

Review of Peter Ochs, *Religion without Violence: The Practice and Philosophy of Scriptural Reasoning*. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2019. 224 pp. \$29.00.

Jeremy Sorgen
University of Virginia

“This is a book about how to teach and learn the practice and theory of Scriptural Reasoning (SR).” With these words *Religion without Violence* modestly begins. I say “modest,” first, because readers can expect quite a bit more than a set of reflections on what Peter Ochs, one of SR’s founding members, has gleaned about teaching and learning SR through 25 years of fellowship and practice. As the introduction outlines in some detail, SR itself is “polyvalent” (to use Ochs’ term of choice). It grounds in-class and co-curricular practices of intertextual learning and interreligious dialogue, acting as a prototypical setting for peacebuilding in world regions experiencing moderate conflict. The second reason I say “modest” is because the story that unfolds in these short but densely packed pages is interspersed with careful, often technical, reflections on the *limits* of this practice. Articulating these limits is a primary way in which Ochs pushes back on the grandiosity of typically modern practices of reasoning, which overgeneralize their claims (often to the point of “universality”) by not displaying their interpretive conditions. Hence, while offering no silver bullet or panacea, his exposition of this modest and methodical approach to peacebuilding offers a (perhaps less modest) “glimpse” of SR’s largely untapped and transformative potential.¹

In this review, I limit myself to Ochs’ reflections on the logic of SR and its application to peacebuilding beyond the Scriptural Reasoning table. This is, for one, the aspect of his new book that I find most exciting. Second, I expect that many readers familiar with the practice of SR will nevertheless be unfamiliar with discussions of its underlying logic. They are therefore positioned to benefit from his reflections on SR’s semiotic roots and hermeneutic consequences. Third, I am writing for those beyond the SR community who have asked me, somewhat perplexed, to explain what Peter Ochs does. Of course, what he “does” is first and foremost a practice. As an invitation to read his own words about this practice, however, I offer a modest sample of themes addressed. I would also like to say upfront that I think Ochs has rendered a great service to those within and beyond the SR community by offering this lucid account of SR’s grounding logic and intimating the earthly practices to which it might yet lead.

Following the introduction, Ochs alternates between chapters that focus on the practice of SR and chapters with a more theoretical focus. Chapters two and four deal with practices of reading and teaching SR, respectively. Chapters three and five offer, by turns, a technical account of SR’s historical and semiotic roots (from Augustine to C.S. Peirce and John Deely) and then reflection on SR’s epistemological conceit (which Ochs places in the interstices of Cartesian certainty and postmodern relativism/skepticism as a practice of “knowing enough”). Chapter six, half practical and half theoretical, completes the study with a foray into Ochs’ work, since 2010, on adapting the logic of SR for the purposes of peacebuilding.

¹ “SR’s collaborative engagements...serve as an eschatological or at least hopeful sign: a glimpse of inter-Abrahamic (or also interreligious) engagement without enmity or violent conflict” (30).

The movement between practice and theory is fitting, since “SR did not develop top-down from some initial theory to a set of practical applications” but “bottom-up from practice to theory to practice, through a series of trials and errors” (2). The practical origins of SR are key for the theoretical practices that follow, since theory, when it acknowledges its origins, is connected to its normative purposes and proper strategies of repair. This brings us back to the issue of limits in the non-pejorative sense I give it here. In the practice-oriented chapters, Ochs displays what it means to reason within these practical constraints. Introducing his own knowledge as irreducibly practical—“knowledge that an experienced practitioner has gained” (24)—as well as specific to his own background and experiences – “one insider’s view of SR” (25)—Ochs imposes limits to the claims he will subsequently make. This does not mean that his claims are merely personal or “subjective,” but that they are appropriately generalized with respect to the reasoner who speaks them.² Soon, I shall discuss how exposing what Ochs calls the “interpretant” enables reasoners to appropriately generalize their claims. For now, I aim to show how Ochs, in the practice-oriented chapters, successfully models the forms of reasoning that he explicates in the theoretical chapters that follow. Other examples are his use of phrases with the form “I find it helpful to think of x in terms of y” and his clarifications when he is arguing, hypothesizing, speculating, imagining, or defining. In these ways, he limits his claims by naming the intentional modes in which he speaks them. This ability to embed his logic into his grammar is itself an instructive exercise in how to think and speak within self-imposed limits. The incredible care with which Ochs attends to language displays his sense that words, as elements of divine speech (*dibburot hashem*), manifest untold power in the world. He thereby models imposing proper limits to our claims as a practice of self-limiting and also as a precursor to building peace.

To understand the connection Ochs finds between errant speech and violence, on the one hand, and self-limiting and peace, on the other, it is helpful to situate SR in the broader tradition of American pragmatism and to see what Ochs does with that tradition. Peirce, as Ochs reads him, developed pragmatism to repair logical errors in modern academic inquiry. Tendencies to neglect the social context, reparative intent, and practical consequences of specialized inquiry severs the academy from its social milieu and civilizational function with unintentionally damaging results. In chapter three, Ochs offers a brief genealogy of Peirce’s repair of Cartesian logic as well as its antecedents in Augustine. While the early Peirce made Cartesian-like errors by taking (probable, three-valued) reasonings as (certain, two-valued) claims, the later Peirce developed his semiotics as a way to diagram and repair such claims. In its simplest form, this probabilistic logic diagrams a claim as a three-valued relation among a sign, object, and interpretant, where signs acquire their “sense” or meaning with respect to some context or condition. A typically modern claim assumes self-sufficient reason rather than a social/language group as its interpretant, thus generalizing the claim beyond its proper context. Overgeneralized claims have a tendency to disrupt processes of semiosis integral to healthy group dynamics. Introduced as a wholesale program—as it was in colonial projects and is today in “re-education” campaigns and transnational development work—overgeneralized modern logics can positively

² Ochs situates this study as follows: “*This book* records an activity of inquiry that I, its author, pursue as a member of the Societies for Scriptural Reasoning (SSR) and (Jewish) Textual Reasoning and as a participant in the philosophic tradition of American pragmatism” (57).

interfere with civilizational processes of learning and repair. Ochs' book does not focus on the disorienting impact of universalizing discourse.³ I highlight the political implications in order to draw connections between what students are learning in the classroom and what they go on to do in the world. Ochs, more rhetorically modest, focuses on Peirce's logic of repair, which sought to restore modern (Cartesian) forms of (academic) reasoning, even as Ochs extends this semiotic to include Scriptures as the ultimate (civilizational) sources of pragmatic repair.

What does this logic mean for the practice of SR? While Scriptural Reasoners are limited in one sense (their claims are interpreted relative to their speech community), in another sense they are liberated to be their fullest selves. Whereas modern claims assimilate reasonings to a universal standard—casting a shadow over communal reasoning that fails to conform to this standard or squeezing different communities into a “thin” space of overlapping reason—displaying the interpretant of reasoning allows reasoners, in Ochs' words, to turn contradictions into contraries (38). Different reasonings are understood as contrary interpretive tendencies. Unlike the reaction to modernity that withdraws into discrete practices of tradition-based reasoning, this approach opens onto a “third context” or “third space” for reasoning across difference (23). By deflating disagreements among the plurality of reasoners as forms of reasonable difference, SR turns what are sometimes grounds for tension into grounds for non-conflictual discussion and often joyful discovery. Speaking freely from within the limits of their speech communities, Scriptural Reasoners find that they are able to continue reasoning across traditions from their deepest (Scriptural) sources. Evoking the warmth of home, Ochs calls this deep reasoning across difference “hearth-to-hearth” (18).

Over the past decade, Ochs and his team of researchers at the University of Virginia have taken the logic of SR beyond the SR table and into the field of peacebuilding. Ochs supplies a diagnostic tool to peacekeepers, adapting this logic (and clarifying it semiotically) as an easy-to-use heuristic for measuring the behavioral tendencies of one social group toward another in terms of their linguistic flexibility (where low flexibility indexes a propensity for violence). Then, adapting SR for this novel application, he suggests steps by which peacekeepers might engage non-violent parties in non-conflictual debate and negotiation. As in SR, Ochs expects that groups engaged in the right ways and under the right conditions may achieve a “shared interpretant” to serve as the basis for pragmatic inquiry and repair. Although somewhat bogged down by technical formulae, chapter six offers the early results of one of SR's most exciting adventures beyond the SR table.

That the logic developed in SR is ready for application—and indeed, according to its own reparative logic, *should* find application beyond the SR table—I take to be a major provocation of the book. In chapter five, which is the most energized and pregnant with further implication, Ochs suggests how SR can ground not only practices of intertextual reading and interreligious dialogue, but also a reintegration of the so-called secular academy with its social purposes. Ochs uses Peirce's logic of relations to clarify the forms of knowing that SR displays, which he describes as a practice of “knowing enough.” Splitting the middle between epistemic certainty and its correlate, skepticism, “knowing enough” is knowledge through relation (R) where identity is not elided (aRb , not $a=b$). Relational knowing wards against the kind of individuated

³ But see his remarks on religious extremism, pp. 153-4.

knowing that the academy rewards and that is a perpetual source of anxiety and overheated, two-valued debates. Moreover, it re-situates knowers among the organizing, communal logics that foster knowing as a reparative activity.

In a Dewey-inspired “pragmatic musement” on this theme (125-130), Ochs imagines the academy restored to its purpose of societal repair. The specialized sciences repair first-level civic institutions that fail to meet their social function, and philosophy repairs errant tendencies in the sciences. Pragmatism is the method for repairing errant tendencies in philosophy, and below that, Ochs speculates, Scripture offers an ultimate source of repair. While not offered in an empirical mood (126), I gather from these musings that the “hearth-to-hearth” method of peacebuilding is but a single application among the myriad possibilities that reparative logics might perform in a variety of institutional settings.⁴

Having studied with Ochs during the last five years, I found this book to be an invaluable summation of the logic he attributes to the practice of SR and the method of reasoning he models in his curricular and co-curricular activities. If SR “can open religious practitioners to means of radically changing, refining, reforming, or even transforming or overturning their conventional habits and rules of action and belief” (20), then so too is reading this book an exercise in reforming one’s habits of thinking and speaking. As cognitive scientists are just now beginning to consider intelligence as a property of social groups, Ochs demonstrates immense learning from 25 years of experimentation in “group thinking.”⁵ And as political scientists grapple with the global resurgence of religion and religion-related violence, Ochs is adapting practiced methods of working across difference for new experimental forays in peacebuilding. That these are experiments in reasoning whose results are open-ended accounts for the somewhat haphazard organization of the volume, though this only adds to my sense that there is something in it for everyone. Long-time Scriptural Reasoners will enjoy Ochs’ detailed reflections on the roots and meaning of SR. Peirce scholars will be challenged by his reparative reading of Peirce. Scholars working at the intersection of religion, politics, and conflict will find value in his logical analyses of competing claims and value judgments, building our sociolinguistic competence instead of reducing inter-group struggles to caricature (e.g. “interests”). And nearly anyone working in the modern academy will find further sources of challenge and nourishment. If “knowing enough” is the epistemic disposition toward peace, then this book can be considered required training.

The Journal of Scriptural Reasoning, Volume 19, Number 1 (December 2020)

© 2020 Society for Scriptural Reasoning

⁴ Following the logic of this musement, widespread societal dysfunction might be taken as a sign of errant logics throughout the modern research university, calling for reparative inquiry into the many disciplines and sub-disciplines that comprise the human and natural sciences. According to this thought-experiment, however, inquiry would find the academy in such disarray that it would be a long time before a re-integrated academy could return to the purposes of societal repair.

⁵ Ochs takes SR as a prototypical setting for how cognitions are generated and shared by a group (56). On the phenomenon of “group thinking” in cognitive science, see Geoff Mulgan, *Big Mind: How Collective Intelligence Can Change Our World* (NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017).