

Pragmatism and Semiotics: C. S. Peirce *after* Peter Ochs

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In this essay, I explain the ways in which Peter Ochs employs and engages with the thought of C. S. Peirce, resulting in making Peirce’s pragmatism and semiotics the most obvious foundations for the practice of scriptural reasoning.¹ This explanation involves addressing the question, “Why Scripture within scriptural reasoning?” and seeing the various ways in which Ochs answers such a question. My explanation yields the following thesis: Ochs’s use of Peirce’s philosophy for describing and developing SR leads to an unresolved tension within the practice of SR: pragmatism vs. semiotics.

Why Scripture?

While it is not typical for a philosopher like Ochs to take such an interest in Scripture (specifically the canonical books of the Jewish, Christian, and Muslim traditions), I detect two motivations for Ochs’s interest in Scripture: one based upon his reading of Peirce’s pragmatism and another based upon his commitment to Judaism. These come together in his formulation(s) for the practice of SR.

Why Scripture? The Pragmatist Answer

Peirce, Pragmatism, and the Logic of Scripture remains Ochs’s most important book. Ochs outlines three ways in which Peirce’s philosophy leads philosophers back to the Christian scriptures. First, there is what Ochs calls “the agency of Scripture” in Peirce’s thinking: “Peirce calls graph writing ‘scripture,’ as in ‘scribing a graph,’ and names the two persons who collaborate on the graph the *graphist* and the *interpreter*.”² Before Peirce arrives at the

¹ I do not mean “foundations” in the sense of foundationalism. I fought the battle of whether Ochs is a foundationalist in a problematic way, and I argue that he is not. For the case that Ochs has a problematic foundationalism, see Lamberth’s “Assessing Peter Ochs through *Peirce, Pragmatism, and the Logic of Scripture*,” *Modern Theology* 24. no. 3 (2008), 459–67; for my response to Lamberth, see Goodson, *Narrative Theology and the Hermeneutical Virtues* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2015), chapter 5.

² Ochs, *Peirce, Pragmatism, and the Logic of Scripture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 207; hereafter, cited as *PPLS*.

particularity of Christian Scripture, he thinks through the *general meaning of the word “Scripture”*: a graph inscribed *by* someone and *for* someone else.³

Second, Peirce envisioned a philosophical community analogous to the ecclesial community, which Peirce called “the great catholic church.”⁴ Like the “great catholic church,” according to Ochs, Peirce sought for the philosophical community to make their scripture Scripture.⁵ Peirce envisioned, in Ochs’s words, certain

communities of philosophers who identify their scripture with Scripture, or the Bible. They read Scripture as the prototypical narrative of how certain musers...were stimulated by their observations of human suffering to undertake corrective-and-diagrammatic inquiries that terminate...in the musers’ dialogues with God.⁶

This represents Peirce’s move from the general meaning of scripture to the particular use of Christian Scripture. Communities need texts that function as graphs, in Peirce’s sense of the word. For a certain community of philosophers, the Christian canon ought to have this function or play this role. The reason that Christian Scriptures should have this function or play this role concerns how it models “prototypical narrative”—putting identifications of human suffering in relationship with “dialogues with God.”⁷

Within philosophy, identifying human suffering belongs to the areas of aesthetics (Aristotle’s *Poetics*) and/or ethics (Aristotle’s *Nichomachean Ethics*), while dialogues with God belong to ethics (Plato’s *Euthyphro*) and/or the philosophy of religion (Plato’s *Laws*). The works in parenthesis pinpoint foundational texts for how human suffering relates to the study of aesthetics and ethics and how dialogues with God relate to the study of ethics and philosophy of religion.⁸ The Christian Bible models how all of these connect to each other and provides an object of study that brings together philosophers interested in the relationship between human suffering, speaking about God, and talking to God.

Third, Peirce moves beyond the claim that the Christian Bible serves as merely a model. According to Ochs, Peirce “illustrates how a philosopher actually graphs God’s attributes...[and] illustrates how *communities of scriptural philosophers* actually graph God’s attributes of compassion-and-correction.”⁹ The Christian Scriptures offer a particular graph of God’s attributes, and Ochs’s words of compassion and correction can be replaced with a plethora of synonyms. From my own tradition of Lutheranism, we would say Law (correction) and Gospel (compassion). Others might substitute love and justice: “love” for compassion and “justice” for correction. Still others might see compassion as equivalent to the categories of grace or mercy, and correction as equivalent to judgment and wrath. The point is that Ochs seems right about this in relation to how God is presented in the Christian Scriptures—how the New Testament authors

³ See Ochs, *PPLS*, 207.

⁴ Peirce, “What Is Christian Faith?,” in *The Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce: Volume VI*, ed. Hartshorne & Weiss (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1935), 443.

⁵ See Ochs, *PPLS*, 287.

⁶ Ochs, *PPLS*, 287.

⁷ See Ochs, *PPLS*, 287.

⁸ See Ochs, *PPLS*, 287.

⁹ Ochs, *PPLS*, 290.

graph their dialogues with God.¹⁰ For Peirce, certain communities of philosophers ought to take these divine attributes as normative for their enquiries into aesthetics, ethics, and the philosophy of religion.

What does this mean for SR? Straightforwardly, it means that Ochs's invention of the practice of SR became his way to create a philosophical community of enquirers who take the New Testament—and added to the New Testament the *Tanakh* and the Qur'an—as normative for conversations concerning aesthetics, ethics, and the philosophy of religion.¹¹ While not all scriptural reasoners are trained as philosophers, all scriptural reasoners participate in this Peircean-inspired philosophical community that bases itself on how God is graphed through Scripture.

In his book, *C. S. Peirce and the Nested Continua Model of Religious Interpretation*, Gary Slater puts into two sentences the Peircean significance of scripture for Ochs:

Hence the reference to *Scriptural* reasoning...bears on two distinctive features of Ochs's work: the centrality of the text, and the meaning of texts in relation to various readerships.... As for the meaning of the term 'reasoning' in Scriptural Reasoning, this refers to the structures of interpretation that are revealed when the plain sense of Scripture *itself* appears unable to perform its task of repairing everyday problems.¹²

In these two sentences, Slater identifies the significance of both the *scriptural* and the *reasoning* aspects of Ochs's scriptural reasoning project: "scriptural" because of the centrality of the scriptural text and the semiotic relation of the scriptural text to various communities of readers, and "reasoning" because of "the structures of interpretation that are revealed" when performing the "task of repairing everyday problems."¹³

Why Scripture? The Jewish Answer

It might seem obvious to say that Ochs's commitment to Judaism leads him to take Scripture seriously, but the so-called postliberal part of Ochs's thinking means that he finds he must "return to Scripture" after its "eclipse" within Jewish philosophy and Judaism.¹⁴ In order to avoid the fallacy of hasty generalization, in this section I will talk about Jewish philosophy specifically rather than Judaism in general.

Ochs's "An Introduction to Postcritical Scriptural Interpretation" outlines his own Jewish "return to Scripture."¹⁵ Ochs utilizes Hans Frei's diagnoses of how modern philosophy slowly

¹⁰ See Ochs, *PPLS*, 287.

¹¹ How does Ochs do this in his own writing (independent from being in a SR group with Ochs)? For one instance, see my analysis of Ochs's interpretation of Matthew 7 in Goodson, *Introducing Prophetic Pragmatism* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2019), 123–33.

¹² Gary Slater, *C. S. Peirce and the Nested Continua Model* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 123.

¹³ See Slater, *C. S. Peirce and the Nested Continua Model*, 123.

¹⁴ See Ochs, "An Introduction to Postcritical Scriptural Interpretation," in *The Return to Scripture in Judaism and Christianity: Essays in Postcritical Scriptural Interpretation*, ed. Ochs (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2008), 1–53; hereafter cited as PSI.

¹⁵ See Ochs, PSI, 3–53.

“eclipsed” biblical narratives.¹⁶ Within modern philosophy, Frei blames Baruch Spinoza, John Locke, and others,¹⁷ and Ochs seems agreeable to this diagnosis. Frei emphasizes modern philosophy’s impact on Christian theology, and Ochs makes the same claim for Jewish philosophy. Ochs writes, for instance, that “the argument of both Jewish and Christian postcritical interpreters is that modern scholars have reduced biblical interpretation to the terms of a dyadic semiotic that lacks warrant in the biblical texts.”¹⁸ This reduction led to making Jewish Scriptures—the *Tanakh*—so unhelpful and uninteresting that, within Jewish philosophy, it became a hurdle to overcome rather than a source of wisdom from which to draw continually.

In the present essay, the terms “postliberal” and “postliberalism” refer to this “return to Scripture.”¹⁹ By “returning to Scripture” after the liberalism of modernity, which slowly “eclipses” the narratives of the Jewish and Christian scriptures, postliberalism in this context does not have to mean anti-liberalism or anti-modernity but, rather, a particular failure or result of liberalism within modernity to make biblical narratives so unhelpful and uninteresting that both citizens and scholars lose a significant source of wisdom for their everyday lives and scholarly pursuits. Ochs’s contribution to the tradition of Jewish philosophy serves as a “return to Scripture” in relation to the tendency within Jewish philosophy, after Spinoza, to take a reductive—and, therefore, problematic—approach to the *Tanakh*.²⁰

Peirce, Hermeneutics, and Semiotics

In this section, I follow the path of what it means to treat Peirce’s semiotics as a theory of interpretation (hermeneutics). I navigate Ochs’s understanding and use of Peirce’s semiotics as a hermeneutic in relation to other treatments of Peirce’s semiotics as a theory of interpretation. Like Ochs, other scholars connect Peirce’s semiotics with a hermeneutics of Scripture. Some scholars, however, see in Peirce’s semiotics a more general hermeneutic. I demonstrate that what Ochs sees in Peirce’s work—the potential for a hermeneutic that requires communal reading—other Peirce scholars see as well. In what follows, I outline the ways in which three other thinkers see a theory of interpretation in Peirce’s semiotics: the famous Italian novelist and philosopher Umberto Eco, literary theorist William Elford Rogers, and American philosopher Robert Corrington (Ochs’s former colleague at Drew University).

Scriptural Reasoning after Umberto Eco

Umberto Eco might be famous for writing novels such as *Foucault’s Pendulum* and *The Name of the Rose*, but he also writes as a scholar of Charles Sanders Peirce’s philosophy. I focus on one of his books where Peirce is the main intellectual character: *The Limits of Interpretation*.

¹⁶ See Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980), 1-16.

¹⁷ See Goodson, *Narrative Theology and the Hermeneutical Virtues*, chapters 1-4.

¹⁸ Ochs, PSI, 38.

¹⁹ See Ochs, PSI, 3-53.

²⁰ See Ochs, PSI, 3-53.

Although he never references the practice of scriptural reasoning, his development of Peirce's semiotics as a kind of hermeneutics resembles the role of Peirce's philosophy in SR.

In Peirce's semiotics, Eco finds an interpretation theory that avoids particular problems within both medieval and modern theories of interpretation. I reconstruct his argument in five points. First, Eco claims, "any act of interpretation is a dialectic between openness and form, initiative on the part of the interpreter and contextual pressure."²¹ Medieval theories of interpretation tend to prioritize "form" over "openness," whereas modern theories of interpretation tend to prioritize "openness" over "form."²² Peirce's semiotics requires both: "a dialectic between openness and form."²³

This "dialectic between openness and form" becomes a necessary feature of SR, where participants must be open to the texts and to other interpretations of those texts. Additionally, SR only works if the interpretations offered have a substantial form to them. Within SR, being open to the text and to others does not mean being 'nice' to other participants. It means, instead, that participants need to articulate substantial interpretations that are received by others with a kind of openness that leads to in-depth engagements with one another rather than mere agreement.

Second, Eco identifies problems he sees in both medieval and modern theories of interpretation:

Medieval interpreters were wrong in taking the world as a univocal text; modern interpreters are wrong in taking every text as an unshaped world. Texts are the human way to reduce the world to a manageable format, open to an intersubjective interpretive discourse. Which means that, when symbols are inserted into a text, there is...no way to decide which interpretation is the 'good' one, but it is still possible to decide, on the basis of the context, which one is due, not to an effort of understanding 'that' text, but rather to a hallucinatory response on the part of the addressee.²⁴

The problem with medieval theories of interpretation concerns how they encourage a singular meaning, both within texts and within the world. The problem with modern theories of interpretation involves an assumption of humanism: texts remain unformed or unshaped until human reason molds them.

Peirce's semiotics ought to be understood as a system that offers the ability to affirm that (a) texts do have some inherent meaning; (b) the meaning of texts is not univocal, and interpreters give texts multiple meanings in addition to the inherent meaning; and (c) human rationality contributes to the meaning of texts and even shapes certain texts, but this process is best described as *semiotic* precisely because human reason shapes texts while texts simultaneously shape human reason. For Peirce, semiosis requires this *constant reciprocity*.

In the context of the practice of SR, this means that engagements around scriptural passages ought to involve an exercise of constant questioning. Participant A offers an interpretation about Genesis 1:1; this interpretation might add to the meaning of Genesis 1:1, or it might be a "hallucinatory response" to the sense of Genesis 1, Participant B, therefore, raises a question or set of questions that helps both participant A and the other participants in the SR

²¹ Umberto Eco, *The Limits of Interpretation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 21.

²² Eco, *Limits of Interpretation*, 21.

²³ Eco, *Limits of Interpretation*, 21.

²⁴ Eco, *Limits of Interpretation*, 21.

study group determine if said interpretation ought to be judged as contributory or hallucinatory—that is, whether the interpretation is in line with the sense of Genesis 1.²⁵ Our interpretations add and contribute to the meaning of Genesis 1:1, but the sense of Genesis 1:1 also forms, informs, and shapes the ways in which our rational faculty gains the ability to even offer an interpretation of Genesis 1:1. This is what Peircean *constant reciprocity* looks like within SR.

Third, Eco learns from Peirce’s semiotics what it means to come to an agreement about the meaning of a text:

[T]o reach an agreement about the nature of a given text does not mean either (a) that the interpreters must trace back to the original intention of the author or (b) that such a text must have a unique and final meaning. There are ‘open’ texts that support multiple interpretations, and any common agreement about them ought to concern...their open nature and the textual strategies that make them work that way.²⁶

Medieval theories of interpretation regard agreement about the meaning of texts as the goal of interpretation, whereas modern theories of interpretation aim for making texts *agree with* human rationality. According to Eco, Peirce’s semiotics shifts both of these hermeneutical goals. Yes, we can reach agreement about texts; the agreement, however, does not concern the meaning of texts but “their open nature.”²⁷ Yes, human rationality relates to interpreting texts; texts, however, do not need to be read to conform to human rationality. Rather, human rationality aids and instructs us in learning how to “support multiple interpretations” of those texts.²⁸

Eco’s development of Peirce’s semiotics as a theory of interpretation speaks to a difficulty within SR that, sometimes, makes both ‘conservatives’ and ‘liberals’ skeptical of the practice.²⁹ ‘Conservatives’ tend to avoid or critique the practice of SR because of SR’s need for agreement about the openness of scriptural passages. Usually, SR practitioners respond to this criticism by saying that *only during the practice of SR do we need to make this agreement*. In other words, SR asks participants only for a type of pretend-agreement about the openness of texts for the purposes of SR sessions. ‘Liberals’ tend to critique the practice of SR because strict SR practitioners bluntly challenge any and all interpretations of scriptural passages that make those passages sound modern or progressive. In other words, some SR practitioners see it as their mission to constantly and directly challenge the modern (in Eco’s sense of the word) tendency of making texts agree with the tenets of human rationality.

Fourth, Eco introduces the role of Peirce’s concept of musement in his semiotics:

[E]ven though the interpreters cannot decide which interpretation is the privileged one, they can agree on the fact that certain interpretations are not contextually legitimated. Thus, even though using a text as a playground for implementing unlimited semiosis, they can agree that at certain moments the “play of musement” can transitorily stop by producing a consensual judgment.³⁰

²⁵ The phrase in quotation marks comes from Eco, *Limits of Interpretation*, 21.

²⁶ Eco, *Limits of Interpretation*, 41.

²⁷ Eco, *Limits of Interpretation*, 41.

²⁸ See Eco, *Limits of Interpretation*, 41.

²⁹ I use these labels for heuristic and introductory purposes—my intent does not involve perpetuating a bad and unhelpful binary that negatively impacts all of us on a daily basis.

³⁰ Eco, *Limits of Interpretation*, 41-42.

Eco emphasizes how texts impact readers. In Peirce’s semiotics, texts read readers as much as readers read texts! This reciprocity between reading texts and being read by texts is how Eco applies Peirce’s recommendation of playful thinking—musement—to the process of interpretation. Readers should allow themselves to be playful with texts, and this playfulness occurs in the process of reading texts and being read by texts.

Semiosis encourages and requires musement as a means of “producing a consensual judgment.”³¹ According to SR practitioners and theorists, the practice of SR does not lead to consensus about the meaning of texts. Within SR, therefore, Peircean musement is not treated as a means to “producing a consensual judgment.”³² In this comparison, what is meant by musement or playfulness relates to one of Eco’s points but differs from another: *playfulness involves the process of being read by texts while reading those texts with others*, but it does not include “producing a consensual judgment.”³³ Perhaps the best description that I can give of SR is this: *SR sessions provide “a playground for implementing [this] unlimited semiosis.”*³⁴

Eco’s fifth and final point captures an aspect of SR that can be taken as both liberating yet frustrating. In Eco’s words, “it is very difficult to decide whether a given interpretation is a good one, [but] it is...always possible to decide whether it is a bad one.”³⁵ This certainly describes SR in the sense that there are no agreed upon standards of judgment within SR: would an interpretation be judged as ‘good’ because it conforms to either doctrines within a particular religious tradition or methods within academic biblical studies? SR allows neither of these to function as absolute standards. If an interpretation seems to make no sense in relation to the scriptural passage that everyone has in front of them, then such an interpretation can be deemed as ‘bad’ within the conversational engagements nurtured by SR. SR participants can determine ‘bad’ interpretations; ‘good’ interpretations, however, cannot be judged as such.

Although Eco does not connect Peirce’s semiotics with interpreting sacred texts, I conclude that his development of Peirce’s semiotics as a theory of interpretation offers helpful insights for better understanding the practice of SR and how SR practitioners engage with scriptural passages. At the very least, Eco gives us ways in which Peirce’s semiotics—and SR as a practice following Peirce’s semiotics—can be understood as an alternative to both medieval and modern theories of interpretation. Eco’s development of Peirce’s semiotics into a theory of interpretation demonstrates that Ochs’s use of Peirce as the foundational thinker for the practice of SR comes with merit and precedence.

Scriptural Reasoning after William Rogers

William Rogers makes Peirce the intellectual hero of his book on “textual hermeneutics as an ascetic discipline,” focusing on the textuality of Peirce’s semiotics. Rogers’s argument helps to identify both the communal aspect and future orientation of SR, and SR can be

³¹ Eco, *Limits of Interpretation*, 42.

³² Eco, *Limits of Interpretation*, 42.

³³ Eco, *Limits of Interpretation*, 42.

³⁴ Eco, *Limits of Interpretation*, 42; emphasis added.

³⁵ Eco, *Limits of Interpretation*, 42.

described as an “ascetic discipline” on the Peircean terms that Rogers uses to develop that phrase.³⁶

First, Rogers’s use of the phrase “ascetic discipline” means that interpretation should be neither seen nor understood as an individual practice. A Peircean-based hermeneutics becomes an “ascetic discipline” in the sense that interpretation always involves the priority of a community over individual rationality.³⁷

My claim is that SR puts into practice this notion of “ascetic discipline” by ensuring that scriptural passages are always read together, within community, so that the individual rationality of a singular person does not take precedence within the process of interpretation.³⁸ When SR practitioners and theorists claim that no one person can act as an authority within a SR session, it is meant to signal this priority of community over individual rationality.

Second, Rogers compares Peirce’s semiotics with the practice of “textual interpretation” within literary studies:

Peirce talks about the explanation that necessarily belongs to every sign. There is “some explanation or argument or other context, showing how—upon what system or for what reason—the Sign represents the Object”.... In textual interpretation the interpretive statement is a sign of—that is, stands for—the text.... Peirce suggests that there is some explicit or implicit set of interconnected rules...for moving from the significant features of the text to the interpretive statement. I can “argue for” or “support” my interpretation, in other words, by explaining the principles on which I have connected the features of the text to the features of my interpretive statement. This system of rules and principles is what I am calling the *interpretive system*. To apply an interpretive system means precisely to take something into the chain of significance, to take it as a sign, or as a *word* in the broad sense that Peirce uses when he says that the word or sign a person uses *is* the person.³⁹

In Peirce’s argument for “the explanation that necessarily belongs to every sign,” Rogers finds a set of rules for getting from “significant features of the text” to an “interpretive statement.” An “*interpretive system*” can be referenced that enables an interpreter of a text to defend their particular interpretation with an explanation of rules for interpretation. To reference this “*interpretive system*” for defending a particular interpretation is to envelope a sign or a word into a system of signs and words.⁴⁰

What Rogers calls “the interpretive system” becomes one way to describe the conversational dynamics within the practice of SR. To transfer Rogers’s words to what an SR session looks like, SR participants “‘argue for’ or ‘support’ [their] interpretation...by explaining the principles on which [they] have connected the features of the text to the features of [their] interpretive statement.”⁴¹ At its most basic, SR simply is the performance and practice of this system articulated by Rogers.

Third, Rogers emphasizes the future-orientation of Peirce’s interpretation theory:

³⁶ See Rogers, *Interpreting Interpretation*, 139–77.

³⁷ See Rogers, *Interpreting Interpretation*, 139–77.

³⁸ On the phrase in quotation marks, see Rogers, *Interpreting Interpretation*, 139–77.

³⁹ Rogers, *Interpreting Interpretation*, 20–21.

⁴⁰ See Rogers, *Interpreting Interpretation*, 21.

⁴¹ Rogers, *Interpreting Interpretation*, 20.

By Peirce's theory of semiosis, interpreting means connecting one sign (or chain of signs) with another, according to some principle or set of principles. That is, I produce an interpretive statement about a text according to some interpretive system. But by the infinitely replicative nature of semiosis, my interpretive statement is now susceptible to being taken up in another interpretive statement, and so on. In fact, according to Peirce, my interpretive statement is only virtually a sign of the text. It can become a sign only insofar as it has the potential to be taken up in an infinitely self-replicating chain of signs that directs itself toward the perfected knowledge of an indefinitely future community.⁴²

Because the process of semiotics—called semiosis—is “infinitely replicative,” interpretive statements are enveloped into other interpretive statements, which are enveloped into other interpretive statements, and so on. This is all an interpretive statement can do for Peirce: become a sign of the text and infinitely replicate itself. This “infinitely self-replicating chain of signs” involves a teleological drive toward a definite “future community.” This “future community,” for Peirce, is the time and place where knowledge gets “perfected.” The *telos* of Peirce's semiotics is that of “perfected knowledge” in a “future community.”⁴³

Peter Ochs thinks of SR groups as embodying and signifying—not in full, but in part—this Peircean notion of a perfected future community. The histories of relations between Christians, Jews, and Muslims has been determined by conflict and violence. SR repairs these historical relationships—not only by putting Jews, Muslims, and Christians in the same room together for a definite period of time, but also by turning members of these traditions into a particular and peculiar kind of community: a community of scriptural interpreters engaged in a semiotic process. *If Eco's take on Peirce's semiotics offers a sense of the playful side of SR, then Rogers's development of Peirce's semiotics provides a sense of the pragmatist side of SR:* SR's definite end concerns turning traditionally broken relationships into a healed community of Christians, Jews, and Muslims. Of course, Rogers does not put it in these Abrahamic terms, but his emphasis on the future-orientation of Peirce's interpretation theory aligns with and correlates to Ochs's description of SR as a peace-making activity working toward a perfected Abrahamic community.⁴⁴ What I mean by the *pragmatist* side of SR concerns this insight from Rogers is that a Peircean interpretation theory involves a teleological drive toward a definite “future community.”⁴⁵

Peirce's Hermeneutics and Semiotics at Drew University

Prior to 1997, both Robert Corrington and Peter Ochs were professors at Drew University in Madison, New Jersey.⁴⁶ In 1997, Ochs moved to the University of Virginia; Corrington

⁴² Rogers, *Interpreting Interpretation*, 166.

⁴³ Rogers, *Interpreting Interpretation*, 166.

⁴⁴ See Jennifer L. Geddes, “Peacemaking Among the Abrahamic Faiths: An Interview with Peter Ochs,” in *The Hedgehog Review* 6 (2004): 90–102.

⁴⁵ Rogers, *Interpreting Interpretation*, 166.

⁴⁶ In the spirit of Gary Slater's argument that there is a “Charlottesville Pragmatism” between Ochs and Richard Rorty (see Slater, “Charlottesville Pragmatism,” in *Rorty and the Prophetic: Jewish Engagements with a Secular Philosopher*, ed. Goodson & Stone [Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, forthcoming], chapter 3), perhaps we could consider this section the beginning of the development of a Drew Pragmatism between Corrington and Ochs.

remained at Drew until his retirement in January 2020. Both Corrington and Ochs spent time developing Peirce's semiotics into a theory of interpretation, and I compare and contrast their developments on this question.

First, Peirce's semiotics leads to a communal hermeneutic. Corrington claims, "Peirce's semiotics gave him the tools for developing a hermeneutics and for showing its relation to the community of interpreters. Initially we can define semiotics as the systematic study of those items in experience known as signs."⁴⁷ Corrington defines semiotics as the study of what is found "in experience known as signs."⁴⁸ According to Corrington, "Peirce...restricted the realm of signs to the realm of thought. That is, he argued that all thought must exist in signs, but that which lies outside of thought need not be a sign."⁴⁹ All thinking, for Peirce, is semiotic in the sense that in order for thought to be thought it necessarily involves signs. This relates to hermeneutics because it involves a "community of interpreters"—a community that attempts to offer a system for interpreting "experience."⁵⁰

Second, knowledge of the self requires an act of interpretation. In Corrington's words, "A sign refers to an object (denotation) in some way (connotation) and to some thought (interpretant)"—which means, "when we look into ourselves we must follow this general threefold pattern. We see our self in some respect, and our seeing produces an interpretant or thought about the self."⁵¹ The self is only intelligible within a triadic relationship: an unexamined self, an experience of the self, and an interpretation or thought produced about the self. Therefore, even to know one's self requires interpretation: to know one's self involves being in an interpretive relationship with oneself. An interpretation of oneself has to be produced in order for there to be a conception or understanding of the self at all.

Third, signs are not for the sake of themselves but rather for the interpreter to interpret. Corrington claims, "Signs...are always signs for someone, namely, an interpreter. The interpreter has the function of interpreting the given sign to another. Thus we can see how signs can be understood only within the complex structures of a community."⁵² Semiotics not only requires *interpretation* but also requires *interpreters*. Semiotics does not allow for an individuated interpreter but, rather, requires a complex communal structure of interpreters. Interpretation takes place with other interpreters in this complex communal structure.

Fourth, Corrington compares Peirce's semiotics with Friedrich Schleiermacher's hermeneutics:

Peirce went beyond the earlier hermeneutic formulation of Schleiermacher by insisting that the expressions of language do not reveal a substantive self-consciousness with one determinate, if evolving nature. We do not necessarily know the "author better than he knew himself," as it is unclear just what ontological status the self would have. Peirce...came to see the self in semiotic terms and thus raised the problem of self-identity to new levels of complexity and interest. Yet,

⁴⁷ Robert Corrington, *Community of Interpreters: On the Hermeneutics of Nature and the Bible in the American Philosophical Tradition* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1992), 2.

⁴⁸ Corrington, *The Community of Interpreters*, 2.

⁴⁹ Corrington, *The Community of Interpreters*, 2.

⁵⁰ See Corrington, *The Community of Interpreters*, 2.

⁵¹ Corrington, *The Community of Interpreters*, 11.

⁵² Corrington, *The Community of Interpreters*, 14.

like Schleiermacher, [Peirce] believed that our external expressions are a fair indication of our internal nature, however complex that nature may be.⁵³

Corrington's move here contains similarities with Eco's argument that Peirce's semiotics differs from modern theories of interpretation.

The German philosopher and theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834) famously argues that, in the hermeneutic process, an interpreter of a text is able to come to know the author better than the author knew herself/himself.⁵⁴ Peirce's semiotics questions such a claim—not because Peirce thinks it wrong, but because it lacks real substance. Interpreters come to know the mind of the author only through the interpretive process. The author comes to know herself/himself the same way that others come to know her/him: through the process of interpretation. Both Peirce and Schleiermacher agree that interpretation is required for knowledge, which involves the claim that there is no internal privileged access that a person has to herself/himself.

Lastly, concerning Corrington's interpretation of Peirce, the scientific community serves as the best model for what Peirce means by *communal* in his semiotics:

Knowledge, which itself is based on signs, can be won only when the individual identifies with the life of the community. For Peirce, the ideal model for the perfect community is the community of science. The scientific community is a self-corrective domain of free inquiry into the semiotic structures of objects and events. The community renews itself by placing all inferences under the skeptical eye of the researchers, who are dedicated to the search for counterexamples. The community has the teleological drive toward the ideal future in which scientific knowledge is secure and based on general metaphysical principles such as that of *agape-ism*.⁵⁵

The scientific community serves as the ideal community and the ideal model for communal thinking because it is “self-corrective” and continually “renews itself” through “the skeptical eye of...researchers.” Also, the scientific community is “teleological” in that it thinks *forward* to an “ideal future” when “scientific knowledge is secure” and has proper “metaphysical principles” in place.⁵⁶ Therefore, both the scientific community and the teleological drive toward the future are necessary parts of Peirce's semiotics because they serve as Peirce's semiotic ideals.

Corrington's interpretation of Peirce offers a good picture of what a theory of interpretation looks like based upon the combination of Peirce's philosophy of science, pragmatism, and semiotics. According to Corrington, Peirce's semiotics involves the necessity of interpretation for thought and understanding, as well for knowledge of the self. Corrington does not focus on the interpretation of texts *per se*, but rather on how semiotics can be understood as an *interpretive process*. The ideals of this interpretive process involve the using scientific community as a model for communal interpretation and the teleological drive toward the future.

The similarity between Corrington and Ochs is that both make Peirce's philosophy of science necessary for understanding Peirce's pragmatism and semiotics. Peirce's semiotics

⁵³ Corrington, *The Community of Interpreters*, 14.

⁵⁴ See Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Hermeneutics and Criticism*, trans. Andrew Bowie (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

⁵⁵ Corrington, *The Community of Interpreters*, 15.

⁵⁶ See Corrington, *The Community of Interpreters*, 15.

involves *textuality*, according to Ochs, because of the emphasis on the limits of knowing a metaphysical reality “beyond the experimental result.”⁵⁷ For Ochs, this conviction, formed in the laboratory, carries over as a conviction about how texts *work*. Peirce does not deny a metaphysical reality; Peirce denies how much individual knowers can know reality. Likewise, when reading texts, a careful reader does not necessarily deny a metaphysical reality outside of the text; rather, a careful (scientific) reader remains within the limitations determined by that particular text. Because of these limitations, a reader who bases interpretation on experimentalism and logic knows not to go or move beyond the boundaries set by the text. Hence, within SR, participants often say (a) do not go beyond the words in front of us, or (b) let’s not speculate about what seems out of reach for this particular passage.⁵⁸ This means that SR asks its participants to read texts as if they are treating those texts on the terms of how a scientist treats her object of study within a scientific laboratory.

However, the difference between Corrington’s and Ochs’s interpretations of Peirce’s philosophy involve what scholars call general hermeneutics versus particular hermeneutics. Whereas Corrington focuses on how Peirce’s semiotics is an *interpretive process* in general, Ochs stresses how Peirce’s semiotics serves as a *scriptural or textual interpretive process* in particular. In other words, Ochs moves from interpretation in general to the interpretation of Scripture in particular.

Ochs recognizes how Peirce bases his pragmatism on Scripture—specifically Jesus’ logical rule found in the Gospels (Matthew 7)—and says that Peirce intends for this to function as more than mere proof-texting the Bible to persuade an American audience.⁵⁹ According to Ochs, Peirce intends for his pragmatism to invite readers to return again and again to the Scriptures for guidance in relation to logic, science, and theology. *As a scholar who primarily studies American Philosophy, I see and think of SR mostly in this vein: as a way to put into practice Peirce’s encouragement and recommendation that pragmatists return again and again to the Christian Scriptures for guidance concerning logic, science, and theology.* In this sense, Ochs’s scriptural reasoning project fills a void within American philosophy since the death of Peirce: no practices have developed that allow and invite scholars within American philosophy to study, think through, and utilize the Christian Scriptures.

SR qualifies as a Peircean hermeneutic because it involves (1) interpreting within a community (by definition, SR cannot be practiced by an individual alone), (2) teleological hopes for the future (peace-building among members of traditions who have histories of violence toward one another—what Ochs will call “religion without violence” in his most recent book), and (3) turning to Scripture for guidance and wisdom in relation to logic, science, and theology.⁶⁰

⁵⁷ Ochs, *PPLS*, 166.

⁵⁸ Both of these tend to serve as rules within most SR groups.

⁵⁹ See Ochs, *PPLS*, 315–16.

⁶⁰ See Randi Rashkover, “Peirce, Metaphysics, and Wisdom: The Work of Peter Ochs,” in *Modern Theology* 24, no. 3, (2008): 439–445.

Scripture in Ochs's *Religion without Violence*

Oftentimes, when we hear the phrase ‘interpreting Scripture’ we think of it as an individual activity. In the previous section, however, we learned that Peirce thinks of reading as a communal activity. This insight gives us a sense of how a scholar of Peirce’s philosophy, like Ochs, might invent a practice of reading together. My claim is that Ochs calls this Peircean practice “scriptural reasoning.”

Again, why Scripture? This is the question I hear most when talking to people about the practice of scriptural reasoning. In his most recent book, *Religion without Violence: The Philosophy and Practice of Scriptural Reasoning*, Ochs attempts a one-sentence answer to the question: “Scriptural Reasoning acquires its name from a conspicuous practice in Abrahamic traditions of turning to scriptural texts as a primary means of accessing the hearth of a given religious community.”⁶¹ Therefore, the most basic answer to the question “Why Scripture?” involves the recognition that to understand religious believers and communities, at some point one has to read and study the canon of texts that those believers and communities take as authoritative.

What does it look like, in practice, to treat Scripture in the ways being described? Ochs claims,

SR tends to engage participants from very different and often antagonistic text traditions in increasingly binding relations as co-readers. When first entering an SR circle, traditionally religious participants tend to bring with a presumption of monovalence: that they know the meanings of individual of individual terms and verses in their traditional readings of Scripture and that, therefore, those who offer different meanings have misread their texts.... [M]onovalent reading accompanies both cool and hot, or stressful, relations among members of different religious groups and a cooling off of hot ones.... [SR] does not, however, imply any loosening of devotion to a traditional religion or to the authority of Scripture. To the contrary, it signals intimacy with Scripture and with those who share in reading Scripture: an intimacy that frees traditional readers to experiment, modestly, with Scripture’s range of potential meaning so that, when the context of reading calls for decision or action, readers have greater trust that their context-specific decisions and commitments are guided by the most reliable readings.⁶²

In terms of the practice of SR, Ochs gets a bit ahead of himself in this final sentence. The interpretations that arise in SR neither inevitably nor necessarily lead to making better decisions and performing rightful actions within the world. Ochs’s confidence in the pragmatist side of SR is my only concern with the arguments found in *Religion without Violence*. What would be the problem with the more modest claim that SR simply allows for and encourages multiple interpretations to be placed on the metaphorical table in order to entertain potential meanings of

⁶¹ Ochs, *Religion without Violence: The Philosophy and Practice of Scriptural Reasoning* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Press, 2019), 18; hereafter, cited as *RWV*.

⁶² Ochs, *RWV*, 22.

the scriptural passages located on the literal table of where the participants sit together? This question reflects what I mean by emphasizing SR a playful practice.⁶³

Conclusion: Surprise and Wonder in SR

In Ochs's reflections on SR, we find a real Peircean struggle between pragmatism and semiotics. On the one hand, Ochs wants to promise certain outcomes for individual SR participants. On the other hand, such promises violate the emphasis on Scripture (individual passages for study) and the overall justification for SR: SR is a practice that is good in itself and not because it serves particular ends. Ochs's struggle displays and repeats two key features of Peirce's own philosophy: the *pragmatist* emphasis on potential conceptual and practical consequences⁶⁴ vs. the encouragement of playfulness within thinking—especially within the philosophy of religion and theological reasoning—that captures Peirce's *semiotics*.⁶⁵ In other words, when reflecting upon SR, Ochs struggles between the playfulness of Peirce's semiotics vs. the purposefulness of Peirce's pragmatism. This tension has created and led to many fruitful and significant disagreements within the Society of Scriptural Reasoning concerning what SR is mostly about.

In terms of the relationship between playfulness, Scripture, and semiotics in Ochs's reflections on SR, I argue that Ochs rightfully claims the “*Scriptural text is the primary teacher*”⁶⁶ within the practice of SR. When the “Scriptural text [becomes] the primary teacher,” then “Scripture and reader meet each other at comparable depths.”⁶⁷ When I say that the pragmatist side violates SR's emphasis on Scripture and the significance of individual passages for study, I mean that the pragmatist side potentially distracts us from achieving this depth.

It seems to me that Ochs talks about this depth by employing three different vocabularies, all of which make comparable points and offer similar distinctions:

From Peirce's Pragmatism: Depth Historiography and Pragmatic Reading

From Rabbinic Judaism: *peshat* and *derash*

From Christian Theology: *Sensus Literalis* and Spiritual Sense⁶⁸

⁶³ For the opposite argument—that SR is *not pragmatist enough*—see Brad Elliott Stone, “Making Religious Practices Intelligible in the Public Sphere: A Pragmatist Evaluation of Scriptural Reasoning,” in *Journal of Scriptural Reasoning* 10, no. 2 (2011), <https://jsr.shanti.virginia.edu/back-issues/volume-10-no-2-december-2011-public-debate-and-scriptural-reasoning/making-religious-practices-intelligible-in-the-public-sphere/>.

⁶⁴ See Peirce, “How to Make Our Ideas Clear,” in *The Essential Peirce, Volume 1: Selected Philosophical Writings, 1867–1893*, ed. Houser and Kloesel (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), 124–40.

⁶⁵ See Peirce, “A Neglected Argument for the Reality of God,” in *The Essential Peirce, Volume 2: Selected Philosophical Writings, 1893–1913*, ed. by the Peirce Edition Project (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), 434–50.

⁶⁶ Ochs, *RWV*, 25.

⁶⁷ Ochs, *RWV*, 27.

⁶⁸ Here, I follow Gary Slater's keen observation that “in Ochs's distinction plain-sense historiography and pragmatic historiography a replay of his [Ochs's] understandings of *peshat* and *derash*, and the sense in which one's explicit inquiries presuppose implicit guiding principles as central to the methodology of Scriptural Reasoning more generally” (Slater, *C. S. Peirce and the Nested Continua Model*, 136). To Slater's summary, I add the terms *Sensus Literalis* and spiritual sense from Christian theology. For Ochs's use of these terms, see Ochs, *PSI*, 3–53.

According to Ochs, SR allows for readers to engage with passages from the Scriptures on all of these levels. Usually, an SR session begins by highlighting what the specific tradition says is the plain sense of the passage being studied together—participants can decide to take that sense as authoritative, as a guide, or as an initial interpretation. Within a session of SR, readers move between what seems to be “the meaning of the text in its...literary context” and possible deeper or surprising meanings of the passage.⁶⁹ In fact, after the traditional plain sense is offered by one of the participants, the next question that often arises within an SR session is: *does someone want to start by saying what surprises them about this passage?*

In SR sessions, the word ‘surprise’ functions analogously to how the word ‘wonder’ operates within ancient and medieval philosophy. “Philosophy begins in wonder” has become a pedagogical cliché, but it remains quite significant when understood in its original sources. First, in Plato’s *Theaetetus*:

SOCRATES: I believe that you follow me, Theaetetus; for I suspect that you have thought of these questions before now.

THEAETETUS: Yes, Socrates, and I am amazed when I think of them; by the gods I am! And I want to know what on earth they mean; and there are times when my head quite swims with the contemplation of them.

SOCRATES: I see, my dear Theaetetus...that you were a [true] philosopher, for wonder is the feeling of a philosopher, and philosophy begins in wonder. He was not a bad genealogist who said that Iris (the messenger of heaven) is the child of Thaumás (wonder).⁷⁰

Second, in his *Metaphysics*, Aristotle claims that philosophy begins in wonder because wonder is what makes human beings ask questions; without questions, there would be no philosophy. Third, in his commentary on Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*, Thomas Aquinas furthers Aristotle’s reasoning on the subject matter: “Because philosophy arises from awe, a philosopher is bound in his way to be a lover of myths and poetry. Poets and philosophers are alike in being big with wonder.”⁷¹

In SR sessions, this kind of wonder gets nurtured by carefully and closely reading small passages from the sacred texts of the Abrahamic traditions. The word SR practitioners tend to use for this is ‘surprise’: what surprises you from or in this small passage? In philosophical terms, what aspect of this passage leads you to wonder—and would you mind wondering aloud about it for a bit? As Aristotle suggests, what surprises us in a passage might be best stated as a question. As Thomas Aquinas defends, what surprises us in a passage might be best stated as a poetic part of the passage—a part of the passage that was neither read nor seen *as poetic* in previous

⁶⁹ Ochs, *RWW*, 25.

⁷⁰ Plato, *Theaetetus*, trans. Benjamin Jowett, <http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/theatu.html>.

⁷¹ Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on Aristotle’s Metaphysics*, trans. Richard J. Blackwell (Topeka: Dumb Ox Press, 1995), 1.

readings of the same passage. Allowing for and encouraging expressions of awe, surprise, and wonder make SR primarily a practice of playfulness—not one of purposefulness.

In conclusion, I claim that Ochs envisions SR as achieving depth and wonder more in the sense we find in Plato's *Theaetetus* than what we gain from Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas. When Ochs says, "Scripture and reader meet each other at comparable depths,"⁷² he means in Plato's terms that a "child of...wonder" meets a "messenger from heaven."⁷³ Within Ochs's understanding of SR, the patterns and words found in the Abrahamic Scriptures represent "messenger[s] from heaven," whereas participants in SR should think of themselves as "children of wonder." The significance of the question—does someone want to start by saying what *surprises* them about or in this passage?—cannot and should not be understated or underappreciated for what it means to participate in an SR session. From Ochs's perspective, this question invites the children of wonder (SR participants) to communally and publicly access messages from heaven (the patterns and words of Scripture).

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⁷² Ochs, *RWV*, 27.

⁷³ Plato, *Theaetetus*.