the cathartic aspect of the spectacle of suffering and [] sort[s] them out "for dramaturgical interpretation" (117). Passion plays are intended to have the following impact: "to suffer along with Jesus for the redemption of man and to triumph in the experience: *gaudeo in passionibus* [I rejoice in my sufferings, cf. Col 1:24–T.-A.P.]" (118) To understand how this double experience is semiotically achieved, Pietropaolo interprets in a novel move selected Late Medieval Passion plays and two scenes in particular from dramaturgical perspective as production scripts.

The crucial results concerning the relation between history and faith are highlighted in a concluding reflection (127–130). "The chief concern of the plays and, we may add, of the liturgy [including the sermon–T.-A.P.] in which the same events are celebrated is not with the magnitude of the suffering of Jesus as a man in history but with the here and now of the community in attendance." (128) They are not simply informing about the past but invite the individual and the community to discover the salvific significance of the Scriptural events in the present reality of their lives.

Imaginative signs in sacred art are not only used to teach or inform about a sacred narrative or a spiritual truth as inspired "by a sacred text and validated by the church" (131) but also to evoke a transformative spiritual process in their recipient towards what they signify. They combine a referential and a conative function.

Chapter 7 on "Signs of passion and compassion" is about the challenges to imagine artistic elements that are not so explicit in the Scripture like reactions of those who witnessed the suffering of Christ ("the swoon of Mary") or the exact mode of how he was crucified. Pietropaolo considers "the semiotic process involved in making such artistic choices, starting with Cajetan's analysis of the proper way of representing the suffering of Mary as a witness of the Passion of her son, and following it with various depictions of the crucifixion in a manner that does not elicit a strong emotional response" (132). He offers deep insights into the development and logic of the sacred sign of Mary and of the Marian piety that became very popular in the Late Middle Age and early Renaissance culminating at the end of the 15th century.

Chapter 8 on the imitation of Christ as the model (sign) starts with a distinction between and characterization of contemplative (holistic) and meditative (analytic) approach to sacred paintings in one's spiritual edification. The result of the meditative mode used in the Jesuit pedagogy is "a blending of the painting into expository discourse", "a double-coded discourse created by the fusion of linguistic and visual elements" (153). How this exactly works evolves during the chapter via Pietropaolo's detailed semiotic analysis.

His verbal-visual sources stem from the beginning of the 17th century, from a book of sacred emblems intertwined with expository and exhortative essays on how to imitate Christ in one's own life to be(come) a true Christian. The idea that the achievement of redemption or salvation necessarily involves the imitation of Christ by means of good works is the result of an interpretation that harmonizes philosophy and the Bible. The chapter lets itself be understood as a good introduction to the principles of the Christian ethics of Renaissance humanism and as an analysis of the performance of the (true) Christian life as involving "a complex dynamic of cyclical semiosis" (164) intrinsically related to imagination. „Painting an image of Christ in one's heart or on one's soul is an exercise of the imagination rendered possible by the visual culture of the time, which encouraged reliance on structured fantasizing in the effort to get closer to God. But achieving a transformation of the self through improved conduct is a practical exercise that can result only from a rational decision to behave as Christ would behave if he were in the same situation." (160)

If I put it in a very abstract way, the last two chapters focus on aspects of imagining the world of humans as history and nature. Thus, the book comes to an end with imagining time and space, the limits of humans' situation, the end and beginning of history and its process, the cosmos as perceived from the earth, the heaven and sky.

In concrete terms, in chapter 9 the "signum magnum" in heaven (Apocalypse 12:1), identified also as the polar star, is Mary as the Queen of Heaven. In the rising Marian devotion, it "became a reference type for the semiotization of historical struggles against the forces of evil, all ultimately interpretable as echoes of Mary's role in the [history] of salvation" (166). In another typology Mary was the antitype of Eve, according to the Vulgata (mis)reading of the messianic prophecy of Genesis 3:15, "the serpent defeater ordained by God to reverse the process set in motion by the fall" (166). In the focus of the chapter are biblical tragedies "Ester" and especially "Iudit" by the great Italian baroque dramatist Frederico Della Valle, published in the third decade of the 17th century, in the context of heavy theological critique against Mariology. Both Ester and Judith have to be considered as types of Mary.

Type as the first element of a typological correlation can become complete in its meaning only when antitype as the second element arrives on the scene (168).

Pietropaolo explains in detail the semiotic functioning of the typological interpretation. He does it by analysing first how Della Vella is leading the viewers to become aware they are entering into the world of signs–a distinction between "seeing in" and "seeing as" is here of relevance –, and how he constructs his main characters as signs having a "temporal semiotic structure" pointing our minds both forward and backward in time (170–171). "By virtue of semiotics of typology, Iudit participates in that part of the work of redemption that concerns the defeat of Lucifer. By decapitating Holofernes, she recapitulates the messianic prophecy of Genesis, and she anticipates the slaying of the dragon in the Apocalypse." (178) For Della Vera typology makes the future, rather than the past, relevant to the present. This is so, because typology is not only a mode of interpretation or hermeneutics but also a structuring principle of history. It presupposes a metaphysical quality binding the mutually explanatory elements together teleologically (173–174). Therefore, the chapter is about imagining history (as history of redemption) through an insightful deconstruction of the construction of the sign and cult of Mary in the (Catholic) Christian imagination.

The theme of the last chapter of the book "The starry saints" is the semiotic relationship between God's two books–the Bible and the nature (or religion and science). Pietropaolo's focus of discussion is a celestial atlas by Julius Schneider from the first third of the 17th century as seen in the broader context of the spiritual and semiotic culture of Counter-Reformation and Baroque aesthetics. In this work "large and detailed maps of the stars … the constellations are reconfigured as allegories of Christian narratives", bringing creatively together science, theology, and aesthetics (182). "Schiller's Christian cartography was at the time an entirely logical development for both science and religion. A map of the celestial vault is the spatial counterpart of the calendar, not only in the scientific sense that the latter could not be constructed without the former but also in the practical sense of their intended function, which is to enable us to find orientation in time and space." (191)

Pietropaolo analyses, first, how and under which presuppositions this "trans-signification of the book of nature, or the transformation of its semiotic value" (187) functions, and second what structure and movement is implied in the imagination of transcendence it evokes. Among others Pietropaolo takes up Peirce's analysis of icons and especially diagrams: "the signification of diagrams is a matter of construction and reconstruction rather than direct reference" (194). Schiller's sidereal signs are diagrammatic. The most interesting aspect of his maps is the convex direction of their curvature. He is "offering a stargazer the fiction that he can project himself into the realm of transcendence and imaginatively assume the perspective of the saints in heaven beyond the bulge, even as he retains his human vantage point as a man looking at the stars from the surface of the earth within the bulge." (197–198)

Concluding discussion and further perspectives

Despite possible expectations raised by the title "Semiotics of the Christian imagination" Pietropaolo's books does not propose or presuppose something like a general semiotic perspective on religion (if not a theory of religion) as developed via focus on imagination. Nor does it want to be more specifically a semiotic theory of Christianity. It rather investigates the role of imagination in the Christianity that was determined by the early modern Catholic church. Other branches and paradigms of Christianity of the time stay invisible because they are lying outside the borders of "the Catholic world."

Neither does the book attempt to approach the Christian imagination from the perspective of contemporary semiotics of image and imagination. No explicit contact is established with contemporary multifaceted research and discussion on imagination. The strategy of the book is not to theorize and define imagination–I rephrase it here as creativity–per se but to explore its manifestations in and vis-a-vis the Christian religion through art, music, drama, science etc. The point of orientation in the book is the auto-communication of the Early Modern Christian culture; and the attempt is made–a very telling one–to reveal the significance of its dominant signs, their creation, organization and dynamics in the framework of this particular semiosphere.

Giambattista Vico with his "New Science" (1725) and "poetic logic", is in a very condensed form mentioned as the integrating theoretical vision behind the book. It implies a commitment to a very interesting, but also specific and controversial understanding of the relationship between philosophy, theology and poetics (cf. Milbank 1991a, 1991b). Usually the terms "theology" and "philosophy" resp. "metaphysics" are used in the book in a nonpoetical sense (together with Cajetan, cf. 138).

Pietropaolo interest lies mostly in clarifying questions like: Towards what kind of imaginative contemplations expressions of the Christian imagination direct their observer or reader? What kind of intentionality is implied in these signs? Where and how do they guide the one who perceives and is affected by them? It is not incidental that he can characterize the process of relating to a cultural period and its issues in the book as "contemplation" (xi, 2, 21). The many references of Pietropaolo to the Ancient and Medieval times or to Modern times, especially also his use of the elements of modern semiotic theory and analysis, are not necessarily every time implying or demonstrating the presence of some kind of direct causal link but are rather functioning typologically. They help readers imaginatively to understand a particular element as performed in the particular context of the Early modern culture. Thus, the primary target of drawing parallels between theology

and semiotics both backward and forward is to enable us to see imaginative universals and perceive patterns in concrete enactments of early modern culture. In short: Pietropaolo exercises cultural analysis in the spirit of poetic logic and typological hermeneutics. By directing the reader's gaze backward and forward, the early modern Catholic imagination and its functioning becomes itself visualized or modelled as a type. It becomes perceivable as an imaginative universal and opens up a possibility to perceive anew the significance of our own being and its challenges in the 21st century, whether or not we are accustomed to imagining ourselves as religious in some way or other..

As I indicated above, Pietropaolo's use of the sign "semiotics" oscillates between semiotics as semiosis and semiotics as reflexion on semiosis. He wants the period under study to become recognized as significant although overlooked in the history of semiotics. With reference to John Deely Pietropaolo suggest seeing the Reneissance "as the silver years of Latin age of understanding" (6, cf. Deely 2001). This is surely worth considering. However, by exclusively focusing on Catholic Christianity Pietropaolo's book on "Semiotics of the Christian imagination" may unintentionally support the impression as if it was only the Catholic church and culture where semiotic consciousness and reflexion on semiosis had a very important place, and therefore as if for the history of semiotics it is only the Catholicism that has (had) something to contribute. First, this picture would leave completely out of sight Orthodox Christianity. I recall here only the very important discussions on icon and iconicity (cf. Oltenau 2021). In addition, this picture would support the idea that Reformation and Protestantism have not only zero but rather a negative contribution to the semiotics of Christian imagination as far as Protestantism is reduced to a semiotically dumb literalism (cf. Yelle 2013). This picture would be a caricature. From the period treated by Pietropaolo I only refer to Martin Luther's very remarkable and, in many ways, significantly different paradigm of semiotic reflection as discussed in Gesche Linde's gigantic research on sign and certitude from the Antiquity to Peirce (Linde 2013, 331–707; cf. Schwöbel 2003, 62–65).

Pietropaolo speaks about "the centrality of semiotics in the Reneissance" (10) in the sense of "the semiotic orientation of the seventeenth century and beyond" (10), of "the semiotic culture of the Counter Reformation" (182), of (Catholic) church's "semiotic orientation" (2). This *modus loquendi* should not hinder us from recognizing that even in cultures where an explicit semiotic theorizing is not present, they can nevertheless be analyzed in terms of their semiotic orientation or semiotic ideology and its particularities. It is a commonplace from a Lotmanian perspective that every culture is semiotic. It means that the enactment of the Christian imagination is sign-mediated also in context where its metasemiosis (i.e. theology) is developed differently or weakly or is missing. It would underline the significance

of Pietropaolo's book and open it up for generating new insights if it would be complemented by the semiotics of the Christian imagination in the context of its other paradigms and periods.

Pietropaolo's book contemplates the performance of the Christian imagination. His analysis is evidently informed by developments and discussions in modern and contemporary semiotics and in other relevant disciplines, but he intentionally attempts to treat the functioning of semiosis and its elements in the framework of the insights and instruments of the time. Therefore, it is only natural that Pietropaolo intentionally abstains from raising questions about the validity of particular contents of the Christian imagination of the time or about the validity of elements of semiotic theory of the time taken up in his analysis. "The Christian", as said, is determined via reference what the doctrinal theology and the church of the time sanctions and defines as "the Christian." In that line "theology" comes to signal somewhat one-sidedly the abstract content-source and control mechanism over the Christian imagination. The fact that Pietropaolo in two related issues becomes himself very critical and refers to opposite view of the time indicates that even if it may stay well behind the scope of the work to question critically the truth-claims, it remains a necessity to make distinctions. Therefore, it would be a complete misunderstanding of the book to think that beside these two critical points we should recognize in the presented vision somehow the normative example for the content and shape of the Christian imagination and culture or that the semiotic reflexion of the time could be somehow the universal(ly valid) semiotics of Christianity.

Last but not least, if we consider Pietropaolo's book as a contribution to semiotics of religion, what kind of semiotic of religion it advances? According to a simple typology (cf. Põder 2021a) it is definitely semiotics of religion in the sense of using instruments and elements from semiotic research with respect to material considered to be religious. Pietropaolo's case studies in 9 chapters use semiotics mostly in a more eclectic and ad hoc way as a toolbox of instruments enabling in his case to explore religious imagination across different modalities without a clear cut commitment to a particular general theory or tradition. This is the most common way to encounter semiotics in the context of studying religion. However, a brief glimpse at a Vicoan general semiotic theory of culture at the start of the book invites us to imagine the following chapters in the horizon of this broader integrating framework. It seems that the general framework entails not only historical but also theoretical significance, although it surely would fall beyond the scope of the book to present it in detail and argue for it. Therefore, Pietropaolo's book can additionally be seen as a version of a wider project of theorizing and analyzing religion in the context of a semiotic theory of culture–as a cultural semiotics of religion (for another version proposed in dialogue with Lotmanian semiotics cf. Põder 2021b).

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