

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

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Religion without Violence is a book I have been waiting for, and I know I am not alone. When I first became acquainted with Scriptural Reasoning, and with Peter Ochs, I accepted the oft-spoken mantra that our practice precedes our theory, that “we’re not sure how to theorize what we’re doing.” This was often spoken with a promise—sometimes implicit, sometimes overt—that a theory would eventually come. In the intervening years, many SR colleagues have contributed in important ways to the theory; Steven Kepnes, Nicholas Adams, Rachel Muers, and Mike Higton, all have made contributions that I have relied upon in my own efforts to explain to others what it is that we do in SR exactly, and why. I am quite sure that there are others I have missed, but all of us, I think, would freely acknowledge our debt to Peter Ochs, a co-founder of the practice itself and its tireless advocate. And so we have waited like monks in the desert, asking “Abba, give us a word.” Nearly twenty years since my first encounter, and nearly thirty years since SR practice began, we now have a book that, at least in part, delivers the word we have awaited.

This book is many things, because it has to be. It is part instruction manual, part philosophical rationale, and part manifesto. He begins with a descriptive introductory chapter on the basic shape and range of SR practice. He helpfully describes “formational SR” (FSR), the basic practice of shared study that lies at the heart of the SR movement, in the straightforward manner of a how-to manual: how big a group should be, how long they should meet, and so on. But the perspective quickly zooms out to consider several models for understanding *how* an SR practice can be understood—as a kind of classroom, as a kind of fellowship across differences, and as a resource for peacebuilding. This rapid oscillation from the very concrete and particular to larger questions of global meaning and then back again can make this book at times exhilarating and at times frustrating. But the overall effect is to illuminate a practice with profound theoretical implications, rather than a profound theory itself. In this way, the book performs the kind of scriptural pragmatist work it recommends and commends. Theory here is not foundationalist, universal, and exhaustive; instead, it is reflective, particular, and provisional, following from rather than preceding practice. Indeed, helpfully highlighted with italics, one will find multiple formulae or definitional statements about what “Scriptural Reasoning” is or what characterizes its practice. For traditional readers looking for the “thesis” and “definition,” these many and various statements, scattered throughout several chapters, could be frustrating. To avoid that frustration, one must realize that the book is proceeding inductively—or, more fittingly and accurately, abductively. The American pragmatist C.S. Peirce is Ochs’ philosophical guide and teacher, and his influence is felt throughout the book as a kind of capillary presence, feeding every corner of it with his semiotic and logical lifeblood. Peirce described abduction as “the process of forming explanatory hypotheses,” and, with this in mind, we can recognize Ochs abductively describing, probing, and then naming various dimensions, both in logic and in the lived experience of the practice, that may contribute to an explanation of what SR is. When the

reader encounters one of the many italicized phrases that begin, “*Scriptural reasoning refers to...*” or something like it, it is helpful to bear in mind that one is reading not definitions, but explanatory hypotheses, partial and particular abductions from, say, classical rabbinic sources (ch. 2), or the semiotics of Augustine of Hippo’s trinitarian theology (ch. 3), or the experience of teaching SR in the classroom (chs. 4-5).

It is only at this point, when so much diligent work has been applied to description and explanation, along this kind of multi-vector analysis, does Ochs return to the theme signaled by the title *Religion without Violence*. How, in Ochs’ view, does SR contribute to peacebuilding, when by many accounts religion itself lies at the flammable center of so much violence? Here Ochs moves very quickly through an analysis of the “secularization” hypothesis and its failure to account for the force of religious violence, and he provides an alternative model. “Secularization,” if it describes anything, names the marginalization and stigmatization of the religious by the Enlightenment-fueled colonializing Western powers, whose global domination has so deeply marked “the modern.” This marginalization and stigmatization has taken place both in the intellectual life of the Western regimes themselves and in the nations and peoples they colonized. But, because religion remains central to humans making sense of themselves in the world, it did not fade or disappear; instead, it persisted, but without the cultural forms of “education and refinement,” without the disciplines by which ancient religious traditions cultivate and form the religious sensibility toward wisdom. It is these cultural forms and disciplines that had been discouraged, marginalized, interrupted, or replaced by “secular” or cosmopolitan forms, imposed both at home and abroad by the dominant modern Western powers. In the reawakening of the religious that took place in the wake of the receding hegemony of Western colonial powers, the forms of religious life that resurged lacked training in the disciplines of wisdom proper to their own traditions, and they were thus volatile sources of violence: “They behave badly, not because their religious traditions lack the needed wisdoms, but because they are severely under-educated in those wisdoms. Lacking traditional wisdom, they react to events out of unrefined human passion, however much they do so in the name of their religion” (154). An advantage of Ochs’ account of “the religious” in the present age is that it admits that “religion is dangerous” (151), and, indeed, “even more dangerous now, today” (153). But the solution is not, as some would suggest, to de-center or marginalize religious traditions more; instead, what is required is a shared religious (re-)training in the disciplines of wisdom. It is a re-training—a rediscovery of lost, hidden, or stunted paths—but it is also a new training, because the conflictual situations in which we find ourselves in the present can only be defused by intentional practices of interreligious learning.

But for Scriptural Reasoning to be an agent of that kind of (re)learning as a form of peacebuilding, the “formational scriptural reasoning”—the practice of shared study with which many are familiar—is, Ochs says, insufficient: “SR is study across difference in a setting of unsettled peacetime (peacetime with underlying potential conflict).” (167) If SR can contribute to peacebuilding in situations of actual conflict, it must develop a new model of engagement, what Ochs dubs “Hearth to Hearth Peacebuilding” or “H2H.” (158ff) This is the central concern of the last chapter. Ochs spends much time here demonstrating the relationship between the logic of Textual Reasoning (within particular traditions) and FSR, on the one hand, and this new model of H2H on the other. The chapter presents a challenge to those who are less familiar with logical

graphing, as it is easy to get lost among the various graphed formulas. I found myself furtively searching for discursive “hooks” upon which I could hang the graphs. They are there, but they are sometimes hard to find. I can see that this logical groundwork contributes to our understanding of this new mode, H2H, as within the SR family; nevertheless, it’s a rhetorical opportunity missed. A robust—even if brief—discursive description of the shape and the fruits of H2H would take up the challenge so powerfully laid out in the first pages of the chapter by the pervasive but violent presence of religious passions undisciplined by the lost arts of wisdom. Even past the logical substructures in the middle sections of chapter 6, Ochs turns to give a kind of “how-to” explanation of the process of H2H, which should move from a logical modeling of the conflict situation, to data collection, to analysis and diagnosis, to recommendations. As described here, it’s a potentially powerful tool for constructive peacebuilding among conflicting parties, but I wonder if it will convince readers of its power. H2H is a new proposal, constructed out of the logic that SR has distilled over its decades of practice, but perhaps it would be well served by a kind of broader discursive vision-casting of its potential. I concede to Ochs that, in volatile circumstances of real conflict, the devil is, indeed, in the details, and I am glad that Ochs has given us those details that might thwart the devil. Nevertheless, without the vision-casting, I cannot help but wonder if Ochs has made it harder to imagine adopting H2H, for fear of getting hopelessly lost in those details. I am left hungry for the practice that, once upon a time, preceded the theory of SR. Can H2H be envisioned as a practice, with the logical description relegated to an appendix or to the footnotes? Or is the dangerous situation of open religious conflict too volatile to risk such imprecision? That’s the question I was left with as I finished *Religion without Violence*. I was inspired by the first 5 chapters of the book, and even more convicted about the necessity of something like H2H by the first several pages of the sixth. But I was left unsure of my own capacity to carry forward H2H by the end of chapter 6. Perhaps this is how it needs to be. Perhaps we need to risk stepping into this uncertain territory in the hope of peace.

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