

# On reading pragmatically: a delayed response to Peter Ochs\*

*Leitura pragmática: uma resposta tardia a Peter Ochs*

Michael L. Raposa\*\*

**Abstract:** This essay represents a long-delayed response to comments made by Peter Ochs about my proposal for a Peircean philosophical theology conceived as “theosemiotic.” The outline for that proposal first appeared in 1989, with Ochs’s remarks included in a 1992 article and then in a book published in 1998. More than two decades have passed since the last of these publications, but the recent completion of a long-term project that pursues and develops my earlier proposal in a book-length manuscript makes revisiting Ochs’s comments seem felicitous. Here I try to explore both the affinities and divergences between theosemiotic and Ochs’s own constructive articulation of a “rabbinic pragmatism.” While both perspectives emphasize the theological significance of reading and rereading, they incorporate differing evaluations of these practices.

**Keywords:** Ochs. Peirce. Pragmatism. Reading. Suffering. Theosemiotic.

**Resumo:** *Este ensaio representa uma resposta longamente adiada aos comentários feitos por Peter Ochs a respeito de minha proposta para uma teologia filosófica peirciana concebida como “teossemiótica”. O esboço para essa proposta apareceu primeiramente em 1989, com as observações de Ochs incluídas em um artigo de 1992 e, depois, em um livro publicado em 1998. Mais de duas décadas se passaram desde a última dessas publicações, mas a recente conclusão de um projeto de longo prazo que prossegue e desenvolve minha proposta inicial em um manuscrito do tamanho de um livro revisitando os comentários de Ochs parece apropriado. Aqui, tento explorar tanto as afinidades quanto as divergências entre a teossemiótica e a articulação construtiva do próprio Ochs de um “pragmatismo rabínico”. Enquanto ambas as perspectivas enfatizam a significância teológica de uma leitura e releitura, elas incorporam avaliações diferenciadas dessas práticas.*

**Palavras-chave:** *Leitura. Ochs. Peirce. Pragmatismo. Sofrimento. Teossemiótica.*

---

\* This essay is the significantly expanded version of a paper presented at the annual meeting of the Semiotic Society of America in Portland, Oregon, on October 12, 2019.

\*\* Professor at Department of Religion Studies, Lehigh University, USA. Email: mlr0@lehigh.edu.

Data de recebimento: 05/05/2020

Data de aceite: 02/06/2020

DOI: 10.23925/2316-5278.2020v21i1p99-111

## 1 Introduction

In his magisterial 1998 study of *Peirce, Pragmatism, and the Logic of Scripture*, Peter Ochs included some generous but also gently critical remarks concerning my earlier portrayal of a Peircean philosophical theology conceived as “theosemiotic.”<sup>1</sup> Within the book, Ochs’s evaluation appears in its most concentrated form both in a discussion of certain “theosemiotic foundations” in Peirce’s Neglected Argument and then later in a direct address under the heading “Dear Theosemioticians.”<sup>2</sup> Related comments had already been presented in a 1992 article published by Ochs in the *Journal of Religion* on “Theosemiotics (sic) and Pragmatism” (see OCHS, 1992, p. 59-81). To be clear, Ochs’s critique was primarily directed at Peirce’s argument and, by implication, my endorsement of it, rather than at my exegetical account of Peirce’s philosophy of religion. During the last two decades, the rationale for my endorsement has become more fully articulated; consequently, it seems timely to review Ochs’s thoughtful remarks.

The purpose of this essay is to formulate a dramatically overdue response to Ochs, one that emphasizes the important ways in which our projects overlap, but also how they differ. Central to my response will be a comparison of how Ochs and I read Peirce’s “Humble Argument;” this will require some consideration of the question about what it means for anything at all to be regarded appropriately as a “text.” In addition, and perhaps directly related to this question, is another one, about what it means to give an interpretation, also about how habits of interpretation are formed and modified. I want to note the importance of these questions, but will not be able to pursue them here.<sup>3</sup> I *will* need, however, to determine how and to what extent Ochs and I differ in our understanding of pragmatism. In doing so, I will supply a brief assessment of Ochs’s deep meditation on *suffering*, also, of his proposal that one of the primary purposes of pragmatic thinking is the attempt to *repair* those conditions that cause suffering. (This proposal is one that Ochs identifies with the project of what he calls a “compassionate theosemiotics”<sup>4</sup>). Finally, I intend to draw on Peircean semiotic resources in order to imagine the sort of intertextuality evidenced in the practices of individuals and communities committed to the careful reading and rereading *both* of scriptural texts and of the “book of nature.”

The essay is divided into two major sections. In the first of these, I intend to compare and contrast in more general terms the perspectives defined by theosemiotic

- 1 My proposal for a theosemiotic first appeared in a book on *Peirce’s philosophy of religion* (1989). Several years later, I supplied additional details in “Theology as Theosemiotic” (1992, p. 104-111).
- 2 OCHS, 1998. See, especially, pages 228-245 and 281-285.
- 3 I have explored such questions at length in my book on *Theosemiotic: religion, reading, and the gift of meaning*, 2020.
- 4 OCHS, 1992; see the discussion of “A Compassionate Theosemiotics” in the last section of that article on pages 78-81.

and rabbinic pragmatism. This discussion will supply the background for a closer examination in the second section of the Neglected Argument, not in all of its details, but most especially in terms of its “humility”, its portrayal of a practice of reading in which anyone, at least theoretically, might be able to engage. Without arguing that we all read in the same way, I want to suggest that there is a certain continuity that links these practices one to another. In very brief concluding remarks, I give some flesh to that suggestion.

## 2 Ochs’s critique of theosemiotic

It makes sense to begin by identifying at least a few key respects in which Ochs’s perspective and my own overlap. Beyond the obvious agreement that Peirce’s ideas are invaluable for the project of reconfiguring contemporary philosophical theology, there is a more determinate consensus that any such theology must consist in a discipline of *reading*, one that involves rather rigorous and consistent *rereading* among its central components. On Ochs’s view, if such reading is performed in the genuine spirit of pragmatism, it will lead to the repair of problems identified in the texts surveyed. This sets the agenda for his book on Peirce; that book is a careful review of selected writings produced by Peirce at various stages in his philosophical career, also a pragmatic attempt to address certain difficulties embodied in those writings. At the same time, Ochs portrays Peirce as being involved in a similar exercise, not only insofar as he offers pragmatic readings and repair of texts produced by earlier philosophers like Descartes and Kant, but also in his self-reading, as the discernment of unresolved tensions in earlier formulations of his thought stimulates the development of new ideas.

I am not interested, for present purposes, in how Ochs locates Peirce’s pragmatism within a narrative about modern philosophy beginning with Descartes and Cartesianism and extending to the present. From my own theosemiotic perspective, I conceive of reading as a form of disciplined practice, not always but most significantly as a spiritual exercise. Despite the other things that Ochs hoped to accomplish in his massive study of Peirce, he seems to agree on this point. It is by carefully and pragmatically reading that we are able to discern the nature and causes of suffering, by compassionate and continuous rereading that we are enabled to respond to suffering. On this view, Ochs suggests, Peirce was not wrong, but too restrictive when he identified *doubt* as the stimulus for inquiry. That is to say, “[...] there is at least a tradition of inquiry for which concern for suffering *ought* to stimulate scientific inquiry.” This tradition is “biblically based” and one for which the “love commandment” serves as a leading principle. Ochs explains that “from the perspective of this tradition, “doubt” is a naturalized locution for “suffering,” and “inquiry” is a naturalized locution for “compassionate response” (Ibid., p. 79).

This is an intriguing proposal and one for which I feel some measure of sympathy. Following the lead of my mentor, the late Murray Murphey, my evaluation of Peirce’s performance in his famous 1877 article on *The Fixation of Belief* tends to be a bit harsh. Like Ochs, I regard the doubt-belief theory of inquiry that Peirce presents in that article as being too narrow, failing to capture the various other ways in which inquiry might be motivated or initiated. At the same time, I want

to break more radically with Peirce's theory than Ochs appears to do. His view of pragmatism is still one that is essentially tied to the portrayal of inquiry as consisting in some form of "problem-solving." Whether the problem is a doubt that needs to be assuaged or another kind of suffering that needs to be addressed, for Ochs the pragmatic goal essentially consists in some form of "repair."

I want to avoid exaggerating this particular disagreement between Ochs and myself, but it does speak to the issue of how each of us understands the nature of pragmatism. Indeed, I think Ochs's position—to which he attaches "rabbinic pragmatism" as a label—stands midway between my own view and the way in which philosophical pragmatism is most typically characterized by others. On my reading, Peirce's rebranding of his philosophical perspective as "pragmaticism" in 1905, done so as to keep it safe from "kidnappers," was much more than a rhetorical move made with tongue-in-cheek. The anxiety motivating this name-change was quite real, and it would have been greatly intensified had he been able to anticipate how the word "pragmatism" would come to be used as a label by certain philosophers late in the twentieth century and now early in the twenty-first.<sup>5</sup> Yet Peirce himself is partially to blame for the misuse of that word because of the way that he caricatured his own position in *The Fixation of Belief*.

Doubt can most certainly function as a stimulus for inquiry, but it hardly represents the only possible one. Elsewhere, Peirce admits that this is the case. The hesitancy experienced as real doubt can to some extent be "feigned" for scientific purposes; moreover, the much milder irritation of *boredom* can sometimes be the motivation that initiates a process of inquiry.<sup>6</sup> I would press beyond such admissions, as they appeared in the form of self-criticism shortly after the publication of "Fixation," and point to the mature theory of inquiry embodied in Peirce's 1908 Neglected Argument, where inquiry is portrayed as beginning in the pure play of musement (CP 6.458ff., 6.486).<sup>7</sup> The practice of musement can hardly be reduced to an exercise in problem-solving; in fact, one can imagine how such a playful reconfiguration of ideas might result in the discovery of new problems where none had previously been thought to exist. (As a teacher of the humanities for nearly forty years now, this is the form of inquiry in which I most typically struggle to engage my students).

Returning to those issues on which Ochs and I have achieved a rough consensus, his understanding of what it means for anything to be regarded as a "text", thus, something the meaning of which is to be grasped by "reading," is sufficiently capacious to include the "book of nature", or what Peirce himself referred to as God's "great poem" (CP 5.119). If the universe is "perfused with signs", as Peirce described the natural world (CP 5.448, note 1), then its meaning can be gradually discerned, albeit only in fragments and by a vast community of interpreters engaged in the process of reading over a long period of time. Ochs distances himself, however,

---

5 I am thinking primarily of the sort of "neo-pragmatism" advocated by thinkers such as the late Richard Rorty and his student Robert Brandom.

6 Ochs himself clearly recognizes that Peirce identified such alternative scenarios in which inquiry might arise; see OCHS, 1998, p. 80.

7 See, also, CP 5.394, where Peirce, in an article published a year after "Fixation", is already qualifying his earlier argument.

both from Peirce's position and from my own adaptation of it for the purposes of a contemporary theosemiotic, in terms of how he understands the nature of such a community. On Ochs's view, "[...] philosophical inquiries belong to, and find their significance in, particular interpretive traditions" (OCHS, 1998, p. 75).

Here the emphasis should fall on the force of the word "particular" in Ochs's remark. The appeal made to a potentially "unlimited" community of inquiry, first by Peirce and later by Josiah Royce, is a move that Ochs must judge to be problematic. It provides evidence of the persistence of an *a priori* method of reasoning in Peirce's philosophy, one that stands in tension with Peirce's commitment to a pragmatic emphasis on inquiry as arising in a specific context, as someone in a particular community struggles to confront and resolve some determinate problem. Ochs gives voice to this judgement explicitly, for example, when he warns that the "theosemiotic displayed in Peirce's Neglected Argument could be adopted in an *a prioristic* and dogmatic fashion," while also accusing Peirce of "[...] failing to identify the particular community of meaning for which his notions of musement and abduction and sign theory have meaning" (OCHS, 1992, p. 67).

This is the central point of divergence between a theology conceived as theosemiotic and the perspective articulated and defended by rabbinic pragmatists, at least on Ochs's account. As he sees it, theosemiotic is committed to endorsing Peirce's appeal to instinct and the role that it plays in shaping the process of inquiry. While Peirce may frame the practice of musement as if it were a "mere experiment", nevertheless, Ochs insists that there are "dogmatic presuppositions" latent in the Neglected Argument (Ibid., p. 77). That the idea of God will sooner or later manifest itself in musement, once contemplated as a hypothesis, that the musier will be inclined to conform her conduct to it as an ideal—such presuppositions suggest that Peirce is here employing the "*a priori*" method of fixing belief, one that he criticized as inadequate in his 1877 article, arguing there that the scientific method offered the only reliable pathway to settling belief in the long run. To be sure, Ochs is not merely attempting to reinforce Peirce's earlier defense of the scientific method here against an array of alternatives. The rabbinic pragmatist is committed instead to a hermeneutical theory that portrays inquiry as always being conducted by the members of some historically identifiable community, always unfolding within "particular interpretive traditions." From such a point of view, the religious instinct that displays itself in musement is one that must be "dogmatically presupposed," and the notion of an experiment that could play out within a potentially "unlimited" community of interpreters is no more than a Peircean/Roycean fantasy. Is it ever really possible to prescind from one's participation in particular communities and traditions in order then to discern the meaning of God's "great poem?" In doing so, does one make a move that is decisively non-pragmatic and ahistorical, opting instead for an all-too-comfortable embrace of the *a priori* method?

In my development of the project that I call "theosemiotic", I have consistently plagiarized a specific biblical utterance attributed to St. Paul, adapting it for my own philosophical and theological purposes.<sup>8</sup> I do this whenever I argue that the strategy of musement involves the prescribed notion that one should "have all beliefs 'as though one did not have them.'" This strategy is quite different, I would want to

---

8 My reference is to Paul's letter to the Corinthians, 1 *Corinthians* 7: 29.

suggest, from simply neutralizing all of the beliefs that one in fact happens to have, as if one could remove all of one's culturally inherited habits of thought, feeling, and perception in order to then "skinny dip" in the book of nature. It is less a matter of *replacing* such beliefs with some biologically determined instinct like the natural tendency to believe in God than it is a matter of softening their typical hegemony by *playing* with them, rather than simply acting on them. In the process of musement, one must be "awake", ready for whatever might appear. To be sure, what *might* appear could be some habit, instinct, or tendency that otherwise and typically lies just beyond the margins of consciousness. There is nothing extraordinary about such a possibility. Free association in psychoanalysis and role playing in cognitive therapy are both ludic strategies designed to achieve a similar result.

While I have argued often and with emphasis that in order to be a Peircean pragmatist one must contend that semiosis cannot be reduced to language, I do not wish to deny that words and humanly constructed texts might have a special significance. A pragmatic refusal to drive a deep wedge between nature and culture should not be interpreted as a refusal to recognize any distinction between them at all. Nor would I want to insist that the idea of an "unlimited community" of interpretation in no way stretches the meaning of the word "community" beyond what it typically conveys when we apply it to specific historical groups and their traditions. Nevertheless, I have argued elsewhere that the post-liberal contrast (first drawn by George Lindbeck, but later endorsed by Peter Ochs) between "experiential-expressivist" and "cultural-linguistic" theories of religious doctrine is a problematic one.<sup>9</sup> I want to lobby for a religious naturalism that not only eschews any sharp distinction between nature and culture but also refrains from insisting on the priority of one over the other.<sup>10</sup> Rather than rehearse that argument here, however, it would be more productive given present purposes for me to supply a brief evaluation of Ochs's proposal for a "compassionate theosemiotics."

Consider the following claim:

For the compassionate inquirer, Peirce's universes of experience are integrated by what Peirce called the reality of love, not because any muser should be able to discover love in the universe (although this remains a possibility), but because any muser socialized in the biblical tradition *ought* to have learned to venture out into new worlds of experience for the sake of love (OCHS, 1998, p. 79).

---

9 Most recently in the fifth chapter on "Communities of Interpretation," in my book on *Theosemiotic*, as well as earlier in an article "On Being a Liberal Theologian in a Postliberal Age," 2014.

10 In this respect, theosemiotic displays some affinity with the sort of religious naturalism proposed and defended by Robert Neville in numerous publications, although it also contrasts with his perspective. For an appreciative critique of Neville's philosophical theology, see my remarks in "Praying the Ultimate: The Pragmatic Core of Neville's *Philosophical Theology*," 2019. For an insightful study that attempts to bring Neville and Ochs into conversation and develop a constructive theology incorporating elements from each of their perspectives, see SLATER, 2015.

My interest here most especially is in the parenthetical admission about the possibility of the musér falling in love with the universe, even feeling loved in return, apart from any special revelation or historical tradition shaping such a response. While Ochs curiously admits the possibility in this context, elsewhere he criticizes Peirce for just this kind of report. “When it was time for him to tell us how he knew that love was really out there,” Ochs complains, “he offered reports about his own intuitions” (Ibid., p. 61). In this instance, Ochs is referring to what Peirce expounded in his essay on evolutionary love. But Peirce makes a similar move in the Neglected Argument, communicating what he experiences as instinctive and then inviting others to test his instincts and intuitions by engaging in musement as an experiment.

From the perspective of theosemiotic, such an experiment is a valid one, although an extraordinarily difficult one to perform, requiring a skill that can only be acquired in the actual practice of continuously rereading the book of nature, moreover, if it is to have any inductive validity, requiring the participation of a vast number of individuals, over long periods of time and traversing a diversity of cultures and communities. Some readers will fall in love and others will not. Some will discern something vaguely personal at the heart of nature and others will perceive only a cold indifference. Each interpreter, each reader, will have to test her perceptions against those of others, whether they are similar, conflicting, or perhaps complementary.

Such an experiment, such inquiry, can never succeed if one pretends not to have the beliefs that one has, not to speak a certain language, participate in certain traditions, or belong to a specific community in some given historical time and place. The individual self-as-semiosis is not abandoned but enlarged when it enters into play. One does not have to be a Buddhist, much less a Christian, in order to perceive that suffering is woven everywhere into the fabric of human experience, a suffering exposed for anyone who has done the work in order to become fully awake to whatever appears. This suffering might also (although not necessarily) elicit a loving response in the form of compassion, very much like what Ochs suggests, for the properly socialized individual, *ought* to be the case. Here again we agree, except that I want to extend the range of that “ought”—think of it even as a divine command—beyond the confines of any particular tradition or community, without in any way denying the authenticity of its articulations in all such local spaces.

### 3 On the “humility” of the neglected argument

It is worth observing here that Peirce characterized the process of thought leading to belief in the reality of God as a “humble argument.” In doing so, he suggested that it was an argument that ought to be accessible to anyone, not just to persons belonging to certain communities or socialized in a particular fashion. It might take some repetition, a certain amount of practice or training in order to arrive at such a belief, but the conditions required in order to do so are otherwise minimal, with the criteria for success radically democratized on Peirce’s account. I want to link this account with Peirce’s more general architectonic theory of the sciences. Philosophy—and by extension the sort of philosophical theology that I would identify as theosemiotic—is included among those disciplines that Peirce classified



as “cenoscopic.” These are to be distinguished both from mathematics on the one hand, as a discipline that deals exclusively with hypothetical constructions, and the special sciences that Peirce labeled as “idioscopic” on the other hand. The latter appeal to special experiences or experiments that would not be readily accessible to or reproducible by just anyone. Cenoscopy, by way of contrast, “[...] contents itself with observations such as come within the range of every man’s normal experience, and for the most part in every waking hour of his life” (CP 1.241).

Having access to experiences made possible by looking through a telescope or a microscope, to be sure, is not quite the same thing as being privy to some special revelation embodied in a scriptural text or to the doctrines embraced by a particular community. Nevertheless, to the extent that theology is to be regarded as a discipline that is *philosophically* informed it will focus on only what might “[...] come within the range of every man’s normal experience [...]” (CP 1.241). Once again, this is not to deny that one’s membership in a specific, determinate community of inquiry will have a dramatic, shaping influence on how such experience will be interpreted. At the same time, no two persons—even in the case where they are members of the same community—will have experiences that are *identical* to each other. That I happen to be *this* homo sapiens rather than *that* one is enough to guarantee some difference in the way that the two of us experience the world. Our shared species-identity will mitigate but not altogether eliminate such differences. Our being bound together in a tightly-knit religious community, sharing many of the same beliefs and participating together in certain practices should be expected to increase the likelihood that our perspectives and interpretations will overlap. Having been nurtured by radically dissimilar communities and traditions would undoubtedly have a contrary effect; to completely ignore that effect when engaged in inquiry might indeed constitute something like the employment of an *a priori* method in its most egregiously naïve forms. I am arguing that Peirce was not that naïve, moreover, that no theology conceived as theosemiotic should be caricatured as utilizing such a method. Peirce insisted that we must begin any inquiry equipped with the beliefs that we actually happen to have at the time. My question is what that might actually mean, not just for any inquiry in which one happens to engage, but more specifically, for the person who practices musement.

One way of getting at what it might mean is to explore the claim that Peirce’s humble argument is best understood as an idiosyncratic form of the ontological argument, idiosyncratic in the sense that it is an *experimental, a posteriori* version of that argument. I have defended this claim in numerous places.<sup>11</sup> Here I want to focus almost exclusively on its character as “experimental” and “a posteriori”, rather than its characterization as “ontological”. This strategy makes the most sense in light of Ochs’s contention that Peirce is leaning heavily on the a priori method of fixing belief in his 1908 article.

Before executing this strategy, two things are worth noting. In the first place, despite his critique of the a priori method in his article on *The Fixation of Belief*, it is interesting to observe that Peirce later demurred, adding a qualifying sentence to the original article. There he admitted that “Indeed, as long as no better method can

11 Most recently, in the final chapter of *Theosemiotic*, as well as in “Peirce and Edwards on the Argument from Beauty,” 2020.



be applied, it ought to be followed, since it is then the expression of instinct which must be the ultimate cause of belief in all cases” (CP 5.383). This sentence was inserted in 1910, just two years after the publication of the Neglected Argument. The motivation for its insertion must have been Peirce’s steadily growing confidence (a confidence made explicit in the text of the Neglected Argument) about the significant role played by instinct in human reasoning. Indeed, this is the explicit form in which Peirce’s own peculiar version of religious naturalism displays itself.<sup>12</sup> Just as “flying and nest-building” are instinctive in birds (CP 6.476), there is a certain natural tendency for human beings to reason correctly, not in all or even in most instances, but just often enough to suggest the operative presence of an instinct for reasoning. If given free play (as it is by design in the practice of musement) that instinct will be likely sooner or later to produce a certain vague belief in God. Thirty years after his publication of *The Fixation of Belief*, Peirce is no longer sharply contrasting the a priori method with the method of science, but rather, integrating them. To be sure, Peirce’s “critical common-sensism” is a perspective that had evolved significantly in the intervening decades. Nevertheless, I would continue to insist that the position articulated in “Fixation” was a caricature of Peirce’s theory of inquiry even at the time that it was written and published.

Secondly, it is also worth noting how, at the beginning of the 1908 article, Peirce makes an interesting distinction between an “argument” and “argumentation” (CP 6.456). The former “is any process of thought tending to produce a definite belief,” while the latter is a specialized form of argument “proceeding upon definitely formulate premises.” The Humble Argument, isolated from the later commentary on its significance that Peirce also supplies, is clearly to be understood as an *argument*; musement is a process of thought naturally tending to produce belief in God. Nevertheless, it is not an “a priori” argument in either the sense that Peirce found problematic (as an appeal to individual tastes and preferences at the expense of failing to subject a belief to scientific scrutiny) or that Ochs eschews (as a method that abstracts from membership in an actual community and participation in concrete historical circumstances). It is a posteriori precisely in the sense that Peirce proposes musement as an experiment, specifies the rubrics for conducting such an experiment, and then invites his readers to test his results. Like any good experiment, no single test will be illuminating; it will need to be repeated, performed with regularity, and not by a single person but by as many as possible who are willing to act on Peirce’s invitation. The argument clearly makes an appeal to *experience*, but not one that is singular or isolated, as in the case of some special revelation. It is an experience that takes the form of a deliberate practice, once again, experience as *experiment*, available to anyone who is willing to engage in the practice.

This may seem to Ochs and others like a generous reading of Peirce’s Neglected Argument on my part; after all, Peirce never anywhere explicitly identifies musement as an experiment. My reading is made substantially more plausible, it seems to me, against the background supplied by Peirce’s phaneroscopy. This is the word that Peirce preferred to the use of “phenomenology”; in his classification of sciences, it is the first and most fundamental of cenoscopic disciplines, perched

---

12 See my recent argument in “Instinct and Inquiry: A Reconsideration of Peirce’s Mature Religious Naturalism,” 2018.

between mathematics and the normative sciences. Most significantly, in describing its practice Peirce issues an invitation that very closely resembles the invitation to musement in his Neglected Argument. Indeed, Peirce directly enjoins his reader to “repeat the author’s observations for himself, and decide from his own observations whether the author’s account of the appearances is correct or not.” In doing so, the inquirer must take “great effort [...] not to be influenced by any tradition, any authority, any reasons for supposing that such and such ought to be the facts.” The strenuousness of this effort is to some extent counter-balanced by the fact that the observations to be made are of those phenomena “perfectly familiar to everybody” (CP 1.286-287).

I think that a failure to properly evaluate such “invitations” is a failure to understand the spirit of classical pragmatism. For James and Dewey, as well as for Peirce, the scientific method was much too powerful and important for its employment to be restricted to the laboratories of physical scientists. Everyday human life is a laboratory, our ongoing encounters and experiences there forming the warp and woof of what can potentially become a rigorous form of inquiry, distinguished only by the fact that it is cenoscopic rather than idioscopic in nature. Much more could be said to convince *my* reader that this is the case, but I hope that it is just obvious that the classical pragmatists operated with a nuanced and capacious sense of what it means to “do science”. (Consider as one especially felicitous example, William James’s proposal for a “science of religions”).<sup>13</sup> Instead, let me direct some concluding remarks to an issue that may be more relevant here given the sort of critique of Peirce and theosemiotic that Peter Ochs has supplied.

#### 4 Final considerations

That issue involves Peirce’s urging his reader, as just quoted above, in making her inquiry “not to be influenced by any tradition.” This is precisely the sort of thing that rabbinic pragmatists are so deeply concerned about, namely, the illusion that inquiry can occur otherwise, anywhere except as embedded in a specific community and its traditions. My response to this concern will perhaps once again seem exceedingly generous to Peirce. I intend to be brief in my articulation of it, hoping that this conversation will continue elsewhere, and without too much further “delay.”

If one adopts a predominantly semiotic model for human inquiry—inquiry as reading and rereading, a search for the meaning of various signs—rather than as a form of problem-solving or repair, it makes a difference in terms of how one then evaluates the precise role of communities and traditions. These are not mutually exclusive models for inquiry and Ochs clearly wants to have it both ways. From a theosemiotic perspective, nevertheless, I want to emphasize the significance of the former over the latter. Problems arise for specific persons, in determinate places and communities, at particular points in history. Any theological inquiry focused on solution or repair will be dramatically shaped by such factors. The theological reading of a world “perfused with signs” will not occur independently of such factors but need not respond to them in the same way as exigencies. Peirce’s talk about not being “influenced” by traditions was perhaps infelicitous. Influence can take many

---

13 In his Gifford Lectures, 2004.

forms. The influence that is manifested by a specific, predetermined purpose or problem radically delimits the signs that one will tend to select as important in one's reading practices, as well as the meanings that one might entertain as plausible for those signs.

Our habits of reading (as well as a complex variety of related habits of attention, feeling, thought, and behavior) are decisively shaped by our participation in specific communities and traditions; no one appreciates this fact with greater passion and insight than a rabbinic pragmatist. Theosemioticians are also preoccupied with such habits, while further recognizing that their "influence" can be enslaving or empowering, more or less gentle. Gentleness is a precondition for the sort of inquiry-as-reading that occurs in musement. There are a variety of strategies for achieving it. Peirce described a form of meditation that flowers into a lively conversation both with the natural world and with oneself. A similar result can be achieved when that lively conversation includes other selves, most especially if it occurs between members of very different communities and traditions. (Perhaps no theologian has worked harder in recent decades to facilitate the latter kind of dialogue than Peter Ochs has). Rereading is a third strategy that deserves consideration. Continuous rereading of a text allows for the "testing" of entrenched habits of interpretation, and also for the inductive establishment of new ones.

In each case, the goal is to occupy a certain metasemiotic or metacognitive space, not just to think *with* signs but to think *about* signs and how we use them. Usage changes over time and meaning evolves or (as Peirce might say) it grows. That "love is as strong as death" is a biblical utterance that might be perceived as deeply meaningful when one first reads it, fade gradually in meaning upon constant rereading, but then take on a whole new level of meaning when it becomes incorporated into the funeral liturgy for one's deceased beloved. A Christian's understanding of the meaning of *jihad* might be dramatically transformed by extended conversation with a devout Muslim who communicates the intensity of her spiritual struggles. Meditative practices can enable us to see or listen differently, attend now to what was ignored, even develop affection or compassion for someone who was held in contempt. The fact that such practices (i.e., various forms of mindfulness meditation) have been appropriated by certain so called "third wave" contemporary psychotherapies indicates their efficacy for reducing the suffering that takes the form of psychic pain. But the primary goal of this kind of therapy is *acceptance* rather than some type of solution or repair. Given the sort of meliorism that we associate with classical pragmatism, one might be puzzled by such a goal, even judge it to be non-pragmatic. Yet, I have argued elsewhere that philosophical pragmatism supplies considerable and unexplored resources for that kind of approach to psychotherapy.<sup>14</sup>

The debate between religious naturalism and postliberal theology is often portrayed as being about whether one demands special priority for the "book of nature" or for the Bible, that is, a decision about which text is to supply the interpretive key for understanding the other. Although I have identified theosemiotic as a species of religious naturalism, it is rather idiosyncratic in that respect, chastened by postliberal criticisms of some of the cruder forms of natural theology and "experiential expressivism." (Like Ochs, I was deeply influenced by George

---

14 In the fourth chapter of *Theosemiotic*, on "Theology as Inquiry, Therapy, Praxis."

Lindbeck, having been his student both at Yale College and the Divinity School.) What I have called for in developing my proposal for a theosemiotic is a new understanding of the sort of intertextuality that such a theology demands. This understanding focuses attention on the act of reading as ubiquitous in human experience, on persons and communities both as readers of texts and as texts to be interpreted. The book of nature and the book of scripture do not sit side by side as if on a library shelf. They do not address each other but are only linked insofar as individual readers and communities engage their meanings.

Here the distinction between intertextuality and intratextuality seems somewhat blurred. If the entire universe is God's "great poem," as Peirce suggested (CP 5.119), then there is no getting "outside" of such a text in order to place it in "conversation" with other books or narratives. This is not to insist that the book of nature trumps all other texts, however, because there is no way of reading it that is not always already shaped by all of our other reading experiences, by every text and person that we have encountered, every meaning discerned. As we attempt to make sense of the world that surrounds us, rather than drowning in a cacophony of noise, Peirce proposed to his reader certain "rules for discernment," a strategy for deeper looking and listening, an experiment to test what might therefore be revealed. It is not dramatically different from a great many strategies (supplying rubrics for prayer and meditation) devised by numerous religious communities and traditions, at various points in human history.

From a theosemiotic perspective, the invitation to such an experiment—while all such invitations should be critically evaluated, in this case, perhaps, appealing to an extraordinarily sophisticated and nuanced economics of research—ought to be given the most serious consideration. To do otherwise would simply be to block the road to inquiry.

## References

JAMES, William. *The varieties of religious experience*. New York: Barnes & Noble Classics, 2004.

OCHS, Peter. *Peirce, pragmatism, and the logic of scripture*. Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1998.

OCHS, Peter. Theosemiotics and Pragmatism. *The Journal of Religion*, v. 72, n. 1, p. 59-81, Jan. 1992.

PEIRCE, Charles S. *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*. Edited by HARTSHORNE, C. WEISS, P. & BURKS, A. W. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1931-1958. 8 v. [Cited as CP followed by volume number and paragraph].

RAPOSA, Michael L. *Theosemiotic: religion, reading, and the gift of meaning*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2020.

RAPOSA, Michael L. Peirce and Edwards on the Argument from Beauty. In: GULICK, Walter; SLATER, Gary (ed.). *American aesthetics: theory and practice*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2020, p. 59-74.

RAPOSA, Michael L. Praying the ultimate: the pragmatic core of Neville's *Philosophical Theology*. *American Journal of Theology and Philosophy*, v. 40, n. 3, p. 49-64, Sep. 2019.

RAPOSA, Michael L. Instinct and inquiry: a reconsideration of Peirce's mature Religious Naturalism. In: BAGGER, Matthew (ed.). *Pragmatism and naturalism: scientific and social inquiry after representationalism*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2018, p. 27-43.

RAPOSA, Michael L. On Being a Liberal Theologian in a Postliberal Age. *The Heythrop Journal*, v. 55, n. 3, p. 455-466, May 2014.

RAPOSA, Michael L. Theology as Theosemiotic. *Semiotics 1992: Proceedings of the Seventeenth Annual Meeting of the Semiotic Society of America*, p. 104-111, Sep. 1993.

RAPOSA, Michael L. *Peirce's philosophy of religion*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989.

SLATER, Gary, *C. S. Peirce & nested continua model of religious interpretation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015.