Special Issue: The Authoriality of Religious Law

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The Authoriality of Religious Law: Preface

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Authoriality can be defined as the series of semiotic mechanisms that contribute to give to a reader the impression of a genetic relation between a text and an empirical author. Reading the text, the reader is led to be convinced that it stems from the intentionality of the author; that the text was actually enunciated by the author. Except for the cases in which the reader witnesses the genesis of the text, and has therefore access to direct empirical evidence connecting the presence of the author and the fabrication of the text as an outcome of the author's intentionality, the link between the text and the author is never certain but must be abduced from signs of various kinds disseminated throughout the text. These signs work as marks of enunciation, constructing both a simulacrum of the empirical author and evidence of the relation between the author's presence in some time and space, intentionality, and textual production. As is known, the author can play with these signs, dissimulating or emphasizing the genetic relation between the author's intentionality and the production of the text.

In the case of religious texts, which a religious tradition ascribes to a transcendent author, the issue of authoriality is paramount. Direct access to the presence and intentionality of the empirical author is impossible, so readers must rely on the structure of the text itself in order to ascertain whether it shows sufficient marks of authoriality. Apocryphal texts, for instance, are those that according to a religious tradition contain insufficient marks attesting the relation with the presence and intentionality of their supposed transcendent author.

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Unlike the philology of religious texts, semiotics is not primarily interested in determining to what degree of certainty a text can be ascribed to an author's presence and intentionality. Rather, semiotics is interested in developing a typological analysis of the various 'cultures of attribution'. The ways of establishing a relation of authoriality, in fact, vary depending on the author, the text, the reader, and the situation of enunciation. Ascertaining that a check can be ascribed to an empirical author with a certain presence and intentionality, for instance, implies a more or less sophisticated examination of the signature: to what extent of certainty can one deduce, from the shape of its lines and curbs, that it is an enunciation mark of the empirical presence and intentionality of the bank account holder? Could it not be, on the contrary, a simulacrum, constructed by an evil spirit exactly in order to convey, to the reader, a false impression of authoriality?

Religious texts, on the contrary, rarely bear a signature of their authors. Their authoriality must be established through signs whose examination is much more complicated. For instance, how does a believer, or a group of believers, ascertain that a certain passage in a religious text can be ascribed to its transcendent author? Through evidence accumulated in religious tradition about the circumstances of its enunciation, through the analysis of stylistic marks, through the evaluation of its content? To what extent can the believer be certain that the impression of authoriality is not produced by an evil spirit, or by a group of readers who want to achieve their immanent purposes through the pragmatic effects of a text to which they managed to attribute a transcendent authoriality? From this point of view, studying the 'semiotic cultures of authoriality' means also understanding how they can be manipulated. How an interpreter, or a group of interpreters, can maneuver a reader, or a group of readers, into believing that a text was actually produced by a transcendent author.

Saying that semiotics is concerned with the authoriality, and not with the authenticity, of a religious text, therefore means that semioticians are not supposed to question the nature of the particular semiotic standards that are adopted in order to establish authoriality, that is, the link between a text and the empirical circumstances of its production. If, for instance, a community agrees on declaring a check as authentic when it bears a signature that strongly resembles that of a bank account holder, even though the signatures are not perfectly identic, then semioticians are not supposed to question the authenticity of checks circulating in this community, but determine the cultural implications of adopting such flexible criteria of authoriality; or, also, find out under what circumstances their rigidity is increased (for instance, when the authenticity of a check is disputed in a court case).

Thus, similarly, semioticians should not question why a community of believers agrees on setting certain criteria to single out their canon of authentic religious texts, so excluding the apocrypha; semioticians should investigate, instead, the historical and cultural genesis of these criteria, their incorporation in documents and texts, exegetical development, and variation according to situations and circumstances. The secular observer might suggest, indeed, that there are no 'authentic' religious texts, and that every religious authoriality is actually a forgery, given that it concocts signs in order to persuade the faithful into believing that a certain text, conveying a certain message, was not produced by human hand but by divine hand

only. From a certain point of view, this is a philological issue, not a semiotic one. Even the secular semiotician, in fact, does not wonder "why do they, the faithful, believe in the authoriality of a religious text?", but rather, "*how* does it, the text, persuade them to believe, according to what established patterns of authoriality?".

Pinpointing the criteria of authoriality shared by a certain community of believers is important also because every community of believers is at the same time a community of interpreters. Establishing the authoriality of a text, in fact, reaching diffused consensus about evidence that proves it the product of the transcendent author's presence and intentionality, is only the first step toward (a) determining the meaning of the text, i.e. its message and (b) adopting this meaning as pragmatic basis for regulating the forms of life of the community. How could a group of believers, indeed, shape its life according to a certain interpretation of a religious text, without first be certain that the text is actually religious; that it stems 'from the pen' of a transcendent author? Any operation of religious hermeneutics would be nullified by the slightest doubt about the authenticity of the text.

The question of authoriality is therefore inextricably related not only to that of authenticity, but also to that of authority. Interpretative semiotics, following Umberto Eco and other scholars, distinguishes between three kinds of *intentio*: *auctoris*, *lectoris*, and *operis*, that is, meaning as an author would like it to be expressed by a text; meaning as a reader sees it in a text; and meaning as it emerges from the structures of a text according to the interpretative habits shared, at least to a certain extent, by a community of interpreters. It certainly holds true, as has been argued by most interpretative semioticians, that semiotics is not interested in the first nor in the second kind of *intentio* (matters of inquiry, rather, for philology and reception theory, respectively); however, it is also true that, in a community of interpreters that is also a community of believers, only the *intentio operis* that coincides with the *intentio auctoris* matters. This is the case every time a transcendent, omnipotent being is posited as the author of a text: indeed, how could this text contain meaning, *intentio operis*, that has not been contemplated by the author, that is not, i.e., *intentio auctoris* as well? That would be a stain in the omnipotent control that the transcendent author exerts on the text. Therefore, the *intentio lectoris* must be stigmatized as potential source of heretic or even blasphemous contamination of the 'real meaning' of the text, which must coincides with the meaning that the transcendent author intended to instill into the text and communicate to the reader/believer.

As a consequence, establishing the transcendent authoriality of a text through such or such criteria deeply affects the modalities of its reception and interpretation: of a text that has been attributed to a transcendent author, the believer does not ask anymore "what does it mean?", or worse, "what does it mean to me?", but rather, "what does He mean through it?". One must conclude that although semiotics is not interested in studying the authenticity, but rather the authoriality of texts, the specific modalities that determine the authoriality of a religious text deeply condition its authority, that is, the possibility of using the text as hermeneutical support for exegesis and, consequently, for the pragmatic regulation of the religious community.

What is the authoriality of religious law, indeed, if not the series of semiotic procedures through which a religious community 'extracts' authority, and therefore pragmatic force of regulation, from a text that is posited as authentic and therefore as authoritative? The interplay between the *intentiones* of a text, pinpointed with reference to the exegetical operations that bear on a religious text, takes place also in the passage from exegetical to juridical hermeneutics: an ideal community of believers will regulate the entirety of its forms of life according to a juridical construction that does not lend anything to the interpretation of the religious text, and as a consequence to the religious text itself, but receives exclusively what the transcendent author has instilled into it. Then of course different religious communities may vary as regards the extent to which they contemplate, and operate, the elimination of any human 'hermeneutic/juridical contamination' from the religious text.

For some communities, establishing the authoriality of a religious text, determining its authenticity, founding its authority, interpreting its meaning, and extracting its juridical prescriptions will be a matter of infinite, never-ending approximation to a Truth that is, at the onset, posited as out of the human reach, and especially out of reach of the human language, of its inevitably imperfect ways of dealing with transcendence. At the other extreme of the spectrum, on the contrary, one will come across communities of believers that adopt extremely rigid criteria for determining the authoriality of religious texts, envisage hard-edged standards for affirming or denying their authenticity, and do not allow and actually punish any exegetical or juridical interpretation that contaminates 'the voice of transcendence' with immanent 'errors'.

The monographic issue of the *International Journal for the Semiotics of Law* on the 'authoriality of religious law' is meant to propose several in-depth analyses of various ways of positing the pragmatic force of a religiously-inspired normative system through reference with the textual enunciation and the exegetical operations that subtend it. Each essay in the collection deals with a different religious tradition, with the semiotic dynamics and criteria it adopts to establish the authoriality of a religious text (its 'culture of attribution'), with the agencies and forces that corroborate or challenge these systems of authoriality, with the exegetical styles to which they give rise, and above all with the juridical consequences of such hermeneutical operations. How does a religious community determine the transcendent nature of the author of religious law? How does a religious community recognize the hand of this author in the religious law, and how does it distinguish it from the traces of human activity? How does it cope with the necessity that the law 'extracted' from a religious text, supposed as authored by transcendence, must be coated in human, immanent language?

These are some of the general questions the essays in the collection have sought to answer.