Theology and Semiotics

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Theology is at an impasse.

Modern apologetic theology that construes God in terms of the self-possessed self has failed. It is clearer than ever that its talk of God cannot give an account how God is other than our own feelings or ideas. The successors of liberal apologetic theology are now mainly interested in social and political ideology and, while they sometimes mention God, they make little pretense of actually being interested in God or clarifying what they mean by God. Theology—speech about God—can hardly proceed if one is not actually interested in speaking God. In any case, the empty pews in many churches are evidence that the God of modern apologetic theology is no longer compelling for people, or at least that the church and its proclamation are not necessary for having some kind of relationship with whomever one's God may be.

The conservative reaction to modernism fights for the objective truth of God, but it, too, can only make its case on the basis of the self-possessed self. Because the common rationality that the Enlightenment assumed has proved to be an illusion, conservative apologetics based on that rationality fail. Facing stubborn rejection, such apologists are left with two alternatives. They can withdraw into isolated cultural enclaves that share the same truth (a "biblical worldview"). Or they can try to conquer society by imposing their worldview through political force. Both choices (and they are not necessarily mutually exclusive) constitute a hostility to the world that betrays the bankruptcy of conservative theology .

In the last century, Karl Barth attempted to lay down the apologetic weapons of modern theology.[1] He eschewed apologetic theology in order to speak unapologetically of God as God, and exposited the Bible and the Christian tradition accordingly. But he, too, could only theologize from the perspective of the self-possessed self. His theology is rich and suggestive, but in the end it failed to connect with modern people. His successors continue on the same track. They seem to think that it's enough merely to assert God, as if in capital letters, thinking that God will do the work of asserting God's own reality by virtue of God's Word. But they mostly find

1. Gary Dorrien, *The Barthian Revolt in Modern Theology: Theology without Weapons* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000).

themselves preaching into the air. In the end, the Barthian revolution in theology gained nothing decisive for proclaiming the gospel to modern people.[2]

The problem is that theology inevitably operates within some kind of general account of human being within the world. Traditional theology based on the metaphysics inherited from antiquity must, despite all reservations, finally assign God some kind of being, which determines ahead of time what it is possible for God to be and to do. This spurred the nominalist revolution in the late medieval period, which tried to free God from such constraints, provoking a chronic spiritual crisis. The Reformation was largely a movement to set people within the Biblical narrative in order to free them from this nominalist God. But the Reformation could not for the most part escape the traditional metaphysics that caused the crisis in the first place. With the advent of modernity, theology cast off traditional metaphysics in favor of an analysis of subjectivity. But the supposed necessity of the God found in human subjectivity quickly breaks down in the modern secular age, in which belief in God is optional, a personal choice. This is not to say that religion has died out. Modern people do indeed live with a transcendental backdrop to their lives; there is *something* people are trying to get in touch with, whether an ineffable oneness with all things or a ground for the reliability of our reasoning or something else. But modern people have only are their own individual beliefs and feelings. There is no road from individual beliefs and feelings to *public* truth—and truth is by definition public. Merely eschewing metaphysics gets us nowhere in our attempt to speak of God. Martin Heidegger's work has been the most influential attempt to critique metaphysics and bring philosophy down to earth. However, his resolutely atheistic presuppositions mean that he can never make theology intelligible except as a study of human believing and of the "God" of that human believing, leaving the truth claims that faith makes about God unanswered, since those claims can only be made as determinations of Dasein.[3]

But decades before Heidegger, the American philosopher and polymath Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914) provided a much more promising way for theology. He picked up a thread of thought left by the medieval scholastics and developed it into a truly new start in philosophy, which he called *semiotics*, the doctrine of signs. This doctrine of signs provides a way of asserting that truth is one and therefore public, so that theology carries on its work within the same epistemic realm as other sciences and it does so in a way that reveals both the constraints under which they work and energizes them with the freedom to unfold the richness

2. Bonhoeffer thought that Barth, despite having made a good beginning in his critique of religion, lapsed into a "positivism of revelation." As he wrote, "For the working person or any person who is without religion, nothing decisive has been gained here." Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, vol. 9, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), 362–65.

3. See Jean-Luc Marion, *God without Being*, trans. Thomas A. Carlson (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2012), 61–73.

of the universe. This paper makes the case that Peirce's doctrine of signs enables theology to articulate its true theme: the interpretation of *the* sign, Jesus Christ as the union of ungodly human and the God who justifies the ungodly. The doctrine of signs gives us a way of advancing Luther's great theme, opening up a vista for the future of theology and promising a renewal of preaching, of the church, of the church's public witness, and of the academy.

A Doctrine of Signs

But before we can catch sight of this vista, we must sketch Peirce's doctrine of signs.

We ask first: What is a sign? Reflection on signs traces back to ancient medicine. Physicians learn how to interpret symptoms as signs of an underlying disease in order to prescribe the correct treatment. So, for example, the physician observes spots on the patient's face and interprets them as a sign that the patient has measles. The spots themselves are not the disease, but *signify* to the physician the disease that causes the spots. Signs of this sort have a physical connection to that which they signify, in the same way that smoke is a sign of fire.

It was Augustine, precisely in reflecting on the interpretation of Scripture, who inaugurated reflection on signs in and of themselves by giving a general definition of signs. He defined a sign as "a thing which, over and above the impression it makes on the senses, causes something else to come into the mind as a consequence of itself."[4] He recognized two kinds of signs: natural signs, such as smoke or footprints, and conventional signs , which "are those which living beings mutually exchange for the purpose of showing, as well as they can, the feelings of their minds, or their perceptions, or their thoughts."[5] He concedes that other creatures may use signs for this purpose, but he is chiefly interested in human words as signs, since he is addressing the issue of interpreting the Scriptures. It is true that our Lord gave signs that are not words as signs of his will, such as the sacrament of his body and blood. However, these are signs that can be put into words, whereas one could "by no effort express words in terms of those signs."[6] In other words, bread and wine by themselves cannot tell the story of the Last Supper unless they are joined to the Word, as they are in the sacrament.

Augustine's reflections spurred a tradition of reflection on signs in Latin philosophy. A major discovery of medieval philosophy was that relations have being, regardless of whether the terms of the relation are external to the mind or internal to it. This applies to the relations created by signs; they have being and they are

4. Augustine of Hippo, *On Christian Doctrine* (*De Doctrina Christiana, iv libri*), trans. J.F. Shaw (Paris: Books on Demand, 2018), ii,1.

5. Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, ii, 2.

6. Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, ii, 3.

real. The nominalists, who denied that concepts are real, did not notice that concepts "cannot be without making us aware of something besides themselves unless relations be admitted as suprasubjective modes (that is, as modes that need not be themselves objectified in order to be.)"[7] The way beyond the nominalist impasse was pointed out by the late scholastic John Poinsot (1589-1644), who sharply distinguished between representation and signification. A thing may represent itself, but a sign represents another than itself. Therefore, the being proper to a sign is *the relation as such*. "Signification is always something over and above its foundation in some individual being or material object, something superordinate thereto, something of its very nature *intersubjective*, either actually or prospectively."[8] Signs are about how the world is known in that it is *communicated*. Signs are indifferent to their foundation. The foundation may be material, psychological, natural or cultural, instrumental or formal. It may even be false. The sign relation is real regardless of the nature or even the reality of its terms.

By the time of Poinsot, however, the dye was cast for a radical break in philosophy. Reflection on signs, rooted in Augustine's concern for interpreting the Scriptures and the Sacraments, was cut off, along with the whole of Latin philosophy, in order to free the individual self for exploration of the world unburdened by any intersubjective authority. Except for a brief mention by John Locke at the very end of his *Essay concerning Human Understanding*,[9] which he never followed up on, the doctrine of signs remained dormant in western philosophy until Peirce took it up again.

Peirce probably did not read Poinsot, but he did read Aquinus and Scotus and other medieval Latins. It was on this basis that he was able gradually to break with modernity and become what might be called the first "post-modern" philosopher. He learned enough from the scholastics to realize that signs are essentially *triadic*. Upon first reflection it would seem that they are dyadic: a sign stands for something else and so there are two elements. But the scholastic reflection had made clear that the sign consists also, and most essentially, of the relation between the two elements. In a late writing, Peirce gives a concise definition of a sign:

> I define a sign as anything which is so determined by something else, called its Object, and so determines an effect upon a person, which effect I call its Interpretant, that the latter is thereby mediately determined by the former.[10]

He goes on to clarify that he uses the word "person" as a concession to those who will not understand the more general "*interpretant*." The interpretant is an inherent

7. John Deely, *Four Ages of Understanding: The First Postmodern Survey of Philosophy from Ancient Times to the Turn of the Twenty-First Century* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001), 392.

8. Deely, *Four Ages of Understanding*, 431.

9. John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Peter Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 720–21.

10. Charles Sanders Peirce, *The Essential Peirce: Selected Philosophical Writings*, ed. Peirce Edition Project, Volume II (1893-1913) (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1998), 478.

part of the sign, whereas a person as interpreter may or may not be involved. The interpretant is the effect that the sign has in relation to the object, which may be actual in a person, but which may be only potential, a "would-be," as Peirce called it. The interpretant, in turn, is a second sign, determined in a particular way by the first sign. Peirce's definition of "interpretant" is as follows:

> Any sign, *B*, which a sign, *A*, is fitted to determine, without violation of its, *A*'s, purpose, that is in according with the "Truth," even though it, *B*, denotes but a part of the objects of the sign, *A*, and signifies but a part of its, *A*'s, characters, I call an *interpretant* of *A*.[11]

Despite the rather awkward language, the concept is quite straightforward and can perhaps be made clearer with a concrete example. Suppose sign A is "Susan is a theology student." The purpose of this sign, its "truth," is the fact that Susan is a theology student. Susan qualified as a theology student is the object of the sign, that for which the sign stands. Sign B is the relation that sign A sets up between itself and Susan. The being of this relation is the truth thus expressed, namely, that she is a theology student, which the sign is fitted to determine but which, of course, is not the whole of who or what Susan is. The interpretant guarantees the objectivity of the sign by relating it to its object. The interpretant is, in turn, a new sign (sign B) ready to be taken up into discourse by anyone who cares to do so, multiplying the signs that qualify who and what Susan is, including, perhaps, finding out that some are false. So the interpretant is a sign that in turn produces a new interpretant, and so on, constantly being tested against the object of the sign, Susan herself. Reality is the regularity that emerges from this series of signs, which is, however, only approached asymptotically in the sign relation because we never get beyond sign relations.

Thus, human beings find themselves in the midst of a stream of signs; as Deely says, we are floating in a river of signs, with no access to the bottom or the banks, in the midst of what seems to be "an infinite process, not a hopeless or self-defeating one, by any means, but neither is it one over which the individual can gain a complete critical control."[12]

But all the signs purport to signify the world as its really is. The question is: How can we know?

Pierce's answer is what he called *pragmaticism*. The usual term is "pragmatism," a school of thought he helped originate, but he later wished to distinguish his version of pragmatism from that of his colleagues and so invented the term "pragmaticism." The more usual pragmatism stays within the realm of the modern self-possessed self and aims to solve the problem of truth by defining the truth of a proposition as the behavior that it funds. Peirce goes deeper. He does indeed affirm the maxim of pragmatism:

11. Peirce, *The Essential Peirce*, Volume II:304.

12. Deely, *Four Ages of Understanding*, 644.

> Pragmatism is the principle that every theoretical judgment expressible in a sentence in the indicative mood is a confused form of thought whose only meaning, if it has any, lies in its tendency to enforce a corresponding practical maxim expressible as a conditional sentence having its apodosis in the imperative mood.[13]

And he concedes that such a philosophy may lead to success. "But," he writes, "it does not at all follow that its conclusions are true."[14] He wants to establish a framework for ascertaining truth that is beyond the judgments we make about statements. All the three "normative sciences" consist in making such judgments by distinguishing the good from the bad. Esthetics distinguishes what is admirable from that which is not, ethics distinguishes the good to which our wills are to be oriented from evil, and logic, which is the application of ethics to thought, distinguishes the true from the false. What is necessary to ground all of these is a science that does not draw any distinctions between the good and the bad, "but just contemplates phenomena as they are, simply opens its eyes and describes what it sees."[15] This science is *phenomenology*.

In delineating his phenomenology, Peirce takes the daring step of proposing *three new categories*. Aristotle's categories map mind-independent being, by the use of which one can make unequivocal predications. Kant's categories are the means by which the mind constructs phenomena for itself based on sensory inputs. Peirce's categories are what we must take into account in order to understand the particularly human way of being in the world. They reveal the way by which, through the action of signs, our world transcends the limits of a mere animal environment and becomes the world of signs that we live in, the human *Lebenswelt*. All living things, perhaps all things whatsoever, exist by means of signs. But humans are the only ones who know that there *are* signs and know themselves in a world of signs. Peirce's three new categories are the parameters of the river of signs within which we live.

Peirce's phenomenology is founded on the "Conditional or Hypothetical Science of *Pure Mathematics*, whose only aim is to discover not how things actually are, but how they might be supposed to be."[16] This explains the mathematical starting point for his new categories, which he set out early in his career. Everything rests on a consideration of the ordinal numbers. "First," by its very nature, requires a "Second" in order to be First. And Second, in turn, is in relation to First, and that relation forms a Third. All further ordinal numbers can similarly be analyzed as triads. A Fourth, for example, is Second to Third, which is the First in the triad and the relation between Third and Fourth is a Third. Peirce takes the triad as fundamental, and therefore calls his new categories, simply, Firstness, Secondness, and Thirdness.

13. Peirce, *The Essential Peirce*, Volume II:134–35.

14. Peirce, *The Essential Peirce*, Volume II:139.

15. Peirce, *The Essential Peirce*, Volume II:143.

16. Peirce, *The Essential Peirce*, Volume II:144.

Firstness is the human capacity to render the perceptual world intelligible. It is what Aquinas termed the *ens ut primum cognitum*, "being as first known." Firstness is our capacity to grasp the essence of things, not by direct intuition, but by relating things to themselves. This relation is what cognition adds to perception, which enables us to live in a world perfused with signs and to know ourselves as living in that world. For example, imagine I sit down to an appetizing meal. The sight and smell of the meal itself are natural signs, such as other creatures may also apprehend, representing, among other things, feelings of satiation and satisfaction. But in addition, I can receive a whole host of other signs in connection with the meal, such as thoughts about the conditions under which it was produced, or memories of past occasions when I ate the same dishes, or questions about whether this food is good for my health. I have the capacity to apprehend the meal within a complex of signs, which lead to other signs, which lead to other signs, and so on. This is the uniquely human life-world in which we live. It is the means by which we construct worlds beyond what is merely presented to us by perception. The understanding does indeed find relations among things presented by perception, but it also constructs relations of its own and it is *all* these relations as such that are the world we call culture.

But Firstness as such is *potentiality only*; all representations of it already go beyond it. Firstness is

> present and immediate, so as not to be second to a representation...What the world was to Adam on the day he opened his eyes to it, before he had drawn any distinctions, or had become conscious of his own existence—that is first, present, immediate, fresh, new initiative, original, spontaneous, free, vivid, conscious, and evanescent. Only, remember that every description of it must be false to it.[17]

Because of Firstness, I can come into objective relation to the world. But, just because "mind-dependent and mind-independent relations are univocal in their being as *objective relations*,"[18] Firstness includes the possibility that I may indeed live in the relation as real, but be mistaken about the reality of the object of that relation. Signs may be false or we may misinterpret them. Firstness is mere possibility and gives no guarantees ahead of time that a sign-relation will correspond to the reality of the object.

Secondness is what happens when we bump into reality. Secondness is the last, which cannot exist apart from the First of Firstness. "It meets us in such facts as Another, Relation, Compulsion, Effect, Dependence, Independence, Negation, Occur-

17. Charles Sanders Peirce, *The Essential Peirce: Selected Philosophical Writings*, ed. Nathan Houser and Christian Kloesel, vol. Volume 1 (1867-1893) (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1992), 248.

18. Deely, *Four Ages of Understanding*: 658.

rence, Reality, Result."[19] I run up against hard facts that "I cannot think away," something that is "there," so that I am forced to acknowledge "a second beside myself."[20]

The immediate result is *Thirdness*, which brings Firstness and Secondness into relationship. "Between the beginning as first, and the end as last, comes the process which leads from first to last."[21] Peirce suggests that we think of the first and second as two points on a line, say on a yardstick, then conceive of these points as the absolute First and the absolute Second, or Last. But both the absolute First and the absolute Second recede out of our grasp and "there is no absolute third, for the third is of its own nature relative, and this is what we are always thinking even when we aim at the first or second."[22] We cannot talk about Firstness without reference to a Second, and hence find ourselves in that which mediates them, the relation between them, which is the Third. In other words, we inevitably find ourselves in the middle, in a world perfused with signs. This places us before a fundamental decision, a faith decision:

> The starting-point of the universe, God the Creator, is the Absolute First; the terminus of the universe, God completely revealed, is the Absolute Second; every state of the universe at a measurable point of time is the third. If you think the measurable is all there is and deny it any definite tendency whence or whither, then you are considering the pair of points that makes the absolute to be imaginary and are an Epicurean. If you hold there is a definite drift to the course of nature as whole, but yet believe its absolute end is nothing but the nirvana from which it set out, you make the two points of the absolute to be coincident, and are a pessimist. But if your creed is that the whole universe is approaching in the infinitely distant future a state having a general character different from that toward which we look back in the infinitely distant past, you make the absolute to consist of two distinct real points and are an evolutionist.[23]

Because we find ourselves in the middle moving through time, Peirce concludes that the Absolute First and the Absolute Second are real and distinct and that the universe therefore evolves and has entelechy. We live within the mediations of the First and the Last, that is, in a world of signs, and this world is moving in the direction of truth. We human beings, with our capacity to be within a world of signs (Firstness), are constantly bumping up against resistances that adumbrate an ultimate end (Secondness), placing us in sign relations, in the stream of signs whose end we never attain, but which is going somewhere. We never attain truth as such. We always have our being only in signs. But we have the hope that the

19. Peirce, *The Essential Peirce*, Volume 1:248.

20. Peirce, *The Essential Peirce*, Volume 1:249.

21. Peirce, *The Essential Peirce*, Volume 1:250.

22. Peirce, *The Essential Peirce*, Volume 1:251.

23. Peirce, *The Essential Peirce*, Volume 1:251.

signs in which we live more and more approximate truth. The condition for this is that we never violate the essentially triadic nature of signs and presume that our ideas directly mediate the world to us in dyadic fashion. The triadic nature of signs keeps us firmly grounded in the facts of both nature and history so that we don't confuse our ideas about either for nature or history itself. In this he sharply distinguishes himself from Hegel, whose philosophy he rejects "in toto." Hegel's problem was that he had "usually overlooked external secondness altogether." In other words, "he has committed the trifling oversight of forgetting that there is a real world with real actions and reactions."[24]

We are embedded in a continuous process of *semiosis* (the action of signs), a doctrine Peirce called *synechism* (continuity). The process of semiosis is ordered toward the truth, but we do not arrive at certainty about truth, only provisional judgments. It is not as if we can be certain about the material world, but our ideas about it may be questionable or vice versa. It is that *we cannot separate the two*. Synechism "can never abide dualism."[25] Because of the triadic nature of signs, there can be no real distinction between matter and mind or at least no sharp dividing line that we can discern. "All phenomena are of one character, though some are more mental and spontaneous, others more material and regular. Still, all alike present that mixture of freedom [Firstness] and constraint [Secondness], which allows them to be, nay, makes them to be teleological, or purposive."[26]

Moreover, the world we live in is a shared world; we are moving toward the world's telos together. In order to understand this point, we have to understand Peirce's profound rejection of the nominalism of modernity. His philosophy requires that we regard "generals" or "universals" as real. We all have our being in the action of signs, in the sign relation, and we have that being in common. The modern assertion that "I am altogether myself, and not at all you" he calls a "metaphysics of wickedness," "the vulgarest delusion of vanity."[27] Each individual has a role in the drama of creation, but "so far as he loses himself in that *role*—no matter how humble it may be—so far he identifies himself with its Author,"[28] and so becomes wicked. The reality of the Third Category is precisely what nominalists deny. In denying the reality of generals, they attribute to humans "a power of originating a kind of ideas the like of which Omnipotence has failed to create as objects…." In other words, they "will not admit that God has the faculty of Reason."[29]

24. Peirce, *The Essential Peirce*, Volume I:256. "External secondness" is in contrast to internal secondness, which is internal to the mind, when the mind sets "one part of a notion in relation to another." (254) Peirce later softened his harsh judgment on Hegel somewhat.
25. Peirce, *The Essential Peirce*, Volume II:2.
26. Peirce, *The Essential Peirce*, Volume II:2.
27. Peirce, *The Essential Peirce*, Volume II:2.
28. Peirce, *The Essential Peirce*, Volume II:3.
29. Peirce, *The Essential Peirce*, Volume II:157.

The telos toward which we are moving is, according to Peirce, love. He bases his notion of *agapaistic* evolution on the synechism (continuity) of a world embued with signs. True movement in history, either natural or human, comes about through the Thirdness that contains within itself both freedom (Firstness) and constraint (Secondness). Evolution does indeed involve chance and mechanical necessity (as in Darwinian evolution) but these are encompassed within agapaistic evolution. In agapaistic evolution, the mind is placed in the interplay of freedom and actuality. It is free to play with ideas, form beliefs, and put them into practice. It is this last that is the test of truth within Peirce's pragmaticism: If the effects of our conception are the reinforcement of love, "the ardent desire to fulfill another's highest impulse,"[30] then that conception is true—or rather, it is approaching the truth, for we have not arrived at a final Second. We continue to evolve and the continuity that powers our evolution is love:

> The agapaistic development of thought is the adoption of certain mental tendencies... by an immediate attraction for the idea itself, whose nature is divined before the mind possesses it by the power of sympathy, that is, by virtue of the continuity of mind…. [31]

In other words, there is such a thing as spirit, not the Hegelian spirit that grasps history according to its necessity, but spirit as the entirely mundane process of human semiosis, by which we, as members of one another, living between freedom and constraint, move in the direction of the Truth. That spirit, Peirce would say, is Love. His creed is the biblical affirmation that "God is love." (1 John 4:8) This is the basis of Peirce's philosophical realism. Ideas regarded in an individualistic and nominalist way can, by definition, never be thought in community. But ideas that are buoyed by a shared "continuum of feeling" are real. They exist in that they can be represented, that is, communicated, which means that they can "influence and be influenced by one another." Arbitrariness certainly exists in human minds, but the reality of this shared discourse—love—is the central reality (though of course we cannot, as of yet, know its final end.)[32] The triadic nature of our being in signs reveals that truth and goodness are transcendentals, that is, that they are convertible with being. Truth and goodness are inextricably linked as one—and together they are beautiful. Semiotics assures us that we don't approach the world doubting everything, but that we are embodied creatures constantly coming up against reality and so forming beliefs about the world that we rely on and that shape fixed common habits of behavior—the doctrine of pragmaticism. This is the basis of the security of thought. Semiotics, however, also assures us that our determinations of the truth and our determinations of the good are always provisional. It prevents us from lapsing into a security that "would stifle and reduce us to that very pure

30. Peirce, *The Essential Peirce*, Volume 1:354.

31. Peirce, *The Essential Peirce*, Volume 1:364.

32. Peirce, *The Essential Peirce*, Volume 1:330.

play of secondness which the old determinisms ever mistake for the whole truth of existence."[33] Semiotics is thus the source of the *uberty* of thought, that is, its richness and fecundity.[34]

What Peirce offers is a cosmos in which we can be at home. It is not the absolute and hierarchical cosmos that the medievals inherited from the Greeks. Nor is it the modern cosmos of isolated individuals created by self-emancipation from that cosmos, the "metaphysics of wickedness." He offers instead a philosophy of radical finitude based on an analysis of our ordinary being-in-the-world in an ineluctably triadic way. That is, we have our being in signs. Decades later, Heidegger would attempt something similar, but, remaining adamantly atheistic, he could only characterize that being as "being-unto-death." Peirce began with just as strong a presumption of atheism but found he could not give an account of finite being without locating us between an absolute beginning and absolute end, and our existence as (very provisionally) mediating those two. And so, on purely philosophical grounds, he had to presume that there is a God, and not just an abstract God, but a loving and personal God.

Theology as Exposition of *the* Sign

The above all-too-sketchy overview of Peirce's thought is enough to give us a glimpse, at least, of his achievement. He presents us with a universal field of discourse that is based on everyone's ordinary experience of being in the world and that excludes no area of inquiry whatsoever. The liberal arts reappear as the ancient Trivium, but now understood in a thoroughly semiotic way.[35] The other fields of inquiry follow in train, both the sciences and the arts. There is one world and one field of discourse by which human beings approach both truth in their thinking and goodness in their behavior. There is no overlay of metaphysics or myth. The "discarded image"[36] of the medievals is truly discarded, and it doesn't reappear in the covert form of the modern analysis of subjectivity. It is truly gone. But it is not simply tossed into the dustbin of history; it is replaced by an account of how things actually are, here and now.

Theology, too, finds its home in this universal field of discourse, or, as we can say, reclaiming one of the signal achievements of western culture, in the *university*. It does not rule there imperiously as queen, regulating the other sciences by the

33. Deely, *Four Ages of Understanding*: 627.

34. See Peirce's "An Essay toward Improving Our Reasoning in Security and in Uberty," Peirce, *The Essential Peirce*, Volume II: 463-474.

35. Outlined in "Ideas, Stray or Stolen, about Scientific Writing," in Peirce, *The Essential Peirce*, Volume II:324–30.

36. C.S. Lewis, *The Discarded Image: An Introduction to Medieval and Renaissance Literature* (Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press, 1964).

authority of its tradition. But neither does it have to beg for a place at the table. Theology's theme, after all, is *the* Word. It has no other subject matter than an entirely human semiosis that has been injected into the world which is at the same time a *transcendental semiosis*: It is the human semiosis that mediates to us the Alpha and the Omega, the ultimate beginning and the ultimate end, the Absolute First and the Absolute Second. In explicating and facilitating that mediation (the mediation being the proclamation of the gospel), it also calls all other fields of inquiry to remain within a genuine Third, both constrained by reality and free to play and explore. It thus becomes an essential and foundational servant—and in *this* way "queen"—of all the arts and sciences.

We can begin to see how semiotics transforms theology by starting at theology's center: Christology. In its Christological reflections, the early church found itself confronted with the claims of the prevailing metaphysics, which laid down the axiom that God could not suffer. This was contrary to the clear Biblical witness to the cross, leading to a centuries-long struggle to square the two assertions: that God is impassible but that nevertheless God the Son suffered. The Chalcedonian Formula distinguished "nature" from "hypostasis" and thus could characterize the Person of Christ as the one divine hypostasis of the Son subsisting as two natures. The distinction between the hypostasis and the natures allowed a formulation that made room for the biblical narrative, the Theopaschite Formula: "One of the Holy Trinity suffered in the flesh." However, since the distinction between hypostasis and nature could not be made intelligible in the prevailing metaphysics, which demanded the distinction between God as impassible and humans as capable of suffering, the attributes of the two natures tended to govern theology and interpretation of Scripture, especially in the west. As Luther found in his controversy with the Sacramentarians, this applied also to the human nature of the exalted Christ, which, according to his opponents, could only be present in one place, in heaven, at God's right hand, and so could not be present in the bread and wine of the Sacrament. Faced with philosophical presuppositions that denied that the clear promise of the Gospel ("This is my body, etc.") was possible, Luther concluded: "...we do better if we leave the language of philosophy behind in its own sphere and learn to speak a new language [*nova linguis*] in the realm of faith, outside of every other sphere."[37] The basic method of medieval scholastic theology was to employ philosophy to determine what was possible, and then construct a Christology that accorded with it. Luther's method was to exclude metaphysics from theology so that theology could speak its "new language." This enabled Luther to employ the ancient church's teaching of the communication of attributes with unparalleled

37. WA 39/II, 3,3f (Th.2) In the disputation *De divinitate et humanitate Christi*, quoted in Oswald Bayer, "Das Wort Ward Fleisch: Luthers Christologie Als Lehre von der Idiomenkommunikation," in *Creator Est Creatura: Luthers Christologie Als Lehre von der Idiomskommunikation*, Theologische Bibliothek Toepelman 138 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2007), 19. (All quotes from Bayer's article are translated by the present author.)

boldness. He did so in the spirit of the inherited tradition of the doctrine of the communication of attributes, which emphasized that this doctrine is not a general rule, but a confession concerning the unique Person of Jesus Christ. As Bonaventura wrote, "There is no communication of attributes in the abstract but only in the concrete, for divinity is not humanity, but God is a human being [non est *communicatio idiomatum* in abstractione, sed in concretione, quia Deitas non est humanitas, sed Deus est homo].[38] So Luther is able to find a basis in the tradition, firmly established as orthodox though constantly slipping from sight, from which to declare his independence from philosophy and proclaim the communication of attributes without reserve. But he thought he could do that only at the cost of giving up the unity of truth. He asserted that theology has its own rules and logic and cannot be dictated to by philosophy. But then we have to ask: Is theology therefore condemned to irrationalism? Isn't theology ghettoized from the whole university, so that it has nothing to say to any other realm of knowledge and they have nothing to say to it? Don't the truth claims of theology become unintelligible, not just to those outside the theological community, but also, if they are honest, to the theologians themselves?

The answer emerges when we realize that the Word with which Luther begins is a *sign*. It is a sign that has been injected into the very same world of signs that we all share and in which we have our being. If we understand that the Word is a sign of the exact same nature as every other sign, then, with Luther, we can not only declare our independence from the substance metaphysics inherited from the Greeks. But we can also declare our independence from the modern analysis of subjectivity, which casts into doubt any truth claims about a God external to our own feelings or thoughts.

For Luther's Christological breakthrough regarding the communication of attributes opens the way to understanding the gospel as *semiosis*. The phrase "communication of attributes" itself references a communication. Christ's very Person is a communication, the Word become flesh. Bayer's concept of the communicative being of Christ expresses this insight and certainly means that the gospel is semiosis.[39] Bayer points out that Luther's famous "joyful exchange" in his *Freedom of the Christian* explicitly depends on the church's two-natures doctrine.[40] The exchange is the communication of a promise:

> The promise (*promissio*) is the medium in which true human being (*vere homo*) and true God (*vere deus*) are indivisibly united. This entails that the

38. Quoted in Bayer, *Das Wort Ward Fleisch*, 14.

39. Bayer himself is skeptical that Peirce's semiotic is helpful in illuminating the communicative being of Christ. (Oswald Bayer, *Das Wort Ward Fleisch*, 32.) He cites Hermann Deuser's use of Peirce's ideas in his *Kleine Einführung in die Systematische Theologie* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1999). Deuser's use of Peirce's ideas is, however, not the same case that is being made here.

40. Bayer, *Das Wort Ward Fleisch*, 8-9.

> *Est* that mediates the *vere homo* and the *vere deus*, God's life and Jesus' death, cannot be understood as apophantic, that is it does not express the meaning of an already established subject. Rather, it is the movement in which the reality of both the *vere homo* and the *vere deus*, God's life and Jesus' death, are posited simultaneously.[41]

This can only be said of the Person of Jesus Christ, not of the natures. The Person *is* this communication of promise. This communicative being of Christ as promise at the center of Luther's doctrine of justification is precisely what animates his Christological reflections in the controversy on the Lord's Supper. In the Supper, Jesus makes his testament (promise) to his disciples. The content of the promise is the conflict on the cross, in which he defeats death and life is victorious. The effect is the joyful exchange: when we hear the promise in faith, he takes our sin and death and we receive his life. All of this is identical to what the phrase "the communication of attributes" expresses: Jesus' Person *as* communication, *as* promise, the union of ungodly humanity with the God who justifies the ungodly, which is Jesus' death and God's life at once. In the words of the Chalcedonian Formula, these two are "one and the same."

But Bayer's understanding of the *Est* needs correction, at least insofar as to what it denies. He writes that "The *Est* is not a signifying copula, but an effective copula that does what it says; it is, in fact, a synthetic copula."[42] But there is no need to take the gospel out of the ordinary realm of signs that signify and transfer it into a "new language" that, in some mysterious fashion, is "effective" and "does what is says." Nor does it help to invoke a dubious distinction between words that merely make assertions and "effective words" that do what they say. To be sure, the gospel is effective and does what it says. It is God's creative Word that indeed synthesizes something utterly new, a new creation, in the reconciliation of ungodly humans with the God who justifies the ungodly. But it does so in *a totally human way*, precisely by signifying in the ordinary way.

For Jesus Christ, in the comprehensive unity of his Person and work, is a sign. As a sign, he signifies Another, the One he called his Father. And, as with every sign, he does so only by determining an Interpretant, who expresses all actual and future relations between the Father and the Son—the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is not a power super-added to the sign to make it effective. The Holy Spirit is *inherent in this entirely human sign* because of the triadic nature of all signs. The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Jesus, of Jesus as the sign of the Father. This sign is the whole Bible, now fulfilled in Jesus' testament, his death for us that is at the same time God's life for us.

The result is that this sign gives us an *Absolute Second, fully embodied in an ordinary human sign*. The promissory nature of this sign makes it utterly certain

41. Bayer, *Das Wort Ward Fleisch*, 24.

42. Bayer, *Das Wort Ward Fleisch*, 24.

and thereby cuts off access to any second sphere we may imagine, whether mythic or metaphysical, which would render the sign questionable. The Absolute Second is fully and truly within this human promissory sign, Jesus' testament in bread and wine. With the giving and receiving of this sign, the end of the ages is upon us. At the same time, the sign gives an *Absolute First, the word of creation*, but again as a promise, beyond which we cannot go. So we are confined to the time in between, to the middle, to finitude. Everything that pretended to give an Absolute First and Absolute Second—all the idols, powers, and spirits of this age—are now defeated, objects of derision in Christ's triumphal procession.

In other words, it is through this sign that God succeeds in being God to us, precisely by being *absent*. The doctrine of the Real Presence is misleadingly named, insofar as it suggests a presence not mediated by the sign. As Luther wrote in the Small Catechism, it is not eating and drinking that give life and salvation, "but rather the words that are recorded: 'given for you' and 'shed for you for the forgiveness of sins.'"[43] The sign is legible and hearable as the communication of *Jesus himself*, or it is not the gospel. The elements and word are inextricably united in the sign. Because the sign is a human sign, we can receive it; we can take, eat, and drink the elements united with the Word. But there is no "presence" in the bread and wine. On the contrary, the elements are now emptied of all presences by which we might take them as dyadic representations, sacred objects whose power we have at our disposal. The elements become bits of creation that cease to speak ambiguously to us, proclaiming both God's blessings and God's curse. Instead, they become *mere* creation, without any other cultural "presence," any other meaning, and now unambiguously speak *only* the words Jesus adds to them: "Given and shed for you, for the forgiveness of sins." We live in the Interpretant of the sign, by faith alone, in the middle, between an Absolute First and Absolute Second which are both sheer gift to us in the promise. So the bread and wine signify—finally—absence, Jesus' death as our death, and at the same time created being called forth *ex nihilo*, out of nothing—all *for us*. The only God we have is the dead man who died forsaken on the cross and who is at the same time revealed as the Son of God because we hear—and only hear!—that he is risen from the dead. We gain the being of the sign relation as our being, and now we live before the God who is truly other, that is, the God who is truly God.

The sign of the gospel is expressed in Bonhoeffer's precise Trinitarian formula: "Before God and with God, we live without God."[44] "Before God" designates the Father, the object of the sign, and "with God" the Son, the sign itself. The Holy Spirit, the Interpretant of the sign, mediates the absence of God. In other words, the Holy Spirit leads us to live *within* the sign, and not beyond it, within finitude, with

43. Robert Kolb and Timothy Wengert, eds., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 363.

44. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 9:479.

only provisional knowledge and no grasp at all of any Absolute First or Absolute Second. The God that we grasp is the sign of that dead man hanging on the cross whom no one rescued when he cried out for help.

So by the work of this sign, we are left alone in this world, with no special power and no special knowledge. We rather find ourselves awake with Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, with our senses more and more attuned to the signs around us, by which God is speaking to us. We are no longer self-possessed selves trying to make something of ourselves. Instead, we find ourselves living fully "in the midst of life's tasks, questions, successes and failures, experience and perplexities," no long taking our own sufferings seriously but "rather the suffering of God in the world."[45]

In other words, God ceases to be *a* being or *being itself* which oppresses and enslaves us. Instead, God encloses us within *his* Absolute First and Absolute Second, and thereby places us within the stream of created time, to live in free responsibility before him. We live, as Peirce recognized, between constraint and freedom. We are constrained by the real, all the reactions and resistances we run up against in our finite life as creatures. And we are free in that we are awake to the signs and can begin to read them, to read the book of history and the book of nature, in hope, and thus apply ourselves to writing the story of our lives in congruence with the world's end, which is love. We begin to perceive God's continuing activity as creator, calling forth the true, the good, and the beautiful as human beings, despite sin, embody God's creative love. Every instance of truth/goodness/beauty is an adumbration of the Absolute First and the Absolute Second. Every sign we encounter that calls forth an interpretant of freedom and constraint is the Word of God in creation, expressing in some manner the Triune God, who is Alpha and Omega, and granting true human *being*. It is not true that the fall is the beginning of history or the beginning of time. Sin and evil are encompassed within the larger bracket of the Absolute First and Absolute Second. Sin is an anomaly within the *creatio continua*, in which we seize being itself by violence and then attempt to rise above it by ascending a heavenly hierarchy (religion, also in its Christian guises) or by assuming a pretended position above it as a self-possessing self (modernity and post-modernity, also in its Christian guises). In sin, we can never escape being and its demand that we be, so that being is always "being-unto-death," weighed down with care for our own being that is constantly threatened with nothingness. Only the Sign enables us to live without God as free and responsible creatures, within finitude, within time.

Yes, the Word of the cross is an effective word. But we don't have to set the divine effective word over and against the human persuasive word.[46] The word of the cross is effective precisely because it is *merely* a human, persuasive word,

45. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 9:486.

46. On this distinction, see André Resner, *Preacher and Cross: Person and Message in Theology and Rhetoric* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999), 130–80.

and nothing more. The power of God is the power of God's own death and a sign thereby given of a truly human life sustained by the abyss of God's love and energized by faith in his promises and hope for his ultimate success in being God to his creation, of being "all in all." The assertion of the gospel is that God *is* this sign, this entirely human, very ordinary (and hence utterly extraordinary) sign. The Christian missionary task is the task of creating a truly universal grammar, logic, and rhetoric, with no overt or covert appeals to any supposed super-human power over and above our own ineluctably divided languages. Proclaiming the gospel is not imposing a new language on people, but uncovering the created reality of their own already-existing language, in which God has all the time been carrying on his "continuous miracle"[47] by which people actually succeed, however imperfectly, in emptying themselves of themselves in order to enter into the narrative of others and walk with them in true communion, community, and communication with each other. The gospel then acquires persuasive force as the sign that announces the ultimate victory of that love. It is the revelation of God who sets us free to live without God.

The result is that we ourselves become signs. We might take as an example Levi sitting at his tax booth (Luke 4:27-28). Jesus says, "Follow me," and Levi gets up and follows him, thereby embodying the interpretant of the sign that Jesus utters. Jesus' command has no other content than simply to be with him; it is in reality sheer promise and gift. So Levi's action, while certainly *his* action, is something entirely new. It is a repetition of the sign that Jesus himself is. It is Levi's death, so that Jesus alone lives in him. If the call had come from anyone else, the interpretant would have been a mere active *imitatio*,[48] which would have then become a new sign demanding a new act of obedience, and so on. The relation would be one of unending bondage. With Jesus, however, Levi's repetition of the sign is the end of bondage. Its interpretant, which re-interprets Levi, is the whole narrative that Jesus Christ is, which brings Levi to an end and replaces his endless bondage with the gift of created time, created by a Final Second that grounds him in a Primal First, living in the power of the sign's interpretant, the Holy Spirit. In Jesus Christ, the human and the divine are "one and the same." The entirely human act of following

47. The phrase is from J. G. Hamann, quoted by Oswald Bayer in *A Contemporary in Dissent: Johann Georg Hamann as a Radical Enlightener*, trans. Roy A. Harrisville and Mark C. Mattes (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2012), 158.

48. Anthony Bartlett's application of semiotics to theology, otherwise very rich and suggestive, in the end reduces the sign that Jesus is to a demand for imitation, albeit one that transforms persons so that they are enabled to imitate him. Bartlett's dependence on the anthropology of René Girard pushes him toward construing the gospel as gnosis: when you know that God is a God of love and non-violence, then you yourself will be transformed into one who loves. The conflation of creation and fall in Girard fails to fully affirm both the goodness of creation and the seriousness of sin. See Anthony Bartlett, *Theology beyond Metaphysics: Transformative Semiotics of René Girard* (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2020), esp. 131–48.

is the in-breaking of the kingdom of God, the turning of the ages, the death of the old and the beginning of the new.

Conclusion

Semiotics began with the question of interpreting the Scripture and was nurtured though its medieval development by the urgent question of biblical interpretation. It now comes full circle to providing a framework for theology in our post-modern context. The task remains of drawing out its implications in all areas of theology. We have before us a wide vista. It is time to explore it.

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