Abstract

Religion is usually perceived as the closed system of beliefs, practices, exegesis, theology, and symbols, but a deeper study of every religious tradition shows that religion is a very dynamic system, which continuously undergoes various re-interpretations and changes. These changes are instigated either by the believer’s unique experiences relevant to faith expressions, or are responses to the cultural, social, and epochal changes that the religion has to encounter. In order to prove the point that religious semantic and symbolic potentials are open for reinterpretations and changes within social and epochal paradigm changes this article applies general semiotic studies in explaining religious dynamism. This article explains major presuppositions of the general theory of Semiotics developed by Charles Sander Peirce and Umberto Eco such as the open sign, dynamic signs, and unlimited semiosis. These complex concepts are applied to the study of religion in examining dynamism within religious movements and the cross-cultural comparison between the major elements relevant to all religions.

**Religion, Unlimited Semiosis, and the Dynamic Signs**

A man denotes whatever is the object of his attention at the moment; he connotes whatever he knows or feels of this object—his interpretant is the future memory of this cognition, his future self, or another person he addresses.

 Charles Sanders Peirce, *Collected Papers* 7.591

**1, Application of the General Semiotic Theory to the Study of Religion**

Semiology, or a general Semiotic theory, has become known through the unique work of the French linguist, Ferdinand de Saussure, who compared his new subject of study to a science which combines a social and general psychology in a way to explain the ability of the human mind to create and communicate concepts and ideas via language. Saussure thought that Semiotics should become the most general science that would present a connection between what is naturally presupposed with what is culturally postulated and encoded in a language as a system. According to Saussure, this new science would concentrate on language, which was defined, in a new way, as a signification process, being highly complex and encoded through the integral web of connections that people learn as convention. It seems that Saussure actually envisioned the possibility for a general science that could unify different special sciences into one line of research via a new methodology.[[1]](#endnote-1)

In his *Course in General Linguistics* (1916) Saussure’s definition for a language is given as, “. . . a system of signs that expresses ideas, and is therefore comparable to the system of writing, the alphabet of deaf-mutes, symbolic rites, polite formulas, military signals, etc.” This explains language as a semiological process, but also opens the idea that in the progress of future semiotic research an amazing amount of different language systems may be recognized which are relevant for human existence and its relevancy in culture. The problem that arises from the Saussurean approach is the arbitrariness of the sign, i.e., a sign is always only a convention that reflects to some extent a collective behavior relevant to only one culture.[[2]](#endnote-2)

The scholarly work and research done for this article concretely finds a need to outline religion as a unified language system that opens the analogy between the system of belief (general conceptions) and practices (conceptual gestures and communicative acts) that are crucial to transform internally (experiences into conceptions) and externally (conceptions into the system of communication) nature into the culture, which maintain the conceptions and symbolic signified practices through the organized system of communication with in-group identity. One of the main ideas in the study of Comparative Religion is a cross-cultural comparison between different arbitrary signification systems: rituals, object(s) of worship, ethical values, moral rules, system(s) of symbols, integral social community, religious institutions, religious specialists, religious ideas systematized in a code of beliefs (dogmas, sacred texts, myths, etc.). The main endeavor of the Semiotic Theory of Religion would be to explain the necessity of putting the parts of different signification systems into the web of logical connections by which religion could be explained as a complex cultural signification system.

As often happens, when a new concept is brought to the human pool of knowledge, it is questionable as to whether Saussure realized the breakthrough he had created by developing a new definition of language, explaining the mode of signification process, and proposing a theory of signs. The consequences of Semiotics were that the object of knowledge was no longer simply given or imposed to the subject, but it is a code that functions as the process of signification between the signifier and the signified. Actually, the object of knowledge is encoded as a mental space in the mind, and it has an interactive function as a signifier which then is able to decode the meaning of the signified.[[3]](#endnote-3)

If one were to apply the process of signification to religion, then the object of study in religion usually corresponds with the idea of a god that is defined as belief in superhuman existence, agencies, and/or supernatural powers. In clarifying the issue, for example, the idea of god would be a relevant point for the religions of the Book—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, but one can equally talk about an object of religion as an ultimate reality in Hinduism where believers relate to the supreme reality of the whole universe, and in the idea of Brahman, one can also relate to the consciousness which becomes one with everything out of compassion, like the Buddhahood consciousness in Buddhism, or even the complex worshiping of the supernatural powers and spiritual agencies that are present in the worshiping of Mother Earth, or a creator god, high god, relevant for native religions. In the application of the signification process this object of religion as god, is no longer presupposed as the absolute that exists for all believers as was usually presented by the phenomenological approach in the study of religion (Eliade, Jung) and as is cross-culturally compared in a historical or cultural sense as an arbitrary sign, which can be used in comparison to the other signs of the same range to emulate the similarities and differences through an unique interpretation, but it outlines a more specific idea.

This idea is that there is a natural ability of the human mind to transfer internally--the most comprehensive experience of the self--that which appears as one which is in the state of acknowledgment that exits in the system arranged by the power of higher purpose. This system is something apart from the consciousness that experiences his/her critical moment of being apart, or the critical understanding of being finite, or being only a little part of the universal system of all things. So, the God/Ultimate Reality/Buddhahood Consciousness; the “mystical participation” in the world that relates different spirits and powers (native religions)—these concepts are all actually the result of the systematization of signs which brings dual analogical structure: signified is what outlines a natural ability of the mind in every religion that relates to the object that is of a superhuman, supernatural, or mystical character and a signifier as a specific sign that arbitrarily functions (historically, symbolically, and culturally) in one religious system. Actually, the object of knowledge is encoded as a mental space in the mind, and it has an interactive function as a signifier which then is able to decode the meaning of the signified.

Very often Semiotics (the theory of signs) opens a problem of terminology, because it is not entirely clear whether Semiotics is the same as Semantics (the theory of meaning). Semantics is a discipline developed in the circles of “Continental Philosophy” in the early twentieth century and concentrates on the discourses and meaning related to a new philosophy of language that fluctuates from mathematical logic (Frege, Wittgenstain) to the continuation of Husserl’s phenomenology investigating the connotations of an intentional object (Vienna Circle, Bolzano, Brentano). The intentional object (modified traditional object of knowledge) is now explained as the systematic transformation of the personal existing being and his/her consciousness into the higher structure of signification that interprets itself and acquires as the result the circle of meaning. Traditional continental Semantics also influenced the theory of interpretation called hermeneutics that puts in the main discourse aesthetical meaning. The main concern in the works of Wilhelm Dilthey and Hans-Goerg Gadamer is the amazing power of art work and literature where one can experience and reach the same meaning in these works as was originally posited. The question is: If the various cultural systems have passed through different socio-economic, political, even ethical changes of paradigms, how is it possible not to lose the original interpretative meaning of a work of art? The final crown of continental Semantics that combines hermeneutics, philosophy of language, and phenomenology as a question of human existence and meaning is given in the works of Martin Heidegger. He tries to explain the phenomenological outline of human existence as *Dasein* (here and now being) whose main crisis involves the relationship to death—the human being is a finite being—so, the only question worth investigation is that of meaning, and meaning opens itself by authentic language.[[4]](#endnote-4)

Sometimes it is difficult to definitely differentiate Semiotics from Semantics, and this problem also reflects to a degree on this article. This paper’s research and approach has the goal to incorporate the two different contemporary Semiotic theories, one of Umberto Eco and the other of Jürgen Habermas, as crucial for the formation of the Semiotic Theory of Religion. The reasons for connecting these two theories into one Semiotic Theory of Religion are: (1) shared methodology rooted in semiotics of Charles Sanders Peirce, which has successfully redefined the object of knowledge as a “production” sign in a new triadic semiotic methodology; (2) shared critical observations to the traditional religious system of beliefs and their institutions; (3) the importance of the open and unlimited religious signs and symbols that still affect the modernity and consciousness of modernity; (4) the idea of the transformation of religious highest ideas into the all modern social, political, and cultural sub-structures—from the work of art to the normative validity claims present in modern legislation processes.

While Eco takes Peirce’s Semiotics in the traditional way of understanding it as the theory of signs, Habermas reconstructs Peirce’s Semiotics in the discourse of communicative theory that, in his view, opens the Semantics of religion, which concentrates on questioning and analyzing all aspects of the religious consciousness. Habermas’ project of “linguificaiton” of the sacred offers the idea that the transformation of the religious idea of the sacred is secularized by means of Semantics, opening the meaning of values that are derived from the past religious experiences into the modern principles that are preserved in the contemporary institutionalized world. One could say that Habermas’ theory stands on the level of Semantics, but the methodology that is the underlying power of his presentation is very much rooted in Semiotics. Also, one can see that Eco’s research tends to concentrate more on symbolic dynamism that can be interpreted as the revitalization powers of religious through the symbols, signs, semiosis, unlimited dynamic signs, and limits of possible beliefs, while Habermas develops a comprehensive insight on the social evolution through the religious symbolic actions that evolve humankind in the new sublated form of the modern consciousness and their social and political sub-structures. In this sense, Eco’s research in Semiotics opens topics that are of cognitive and aesthetic value for the new Semiotic Theory of Religion, while Habermas’ theory opens the view on ethical and practical (politics, economics, and creative human potentials) aspects of religion, society, and the personhood. The conclusive goal of this article is to summarize Eco’s and Habermas’ views on religion and to reconstruct their Semiotic theories, giving a better picture on religion within the context of the universality of cultural systems, and also to give the methodological strength in explaining religious existence in our time.

The pattern—from the religious to the secular and beyond—is present in all religions of the world. It is necessary to explain how and why the dynamics between the religious and the secular exist and in what way it can be seen, the transformation of the religious or religious consciousness from their primary existent forms to the comprehensive functioning in the contemporary time, when the religious is no longer dominant in the secular world, but is transformed in new qualitative forms by the means of symbolic and dynamic sign transition.

The main tension and strength of this research is to explain religion as the dynamic organism that functions as the important part of the larger system in the dominant culture, but also in the dynamism of all possible cultures. Religion, religious reasoning, religious faith as the substrate of one’s consciousness, religion in connection to political affiliations and convictions, new religious movements, religious sacrifices, religious symbols, and religious texts often surprises one with ideas that can range from aesthetical stunning revelations to ideas which are totally opposite and pushes one away.

The first step of this presentation will offer to the reader a better understanding of the main Semiotic methodology related to the open sign, symbols, and unlimited semiosis.

At the same time when Saussure’s semiology was becoming more and more popular in the study of the continental intellectual circles, Charles Sanders Peirce, independently from Saussure, in the USA, presented the triadic general semiotic model by which any object of knowledge acts as a sign and by this virtue is a referent, which takes the form through its representament that is at the same time its interpretant. By his triadic interpretation of the sign, one can say that Peirce definitely moved general Semiotic theory from linguistics to the realm of epistemological investigation and philosophical interpretation. His main idea is that a sign can be either possible or real, so it encompasses everything, but either way—possible or real, a sign denotes the basic structure of the process that communicates the sign, the intellectual abilities of the one who invents or acknowledges the sign, and finally the result of the semiotic process is settled in interpretation. The most important aspect of Semiotics is the reproduction of the signs. In this, Peirce has a view of the universe as “. . . perfused with signs, if it is not composed, exclusively of sings,” so he calls this new discipline pansemiotcs, which, according to him, will develop in the future as the most general science.[[5]](#endnote-5)

**2. Open and Dynamic Signs**

What is inspiring about Peirce’s Semiotics is the representation of a sign as the dynamic object. To Peirce, the universe of signs cannot be absolutely conventionalized or settled. This point contradicts Saussure, but it opens the line of contemporary research in Semiotics that is used to compare the shift of meaning and contextualization of signs from one historical paradigm to the other.

This investigation is present in the Semiotic works of Umberto Eco where he often researches the shift of meaning in the signification process that occurs with the new poetics of modernity, or influences from one cultural system to the other. For example, he shows that the system of sings in the Middle Ages functions under the umbrella of the global theocentric allegorical structure, so every sign is a symbol that has a theological aspect of meaning and is fixed. With modernity, the old system is engaged in the deconstruction process, which finally re-interprets signs that once were symbols, isolates them from the former signification, and puts them into a new perspective. A sign might be transformed into another signification process and from the association with the sacred or theological aspect, by which it could be interpreted simply as an iconic sign—i.e., its function that is naturally presupposed and possibly defined scientifically (the Enlightenment period); or perhaps could be interpreted by the extraordinary personalist experience that is important for the poetics of romanticism where a sign becomes a new open symbol (nebula); or simply a sign could be put in the processes of experimentation, changing different perspectives and modes, which is a crucial point for the Avant-garde poetics. In any way, the sign opens its potential in each new epoch, and although sometimes has a fixed meaning in one system of signification, because it is a sign it is also a possible object of knowledge, so, does not necessarily stay fixed.

The value of Eco’s research brings to the main focus the functioning of the dynamic sign under different ideological, philosophical, and cultural changes. In his book, *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language* (1986) Eco analysis the changes of symbolic interpretation of the Old Testament. He states that the Old Testament was used by many of Stoic philosophers, writers, poets, and even by Philo of Alexandria who influenced early Christian theology. They read the Old Testament as an example of allegorical story that can be used for secular purposes—to enlighten or educate people about opposites—good and evil—in their nature and they were giving a secular interpretation trying to translate the allegorical message into the real aspect of life. In the first-century C.E. an opposite direction in interpretation took course. Clement of Alexandria and Origen found themselves in a difficult position to decide: Were they going to accept only The New Testament as relevant, or were they going to interpret both, The Old and New Testament, as crucial to the Christian movement and theology? They decided that the Old Testament speaks in a significant sense of the New Testament, so they are both engaged in producing semiosis (the signification process) with one sense and meaning. For example, the Exodus story represents a signifier of the signified story with the redemption through Christ. As Eco states:

The semiosic process was thus rather complicated: a first book

speaking allegorically of the second one, and the second one

speaking—sometimes by parables, sometimes directly—of

something else. Moreover, in this beautiful case of unlimited

semiosis, there was a curious identification between the message

sender, message as signifier or expression, and signified or content

and referent, intrpretandum, and interpretant—a puzzling web of

Identities and differences that can be hardly represented by a

bidimensional diagram….[[6]](#endnote-6)

Because of the complexity of problems in interpretation, and the necessity that Semiotics takes a critical distance, Eco thinks that general Semiotics cannot function without interpretation, which engages philosophy. Eco purposes that all research in general Semiotics is primarily philosophical, rather than scientific. This means that this research then requires a unique interpretation—a view on the issue, which also implies a specific method of investigation (theory) in order to process the abstract and complex signs. In this approach, usual topics of religion might be how one interprets or sees good and evil in one religious system. These kinds of signs cannot be scientifically explained; the interpretation of such signs requires what U. Eco says, “positing [a] question philosophically,” i.e., a possibility to use one’s experience, interpretation, and all faculties of the mind to circle the possible authentic understanding of the problem. If we detach the concepts of good and evil from philosophical discourse, then these concepts in the scientific reasoning barely exist, and there is not “possible unity and cohesion” in their understanding.[[7]](#endnote-7)

There is another great value of Eco’s research that can be applied to the problems in the study of religion. The most dynamic (unlimited) signs are symbols and they are an important part of a signification system in religion. According to Eco, there are open symbols with the metaphoric transitional ability, and there are symbols that function as the subclass to the larger allegorical system--where the symbols are fixed, but the system itself is open.[[8]](#endnote-8) Both types of symbols are also the signs relevant for the greatest concern of religion.

Every religion communicates its ideas through symbols, and tries to settle symbols in a fixed doctrinal perspective where there is no fear of collapse with the pillar concepts supporting the dogma.

For example, in the book by Caroline Walker Bynum *Metamorphosis and Identity* (2005), where in the introductory chapter there is given an exposition to the problemof her research, the change and metamorphosis interpreted in the traditional Christian theology of the Middle Ages, she presents the question: What if a priest is asked to give the Eucharist to the mate of a lycanthrope? As shown in Dr. Thomas E. Lawson’s cognitive methodology the use of examples in comparative religion studies is crucial to represent the obvious differentiation between the “theologically correct” reasoning, usually highly philosophized and abstract (that might be compared to the U. Eco’s semiotic allegoric system), and the religion of the common people. Dr. Lawson’s methodology has had a great impact on this research and the way of thinking about religions of the world and their complex dynamic structure that exist. Dr. Lawson defines religion as a necessary organism/system of the culture, which transforms what is naturally presupposed into the culturally postulated “conceptual ideas” that reflect and reason about the “superhuman agents.”[[9]](#endnote-9) In relationship to this approach, Bynum’s example about the Eucharist given to the werewolf represents a problem that is differently viewed by the eyes of a theologian vs. the cultural spontaneity of common people expressed in their oral tradition and fictional story. As she describes, in the writings of Gerald of Wales, who wrote the ethnography of Ireland in 1187, he tells the story of a priest who has been traveling from Meath to Ulster and meets on the way a werewolf who tries to get the Eucharist for his dying mate. The priest, from this original story, gives the mate of the werewolf the Eucharist, but Bynum gives the great observations on Gerald of Wales’s comments, which are substantiated later on, where he tries to explain and theologically justify the story and the act of the priest who gave the Eucharist to the werewolf’s mate. Wales has a problem how to explain the regressive change that occurred from human to the wolf. It seems, according to Bynum, that Wales doesn’t want to say that any substantial change or metamorphosis is just a make-believe story, and not really related to the true belief as Christianity. At one point Wales talks about real Incarnation and he defines it as a true miracle and metamorphosis from human to superhuman, god’s, nature. So, he uses an analogy to explain the werewolf’s nature. Now, Wales tries to compare the regressive change in human nature to the Eucharist, which represents the real substantial change in one’s nature. In short, Wales says that the werewolf represents the hybrid change that is not substantial to the nature but is only changed in appearance, while the Eucharist represents the true change in quality, and so is substantial, but not related to the change of appearance.[[10]](#endnote-10) This example nicely underlines what kind of problems can be faced in religious symbolism. This example gives a picture that the signification of symbols in religion is a very complex problem—the highly theological, “clean” systems of signification are in constant contact with the culture in change. One can notice, when religion spreads and is missionary, rather than stationary, then as the body of believers change, the religion and its symbols modify and change. In this sense, the Semiotic Theory of Religion relates to the symbols as metaphors (transitional symbols—in the above noted story a werewolf) and the mainstream fixed symbols in the allegorical system, which the main concern is to re-enforce the belief concepts in one religion as true and absolute.

Every religion develops a system of signs and symbols. This system of symbols acts as the main motivating power to the believers and, also, it is the most important factor in the unification of the religious community into one recognizable identity. Religious signs and symbols have the most immediate access to the supreme religious content, but also they are an active force, because they represent the transformative powers in religion: they initiate, for a believer, the transformation from the denotative level, ideas and beliefs, into the gesture, action, and finally, they may represent the whole meaning for one’s religious worldview, which directs a person’s practical aspect of life. Therefore, religious symbols are dynamic signs in a semiotic sense, having multiple intentions, possibilities, and powers for the religious community and the personal religious consciousness. The problem is that the religious dynamic signs are interwoven with the cultural, historical, and social heritage, so very often the existence and rise of symbols relevant for one religious tradition might not be always distinctively pure in meaning and have a clear message. This problem appears with the religious movements that grow in the multicultural surroundings, so they generate different cultural codes as their possible subsystems. This alternative subsystem very often becomes deeply buried and hidden under the surface of the theological accepted ideas and canonized religious texts that through time become the exclusive interpretative authority for the symbols. There is no better example than that of the rise of Christianity, which outlines perfectly the religious symbolic dynamism and the existence of the alternative semiotic subsystem within the mainstream theological interpretation of the Christian church.

**3. Semiotic Dynamism in Early Christianity and Overinterpretation Beyond**

 **Belief**

In the last half of the century from the discovery in Qumran, Nag Hammadi of the Dead Sea Scrolls (1945) and the comparative studies of the Gnostic Gospels in contrast to the created traditional Christian Canon (E. Pagels), to the question of identity and the role of Jesus during his life-time in the scholarship of Jesus Seminar and works of J. D. Corssan, it has become obvious that Christianity, indeed, is rather a very syncretistic movement, rather than an unified and monolithic as known from theology and the canon of the Church. [[11]](#endnote-11) One of the Gospels found in the hidden jar of the cave in Nag Hammadi was the Gospel of Thomas, whose existence was known to Biblical scholarship prior to this discovery, but finally the whole text revealed itself. In this Gospel the idea of the Kingdom of God definitely contrasts the one in the synoptic gospels and Paul, which presents an Apocalyptic Jesus, where the Kingdom of God is put in the perspective of the future event, in the theology known as a “*parousia*” delay (Matt. 24-25; Mark 13; Luke 21; 1 & 2 Thess.; 2 Pet. 2-3).[[12]](#endnote-12)

In the Gospel of Thomas 113 Jesus says that “The Father’s kingdom” will not come by expecting the great apocalypse “there” or “here,” but it is stated that the Kingdom of God is here, “spread out upon the earth, but people don’t see it.” This definition of the Kingdom of God is similar to the ideas of ethics presented in Greek stoic philosophers that traces its roots in ideas of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle who believed that ignorance is the source of all wrongdoing. If one might doubt that the Gospel of Thomas has a different view on Jesus, how then can one interpret the Gospel of Thomas 3? There, it is quoted that Jesus said: “When you know yourselves, then you will be known, and you will understand that you are children of the living Father. But if you do not know yourselves, then you live in poverty, and you are the poverty.”[[13]](#endnote-13) Definitely, the Gospel of Thomas appears in recent discoveries as the most compelling text of the early Christianity which has the purpose to express, not the story of Jesus, as J. D. Crossan suggested “prophecy historicized,” but simply the collection of original teachings of Jesus.[[14]](#endnote-14) This Gospel is presented in a different structural manner than the Synoptic Gospels, only as the combination of Jesus’ original quotes.[[15]](#endnote-15)

Still, it is left to our time to puzzle how to interpret the Gospel of Secret Mark where it is given the clear message that the knowledge about the Kingdom of God is a mystery that can be told only to the chosen disciples and pupils. [[16]](#endnote-16) Also, the Gospel of Secret Mark awakens again some suspicions about Jesus’ sexuality: Jesus is presented as the one who resuscitates a rich young man who recently died, but then “the young man looked at Jesus, loved him, and began to beg to be with him” (Secret Mar vs. 8). The similar case is presented a few lines later in the Gospel of Secret Mark when Jesus spent the night with the young man and Jesus “taught him the mystery of [the] Kingdom of God.” The interesting point being here, that the term “mystery of Kingdom of God” is also used in the canonical Gospel of Mark (Mark 4:11).[[17]](#endnote-17)

Perhaps, the most stunning story presented in the non-canonical Gospels is the story about Jesus’ infancy, where in The Infancy Gospel of Thomas, Jesus was presented as a child with the strong “magical” powers that he uses for revenge when someone crosses him. One of the stories says that Jesus killed his teacher who didn’t recognize his talents and his mystical interpretation of the Jewish letters. Jesus was presented that he made so much troubles using his powers, that the people of Nazareth asked Mary and Joseph to lock the child at home. [[18]](#endnote-18) Finally, it is presented that Jesus decided to use the powers only for good deeds and to help. Interestingly, we know that there is no one canonical Gospel referring to Jesus’ childhood in any extensive sense, but we know that all Synoptic gospels present the rejection of Jesus’ teachings when he went to visit his birthplace, Nazareth (Mark 6:1-6, Matthew 13:54-58, and Luke 4:1-13).

With the discovery of the Gnostic Gospels, and all non-canonical Gospels, it is proved that the canonization process of the Christian Church was borne through the political and theological battle, which arose in the late second century C.E., when the persecutions of Christians became a serious problem. At that time Irenaeus of Lyons proposed the four Gospels as the main canonized story of Jesus’ life and mission, which definitely opposed to Marcion, who wanted only parts of Luke’s Gospel to become a canon, because he wanted to separate the new covenant and Testament from the Old one, being prone to the Gnostic type of Christianity.[[19]](#endnote-19) In the light of these discoveries, one thing is clear: the theology or the main Christian ideas were not unified and settled from the beginning. For example, it is a known fact that in 367 C.E., Athanasius, Bishop of Alexandria, declared that all non-canonical books should be destroyed in the land within his rule (Egypt).[[20]](#endnote-20) Today, with the new comparative analysis of the Apocrypha and early Christian artifacts whole symbolic subsystems are discovered which reveal the diverse multicultural connections with the so called “pagan world.”

Unlike the Mosaic interpretation of Christianity, which necessarily contextualizes the Christian tradition in the discourse of the Prophetic writings, Jewish monotheism, and the idea that the Christ is the Messiah, there is also the other Christian tradition that can be interpreted in connection to the Hermetic philosophy, concepts of Pythagoreanism, and the Neoplatonic mysticism, which influenced Jewish mysticism. A large number of the common Christian practices show how Christianity has emerged from the cults of the mystery religions, where actually the central rituals are related to the concepts of the birth and resurrection.

The initiation rites in the mystery cults were secret (Eleusis), but modern studies were able to reconstruct the main concepts, ideas, and ritual significance. The central idea in all of them is the enlightenment of the soul that has to undergo through death, which symbolizes the detachment from the biological, pragmatic, and earthly life and coming into the other, spiritual realm, as a new birth that is resurrection, where the consciousness moves in the spiritual life. The final goal of the spiritual life is that the person unifies with the powers of god himself, usually named and glorified as the “light of the world.” These ideas ware present in worshiping Dionysus and Orphic traditions, where Orpheus was presented as a “fisherman” for human souls. Many symbols from the Orphic cults are found in the Christian tradition too. Just the resemblance between Dionysus and Jesus is stunning: both are the sons of supreme gods—Dionysus is son of Zeus; Jesus is son of god; both are the sons of virgins, Semele and Mary, both survived the attempt of being killed (Hera almost killed Dionysus; King Herod almost killed infant Jesus); both battle supernatural evil (Dionysus struggled against Titans; Jesus against Satan); Dionysus invents wine; Jesus transforms water into wine; Dionysus is wounded and is killed by Titans; Jesus is crucified by Romans and undergoes a shameful death; Dionysus becomes immortal and join his father Zeus; Jesus is resurrected to glory and unifies with his father; Dionysus punishes opponents to his divinity; Jesus will return on the judgment day to punish those who do not believe (Matt. 24-25; Rev. 19-20).[[21]](#endnote-21)

In Mithraism, Mithras is presented as a solar deity of the whole universe, whose birth was on December 25, when Mithras would slay a bull (Taurus) as a form of a sacrifice, from which a new life arises. The initiation ceremony has represented usually a spiritual rebirth where a person which undergoes through the symbolic death, now is re-born spiritually and then is committed to follow the principles of light and life.[[22]](#endnote-22) Mystery cults in Eleusis were associated with worshiping mother goddesses: Demeter, the goddess of fertility and life, who gave grain to the world as the substance of life—bread, and her daughter Persephone, was abducted by the underworld king Hades (Adonis).[[23]](#endnote-23)

During the Roman Empire’s time a more popular cult than that of Demeter, was Isis, an Egyptian mother goddess, usually portrayed as a goddess that holds her little infant son, Horus. The Roman writer, Apuleius, in his work *The Golden Ass,* describes his mystery experience by which the goddess Isis appears to him as a savior. He gives the details about his religious enlightenment, explaining that this new spiritual life gives him blessing, and knowledge of what life and death are, and the goddess Isis appears to him as a redeemer who saved him from his animal soul.[[24]](#endnote-24)

Some research shows possible connections between the Egyptian worship of Amon-Ra and an understanding of the Christian god, some concentrates on the important role of John the Baptist, who influenced Jesus and even might be that both were associated with the Essene movement which assumes even the possible influences of Buddhism and probable connections with the mysticism of Pythagorean schools that influenced some Essenes groups of the Jewish scholars.[[25]](#endnote-25) Definitely, some form of the Jewish mysticism is ascribed to John the Baptist and after the Dead Sea Scrolls discovery there is a serious attempt of scholars to explain the connection of John the Baptist and Jesus in a new way.

Burton L. Mack argues in his book *The Lost Gospel of Q* (1993) that the whole methodology of the Biblical scholarship in the past was wrong, because they wanted to prove the existence of the Christian community along with the appearance of the first Christian texts. The modern comparative religion approach to Early Christianity shows that this was not the case. The Christian movement was developed dispersive throughout the Mediterranean area, North Africa, and the parts of the Middle East where the originated Jewish Christian sect was separated from the new becoming Christians and their way of beliefs and practices. A. N. Wilson, in his book *Jesus* (1992), tries to prove the point that in the Mediterranean area actually spread the religion of John the Baptist rather than that of Jesus, which was a different type of a Christian movement more prone to the mystery cults, so important to religious practices of the ancient Greco-Roman world.[[26]](#endnote-26) Today, modern research shows that more than half a century passed after Jesus’ death the existence of the larger and ideologically unified Christian community in Jerusalem or any other Jewish territory can be confirmed. [[27]](#endnote-27) The modern biblical studies as well as comparative religious studies in Early Christianity concentrated on the anthropological Biblical research and archeology, comparative linguistics, history of art, and contextualization of the Hellenistic culture of that time. The main idea was to historically contextualize Christianity as a social, political, and religious movement (R. Stark) “painfully” separating the theological and dogmatic aura from the facts (D. Crossan).[[28]](#endnote-28)

Perhaps, before half a century ago no one could predict how far and beyond any expectations Biblical connectionism along with the history of art, history, church history, comparative literature, and religion would progress. Presently, most are familiar with the enormous popularity of David Brown’s novel *Da Vinci’s Code*, which was inspired with the earlier popular book by Michel Baigent, Richard Leigh, Henry Lincoln *Holy Blood, Holy Grail* (1982), the adventours scholars in comparative literature and journalists. Both, Brown’s novel and the historical mystery about Jesus’ blood line *Holy Blood, Holy Grail* --the Merovingian dynasty in France is the result of the direct bloodline of Jesus and Mary Magdalene--were inspired by the works and research style of Lynn Picknett and Clive Prince, which specialized in the theories of paranormal, historical and religious mysteries, and the occult tradition. The crown of their research appeared in the bestseller--a pseudo-history book that uses a methodology “if it is possible to happen, then it has happened, or if it is possible to see this way, then it signifies this”-- *The Templar Revelation: Secret Guardians of the True Identity of Christ* (1997) where Picknett and Prince constructed a sensational, new story of Christianity as a 2.000 year hoax. [[29]](#endnote-29)

According to Picknett’s and Prince’s theory, Jesus was a competitor with John the Baptist, who was his religious leader. John the Baptist is presented as the mystic who was introduced into the Egyptian mystery religions of Isis and Osiris. Their theory goes so far that Jesus’ group, which separated from John the Baptist, was actually responsible for John the Baptist’s death through their treason. Jesus himself organized the treason because he was expected to become the successor to John the Baptist, but the honorary position was given to Simon Magus. Also, Picknett and Prince disputed the role of Mary Magdalene in early Christianity. Picknnett claimed that she had a “ritualized” sexual relationship with Jesus, signifying through the sexual act the access to god himself and unification with him.[[30]](#endnote-30) Mary Magdalene was presented as the main “initiator” into the sacred mystery cult to which Jesus belonged. Finally, Jesus himself was described as an “aggressive” political charismatic leader who was introduced into the magical powers by John’ the Baptist, but his miracles were publicly acknowledged after John the Baptist’s beheading.[[31]](#endnote-31) Their final saying on Jesus’ role in the early stage of the formation of Christianity was that Jesus hid from his disciples the mystery and initiated knowledge learned from John the Baptist, so he manipulated the whole movement. As the main support for their thesis these authors use the interpretation of the term “Christ,” which at the time of John the Baptist in his circle meant simply the initiation ritual into the circle by baptism. [[32]](#endnote-32)

Picknett and Prince, prior to their popular book *The Templar Revelation,* published the text *Turin Shroud: In Whose Image*. They concentrated on the mysterious picture titled *Shroud of Turin,* the 13-1/2 foot long piece of fabric having a photo-like image of the crucified body of a man. The Catholic Encyclopedia interprets the *Shroud of Turin* as an extraordinary image that projects “the Holy See.” Picknett and Prince tried to prove that this photo-like-picture is the work of Leonardo who was able to use a *camera obscura* technique. The *Shroud of Turin* became one of the most important relics to Pope Sixtus IV. Picknett and Prince posed the question: Why would Leonardo “fake” the image of Jesus’ body for the Christian Church? For a true believer this would be an offence. Their final interpretation of the *Shroud of Turin* is that Leonardo himself was involved in the battle against the Church. The head on the picture appears to be beheaded, which might send a message that the real leader was beheaded, and to Leonardo this leader might be John the Baptist. Picknett and Prince created an idea that Leonardo might be associated with the underground movement that was oriented towards the Johannite tradition, and that he developed the web of encoded symbols which generate the movement opposite of the traditional Catholic Church. Consequently, Picknett and Prince concluded that there is a possibility of connecting what is known as the legacy of the Priory of Sion to Leonardo’s work and possibly his religious convictions.[[33]](#endnote-33)

Of course, the alleged secret organization of the Priory of Sion for which it was claimed that was founded in the 11th century and created by the medieval order of Knights Templars to protect a secret about the bloodline of Jesus, supposedly continued in the Merovingian line of rulers, was shown to be actually a pseudo-history. Namely, May 1956 was the first time when this organization was registered as an existent society and was established by Pierre Plantard. He was also responsible, along with his friend, de Cherisey, for the production of the forged documents known as *Secret Dossiers of Henri Lobineau*, planting them in the French Bibliothéque Nationale and using the pseudonym “Philippe Toscan du Plantier.” The content of these forged documents was presented in the form of different parchments used to prove the existence of the Priory of Sion and the line of the Grand Masters. The list of the Grand Master includes names such as Marie de Saint-Clair (1220-1266), Leonardo Da Vinci (1510-1519), Isaac Newton (1691-1727), Victor Hugo (1844-1885), and Claude Debussy (1885-1918). On the *Secret Dossiers* i.e., a modern myth, is based Dan Brown’s novel *Da Vinc’si Code*.[[34]](#endnote-34)

The most appealing argumentation in both of their published works was that in Leonardo’s *The Last Supper* located in Santa Maria delle Grazie (Mila) to the left of Jesus from the viewer’s point of view is painted Mary Magdalene rather than John the Apostle. The whole theory of Picknett and Prince is laid-out in the fashion of a mystery story, where the scholars act as detectives and re-write the meaning and signification processes of the whole history of Christianity. Seven years after their popular book, Dan Brown’s novel reached enormous popularity and, even more interesting, engaged people of different agendas in the great public debate in the American Media. What this public debate about Dan Brown’s book opened for the American society was that common religious men and women showed fear and disappointment that the cannon of religion, with the whole meaning of Christianity, could be highly disputed if separated from the theology and main Christian set of beliefs, and put into the historical perspective with the interpretative freedom from the researcher’s point of view. The true Christians asked themselves: Is it possible that the Christian Church and Churches hid from the public and their own believers a “thread of heresy” for more than two-thousand years? Is it possible that what was believed to be on Leonardo’s picture *The Last Supper* is actually an encoded story of Jesus’ betrayal? Is it possible the “John’s gesture,” an index finger pointing up, is a sign on *The Last Supper* that denotes and defines Jesus as a traitor?

This example of reinterpretation of Leonardo’s signification of religious symbols in his paintings shows what is the power of the religious symbolization: they tend to be open to interpretation as time changes and the structures of society changes aspiring in modern time for secularism rather than theocentrism. One might say; these, in many of ways, “paranoid” interpretations seem to be strictly secular and critical to the religious establishment. These free interpretations of Christianity today radically dispute the apocalyptical, the eschatological, and the Christological picture of Jesus that the Christian theology and religious establishment preferred for Jesus as the “wise teacher” or even Jesus as only a man and the charismatic leader of a religious movement. Although only a novel, David Brown’s book opened a war in the media between the pious Christians with their Churches and his poetic license to use the research of Picknett and Prince for his plot of the hoax story that lasts for centuries. For example L.D. Meagher’s for CNN book review concludes about Picknett and Prince:

In the end, Picknett and Prince propose that a murky conspiracy has been at work for nearly 2000 years. Two conspiracies in fact: one, involving all denominations of the Christian faith and spearheaded by the Vatican, suppresses the truth while the other, stage-managed by the Priory of Sion, hides it. Their theory makes the "X-Files" look like "Mr. Smith Goes to Washington". The publicity for ‘The Templar Revelation" claims the book "could shatter the foundation of the Christian Church.’ It's been more than a year since it was first published in Great Britain and there's no indication religious institutions are beginning to crumble. (<http://www.cnn.com/books/reviews/9902/19/templar>, accessed June 6, 2006)

The making of Christianity a mystery story with a paranoid plot, of course, is an appealing and new method that opens material interesting for scholars, writers, academia, those open and prone to secular ideas, but definitely seems offensive to pious Christians. Meagher ironically concludes in his review that there is no sign of the breaking of religious institutions by all of these alternative truths about Christianity. This is, of course, a simple truism, but still doesn’t give a full explanation of why and how Christianity exists, and even reaffirms its position in the time when science, history, comparative methodologies developed in diverse scholarship projects offer more common sense explanations and answers to human existence and problems, than the ones offered in religion.

The question of belief and what are the limits of possible beliefs, is a critical question that Semiotic Theory of Religion vigorously discusses, because sometimes beliefs are also viewed as the expression of foolishness or craziness. So, the questions for the Semiotic Theory of Religion are: How does the human mind distinguish foolish ideas from righteous ones, or acts of free imagination from the valuable beliefs? Of course, when talking about the nature of belief, in the semiotic approach, one should always take into consideration the faculties/abilities of the human mind and what are the limits of free imagination.

**4. The Nature of Belief and Cognitive Limits of Belief**

The nature of belief has been one of the crucial questions that also has amazed semiotician C. S. Peirce. His idea is that the source of belief can be anything. This view is supported with an idea that any object of knowledge can become signified not just as the “real” object of knowledge, but can also become a symbol, a sign for something else. Peirce expands the theory of knowledge in semiotics. The object of knowledge is not fixed only as an object in reality, it is only a sign, so it can change or switch from the fixed meaning to the open sign again.[[35]](#endnote-35)

Based on the research and in-depth study for this research, the Peircean concept of belief is founded on the strong influence, but also criticism of David Hume’s skepticism, who put in question the continuum of consciousness existence, metaphysics, god, and morality. One work that specifically has triggered Peirce has been Hume’s criticism of the religious miracles.[[36]](#endnote-36) First, Hume argues that the consciousness is problematic in its existence, because it is rather the entity that emerges from various discontinuous time fragments. Besides this problem, Hume thinks that this “disappearing self” is in the constant change of the roles while processing through experience knowledge about the world: (1) consciousness first becomes one with the object of knowledge and so it loses itself in the process of understanding the object; (2) consciousness interprets the object of knowledge, putting it into the perspective of causality; (3) and the final circle of knowledge is an achievement of differentiation of the object and the self, distinguishing one from the other.[[37]](#endnote-37) According to Hume, the most dangerous part of “knowing” of an object is the application of causation, which, he perceives, is one of the greatest limitations of human knowledge. The idea that one event makes another happen assumes that there is a necessary connection of events, but Hume is skeptical that the causation is a sufficient explanatory theory either for the object of knowledge, or the problem of consciousness/the self. According to Hume, what we know as the self is established as the habit and the self as a continuum is explained through the cause and effect pattern, so, it is a belief rather than the objective knowledge.[[38]](#endnote-38)

Analyzing the problem of superstitions, for example, Hume thinks that the belief in miracles is one of the superstitious elements of reason, and he is critically positing the question: Why does the mind use the explanation of events that are contrary to logic and reason? Hume thinks that the problem is in the connection between the impressions (matters of fact) and the association of impressions with the ideas. While ideas are presented as the rational conceptualization of reality and backed up by reason, the impressions are derived from experiences, and finally, they are associated with ideas.[[39]](#endnote-39) The human predicament is to apply causation logic to every single thing. The problem occurs when the idea is associated with the impression as a short-cut explanation that denotes the pattern between the cause and effect. The whole human perception is intuitive rather than scientific; so every day we see the sun rising from the East and going down in the West, and our perception that is based on the causation intuitive logic is wrong, while scientific proof that the sun doesn’t go anywhere is truth.[[40]](#endnote-40) In this sense, Hume sees the *par excellance* problem: How can one be sure about anything that is perceived and what might be the consequences of the limitation of knowledge by causality?

In summarizing the problem, to Hume religion appears as a critical problem because faith is based on the acceptance of miracles or stories that are imaginative and symbolic, rather than rational and logical. Hume rejects miracles, because they contradict to the laws of nature. Hume also doubts god because all our knowledge is derived from experience and therefore all our knowledge is a construct based on a-posteriori access to reality. The miracles presented in the Gospels contradict to reason, and so the miracles should be suspended as the suitable reason for being religious.

Peirce, however, would have a hard time to accept this argument. He states in his text *The Laws of Nature and Hume’s Argument against Miracles* that this is a wrong argumentation based only on a simple inductive logical method, which doesn’t apply real aspects of probabilities that are even becoming the part of modern scientific reasoning. He goes so far to confront Hume’s argument with the definition of miracles by the church fathers: “The fathers of the church defined a miracle as performance so far beyond ordinary human powers as to show that the agent must have had extraordinary super-human aid,” and he states that Hume was not familiar with this definition, but rather Thomas Aquinas’s, who opposed miracle to the law of nature. Peirce argues that what Hume sees is only the “regularity” of the phenomena in the law of nature that is projected by the scientific method.[[41]](#endnote-41) Actually, Peirce proves that the irregularity of the phenomena is a common aspects of the modern scientific theory of probability, but also that the irregularity of phenomena is the issue with which humans live every day. To count the Gospel story of miracles as “evidence” that counter reason because it is an extraordinary story with nothing like it in history or in other life experiences, to Peirce, is an absurd idea. To him the objective probabilities are statistical facts that have an origin in the insurance business, subjective probabilities, or likelihoods, all of which rely on preconceived notions.[[42]](#endnote-42) What Peirce says is the following, yes, the sun appears as traveling around the Earth, so the Ptolemaic view is common to our experience based on perceptions, but at the same time we know the scientific truth, and this is not going to change the perceptions in anyway. So, the sun can co-exist in two different aspects of signification, one perceptive, and another scientific, but also can function in different cultural signification processes as one can find in ancient Greeks, to whom the sun was the God Helios.

On the matter of belief, Peirce comes close to a problem presented and outlined by Hume. Still, Peirce goes further in his inquiry and asks why don’t we accept the simple beliefs that are the most opportune, convenient, and comfortable to us as truths? The belief is a will powered conviction. In his text *How to Make Our Ideas Clear* (1878) published in *Popular Science Monthly 12* Peirce says: “And what, then is belief? It is the demi-cadence which closes a musical phrase in the symphony of our intellectual life. We have seen that it has just three properties: First, it is something that we are aware of; second, it appeases the irritation of doubt; and third, it involves the establishment in our nature of a rule of action, or say for short, a habit.”[[43]](#endnote-43) When Peirce investigates the power of beliefs, he sees that lots of beliefs are indeed in contradiction to reality, but a person who believes feels that this belief, although against the objective reality, is somehow settled and he/she doesn’t think that the statement of the belief is in contradiction to reality. Peirce asks a further question: why then don’t we have only beliefs, but also knowledge that is backed up by reason and science? His answer is that beliefs are not simply voluntary things, but are settled not only by our faculties and abilities of the mind, but also by and in the community. In his text *The Basis of Pragmaticism* Peirce writes: “Now a sign as ordinarily understood is an implement of intercommunication.”[[44]](#endnote-44) If anyone would simply believe what he/she wants, there would no longer be even a possibility for any communication.[[45]](#endnote-45) That every person has a different explanation of what is the sun, god, or goodness, this would mean a total disintegration of the human race. Therefore, all beliefs are settled in the community. The communication community establishes a simple system of language—to every object it is assigned the word, and the word is encoded through the system of written signs, letters. One can interpret Peirce’s view on religious beliefs as a very interesting concept. Religious beliefs are those which trigger equally the imagination, the powers of life, and reason, and are settled in the ideal communication community. This ideal communication community reflects what is taken as the norm of belief, which now reflects its value and content throughout time of the past, present, and future.

Surprisingly, to Peirce, knowledge established by science is the highest aspect of beliefs, because there is no possibility to know something in the context of absolute objective knowledge or in the realm of *noumena*. According to Peirce, every science begins with the hypothesis, and this hypothesis should be confirmed by the methodology that the scientists have established. Science is not the absolute knowledge. It is only the best belief we can finally settle upon: science acknowledges the object of knowledge as independent of our intentions or opinions, by science is confirmed only as a thing that is put in the perspective of predictable and regular laws, and when the hypothesis is confirmed by the experiment, we can agree easily to one conclusion.[[46]](#endnote-46)

Peirce finally concludes his observation on the problem of beliefs: belief is a habit, and doubt is the lack of a habit.[[47]](#endnote-47) On one hand, the religious beliefs and simple personal convictions are beliefs that often bring forth doubts, a sense of relativism, or even rejections. On the other hand, beliefs are necessary to straighten a person’s will and power as a condition from which one behaves in a specific way when the occasion arises. Without beliefs it would not be possible to act and fulfill the practical aspect of life. The doubt is something that urges a person on the journey of inquiry, but this is rather a rare moment of our existence than the rule according to which we act. We accept beliefs as long as we have no cause to doubt. Truth is a fixed belief.[[48]](#endnote-48)

 There are definitely different ways how beliefs can be fixed in the community: by tradition, by authority, and by accepting what is the most reasonable or favorable explanation. What is important for religious studies is that the fixation of beliefs is one of the great parts of every religious tradition. It has been discussed on the former pages about the canonization processes in Christianity, and how this process was crucial to the formation of settled Christian ideas in theology and in the Church. It seems that the Mosaic interpretation overpowered any Hermetic or philosophical interpretation of Christianity. One can also see that even a forgery or a myth—something made up and thus the result of imagination--can become sensational for the public discussions and viewed as real. Consequently, often the imaginative ideas act as the real ones, as one could see in the examples of the popular story about the secret society Priory of Sion which was a hoax, but still it has been engaged in a labyrinth of false connections to scholars and writers. The best example is given in the popularity of Dan Brown’s book *Da Vinci’s Code*.

Eco in his collection of essays, *Serendipities: Language & Lunacy* (1998) discusses in what way a myth, a fake story, or a fake narrative can become a part of history or an important cultural idiom.[[49]](#endnote-49) The essay *The Force of Falsity* discusses known historical forgeries, which were created and designed to maintain the desired worldview, to sway political directions of the rulers, produce a feeling that the world is governed by the higher secret authority on which a common person cannot have any impact, so called the conspiracy theory. Eco notes some examples: (1) the official stand of the Medieval Christian Church (Eastern and Western) that the earth is a flat disk in the shape of a tabernacle with Jerusalem in the middle, the very idea of Cosmas Indicopleustes, the geographer committed to the Church fundamentalism, which idea became accepted as official for a thousand years after its publication; (2) the Donation of Constantine, a forged document by the Roman Church between 750-850 C.E. that proves how the Roman Emperor Constantine I had granted Pope Sylvester I and his successors as those who has the right to rule over the city of Rome, Italy, and the Western Roman Empire; (3) the letter of Prester John to the Pope and the West in which is described the non-existent land of non-existent ruler where one can even find the beings of imagination such as hippopotami, metagallinari, cametennus, tinsirete, onagers, gryphon, centaurs. This letter is believed to be the main motivation for the third Crusades under the leadership of Frederick I; (4) the manifest of Roscirucians for which it was believed to exist as the secret society, the organization allegedly established in 1615, but no person has ever seen one Rosicrucian, so it is most likely to be the popular idea of utopian aspirations of the intellectual elite; (5) and the text the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* that was written as the satire on the events during the French Revolution between 1797 and 1798 and has made the whole literary journey from France to tsarist Russia. There, a Russian Monk, Sergej Nilus, added to the original text his vision of reality. He was inspired with the romantic Rasputinian mysterious religious experiences, so he associated the idea of “the Antichrist” with the underground movement embedded in the secret societies of Europe i.e., Masonry, which he has presented to have an intention to provoke the line of revolutions in all European countries in order to enhance social injustice and ensure the mass control of the rich ruling class over the common people, adding the chauvinistic perspective on the Jewish nation, accusing them that the final goal of this conspiracy was de-Christianization and conversion of the ruling class to Judaism.[[50]](#endnote-50)

In examining the nature of belief one could easily see that even fake tales, false theories, or ideas opposite to reality and reason can become accepted in the society, so we can interpret such ideas as the myth-making constructs. Analyzing the unifying aspect of all fake stories/new myths that caught on and have become accepted, Eco states that the power of these stories lays in their persuasiveness. Some historical events that resulted with the unexpectable consequences seem to be not logical or believable at all. With the split between the Christian Church in the East and the West to true Christian may seem incredible and foolish. So, if one would add to the plot of events, the text such as the Donation of Constantine, the split would look more logical and acceptable to people. The same power of persuasiveness can be seen in the anti-Semitic text of the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. The idea of the total conspiracy theory is a short-cut story that puzzles together a complex situation of modern political developments that are going astray, against the rational reasoning, against social, political, and economic piecemeal, making dialogs in societies, so it is easy to piece together the story that makes sense and blames someone for all of what was done wrong in the complex reality. After the critical observations of how does the society accept as the truth, the fake tales or stories, which then make them the modern myths, Eco concludes his text with an observation that the “cultivated person’s first duty is to be always prepared to rewrite the encyclopedia.”

Eco’s point is again important for the Semiotic Theory of Religion. In the modern world that is split between the religious and the secular worldviews, there is an attempt to analyze the main beliefs of religions as ideas that are presented in the stories that have the elements of the myth, and therefore, of the fake. Naturally, no one immediately associates the problem of the fake as closely related to the religions of the world because these mythical stories became such an important part of the common human knowledge and are associated with the cultural norms and values that are observed by the global community as an important source of culture, society, and personhood.

**5. Eco’s Differentiation of Religious Symbolism**

In every religion there are the fixed set of beliefs and practices by orthodoxy, which is given as the primary resource for a specific religious worldview. Once when this code is absorbed, a believer has to engage his/her own experience by the power of one’s own reasoning and imagination in order to rejuvenate faith and to understand what religion stands for in reality.

Analyzing the power of religious symbols Eco gives an interesting analysis on how did the vision of Saint Margaret Mary Alacoque, who experienced the mystical presentation of the Sacred Heart of Jesus in the 17th century, became accepted by a large amount of the Catholic followers in the 20th century.[[51]](#endnote-51) Margaret Mary Alacoque was born in 1671 in France, and after surviving a rheumatic fever at age 11, she became a devotee of the Blessed Sacrament. A few years later she joined the Order of Our Lady of the Visitation at Paray-le-Monial where Mary Margaret received visions of the “Lord Himself,” who appeared to her and asked her to be devoted to his sacred heart because the heart is the center of true love.[[52]](#endnote-52) Eco states that Pope Pius XII, who wrote the Encyclical that promulgated the devotion to the Sacred Heart in 1956, definitely knew that the heart is a human organ with the crucial physical function for the organism’s survival, and not a place of a religious or spiritual significance or sense of love, but he still insisted on the symbolic significance of the sacred heart of Jesus: “Who does not see, venerable brethren, that opinions of this kind are in entire disagreement with the teachings which Our predecessors officially proclaimed from this seat of truth when approving the devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus? Who would be so bold as to call that devotion useless and inappropriate to our age which Our predecessor of immortal memory, Leo XIII, declared to be ‘the most acceptable form of piety’?”[[53]](#endnote-53) It was in the Middle Ages when the majority of people believed that all human emotions and feelings, especially the sense of love, were placed in the heart, so the heart was understood not as an organ, but as the place where the soul reflects all turmoil in the emotional sense. The scientific and commonly accepted knowledge in the 20th century that the heart is an organ with strictly physical function didn’t put aside the authentic mystical experience of Margaret Mary. In her vision a symbol of the heart appears as the sign that serves as the vehicle and detonator for the “transcendent voices” of what Jesus stands for and what true faith in Christian parameters is, or should be. In this sense, religion always involves the action as semiosis—interpretation of the signs that are open to its interpreter which acknowledges at the same time present other higher concepts hidden in the religious message. Eco accepts the definition given by Peirce who says that a sign is “an action, or influence, which is, or involves, an operation of three subjects such as a sign, its object, and its intrpretant, this tri-relative influence not being in any way resolvable into an action between pairs.” (C.P. 5.484).[[54]](#endnote-54)

A religious symbol is not only a picture of something that represents something else by the virtue of analogy. It is a full representament of the communicative process between the sign that is open for interpretation to its interpreter, and at the same time an object that stands open for interpretation as it is in the role of dynamic object. This object then transforms one thing to the other. This thing might be even a concept, but under its appearance underlies the importance of the deep religious experience as the faith and mystery. Religious symbols and the religious highest concepts are similar to nebulas and are religious symbols because they are open for interpretation. They are open signs in a sense that they are often ambiguous, empty and full at the same time. Analyzing symbols as archetypes and the Sacred, Eco concludes that these symbols as universal images and representations of the collective unconsciousness such as solar, lunar, vegetal, meteorological representations are fundamentally vague. This vast openness of religious symbols gives the tri-level hermeneutic circle in order that the symbol can be understood: a religious symbol appears as a sign which involves interpreter, but at the same time appears as the object whose identity is changed by the virtue of analogy with the other object whose meaning is more open and again involves the interpreter’s experience to participate in its transformation.

According to Eco, for any religious tradition the most difficult problem is to translate the exegesis of one religion into the other culture. Although every exegesis tends to give a strict and orthodox interpretation, the religious symbols are so vastly open and require immediate and often spontaneous reactions of believers that every translation requires as well reinterpretation. Every religion, of course, has symbols, even more so, a system of symbols. In every religion allegorical representations are crucial for understanding fully what this religion is about. As Eco thinks, “allegory transforms an experience into a concept and a concept into an image, but so that the concept remains always defined and expressible by the image.” Once when the system of symbols is transferred into other cultures the interpretation of specific symbols might slightly change or these symbols can be accepted as important because they are analogous with the codes and symbols of the other culture. One example is that of the Virgin Mary of Guadalupe.

Eric R. Wolf, an anthropologist and an expert in popular religion associated with their main symbols did research about the Virgin Mary of Guadalupe that is perceived as the main national symbol of Mexico as well as the main patron saint of all Mexican Catholics. The Virgin Mary of Guadalupe is perceived as a stunning symbol, the main refuge for the poor, especially women, and the common people of Mexico. Also, under this symbol were fought two great battles—the War for Independence of Mexico and the revolution led by Emiliano Zapata and his followers. Wolf, interested in the specifics of the regional religious past, found a curious fact that on the mountain Tepeyac where was built the shrine to “Our Lady of Guadalupe” was prior to the Christian worshiping place a shrine to the mother, fertility goddess, Tonantzin, which in translation means Our Mother and was often addressed by people as Our Lady. Also, Tonantzin was surrounded with the symbol of the moon as well as was the Virgin Mary.

When in 1531 the Virgin Mary was said to appear to Juan Diego, she addressed him in the area’s native language, and demanded of him that the archbishop of Mexico build the church on the hill where she appeared. Diego’s request was denied several times, and finally, it is said, the Virgin Mary acted miraculously; she caused roses to grow in the desert soil, gathered roses in the Indian’s cloak, and gave them to Juan Diego as a proof of her presence. When Diego came with the bundle of roses before the archbishop the Virgin Mary miraculously appeared and the archbishop soon built the shrine in her behalf.

Researching the church documentation about the Virgin Mary’s appearance, Wolf has discovered that the Catholic Spanish establishment was very much aware of the syncretism that occurred between the goddess Tonantzin and the Virgin Mary. Two church officials, F. Bernardino de Sahagún and F. Martin de León, stated that on the hill which the common Mexican people address as Our Mother or Our Lady is actually the old goddess, Tonantzin. They even express their fears that this kind of mixing of the old goddess with the Virgin Mary might have some “satanic code” or the whole worshiping can actually be idolatrous for those who address the Virgin Mary as Tonanzin. Wolf presents an interesting quote by F. Jacinto de la Serna who stated discussing the pilgrimage to the Virgin Mary in this way “ . . . it is the purpose of the wicked to [worship] the goddess and not the Most Holy Virgin, or both together.”[[55]](#endnote-55)

The Mexican people didn’t consciously compare these two religious symbols and made a simple replacement as the result of their rational decision, but the long process of semiosis was involved in this substitution. Semiosis is a process of having a dynamic object as the signifier which significance is in correlation between the interpreter, its interpretation, and the possible modification of a dynamic object by the interpretation.

**6. Aesthetical Hermeneutics of Religious Experience**

The semiotic process is similar in its methodology to the process defined as the hermeneutic circle by Hans Georg Gadamer.[[56]](#endnote-56) Trying to find a new methodology for the Humanities and Social Sciences, Wilhelm Dilthey and H. G. Gadamer investigate how to explain why and how works of art, literature, mythologies, philosophies, religions, and of different cultural values persisted throughout time, and even are still of value in the modern world where science is the dominant tool for explaining reality. Gadamer asks the following questions: How is it possible that a modern reader or an intellectual can relate with the same passion to an ancient Greek tragedy? How is it possible, for example, that the text of Sophocles’s *Antigone* can be still understood and its meaning recovered but the audience does not live in the Athens of 5 B.C.E?

It can be easily recognized that the context of reading has drastically changed throughout the cultural and historical developments. While, in the Athens of the 5th century B.C.E. the tragedy had a great ritualistic character and was played on the behalf of the god of darkness, Dionysius, celebrating his “resurrection,” usually in early or mid April. The tragedy represented the great collective catharses which involved the whole community. The modern form, however, is reduced basically on the contact between a single person and the text (whether it is dramatized on the stage) stripped from its original mythological and ritual character. These generational, political, and cultural changes are called in the German tradition the “*zeitgeist*.”

According to Gadamer, it is amazing that the meaning of Antigone’s great moral action--choosing death in order to save the memory of her loving brother Polynices by giving him a proper burial and homage, and opposing the absolute rule of the king Creon--is still preserved in its original sense. How is it possible that this meaning is not lost throughout historical changes and translations of original Sophocles’ text? Wilhelm Dilthey and Hans Georg Gadamer have found an answer in the human ability to reconstruct the past involving the cultural and individual potentials in a sense to circle the experiential path that was given as an input in the original text. This means that every person who is capable of understanding the tragic event when read Sophocles’ *Antigone* has, on the objective level, enough and efficient information that is preserved in a proper translations, commentaries, and understanding of what was the Greek tragedy as the literary form, but also has freely open one’s self to become one with the characters and can experience the tragic event in the same way as the drama unfolds in the actions of the main protagonists.

In order to explain the horizon of understanding, Gadamer powerfully uses Schleirmacher’s description of the aesthetic experience that is similar to the process of divination by which “all individuality is a manifestation of universal life and hence everyone carries a tiny bit of everyone else within himself, so that divination is stimulated by comparison with oneself.”[[57]](#endnote-57) In this sense, the peak of the aesthetic experience is in the transformation of oneself into the aesthetic object, where the truth of this object becomes as well the truth of its observer, but both transcend this recognition of the universal human value as the act of collective consciousness that stands potentially open for the future. The hermeneutic circle is like the kaleidoscope of mirrors that unfolds one image that reenacts itself through time. In other words, one is able to grasp a meaning of *Antigone* if it is able to reenact the same moral feelings, doubts, and experiences, as the part of him/her, the tragedy of confronting rules where morality appears as the center of one’s autonomous acting. Gadamer would say that one transforms one’s self into the other.

To Gadamer, hermeneutics appears as the “art of understanding” that is circular. He even defines the hermeneutical rule as the “whole in terms of the detail and the detail in terms of whole.”[[58]](#endnote-58) It is similar to what M. Heidegger has defined as the hermeneutical circle that can be expressed in terms of “the most primordial kind of knowing,” where intuition such as fore-sight or fore-conception is in action.

The hermeneutic circle appears as a great methodology from the mid 20th century that has been able to explain how occurs the transformation of the aesthetical and moral potentials from the distant historical into a modern time.

In this sense, what is given in the example of the Virgin Mary of Guadalupe, when in the 16th and 17th centuries indigenous people from Mexico at the same time greeted the goddess Tonanzin and the Virgin Mary making the identification of the two female goddesses is not a simple translation of one symbol into the other, but it is a process of interpretation where two different traditions – the indigenous and the Christians – are becoming one in a sense that the meaning of the one, almost, divinely, becomes the other. Syncretism as blending of two different traditions is a powerful expression of the human ability to correlate two different cultures and their symbolic idioms interpreting both in a new form and a new experience.

The discovery of the aesthetic experience that has become a new salient point of modern philosophy from Kant to the post-modernist thought could be seen as crucial for the interpretation of the religious experience, but also for the movements that try to primarily concentrate around the value of personal religious experience, spiritual growth, and new interpretations of the traditional religious concepts. Movements that would imply redefinition of the old concepts or a search for a new spirituality are usually perceived as off-shoots of the mainstream religions such as religious syncretism, new religious movements, and the modern audience cults. The elitism and high training of the members of these groups often require the sophistication of the religious concepts, symbols, or unlimited religious objects such as deities, spirituality, or other intelligible forms. For instance, the religious training in the Wicca movement requires of the members a high level of study and intellectual training in a specific either pagan, some mystical, or ancient tradition that the group arranged by their interests is dedicated to. This intellectualism is then used for designing the rituals that would enhance the religious experience and achieve a full dedication of the member of the movement to the group and their practices.[[59]](#endnote-59) This new spirituality can be comprehended by circling a religious experience, similar as described in acquiring the aesthetic experience in modern hermeneutics. Religious experience, as C.G. Jung would define is indisputable, and represents the pivotal point for a person dedicated to a religious tradition. It requires of its members deep “divination” processes in which one’s individuality becomes one with the acquired religious object or power in order to transcend it in the future.[[60]](#endnote-60)

Kant was the first who defined the importance of an aesthetic experience in the discourse of modern philosophy in his book *Critique of Judgment*. As he defined, the real aesthetic object when it reaches its actualization through one’s experience, it escapes any utilization, interest, or even conceptualization biased on the schematism of reason. The aesthetic object becomes real through one’s experience demanding the normative validity. The individuality and extraordinarity of aesthetic sublimation is so important in the circling of the aesthetic judgment that one feels his/her objectivity is not questionable, but because the individuality is crucial in expressing one’s tastes, this supposable universality is only tentative and not real. In this sense, the aesthetic judgment is defined as “a free play between the imagination and understanding” where one becomes the other, and the other becomes the one, and both transcend a possible universality by opening a sensible meaning that transcend beyond the limits of time continuity.[[61]](#endnote-61)

 Eco acknowledges the importance of Kantian aesthetics and later hermeneutics, which both have led modern investigations from aesthetics and epistemology to redefine the object of knowledge. If the hermeneutic circle insists on the point that the understanding horizon of a true aesthetic object means for the subject to become one with its object in the act of his/her sublime experience, this does not mean that differentiation of the subject, and the object has become an invalid inquiry for sufficient understanding of the world or even applicable to the aesthetics.[[62]](#endnote-62) The point of their identification means that the aesthetical object can no longer be seen as a static object, let alone as only an object. The importance of the aesthetic object that unfolds itself through the free play of parts and the whole is in the reaching of the understanding that can be explained as the identification of the subject of knowledge and its object in experience, where this experience, then, in the breadth of life into the object and its intention becomes fulfilled action.

 In many of ways the dynamics of the aesthetic object with the underlying intention to integrate the subject of knowledge in a process of understanding is similar to the grasping of the knowledge about the highest spiritual objects of religion. The objects such as gods, god, the ultimate reality, angels, spirits, mandalas, and enormous range of other religious dynamic symbols are intentionally unlimited objects that engage the subject of cognition into the process which result is in the achievement of the sublimity of experience and transcendence. This kind of experience that is described as important for modern art in the aesthetics of the 19th and 20th century is present in religion from its beginnings. In the primary oral and basic traditions, rituals are still associated with the mystical and transient experiences.

For instance, in the Navajo culture, the mandalas are important. When the Navajo medicine man constructs with the colored sand the Creation image (a symbolic picture), it has the intentional healing purposes or it is strictly used for a ritual of the tribe, but for the public display no mandala is ever finished. The purpose of the mandala construction is to reenact the sacred powers of the Mother Earth and to apply this power to some purposes such as a healing ceremony. The mandala is to restore an “inner” lost balance that is believed to be expressed in illnesses. The one to whom the mandala is dedicated has to undergo through the transformation of consciousness and become one with the powers of the universe. The person that undergoes the ritual must be encircled by the sand image to regain the balance with the universe. C.G. Jung explains the purpose of the Navajo mandala as bringing “a sick person back into harmony with himself and with the cosmos.” [[63]](#endnote-63)

In analyzing the example of the Navajo mandala one can recognize that the Navajo people perceive the power of their mandala symbol as unlimited within their cultural experience, but they also set well the limits of interpretation that come, one might say, from their cultural code. In the New York museum of the Navajo, all mandalas are presented unfinished because the pure presentation of the mandala as an object without any healing purposes and engagement of real actors of the ritual can be considered “sacrilege” to the Navajo people.[[64]](#endnote-64) The point here is that every religious object that has the intention of the unlimited object also implies limitations that are crucial for its understanding and is associated with the cultural code.

**7. Cognitive and Aesthetic Aspects of the Dynamic Sign and Unlimited Semiosis**

The value of Eco’s interpretation of Peirce is in his focusing on the dynamic sings and unlimited semiosis and applying these concepts on the religious symbols and their historical interpretations or re-interpretations. Religion always develops its tradition through the dynamism of the signs, that are transformed into the symbols, and sometimes goes beyond the expected, into the unlimited signification process that is, for example, one of the chief characteristics of the mystical insights.

In summarizing this part of the research, once again, religion could be defined as an open system of signs that is originated in the cognitive ability of the human mind to become engaged in the process of an unlimited semiosis (un-ended signification processes). The unlimited semiosis denotes a cognitive ability of the mind to create the possible system of connections between all things, whether they are existent or not. This ongoing process of thought which can create the idea of arranged connections between all things is very much analogical to the ability of a traditional believer relating to the supreme idea existent in his/her religion that is traditionally known as the object of belief. This object of belief is defined usually as a superhuman/supernatural being or an ultimate reality, which, for different religions, is common to refer to as god, gods, could be also an all encompassing reality such as Brahman, consciousness of the world and supreme (Buddhahood), or creator (native peoples of Northern America or Africa). The semiotic theory defines the idea of this “absolute” as a dynamic object that is put in the process of unlimited semiosis. This ability of the human mind to project a supreme being (God), ultimate reality (Brahman, Buddahood), or the way of truth that reveals itself in the world (Tao), comes from a natural presupposition of our consciousness to project a connection between all things that are separated from the mind itself (thinking consciousness) in a way of purposive relationships. The unlimited semiosis process tends to outline the unified system in an ethical and aesthetical sense (theleology), which opens the meaningful solution for the existence of the self and the world, that is not, of course, a common ability of the actual natural world.

Besides this natural presupposition of the mind, there are also critical amounts of the cultural constraints that influence the process of thought and how a person reflects and outlines this unlimited semiosis. Accordingly, the Semiotic Theory of Religion interprets culture and the environment as the base for the interpretation of the unlimited semiosis. However, semiosis is a process that denotes the ability of the human mind, and, so, is, on the one hand, universal to all humanity, but, on the other hand, is very much the matter of a personal experience.

As a personal experience the process of unlimited semiosis reflects the tripartite structure: the appearance of a generic sign that represents the unity of all things, the referent who stands as the observer of the generic sign, and finally, the intepretant, who creatively interprets in a meaningful way the sign that transforms itself into the symbolic system of signification. The idea that the cognitive ability of the religious is in the interpretative strength of the mind, which connects the imaginative and real, the conceptualized and phenomenal, is very much an aesthetical ability, whose roots are in going beyond what is known and given. This level of semiosis represents the unique aspect of the human aesthetical potential. Of course, the cognitive aspect always lacks to fully comprehend the process of knowledge because it separates it from the social contextualization and interaction with the world. Very often the unlimited semiosis process is constrained by the social aspect of the religious and religious practices.

1. Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics,* (Trans. Wade Baskin, London: Fontana/Collins, 1974.) pp. 15-16. “It is possible to conceive of a science which studies the role of signs as part of social life. It would form part of social psychology, and hence of general psychology. We shall call it semiology (from the Greek *semeîon*, 'sign'). It would investigate the nature of signs and the laws governing them. Since it does not yet exist, one cannot say for certain that it will exist. But it has a right to exist, a place ready for it in advance. Linguistics is only one branch of this general science. The laws which semiology will discover will be laws applicable in linguistics, and linguistics will thus be assigned to a clearly defined place in the field of human knowledge.” [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Ibid. p. 68. For Saussure, language as a system of signs outlines “anthropoSemiotics” i.e., predominantly a Semiotics of culture. Unlike Morris or Peirce, Saussure takes out comparison with the human and animal worlds of communication, and he is not concern with a sign as a phenomena in the epistemological sense as it is Peirce. The arbitrariness of the sign is explained as the result of convention: “Signs that are wholly arbitrary realize better than the others the ideal of the semiological process.” [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Ibid. That a sign is a mental space is one of the most important ideas in Semiotics. Saussure explains a linguistic sign in the following way: “A linguistic sign is not a link between a thing and a name, but between a concept (signified) and a sound pattern (signifier). The sound patter is not actually a sound; for a sound is something physical. A sound patter is the hearer’s psychological impression of a sound, as given to him by the evidence of his senses. This sound pattern may be called a “material” element only in that is the representation of our sensory impressions. The sound pattern may thus be distinguished from the other element associated with it in a linguistic sign. This other element is generally of a more abstract kind: the concept. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. J. Alberto Coffa, *The Semantic Tradition from Kant to Carnap,* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Winfried Nöth, *Handbook of Semiotics*, (Bloomingon & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1995.) “Peirce defended a pansemiotic view of the universe. In his view, signs are not a class of phenomena besides other nonsemiotic objects: ‘The entire universe is perfused with signs, it is not composed, exclusively of signs (Ph. 5.448, fn.). Smiotics in this interpretation turns out to be a universal science….’ [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Umberto Eco, *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language,* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), p. 148. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Ibid. pp. 10, 11, 12. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Ibid. The fourth chapter called *Symbols* is the best part where Eco gives the differentiation of symbols on one that are metaphors or are engaged in the allegory. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. In the book by E. Thomas Lawson & Robert N. McCauley, *Rethinking Religion: Connecting Cognition and Culture*, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1990), Lawson defines religion in the following way: “For the purposes of theorizing we construe a religious system as a symbolic-cultural system of ritual acts accompanied by an extensive and largely shared conceptual scheme that includes culturally postulated superhuman agents. (….) That conceptual scheme can be exemplified in oral traditions, sacred texts, devotional materials, theological essays etc.” p. 5. Also, Pascal Boyer inspired by Lawson’s cognitive theory of religion discusses a problem of highly theological ideas that are often in opposition to the religious conceptual spontaneity in his book *The Naturalness of Religious Ideas: A Cognitive Theory of Religion*, (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1994). [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. For the interpretation of the story check Caroline Walker Bynum, *Metamorphosis and Identity,* (New York: Zone Book, 2005), pp. 15-36. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. The consequences of the Nag Hammadi discovery at the Jabal al-Tarif mountain where Muhammand Ali al-Samman discovered a jar filled with papyrus (scholars were able to identify more than fifty-two texts) and texts such as Gospel of Thomas, Gospel of Philip definitely changed the views on Early Christianity. The consequences of this discovery were described in details in Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels*, Vintage Books: A Division of Random House, INC., New York, 1989. In association with this discovery another problems are discussed such as the true biography and identity of Jesus. John Dominic Crossan in his two books *Jesus: A Revolution y Biography*, Harper Collins Publisher, San Francisco, 1994., and *Who Killed Jesus* Harper Collins Publisher, San Francisco ,1995., argues that Jesus presented in the Gospels’ and Paul’s writings if highly “theologized” and “mythologized” rather tan historicized. Crossan tries to apply the standards of the modern comparative anthropological research on Jesus, deconstructing the story presented in the Synoptic Gospels as the theological concepts rather than possible truth. Lynn Picknett and Clive Prince in their extraordinary eclectic work about the connection between the Priory of Sion and Early Christianity, *The Templar Revelation: Secret Guardians of the True Identity of Christ*, A Touchstone Book (Simon & Shuster), New York, 1997. pp. 303-324, give in the chapter fourteen “John Christ” the detailed overview of possible connections of John the Baptist with the Egyptian and Jewish mysticism and mystery cults.  [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Parousia is a term that denotes the Second Coming or appearance of Christ, his return to judge the world, punish sinners, and redeem those who are seved. The comes from the Greek, which in translation means “being with,” “being with presence.” See “Glossary of New Testament Terms and Concepts” in Stephen L. Harris, *The New Testament: A Student’s Introduction* (4th edition, McGraw Hill, International Edition, USA, 2002),p. 445. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Robert W. Funk, R.W. Hoover, The Jesus Seminar, *The Five Gospels*, (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1993), pp. 470-471. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. John Dominic Crossan in the Prologue of his book *Who Killed Jesus?* discusses the elements of prophecy historicized in a way that Jesus life is interpreted through the Jewish prophecy. This kind of methodology opens a critical question of the real mission of Jesus in his life-time. More than this, Crossan thinks that the purpose of applying prophecies to Jesus’ life was purposively done by the writers of Gospels to present Jewish establishment as “sinful,” money oriented, and opportunists—especially in the role of Judas Issacariot, which methodology has given in the recent history a possibility for using Gospels for the Anti-Semitic feelings. J.D. Crossan, *Who Killed Jesus: Exposing the Roots of Anti-Semitism in the Gospel Story of the Death of Jesus*, (Harper Collins Publishers, San Francisco, 1996) pp. 1-38. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Elaine Pagels, *Beyond Belief:* *The Secret Gospel of Thomas*, (New York: Random House, 2005). [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Stephen L. Harris, *The New Testament: A Student’s Introduction* (4th edition, McGraw Hill, International Edition, USA, 2002), pp. 244-255: “The tradition that Jesus reserved “secret” teachings for his innermost circle of disciples—information denied the general public who heard him speak exclusively in parables—is firmly embedded in the Synoptic Gospels. (…) That Jesus disclosed “secrets” or “mysteries” to specially privileged intimates was typical of philosophers and other teachers in the ancient world.” [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Ibid. p. 245: “Upon rising form the tomb, “the young men looked at Jesus, loved him, and began to beg to be with him (Secret Mark vs. 8). Six days later, Jesus summons the young man, “dressed only in a linen cloth,” to (spend) the night with him,” during which Jesus “taught him the mystery of God’s domain”….) [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Ibid. pp. 246-248. The Infancy Gospel of Thomas is presented in details in Stephen L. Harris chapter “The Other Gospels,” where he also discussed about the Infancy Gospel of James. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Howard Clark Kee, E. Albu, C. Lindberg, J. W. Frost, D. L. Robert, (ed.), *Christianity: A Social and Cultural History* (second ed., Prentice Hall: Upper Saddle River, New York, 19980, pp. 92- 95, text “Which are the Authoritative Scriptures?” [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Michael Baigent, *The Jesus Papers: Exposing the Greatest Cover-Up in History ,*(San Francisco: Harper Collins Publishers, 2006), pp. 237-239. Baigent talks about the importance of Gospel of Thomas and that probably this Gospel should be included in the New Testament texts, as Harvard scholar Helmut Koester argued too. The new discovery shows that Gospel of Thomas was the result of Egyptian Christianity, so that, as Baigent states, (p. 238) “At Easter in A.D. 367. Athanasius, Bishop of Alexandria, declared that all noncanonical books in Egypt should be destroyed,” therefore Gospel of Thomas didn’t make it to the Christian canon. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Stephen L. Harris, *The New Testament: A Student’s Introduction* (4th edition), McGraw Hill, International Edition, USA, 2002., p 50, Harris gives a detailed parallels between Dionysus and Jesus of Nazareth (Box 3.2). [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. Ibid. pp. 40-55. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. <http://www.pantheon.org/articles/e/eleusis.html>, (accessed June 5, 2006). [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. Grant, F.C., ed. *Hellenistic Religion: The Age of Syncretism*, (Indianapolis, Ind.: Bobbs-Merrill, 1953), a collection of Greco-Roman religious writing. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. Stephen L. Harris, *The New Testament: A Student’s Introduction* (4th edition), McGraw Hill, International, USA, 2003., pp. 80-85. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. Wilson, A. N., *Jesus,* Sinclair-Stevenson, London, 1992., p. 102: “…John the Baptist religion (and we know there was one) had become the dominant cult of the Mediterranean rather than the Jesus religion…” [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. Burton L. Mack, *The Lost Gospel: The Book of Q & Christian Origins*, (San Francisco: Harper Collins Publisher, 1993), p. 41. “Biblical scholar always assume a community behind their texts. And New Testament scholars have always thought that the earliest followers of Jesus immediately formed a Christian congregation. That is what Luke reports, and Matthew and John. Mark’s ending seems to allow for it. And Paul’s letter to the Galatians tells us that Cephas and James were residing in Jerusalem as “pillars” of some group of Jesus people in the mid 50s C.E. It is the importance of Jesus was his role in starting the Christian religion, or so the reasoning has been, the first followers must have been Christians. It may not have been easy to start a new religion with fishermen and such, especially when the large-scale plan required coming to see Jesus was the Christ who came to transform the world by dying for it.” [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. Rodny Stark, *The Rise of Christianity,* (San Francisco: Harper Collins Publishers, 1997); John Dominic Crossan, *Who Killed Jesus: Exposing the Roots of Anti-Semitism in the Gospel Story of the Death of Jesus*, (San Francisco: Harper Collins Publishers, 1996). [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. Michael Baigent, Richard Leigh, Henry Lincoln, *Holy Blood, Holy Grail*, A Dell Book, New York, 1983. pp. 11-269. They constructed an idea that the Priory of Sion is a secret society in Europe, established back in 1090 and the purpose of the society is to restore the Merovingian dynasty. Massimo Introvigin in his book *Beyond Da Vinci Code* states that The Priory of Sion is an esoteric order established in France much later in 1956 by Pierre Plantard, but he also shows that Plantard claimed their connections with the old society. There is also a theory by Robert Anton Wilson that Priory of Sion is a Hoax invented by surrealists in France. [http://wwwAmuseyourself.com/goodreads/leonardodavicni](http://wwwamuseyourself.com/goodreads/leonardodavicni) (accessed June 2, 2006). [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. Lynn Picknett, *Mary Magdalene*, Carroll & Graf Publishers, New York, 2004.pp. 47-71, Picknett discusses how Mary Magdalene was misrepresented by the Gospel’s writers, and that there are strong possibilities that she was Jesus’ disciple, but also she was associated with the mystery cult through which Jesus probably experienced the initiation into the Divine Love. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. Ibid. p.191. “While only the more extreme skeptics would deny that miracles do occasionally happen—although, it must be said, rarely—even many of the relatively unsophisticated people of the first century Roman Empire had their dobuts about the alleged powers of Jesus Christ. Like the Jewish Talmud, the Babylonian Talmud describes him unambiguously as an ‘Egyptian sorcerer’ who was ‘to be stoned because he practiced magic and incited Jews to worship alien gods and as a false prophet, led Israel astray.’ [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. Lynn Picknett & Clive Prince, *The Templar Revelation: Secret Guardians of the True Identity of Christ*, A Touchstone Book: Simon & Shuster, New York, 1997, chapter 14 “John Christ,” pp. 303-324. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. Daniel C. Scavone, The Book Review: “The Turin Shroud: In Whose Image?”<http://www.shroud.com/scavone.htm> (accessed June 6, 2006). [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Priory\_of\_Sion pp. 1-10. [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. Charles S. Peirce (ed. Philip P. Wiener), *Selected Writings*, New York: Dower Publications, INC, 1958. pp. 91-113 in the text “The Fixation of Belief.” [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. Charles S. Peirce (ed. Philip P. Wiener), *Selected Writings*, (New York: Dower Publications, INC, 1958). One of the most interesting texts in this collection is Peirce’s criticism on David Hume’s argument against miracles. See. pp. 289-321. [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
37. David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature,* ed. L.A. Selby-Bigge, (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press), 1888. p. 252: “The mind is a kind of theatre, where several perceptions successively make their appearance; pass, re-pass, glide away, and mingle in an infinite variety of postures and situations. There is properly no simplicity in it at any one time, nor identity in different; whatever natural propensity we may have to imagine that simplicity and identity.” [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
38. Ibid, p. 252 “For my part, when I enter most intimately in what I call myself, I always stumble on some particular perception or other, of heat or cold, light or shade, love or hatred, pain or pleasure. I never can catch myself at any time without a perception. When my perceptions are remov’d for any time, as by a sound sleep; so long am I insensible of myself, and may truly be said not to exist.” [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
39. David Hume, *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Eric Stainberg*,*Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 1977., pp. 15-16: “All the objects of human reason or enquiry may naturally be divided into two kinds, to wit, Relations of Ideas and Matter of Fact. Of the first kind are the sciences of Geometry, Algebra, and Arithmetic, and in short every affirmation which is either intuitively or demonstratively certain. (…..) Matters of Fact, which are the second objects of human reason, are not ascertained in the same manner; nor is our evidence of their truth, however great, of a like nature with the foregoing. The contrary of every matter of fact is till possible; because it can never imply a contradiction, and is conceived by the mind with the same facility and distinctness, as if ever so conformable to reality.”  [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
40. Ibid. p. 16 “That the sun will not rise to-morrow is no less intelligible a proposition, and implies no more contradiction, than the affirmation, that it will rise. We should in vain, therefore, attempt to demonstrate its falsehood. Were it demonstratively false, it would imply a contradiction, and could never be distinctly conceived by the mind.” [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
41. Charles S. Peirce, *Selected Writings,* ed. Philip P. Wiener, (New York: Dover Publications, INC., 1958). p. 310: “The objection to Hume’s conception of a Law of Nature is that it supposes the universe to be utterly unintelligible, while, in truth, the only warrant for an hypothesis must be that it renders phenomena intelligible. The Humists are very fond of representing their conceptions of a law of nature as a scientific result; but unfortunately metaphysics has not yet reached the scientific stage, and when it shall at length be so far matured, every indication today is that it will be a metaphysics, as far as possible from this fourteenth-century Ockhamism.” [↑](#endnote-ref-41)
42. Ibid. p. 311 ‘The treatises on probabilities, which are written exclusively in the interest of the mathematical developments, and are weak upon their logical side, treat testimonies as “evidences” to be balanced along with and against one another. That is to say, they think that the character of a witness, etc., will in itself afford an absolute assurance that he will falsify just once in so often, neither more nor less. This seems to me absurd. ….. I may mention, however, among the objections t that method, that it confounds two totally different things; objective probabilities, which are statistical facts, such as form the basis of the insurance business; and subjective probabilities, or likelihoods, which are nothing more than the expression of our preconceived notions.” [↑](#endnote-ref-42)
43. James Hoopes, *Peirce on Signs,* (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1991). See “How to Make Our Ideas Clear?” p. 166. [↑](#endnote-ref-43)
44. Ibid, p. 256 [↑](#endnote-ref-44)
45. Ibid p. 107: “Why should we not attain the desired end, by talking as answer to a question any we may fancy, and constantly reiterating it to ourselves, dwelling on all which may conduce to that belief, and learning to turn with contempt and hatred from anything that might disturb it?” [↑](#endnote-ref-45)
46. Ibid. p. 158 [↑](#endnote-ref-46)
47. Ibid. “How to Make Our Ideas Clear?” p. 166: “The essence of belief is the establishment of a habit, and different beliefs are distinguished by the different modes of action to which they give rise.” [↑](#endnote-ref-47)
48. Ibid. p.156-157. [↑](#endnote-ref-48)
49. Umberto Eco, *Serendipities: Language & Lunacy,* Trans. William Weaver, (San Diego, New York, London: A harvest Book Harcourt Brace & Company 1998). [↑](#endnote-ref-49)
50. Ibid. pp.1-23. [↑](#endnote-ref-50)
51. Umberto Eco, *Semiotics and Philosophy of Language*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984. pp. 146-147. [↑](#endnote-ref-51)
52. <http://www.sacredheart.com/SaintMargaretMaryAlacoque.htm> Biography of Saint Margaret Mary Alacoque, (accessed May 05, 2005). [↑](#endnote-ref-52)
53. <http://www.ewtn.com/library/ENCYC/P12HAURI.HTM> (accessed May 25, 2005), see: *Haurietis Aquas (On Devotion to The Sacred Heart).* Pope’s Pius XII encyclical promulgated on May 15, 1956. See number 14 part of the Encyclical. [↑](#endnote-ref-53)
54. Ibid. p. 1 [↑](#endnote-ref-54)
55. Eric R. Wolf, “The Virgin of Guadalupe: a Mexican National Symbol” in David Hicks (ed.), *Ritual and Belief: Readings in the Anthropology of Religion*, (International Edition: McGraw Hill, second edition, 2002), pp. 354-359. [↑](#endnote-ref-55)
56. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, transl. Garrett Barden and John Cumming, (New York: The Seabury Press 1975). [↑](#endnote-ref-56)
57. Ibid. p.167. [↑](#endnote-ref-57)
58. Ibid. pp. 235-236. [↑](#endnote-ref-58)
59. Thea Sabin, *Fundamentals of Philosophy & Practice: Wicca for Beginners,* (Woodbury, Minnesota: Llewellyn Publications, 2006). [↑](#endnote-ref-59)
60. Carl G. Jung, “The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious” in *The Collected Works of C.G. Jung.* (New Jersey:Princeton University Press, 2nd ed. 1968), pp. 387-90. [↑](#endnote-ref-60)
61. Immanuel Kant, “The Judgment of Beautiful, The Judgment of Sublime” in <http://www.iep.utm.edu/k/kantaest.htm> (accessed March 18, 2004). [↑](#endnote-ref-61)
62. Umberto Eco, *Kant and the Platypus: Essays on Language and Cognition*, transl. Alastair McEwen, (New York, Sand Diego: Harcourt Brace & Company, London, 2000), p. 35 “It tells us (the hermeneutics) that precisely by destroying our consolidated certainties, by reminding us to consider things from an unusual point of view, by inviting us to submit to the encounter with the concrete and to the impact with an individual in which the fragile framework of our universals crumbles. Through this continuous reinvention of language, the Poets are inviting us to take up again the task of questioning and reconstructing the World and the horizon of the entities in which we calmly and continuously thought we lived, without anxieties, without reservations, without any further reappearance (as Peirce would have put it) of curious facts that cannot be ascribed to known laws. In this case the experience of art is not something radically different from the experience of talking about Something, in philosophy, in science, in everyday discourse.” [↑](#endnote-ref-62)
63. Carl G. Jung & M. L. von Franz (ed.), *Man and His Symbols*, Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company Inc, 1964. p. 213. [↑](#endnote-ref-63)
64. See basic description of the Navajo healing mandalas. <http://www.navajo-coop.org/sandpaintings.htm> (accessed March 23, 2004). [↑](#endnote-ref-64)