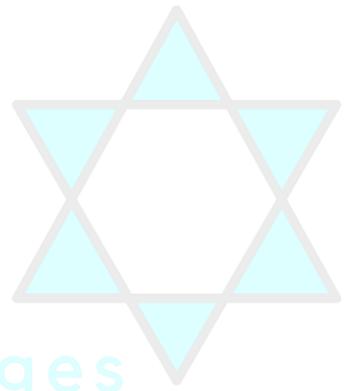


Integration Essay on Semiotics and Ministry

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Introduction

Over the course of this past year, I have learned quite a bit about semiotics. When I first entered the program, I had a limited understanding, or as Dr. Sweet would remind us over the course of the second advance, seeing dimly in the mirror.¹ My prior experience with semiotics was in my college writing coursework for my Associate degree. The instructor, Dr. Terry Krueger, taught on the semiotics of Disneyland, with the "hidden Miceys," the vanilla scent, entire underground operations, etc. Everything I learned about semiotics at this one-hundred level writing course was in relation to marketing and the power of the image to toy with one's emotions and allegiances to better market and sell the sale. Discussions even included the romantic issues between G. I. Joe, Barbie, and Ken.² This experience, however, gave me no real advantage within where HaShem³ has aimed for me to be, and I realized this during the time of the first cohort advance, when Dr. Sweet's lessons focused on the importance of mandorla.⁴ From that point on, I viewed everything differently. Instead of opposites, I saw unity. Instead of facts, I saw opinion. Instead of clarity, I saw the murky mud that being in two realms (in this world but not of it) brings with it. Instead of evangelism, I saw discipleship. Instead of pushing salvation, I saw embracing and communing. Instead of a blank face, I saw a neighbor. Instead of

¹ Dr. Leonard Sweet, *Concluding Remarks, SFS15 Second Advance* (Portland, OR: Portland Seminary, 2017).

² Writing Composition (WR 121) taught by Dr. Terry Krueger at Central Oregon Community College in 2005.

³ Hebrew, "The Name" of G-d.

⁴ Dr. Leonard Sweet, *Mandorla, SFS15 First Advance* (Portland, OR: George Fox Evangelical Seminary, 2016).

being isolated, I saw the need for communal living/loving.⁵ This journey took its time over the past year of coursework and led me to have a different view than I originally anticipated.⁶ My first year of coursework in Dr. Sweet's program impacted me both professionally and personally. Additionally, I find that how I see things is no longer as dim, and much like a hologram can have a better focus, I too am looking more closely at what is being signified in order to better understand, a practice that leads directly into studying the future by seeing beyond the sign in the present.⁷ Nonetheless, I acknowledge that although I have a bit more clarity in my own life and the role of Semiosis within the contemporary culture, I recognize that I have much more to learn and farther to go. This next year of the cohort program will continue to challenge me to expand my mindset and worldview. I must concede, though, that I often hold myself to a harsh standard of excellence and aim to be at the end of the program instead of where I am, which truly feels like it is still just beginning.

Semiotics in a Contemporary Setting

There are two main views that I can take with semiotics: looking outward and looking inward. In the two subsequent sections I will expand on what looking inward looks like. For this section, I evaluate the outward change I have witnessed in the past year. This is twofold: the opening of my eyes to semiotics and critical analysis and the ever-changing landscape that has

⁵ Marc J. Dunkelman, *The Vanishing Neighbor: The Transformation of American Community*, First edit ed. (New York, NY: New York, NY : W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2014).

⁶ My application to the program was not necessarily to learn and be changed, but rather to find a conduit in which to validate myself. Once I opened myself to learning from the program, my entire worldview adjusted drastically, which even led to a substantial dissertation thesis change.

⁷ David Crow, *Visible Signs: An Introduction to Semiotics in the Visual Arts* (New York: Fairchild Books, 2015).

become even more evident and polarizing from the last election and its (still occurring) fallout.⁸ My knowledge gained in semiotics via the advances, weekly Zoom chats and FoxTale chats, and assigned readings has been quite diverse. From the very basics (literally) by Daniel Chandler,⁹ I had to redefine semiotics to be more than “the study of signs” to actually looking past that and the sign being signified. Making this transition has been a difficult but necessary one. This transition has allowed me to be more aware of the world at large, which unfortunately has been ill-timed with the flagrant increase of anti-Semitism both in America and worldwide.

Overall, I have witnessed a lot of anger built up in America. The acts of violence and protest makes this quite evident; the movements such as Black Lives Matter show that America has not been able to resolve the racial tensions since the Civil War, and have only been increasing the tribalism and “me-types” that divides America. Dr. Sweet is quite on the mark to argue that the American civil religion is in decline.¹⁰ Sweet identifies that renovation is needed instead of repairing. I posit that there is the additional reality that America’s civil religion may not be able to survive renovation. Based off the early form of Christianity and Theism that reigned in the formative years of this nation, America is crippled in that its civil religion needs the early faith models in order to have stability. Just as different soils can impact a seed’s growth, America was founded on a necessary partnership with ethical monotheism. Now that

⁸ This fallout may very well continue to be a modern “plague” on America until people can actualize their feelings and call out, without micro-aggressions, justice versus revenge, fairness, equity versus equality, etc.

⁹ Daniel Chandler, *Semiotics : The Basics*, 2nd ed. ed. (London: London, 2007).

¹⁰ Dr. Leonard Sweet, *American Civil Religion, SFS15 Second Advance* (Portland, OR: Portland Seminary, 2017).

America has by and large tried to do separation of church and state to an extreme where religion is generally no longer tolerated in the nation, the nation has divided its adherents between camps of nationalism, evangelicalism, and agnosticism. Split into three differing parts (that definitely have some overlap, but the theology of evangelicalism cannot condone the praxis of nationalism, despite what nationalists argue), America has to look back at the reality that was once known, as Abraham Lincoln famously said, “a house divided against itself cannot stand.”¹¹

If America is unable to mend its divisions, it may very well crumble apart as a whole. This could bode well in the eyes of some, such as how shows like “Designated Survivor” depict a fallen nation that could be reformed, but most will undoubtedly recognize that the dystopian future is a grim reality for a nation that works outside of theological eschatology. The falling of America could lead to an escalated world war, but the retention of America is one of the few forces and movements that is an active force toward world peace and the safety of many. This may be an extremist view, but the signs I am seeing signified are not ones of collaboration and peace, but rather tremors that are indicative of a future earthquake that could split this nation and world. The anger being built up between the classes, races, and regions are only applying more pressure to the cracking seams, as if ready for a tectonic shift. The rise of ISIS worldwide is evidence of this, that the majority of recent terrorist attacks worldwide have not been the collaboration of outsiders and non-citizens, but rather those that are part of the nation they pledge allegiance to. The radicalization of citizens via social media shows that ISIS recognizes

¹¹ Abraham Lincoln, *Debate on the Compromise of 1850* (Springfield, IL: 1858).

the pain and hurt, frustration and anger, that society is collectively experiencing right now, and leverage it via a bare-bones semiotic message, applying ingenious marketing strategies to turn people against their own lands. This platform adjustment should be a wake-up call to the nations, but instead it is a micro-focus on the outsiders that are in ISIS, not the root cause. The nations, as a collective whole, are not healing the rift, but only putting super glue and scotch tape on the wounds, further irritating the pain and spreading the injury to affect others not previously engaged.¹²

Professional Impact

My "active ministry role" is not a day job, but rather an online presence. I originally believed that if I threw my views out into and onto the internet, it would benefit and change lives. Now, I recognize that is far too distant and ineffective. My ability to impact is not from words on a blog, but rather engaging people one on one. Even further, my impact is no longer about a "headcount of salvation;" it is about getting to know people and encouraging them regardless of their religious or political views. Within this framework, I have come to recognize that I may have completely different religious views from others in the cohort, or Dr. Sweet, or the administration, and even those that live near me, but regardless of differences, we can forge relationships that do not rely on religiosity and theology, but instead on praxis and

¹² One excellent example of this is the recent decision on blocking laptops and devices from carry-on for several flights. The intent to review a widespread application of this "anti-terrorism tool" will impact thousands that need those hours to complete final reports, projects, and manuscripts. Furthermore, the removal of laptops is only partial: checked luggage still permits them, and a bomb in the cargo hold can take down a plane just as effectively as a bomb in carry-on.

intentional living.¹³ My day job is the same, working with accounting and social media at a bookstore. I now recognize, even more so, the power of an image, and am able to focus on the small parts to start creating a narrative in my work life. Within my online life, I am changing my focus and aiming for a community-oriented source of content that helps build bridges and overcome differences between different religious traditions. It is no longer about throwing words on the web, but rather offering a narrative metaphor¹⁴ that brings forward a more powerful story: one of healing and unity.

I have always tried to compartmentalize my life. Work, family, school, and more all had their separate roles and I hated blending them. Such is one of the traditional observances of the American civil religion. Alas, I admit that this is ill-conceived and only kneecaps my ability to grow in every area as a whole and holistic human being. Growing in my limited knowledge of semiotics, I see now that I need to accomplish a mandorla perspective: seeing the big picture and the inner workings at the same time. As I initially glance at my professional versus personal life, I see a stark contrast of black and white. Grey is beginning to emerge and introduce the notion of shading and complexity, as well as a third dimension to help me be more alive.

As I engage this grey I know that my professional goals are no longer where they were a year ago. One year ago, I was actively seeking pastoral positions. Truthfully, even as recently as January. This past term, both in school and in personal life, I have been challenged to re-evaluate my faith and be who HaShem has called me to be, not who I think I should be. I will

¹³ Sweet, "American Civil Religion."

¹⁴ Narraphor

address this more in the personal section, but suffice it to say that I am actively in the market to look for positions that enable me to teach and educate others, as well as positions that help me more closely engage with my new welcoming community: the orthodox Jewish community.

Personal Impact

My personal life bore the greatest changes in this past year. Working through the reality that what I once considered sacred content is now a story to be told and treated differently, both Rita Felski¹⁵ and Michael Polanyi¹⁶ reminded me to not delve too far into textual criticism and allow my natural skepticism to tear apart everything I knew and held dear. On the other hand, Sweet's "Tablet to Table"¹⁷ and "Mother Tongue"¹⁸ pointed to where I need to go back to my Jewish roots and embrace the power of the feast and value of my own heritage and ethnicity. Looking through the metaphoric lens, I realized my need to reshape my own understanding of faith. Whereas before it was a taught word, now it is a lived and modeled life.¹⁹ Luther saw issues within Catholicism and attempted to correct it,²⁰ and using that as a springboard, I see my need to be post-Christian.²¹ This translates into becoming more Jewish,

¹⁵ Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016).

¹⁶ Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 1998).

¹⁷ Leonard Sweet, *From Tablet to Table* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2014).

¹⁸ Leonard Sweet, *Mother Tongue: How Our Heritage Shapes Our Legacy* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2017).

¹⁹ Alan Wimberley, *Reshaping the Paradigms of Teaching and Learning: What Happens Today Is Education's Future* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016).

²⁰ Some debate on his success and his flagrant anti-Semitism is still a known issue within the Jewish community.

²¹ Lyndal Roper, *Martin Luther: Renegade and Prophet* (New York: Random House, 2017).

even religiously so. This past year led me from little Jewish knowledge applied to a Messianic lifestyle to using my seminary knowledge of Christianity to help me learn to be a better human, and as a natural result, and Orthodox Jew.

This transition is a culmination of more than the past few months and past year, and not a complete state either. My decision to become more Jewish, even theologically so, is a long-term process as I relearn the signs that I had defined and see what they truly signify. Just as Dr. Sweet elaborated on the truth behind the “American Gothic” painting in one of our Zoom sessions,²² I am seeing theology, praxis, and Torah with a fresh set of eyes: eyes that are no longer applying my colored lens to the world, but rather embracing it for what it is. No longer are the clouds rosy-colored, but white. The innocence they carry, the water that cleanses body, mind, and soul, need to be freed of our ritualistic impression and presuppositions in order for us to fully experience the refreshing downpour they (the clouds) offer. Perhaps that is why I love the rain - I certainly know I moved to Portland to experience more of it.²³

Where Do I Go From Here?

So much has happened over the past year that it is challenging to put the experiences into a succinct essay. From starting to learn about semiotics and its philosophical history in

²² Dr. Leonard Sweet, host, "American Gothic," SFS15 Zoom Chat, *Portland Seminary*, April 24, 2017.

²³ Sadly, however, it seems that it has been more heat and cool than I anticipated. Much to my chagrin, I suspect that the High Desert weather followed me to the valley, or as I have sometimes viewed it, the promised land fully of lush produce and the giant towers of downtown.

Chandler²⁴ to learning to see being the sign in Crow,²⁵ my perspective shifted. Even the recent election and the stress fractures in today's civil religion point to how communication is changing quicker than the religious institutions can keep up.^{26, 27} I have discovered that all of the issues brought forward this year, ala the "problem" of the church when given a semiotic inquisition, are solved within going back to the Jewish roots. For example, shabbos²⁸ still exists in the orthodox community, and its strict adherence enables neighbors to exist, signs to be found within one's own prayers, and value to be placed on the represented images and metaphors of the Jewish faith. For Judaism, "let it be a sign to you"²⁹ is not a simple comment, but rather a semiotic commentary on society and culture. We stand sanctified by the metaphors we live by.³⁰ So, come hell or high water, as we near closer to the end of all things, both literally and metaphorically, we can look to how even the artist culture expresses the end as a dystopian future and know, with certainty, that such is not the true fate to come.³¹ The

²⁴ Chandler.

²⁵ Crow.

²⁶ Sweet, "American Civil Religion."

²⁷ Crystal Downing, *Changing Signs of Truth : A Christian Introduction to the Semiotics of Communication* (Downers Grove, Ill.: Downers Grove, Ill. : IVP Academic, 2012).

²⁸ Ashkenazic traditional spelling of Shabbat, the Jewish Sabbath.

²⁹ Found in the vahafta, the concluding portions of the Shema passage, as well as laced throughout all of Torah.

³⁰ Mark Johnson and George Lakoff, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: Chicago : University of Chicago Press, 2003).

³¹ Robert J. Joustra and Alissa Wilkinson, *How to Survive the Apocalypse: Zombies, Cylons, Faith, and Politics at the End of the World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016).

boob-tube³² may show us our worst fears of the future of humanity, but returning to Torah shows us the bliss that corrupts even the programming of the Matrix itself.

Where do I go from here? I am starting on a new journey. Young as a practicing orthodox Jew, and young as a future semiotician,³³ I have found a unique niche where being Jewish and looking at signs are mutually beneficial, allowing me to reform my own faith notion and truly embrace the commission that both the Jews and Christians claim ownership to: being a light to the nations.

Concluding Remarks

As I have indicated several times over by now, this journey is far from over. In fact, I am barely getting started. With new paths to follow, guided by new world views and learning the true signifiers³⁴ of the world before me, I have a more than a marathon to start: its is a career in long-term running. This running is not running from G-d, nor is it running around Him. Rather, this running is running with Him, in communion with Him, as part of my everyday existence. There is much more to come, but this brief examination gives a bit more focus, a bit more clarity, into my own personal journey. Just as the Jew ends every day with the words of the Shema, in case one does not wake the next morning, I find it proper to repeat those words here, giving the clarion call of what this cohort has taught and encouraged me in:

Hear, O Israel: HaShem is our G-d, HaShem is alone and One.

³² Known as TV in the contemporary vernacular.

³³ Young in experience in both, not in age.

³⁴ Signifiers reveal significance.

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