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Preface

We live in a semiotic age. Problems and questions of signification and communication are unusually salient. Of course, semiotic principles are operative in all periods and societies. However, in our times advances in technology and related social changes have made us conscious, at times painfully so, of the processes and problems of representation, interpretation and communication. To give only some technological examples, we have the mass production of images and songs, the ubiquity of advertising, marketing and propaganda, problems of privacy and the development of instant communications technology, originating with the invention of the telegram but now flourishing with today's plethora of sophisticated messaging devices. There is also the tremendous increase in access to information, to the point that people have unprecedented access to every kind of text from human history, but without any agreed upon paradigms for interpretation or overall coherence. We deal with questions about disinformation, with distinguishing between the real and the virtual and about the pressures that people feel to create and recreate themselves virtually. At a broader level, we are increasingly conscious of identities being accidental contingencies. In this Heraclitean flux of symbolic forms, structures of signification that could have been taken for granted in previous times are now exposed as objects of choice.

Religion is not in any way exempt from these processes. It cannot be. Religion, however we define it, by its nature always attempts to provide orientation for practical life. Hence, it also necessarily takes on the characteristics of social reality. In particular, religious questions of representation assume special importance. Regardless of whether they affirm one deity, several or none, they always grapple with transcendence. The transcendent, by definition, eludes or resists ordinary means of perception. To become a principle of orientation for practical life, the transcendent must operate through structures of representation. Doing so, however, evokes the paradoxical character of sign representation. A sign at once both connects and separates what it conveys or signifies. Paradoxes may be implicit or latent in ordinary means of signification. Because religion connects us with the transcendent (or attempts to do so), it always heightens these kinds of paradoxes. Now, in particular, in our semiotic age, we have a consciousness of the changes in how we represent the sacred.

Consequently, we now have an occasion for two sets of disciplines to communicate with each other. On the one hand, there is the whole family of disciplines that study religion. This includes religious studies as a formal field of study, the closely related disciplines of theology and philosophy, and a variety

of social sciences, such as anthropology, sociology, linguistics, political science and psychology (for the latter, especially cognitive psychology and social psychology). All these disciplines that deal with religion must now pay special attention to semiotic problems. It seems natural, then, for them to make use of semiotics. Likewise, for semioticians themselves, even if they do not have an intrinsic interest in religion, phenomena commonly deemed as religious offer an interesting set of case study applications. A discipline always advances by applying its theories and models to particular examples (sometimes, the more unusual, the better). In the case of religion, precisely because it pushes semiotic boundaries to the limits of representation, the possibilities for interesting and fruitful semiotic explorations is especially pronounced.

These considerations provided much of the inspiration for this book, as reflected in its title. *Sign, Method and the Sacred* refers to the three fundamental factors or dimensions of our proposed dialogue between semiotics and the multidisciplinary study of religion. We take “sign” metonymically, indicating not only something that brings something else to mind when perceived (or whichever definition of “sign” we may prefer), but also the array of phenomena in which signs play a special part, such as sign systems, representation, communication and interpretation. “Method” refers to the book’s focus on presenting the diverse methodological options in studying religion from a semiotic perspective. “The sacred,” like “sign,” also functions metonymically. It refers to a constellation of related meanings, such as “transcendent,” “holy” (as in Greco-Roman and Abrahamic traditions) or “noble” (as in South Asian traditions). The term, as used in the title, does not import any strong philosophical or theological claims, merely indicating the range of topics treated by our contributors. Of course, the term “sacred” can also carry deeper senses, such as those relating to the function of transcendence in social systems. Frequently, religions deal with transcendent principles of life, and so can possess features that their adherents call “sacred” or “holy.” For this book, however, *Sign, Method and the Sacred* simply means the different methods we can use to explore the use and interpretation of signs in matters that are commonly regarded as religious and experienced by many as sacred.

As with all books, there is a story behind how this one originated. It began with Thomas-Andreas Pöder’s seminar “Semiotics of Religion” at the University of Tartu. I attended this seminar because, from my own academic and personal connections with Christianity, Judaism and Islam, I had become convinced that comparative studies of these three traditions could benefit greatly from making use of semiotics. In hindsight, the seminar discussions on the literature of semiotics of religion planted the seed for this volume. Then, the European Association of Study of Religions (EASR) announced it would be having its 17th annual conference at the University of Tartu. We took this as an opportunity to initiate

the first session on semiotics of religion at this general religious studies conference. Sometime afterward, Massimo Leone suggested that the session could provide an occasion for a book in this series, *Religion and Reason*. And in fact, the papers presented at the session, together with the accompanying discussions, provided the template for the present volume.

Inspired by these dialogues, we present this book with a threefold hope. First, we encourage scholars of religion from all fields to make use of the array of semiotic tools and methods available to us today, some of which our contributors exhibit in a variety of case studies. Second, we want to engage more semioticians in the study of religion. The introduction and the first chapter, both by Thomas-Andreas Pöder, make the case for this. Third, we would like to make the general public more aware of the relevance of semiotics of religion. Since we do find ourselves in a semiotic age, where questions of communication, meaning, representation, identity and interpretation are prominent, the joint work of semioticians and scholars of religion can be highly relevant to society at large.