

Excerpts from Reviews of Robert A. Yelle's Books

Praise for *The Language of Disenchantment* (Oxford University Press, 2013):

“Yelle's scholarship is impeccable and nearly exhaustive—patently first-rate. The writing is precise, clear, and rich. Most importantly, the historical thesis about the theological roots of disenchantment and the Christian origins of modernity is, in my opinion, unanswerable. The book is profound and makes a very real and very important contribution to the fields of intellectual history, history of religions, Indian history, the history of Christianity, the history of the study of religion, and, perhaps most interesting of all, the philosophy of language.”

--Jeffrey J. Kripal, Rice University

“Highly creative... Yelle directly challenges modern secularists who claim that modernity represents the triumph of rationality over religious superstition and of supposedly neutral, value-free judgment over prejudice... Yelle has written a fascinating, if also controversial, book, one that has important things to say to a wide number of disciplines. He provides insightful commentary on everything from religious studies, to Indian religious, colonial, and legal history, to the history of Christian missions and Christian-Hindu relations, not to mention biblical interpretation.”

--Brian Stanley, Edinburgh University, *Marginalia Review of Books*

“Yelle's work on British critiques of South Asian mythological, ritual, linguistic, and legal traditions offer new insights on modernity, secularization, religious literalism, and colonialism.”

--Christian Peterson, *New Books in Religion*

“Theoretically rich and provocative...will command a place on reading lists of South Asian history seminars for generations to come. ... Yelle offers an excellent account of how Protestant literalism in the guise of attacks on Indian religions by Christians and Orientalists alike actually derives from older polemics aimed at, in earlier guises, Jews and Catholics, and then neatly reappearing in colonial India. This allows him to argue that the disenchantment Weber famously articulated actually has, like Orientalism and secularism, theological roots in the Christian world. ... Yelle's research is meticulously documented and presented. ...”

--Neilesh Bose, University of British Columbia, *Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History*

“This is a careful work of intellectual history based on extensive reading and profound knowledge. A vast canvas is mastered by the author, apparently with effortless ease. The coverage ranges from Christianity to Hinduism and from myth and idolatry to iconoclasm and science. ... Yelle's thesis is that the history of Protestantism must be studied much more deeply than has been done until now in order better to understand the meaning of British colonial discourse in India and the contingent reforms implemented there.”

--A. V. M. Horton, *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*

“Yelle...aims throughout his book...to destabilize the myth of religious neutrality that fuels the illusion of a secular modernity. In this book, the British engagement with colonial India provides a robust case study for a more general inquiry into modernity, secularity, and ‘the roots of modern exceptionalism and disenchantment.’ ... Yelle is able to ambitiously engage with the history of colonialism in a way that is both unique and engaging--through his analyses, he is able to add a new and valuable theological dimension to the conversation about India's engagement with British colonial powers. ... Yelle has written a book that effectively contributes to the fields of India Studies, Postcolonial Studies, and Hindu-Christian Studies. Yelle is successfully able to debunk claims to the universality of Western reason as produced by Protestant, post-Reformation thought. Though focused on the colonial encounter in India, this book is ultimately about a broader issue regarding modernity: that the myth of disenchantment that is held so dear in modern societies, is one that must be questioned and challenged. Yelle concludes that by continuing to expose the origins of the myth of disenchantment-- as he has done in this book--we are able to broaden our awareness about the impact of this mode of thinking and its pervasiveness in our quest for modernity.”

--Roselle Gonsalves, University of Calgary, *Journal of Hindu-Christian Studies*

“The exactness of the present volume’s title belies its successful demonstration of a much larger claim: that British colonialism in India was a profoundly protestant project. ... Yelle argues that Weber’s theory of disenchantment reveals the inadequacies of Said’s overly secular rendering of Orientalism. ... The observation that protestant anti-Catholicism informed British colonial critiques of India is by no means new. Yelle’s achievement lies in how he demonstrates [this] through detailed use of a range of sources from protestant theology, the Hindu reform movements and colonial debates. ... It is certainly the case that the intellectual history of British India has not given the same attention to the protestant roots of secular governmental enterprises as its metropolitan counterpart. Yelle has produced a densely packed, highly nuanced argument. The richness and range of examples will add greatly to our understanding of the protestant dimensions of British India and give new vigour to the enduring debate about colonialism and modernity.”

--Jack Harrington, *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*

“Yelle...trac[es] some of the ways in which ‘colonial-era scholarship and rule effectively transferred from Europe to India a hermeneutic that proclaimed itself secular and rational yet whose roots lay in key themes from Europe’s Judaeo-Christian heritage, from the writings of St. Paul through to the Reformation. ... Yelle’s scholarship stretches across colonial encounters with Hindu myth, Indian languages and the practice of using mantras... and is intended to take forward arguments made by Max Weber and developed by the likes of Talal Asad about the Protestant Christian roots of ‘disenchantment’, modernity and the religious-secular dichotomy. ... The result is a highly readable account... Yelle offers the sort of balance and clarity with which postcolonial writing has not always been synonymous....”

--Christopher Harding, University of Edinburgh, *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*

“*The Language of Disenchantment*...is a rich contribution to scholarship on the growth and globalization of Christian language ideology. Yelle, an historian of religion, accomplishes two principal aims in his book. On a smaller (but still very large) scale, he effectively shows how various British colonial legal and religious projects in India were underpinned by Christian, specifically Protestant, language ideologies. More broadly, he presents a well-supported argument, following in the footsteps of Max Weber, that ‘what we think of as modern, secular rationality is actually an inheritance from and a transformation of Christian soteriology’...At the heart of both the universal language schemes and British colonial codification projects, Yelle contends, was a Protestant ethic that locates religious authority in texts as well as a particularly Christian analogy between monotheism and monolingualism. ... [I]n pointing out the Christian roots of secularization, Yelle...demonstrate[s] that ‘what we call secularization appears in some cases to represent the process by which a particular religion has attempted to transcend its own past and limits.’”

--Adam Harr, St. Lawrence University, *Reviews in Anthropology*

Praise for *Semiotics of Religion* (Bloomsbury, 2013):

“This book is vast in scope, deep in implications, and admirably clear and forthright in exposition. The study of religion has needed a work of this kind, which brings together several research traditions and pushes the resulting synthesis in new directions. The result is an agenda-setting project of huge ambition.”

-- Webb Keane, University of Michigan

“*Semiotics of Religion* displays sensational semiotic sensitivity in analyzing the practical poetics of performance - the 'pragmatics' of performativity - of various expressions of the religious life. From this perspective and with great erudition, Yelle then engages the four-hundred-year-long European Enlightenment drive both stipulatively and interpretatively to 'semanticize' religious practice - as also language itself - in an ideological project of containment that has been central to institutionalizing 'disenchanted modernity.' In this enchanting book Yelle demonstrates a more inclusive semiotics of religion.”

-- Michael Silverstein, University of Chicago

“A deep and engaging book sure to pique the interests of researchers in both semiotics and religion. Summing Up: Highly recommended. Graduate students, faculty.”

-- J. L. Best, St. Thomas University, *CHOICE*

“As Robert Yelle compellingly argues in his compact, meaty monograph, a semiotic approach to religion (magic, ritual, myth) requires attention to both semiotic form and semiotic ideology--the poetics of rhyme and repetition, but equally the underlying nominalist ideology that naming invokes the ghost. ... Yelle’s is a book about ritual performativity and religious textual hermeneutics by way of an intellectual history of semiotic theory itself. ...the cogent ways in which he pulls together countless familiar piecemeal insights and well-known cases and debates in the anthropology of religion make his book worthwhile reading for linguistic anthropologists. ...[another] goal is to characterize modernity and in particular, the ‘semiotic dimensions of the historical process known as secularization’...which he argues is best characterized as a series of efforts to constrain and sequester magical, poetic, and highly symbolic discourse practices through various language purification movements associated not only with Enlightenment science, but other projects as diverse as legal codification and Protestant literalism, iconoclasm, and ‘plain speech.’ ... In sum, this groundbreaking interdisciplinary work provides a compelling argument for the tools of our trade by someone firmly situated in a different discipline.”

--Kristina Wirtz, Western Michigan University, *Linguistic Anthropology*

“Yelle argues that semiotic ideologies present in religious phenomena function rhetorically, that is, religious practitioners have a reflexive awareness of the materiality of language and use this awareness to reinforce the impression of the efficacy of ritual practice. ...Thus, ritual practice must be understood not simply semantically but also rhetorically. Yelle argues that semiotics, because it takes in the entire system of meaning making, ought to play a more central role in contemporary scholarship on religious practice. ... Yelle makes a valuable contribution to the study of ‘semiotic ideology’ in his [earlier] book, but in the current book he suggests a more radical reorientation for the study of religious phenomena that shifts focus from attempts to uncover the underlying cosmology of religious and magical rituals--that is, the particular ‘semantic or symbolic’ meaning of such practices--to an approach that gives closer attention to the semiotics of ritual repetition and form. ...If we are to take seriously the notion that religious phenomena can be understood as rhetorical, Yelle suggests, then we must also understand the specific ‘semiotic ideologies’ of the cultures that produce these phenomena. ... Yelle’s willingness...to take religious discourse on its own terms as well as his explanations of the complex language ideologies at work in South Asian religious ritual and practice provide a valuable contribution to both the study of language and the study of religion.”

--Meghan O’Keefe, University of California, Davis, *Language in Society*

“This important work takes up the almost forgotten task of advancing the study of religion to a place of deeper comprehension in which the tasks of comparison and broad categorical analysis are possible. The means of advance, as the title indicates, is semiotics... [T]his [is a] carefully plotted argument, making *Semiotics of Religion* a highly recommended work of theory and method.”

--Brian Collins, *Religious Studies Review*

From the book review symposium in *Religion* 44: 1 (2014): 84-147:

“Students of semiotics, semiotic anthropology, cultural anthropology, religious studies, anthropology of religion, and especially semiotics of religion, have long waited for a publication of this kind. Despite the somewhat too-broad title, *Semiotics of Religion* is not a survey (although the first chapter offers a concise but extremely competent introduction to this disciplinary field); its highest merit is rather that of revitalizing the domain of semiotics, and in particular that of the semiotics of religion, with new themes, insights, sensibility and, last but not least, a new style. ... Another merit of Yelle’s book, perhaps the greatest one, is to demonstrate with lucidity and efficacy that the semiotic ideologies that underpin religious traditions did not vanish in the era of supposed secularization but mutated, instead, into often neglected aspects of secular, modern, and even post-modern semiotic ideologies.”

--Massimo Leone, University of Turin

“Yelle’s book is broad in scope and ambitious. ... According to Yelle’s compelling argument, religions develop their own poetics that promote the use of signs and languages as non-arbitrary and motivated entities; as such, religious uses are related to poetry and performance, rather than history or philosophy. Non-arbitrary signs are employed as endowed with special performative powers, which in turns opens up new ways to understand how religious texts and practices are deemed to be efficacious on the one hand, and new approaches to the issue of religious agency on the other. ... Yelle makes the bold (but

convincing) argument that the particular religious attitude toward the Bible known as 'Protestant literalism' was a semiotic ideology in itself (a different way to deal with signs and texts); it involved a peculiar understanding of the sacred (and the divinity) and the ways in which it manifested itself in the world and the modes in which it could (or could not) be represented. ... Yelle's book is a landmark in semiotics and religious studies, and will be the basis of many research developments for several years"

--Fabio Rambelli, University of California at Santa Barbara

"The symbol, index, and icon sign-functions of Peirce's theorizing are drawn on by Yelle in order to think about magic, ritual, dietary laws and secularism, and systems of belief and practice. His extremely interesting engagement with ritual language with regard to magic in particular provides a different reading of magic, one that takes for granted its rationality and takes seriously its discursive poetics as an aspect of its efficacy and not an aspect of its being 'science gone wrong.' In this kind of approach, Yelle provides a fresh and insightful reading of magic, something quite unique in the study of systems of belief and practice."

--Darlene Juschka, University of Saskatchewan

"This is precisely what Yelle does and that is the great merit of his volume: he demonstrates how certain (chosen) events in history are semiotically, and thus socially and culturally, constructed. Examples are 'fictitious etymologizing in Hinduism,' 'the Puritan critique of vain repetitions in prayer,' 'the Protestant repudiation of ritual' ... and 'Deist polemics against the ceremonial laws of the Jews.' These topics are treated in such a manner that their ostensible specificity is used to trace more general and significant issues concerning signification, communication, ideology, and agency."

--Jeppe Sinding Jensen, Aarhus University

"Robert A. Yelle's *Semiotics of Religion* lays important groundwork for a revival of semiotics in the study of religion. In an admirably clear and straightforward manner, he examines a number of semiotic ideologies and their implications for ritual actions and historical interpretation. ... At the core of Yelle's investigation lies the exclusion of certain modes of signification from the rational, true, or valid. This exclusion, as he shows, has been progressive in the West: beginning with the Platonic rejection of poetry, we later see in Reformation literalism an attack on all but 'plain speech.' Yelle argues that the ongoing trajectory in question, for him culminating in Saussure's structural linguistics, ends up locating 'magic' and 'ritual' – and eventually 'religion' – in a segregated space of irrationality, where it can be questioned and analyzed but never taken seriously. ... Yelle's account of Protestant literalism, with its entailments especially in the sphere of law, is remarkably clear and to the point. Despite an inordinately large corpus of material to grapple with, Yelle succeeds admirably in articulating the implications of 'plain speech' – and the rejection of 'vain repetitions' – within the 16th- and 17th-century moment."

--Christopher Lehigh, Boston University

Praise for *Explaining Mantras* (Routledge, 2003):

"Robert Yelle . . . in his short but ambitious monograph . . . starts from the relatively specialized issue of the mantra and expands to address theoretical issues of interest across multiple academic disciplines. . . . Yelle is interested in explaining the motivational force of ritual utterances, and he argues, convincingly, that the poetic structure of these utterances is deployed in order to create an illusion of correspondence between language and reality . . . He makes this case in the context of Tantric mantras by showing how . . . mantras replicate the threefold cosmic processes of creation, stabilization, and dissolution, which are central features of the cosmologies that underlie these traditions. . . . Yelle concludes with a call for a semiotic approach in the discipline of religious studies. . . . [H]is call is provocative and worthy of serious consideration."

--David Gray, Santa Clara University, *Journal of Religion*