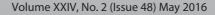# *Lutheran*
Mission Matters

Signs of Transformation:
Communicating the Gospel
in an Age of Nones and Dones

Scott Yakimow

Abstract: The Church is confronting an emergent phenomenon in populations described as the "nones" and the "dones," that is, those who have never been religiously affiliated and those who became disenchanted with their church home or with "organized religion" and left. Both display new epistemological challenges to the Church because of the lack of a shared cultural common ground. Some argue that what is needed is a better apologetics to arrive at a shared ground to demonstrate the unreasonableness of unbelief. Others eschew apologetics for a purely proclamatory approach, believing that presenting the faith directly carries with it its own power. The first is an objectivist approach and the second, a subjectivist. In this article, I argue that both approaches have valid concerns but that both also fail epistemologically. Instead, I propose a semiotic epistemological model via an understanding of triadic signs that both shows the futility of such an objectivist/subjectivist dichotomy, while taking into account their valid concerns, and opens new avenues for restructuring our understanding of outreach with the Gospel, particularly to the nones and the dones.

In the first half of 2012, I was faced with a decision: Should I return to Kenya to continue my service as a missionary with the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS), teaching at the seminary of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Kenya (ELCK), or should I accept the recently proffered call to teach theology at Concordia

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University in Portland (CUP) in the heart of the great Pacific Northwest. Frankly, my heart was back in Kenya, where I had served from 2002–2005 and had first visited in 1994. It felt as much like "home" as anywhere to me. Portland, on the other hand, felt strange, foreign—even hostile to a large degree, based on everything I had heard about it, which entailed political views far to the left of my own, an odd hipster subculture, the annual naked bicycle ride, and an overall general weirdness proudly proclaimed by the sign downtown which says: "Keep Portland Weird." When I eventually did make my decision to accept the call to teach at CUP, I announced it to my family using a quotation from Homer's *Odyssey* in which Ulysses, washed up on an unknown shore, laments that even the trees are strange.

More than anything else, what made Portland strange to me—and was the cause of my decision to teach here rather than to return to Kenya—was the high prevalence of what are now called the "nones" and the "dones." These are two distinct groups who either are not religiously affiliated and never have been (nones) or those who were previously affiliated with a religion, usually Christianity, but are no longer (dones). While many people have a tendency to lump these two groups together, they are actually quite distinct and take quite divergent attitudes toward religion in general. The nones typically do not have strong feelings toward "organized religion" one way or another and simply have little experience with the phenomenon. This attitude leaves some open to the idea of religion and curious to learn more and others simply seeing no need for organized religion in general. The dones, on the other hand, are those who have extensive experience with religion and, in the words of Neil Carter, a self-proclaimed "done": "We're not unchurched, we're 'done churched.'"[1] Perhaps what is most characteristic of this group is a deep familiarity with Christianity, having lived and absorbed it for some time. This experience leaves many of the dones with a respect for some Christians who are able, in the dones' understanding, to live the faith authentically. This respect is coupled with a lack of patience for those who know their own faith only formulaically, repeating well-known teachings without having absorbed them into their lives deeply. Perhaps most important is that both groups tend to hold in common an openness to absorbing new data, to gathering more information in order to be better informed. To be more accurate, a *self-perception* of openness is characteristic of both the nones and the dones. Thus, such openness to new information tends to be more aspirational than actual.[2]

My concern in this brief essay is the same that ultimately drew me to teach at Portland—to reach out with the Gospel of Christ to a new generation of people who are disconnected with the Church and to whom the Gospel message is nearly incomprehensible or simply offensive, and not for the right reasons.[3] Constructing a brief outline of how such outreach might be conducted among the nones and the dones who register both intellectual objections to Christianity, as well as attitudinal and spiritual hesitancies to it, is the burden of this investigation. Many of these

objections relate to the role of science and demonstrative, observational truth that has currency beyond any particular community and those more local, faith-based truth claims that might make sense to a particular group of people but do not extend beyond them. In short, these objections are formulated according to the well-worn debate between understanding truth claims as referring to something objective or subjective, something that can clearly be seen to be "as it is" out there in the world and something that has resonance only with an individual. This debate is sometimes described as one between dogmatism or scientism and fideism or relativism. When weighed in the scales, Christians are seen to fail in their connection to the "real" world and are frequently dismissed as irrational or unwilling to confront hard truths. The attitudinal and spiritual hesitancies of the nones and the dones are connected to the intellectual objections in that they are rooted in observations of Christians being inflexible, (naively) dogmatic, abusive, aggressive, and satisfied with platitudes. This is to say that negative experiences weigh heavily among the dones, and the nones are left with only what the popular culture tells them about Christianity. What is required here are eyes to see and ears to hear.

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In this article, I argue that we need to refigure our understanding of the relationship between evidence and faith beyond the objectivist-subjectivist dichotomy in order to arrive at a different way of conceptualizing the epistemological task altogether. The way I propose is the way of semiotics, the way of signs. By understanding communication—and indeed, thinking in general—as being nothing more (and nothing less) than the interplay of signs, the need to make a hard distinction between the objective and the subjective is obviated. What is left is a way of understanding communication that allows for the role of both mind-dependent (subjective) beliefs and how they correlate with mind-independent (objective) data. This approach provides the nones and the dones with an intellectually satisfying model of how Christians arrive at knowledge, and it allows for a demonstration of a Christian spiritual *habitus* that they might find ultimately attractive.[4]

While speaking of semiotics as mitigating the objective-subjective divide may come across as being a purely theoretical exercise, there is great practical benefit in doing so in at least two ways. First, it serves to alleviate the angst that arises due to a debate within the church itself that serves to fracture our outreach to those who champion a largely apologetic approach and those who largely eschew apologetics in general in favor of a proclamatory model of outreach.[5] This debate promotes schisms

within the LCMS, and such schisms hinder our Gospel proclamation and serve to drive people away from the church for all the wrong reasons. A second practical benefit of achieving a new way to conceptualize the relationship between evidence and the interpretation of that evidence (the objective and the subjective) is that it allows the nones and dones to see Christianity in a new light as something that has a surprising amount of intellectual substance and integrity—something that many nones and dones dispute heartily. It also shows how new data might be absorbed within a Christian worldview such that Christians can at the same time *both* remain faithful to the language of Scripture and the way it has been interpreted in the tradition *and* creatively apply that understanding in surprising ways to a new situation given new data. This is to say that a semiotic approach enables one's habits of interpretation to be refigured, thereby creating the space for a new appropriation of the Christian proclamation that may go beyond the intellect to the heart, resulting in a new understanding, a new mind.

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This article will proceed in the following manner. The first section is dedicated to introducing the concept of the sign itself in triadic terms, along with some missteps that have been made in modern times in describing it. This is the most technical section of the essay. The second section applies this understanding of the sign and its epistemological consequences to the debate over the role of apologetics in outreach. The third and final section of the paper examines the implications of a triadic understanding of the sign for fruitful engagement with the nones and the dones and how it opens up the space for the beauty of the Gospel to be perceived.

The Way of Signs

The concept of the sign has a long history in Christianity, from the Gospels and especially the Book of John to Augustine until the time of Descartes, when John Poinsot wrote his magisterial summary of the study of signs, *Tractatus de Signis* (1632). Semiotics, or the study of signs, which had been a fruitful area of study, lay dormant for most of the modern period as philosophy pursued what John Deely has termed "The Way of Ideas," following Descartes' lead, which, in Deely's opinion, has largely been a failed project.[6] It is only with the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century philosopher and polymath Charles S. Peirce that semiotics has reemerged into the intellectual life of the West, and it is only even more recently that

numerous thinkers are realizing that it is crucial not only to epistemology but to logic as well.[7]

Within this tradition, the earliest definition of a sign comes from Augustine in his *De Doctrina Christiana* (*On Christian Doctrine*): "a sign is a thing which causes us to think of something beyond the impression the thing itself makes upon the senses."[8] This admittedly quite vague account of a sign was revised over the course of the tradition, but it was Charles Peirce who gave a more precise formulation of what is involved. In his understanding, a sign has three distinct aspects: the representamen (or sign-vehicle), the object, and the interpretant. The *representamen* or sign-vehicle is what is usually thought to be the sign itself; it is the stop sign along the side of the road, the smoke from a fire, the word on the page. The object is the thing that the sign-vehicle represents, for example: eliminating the kinetic energy of a vehicle in the case of the stop sign, the oxidation of wood for the smoke, and the idea connected to the word. The interpretant is the mental habit that associates the representamen and the object; it is how one "instinctively" knows to bring the car to a stop, to look for fire when one sees smoke, and to search for meaning for the word. It is only by the interrelation of all three that a sign actually functions as such; that is, it is not just the relationship between the representamen and its object that constitutes the sign, nor is the relationship between the interpretant and the representamen sufficient to be an accurate description of the semiotic process. Rather, it is all three at once, and any discussion of the functioning of a sign must keep this in view.

Even as Peirce developed his triadic conception of the sign in the nineteenth century, it was Ferdinand de Saussure's dyadic sign that he described in his *Course on General Linguistics* (published posthumously by one of his students in 1916)[9] that took pride of place in linguistics and philosophical reflection for much of the twentieth and now the twenty-first centuries. Saussure was not so concerned with the theoretical implications of the sign but rather was interested in training linguists how to understand foreign languages. To this end, he came up with his idea of the sign comprising two aspects: the signifier and the signified. A word refers to its meaning in a structured way with that structure being the natural language itself. This is encapsulated in his distinction between *parole* (what is said; the utterance) and *langue* (the structured natural language that gives an utterance meaning). The signifier is itself arbitrary for Saussure; it acquires its meaning only in relation to its structure. Meaning arises only by the relationship of a sign to other signs; it is differences between signs that are crucial for understanding. For example, when one hears the word "di:r," one differentiates between something that eats corn and that one hunts from someone whom one loves or feels affection toward only by looking at what else is in the sentence. What gives the utterance "di:r" its meaning are the words that surround it, such as "Please pass the pepper, dear," or "I hit another deer with my truck last week." To repeat, it is not the habit of interpretation that connects

the utterance "di:r" with its meaning but purely the objective words also uttered that do so.

Far beyond his original intention, Saussure's dyadic sign became the theoretical background for much philosophical speculation in the twentieth century. It underwrote the Structuralist movement, which held that one could understand a given utterance or instance of language use by relating it to the linguistic structure within which it was constructed. A corollary of this approach is the belief that the interpreter can, in principle, arrive at *the* proper understanding of a sign if one sufficiently understands the sign's relationship to other signs within the structure. There is *a* correct interpretation that one can fully and completely understand within the relevant structure, and views that differ from that understanding are simply wrong. The situation or character of the interpreter is irrelevant; what is relevant is the sign itself and the system used to decipher that sign.

While it would be reductionistic to posit that a dyadic understanding of a sign was the only factor contributing to an objectivist approach to the interpretation of signs, it is hard to dispute that Saussure's understanding was a primary contributing factor in establishing the intellectual *bona fides* of such an approach. This is the case because if one could, in principle, arrive at *the* understanding of a sign, and the only relevant element to the sign's proper interpretation is a structure that is independent of the interpreter, then one could, in principle, give *the* objective meaning of the sign. There is no room for subjective interpretation because the situatedness or formation of the interpreter is simply irrelevant.

Ironically, Saussure's dyadic understanding of the sign, which was intended to yield *the* meaning of an utterance, was its own undoing. The well-known Deconstructionist, Jacque Derrida,[10] gleefully took Saussure's dyadic sign and ran with it—away from objectivism to a subjectivist relativism. It was precisely the gap between the signifier and the signified that became crucial in Derrida's understanding, and he labeled this gap variously, calling it *la trace* or, more famously, *la différance*. What Derrida essentially did was to constantly move between various interpretive structures, each of which was a plausible fit for the context at hand. By doing so, he could take the same word, phrase, or sentence and make it mean, not just one thing, but to take on nearly infinite meanings, the scope of which is determined only by the creativity of the interpreter. *La différance*, itself nothing more than a gap or a lack, becomes a type of generative anti-matter that produces interpretation on top of interpretation, the endless play of the interpreter who glories in the game. The movement that he and others spawned is commonly known as "Post-Modernism," but that term is a misnomer in that obscures the reality of what occurred. Rather than being "post" or "after" modernism, Derridean deconstructionism is simply the inevitable endpoint of a modernism characterized by Saussure's dyadic sign. In an ironic twist, the quest for objective certainty yielded

the free play of the subjective mind, and the debate between the two modernist trajectories continues to this day.[11]

To return to the more ancient understanding of the sign that Peirce described in explicitly triadic terms, its very triadicity prevents it from a critique like Derrida's. Unlike Saussure, where there is an explicit gap between signifier and signified, which Derrida relabels *la différance*, no such gap exists in Peirce's sign. In fact, the sign takes explicit account of the subjectivity of the interpreter within itself in the interpretant. The history, situation, character, and habit of the interpreter is part and parcel of how the sign is to be understood. One does not approach interpretation antiseptically, as if one can just clear away all of one's biases and arrive at *the* meaning of the sign. Rather, Peirce's triadic sign takes note of the interpreter and how his life experiences have formed him in describing how that person goes about interpreting signs. The triadic sign enables one to explain why, for example, the idea of voter ID laws have very different valences among different populations in the United States. Among some communities, showing an I.D. to vote is simple common sense; one must be a citizen to vote, and proving citizenship can only be done expeditiously by showing a government-approved I.D. On the other hand, some communities perceive such laws in relation to their experience of obstacles being raised to prevent them from voting. Far from seeing this as a common-sense regulation, they perceive it based upon their experience as yet another attempt to keep their voices out of the voting process. In Peirce's terms, they interpret the same representamen differently because their interpretants differ; Saussurean Structuralists would claim that one is right and the other is wrong and base their understanding on the structure they believe to be relevant; finally, the Deconstructionist would joyfully point out the arbitrariness of the Structuralist in choosing which structure is relevant even as they deny doing so. This is to say, Peirce can easily account for such a difference in sign interpretation in his triadic semiotic; Saussure's dyadic approach cannot.

To be clear, the interpretant does not refer to the interpreter *per se*; it refers instead to the habitual manner in which the interpreter understands signs. The habit of interpretation does not even have to be cognitive. For example, when approaching a "stop" sign, rarely does one who has experienced driving on American roads for any length of time go through a mental checklist of identifying the sign, mapping that onto a linguistic structure, and only then deciding to press the brake pedal. Rather, once a driver notices the stop sign, she simply by force of habit presses the brakes (assuming that she is a good, conscientious driver), and it is the actual pressing of the pedal that is the interpretant.[12] Similarly, one skilled in idiomatic expressions realizes that when one "dials" a phone in this day and age, no dial is involved. It is the force of habit that causes one to interpret the archaic idea of "dialing" in this instance as connecting one phone to another in order to have a conversation. Yet even here, there is no cognition that arises to the level of

consciousness when understanding the expression "to dial a phone," and such a habit is the interpretant of the sign.

There are many implications of a triadic understanding of the sign, but for our purposes the most relevant one is that the sign serves as a bridge between the subjective and the objective, the mind-dependent and the mind-independent. In this understanding, what is objective or mind-independent corresponds to reality, where reality is defined as that which is what it is, independent of what anyone thinks about it. What is subjective or mind-dependent is the understanding or stance that one takes or finds oneself in toward reality. These two domains are joined by the sign. This is the case whether it be visual observations that are nothing other than light reflecting off an object onto the eye's optic nerve and transmitted via electric impulses to the brain, which then interprets those impulses into conventional signs that also are transmitted ultimately via some type of sensory input (typically touch, taste, smell, sight, hearing). Thus, the information that is accessible to us is not the real thing itself experienced purely (objectivism, i.e., there is one, "absolute" truth that we know), nor is it all a product of whatever we think or want it to be (subjectivism, i.e., we all have "our" truths). Rather, we know the real world, but we know reality mediately via the operation of the sign.

Ears to Hear

With this understanding of the sign in hand, I turn to the implications for the debate between those who believe that apologetics is crucial to the conduct of outreach with the Gospel and those who believe that apologetics is ultimately a fruitless endeavor and should be largely abandoned in favor of pure proclamation. In this section, I argue that such a dichotomy is intimately connected to a worldview that polarizes knowledge between objectivist and subjectivist poles, between knowing the world simply "as it is" and the inability to know such a world in favor of holding on to whatever one finds personally meaningful. Further, as we have seen, a triadic understanding of the sign dissolves this strict dichotomy by placing each pole within a larger, unitive framework. Christian claims, such as the existence of God, can be seen to indeed be the product of a particular, formed understanding; they are the product of a worldview that holds Christ to be crucified for our sins and raised for our redemption.

Yet understanding the world according to a belief system is not itself strange. Everyone has a set of beliefs and a personal history that greatly influences how he understands any sign or event. Even so, such beliefs also have a connection to something outside of one, to objects, events, concepts, etc., that can be discussed and debated, precisely because they are not purely subjective but exist in reality. They are public, not private, even as their interpretation involves a particular stance that

the interpreter takes toward them. The triadic sign makes this a comprehensible and thus a defensible stance to take.

The apologist's chief concern is for the ability to reach outside of private understandings to evidence that exists independently of what anyone thinks about it in order to show the rationality of Christian belief. The influential LCMS apologist John Warwick Montgomery evidences such a concern frequently, such as in his essay "Lutheran Theology and the Defense of Biblical Faith," when he expresses his concern about a Christian arbitrariness that rejects apologetics, saying: "Only a genuine apologetic based on external, objective fact as presented in general and special revelation preserves religious decision from arbitrariness, keeps the gospel truly *gospel*, and . . . 'lets God be God.'"[13] Given a disagreement, the only way to discuss anything productively is not to focus on the disagreement *per se* but rather to bring in external data, something that *is as it is* independent of what anyone might think of it, to discuss. That is, there must be a publicly available subject matter or else all that is left is

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the will-to-power of the participants who arbitrarily decide what to believe. Peirce's triadic sign addresses this concern by emphasizing that signs do have objects, and these objects exist in reality just as they are. It does not eliminate the need to interpret those objects, but it insists that disagreement needs to be about something real in order to proceed fruitfully toward possible agreement (or at least better understanding) and not just spin wheels. Having ears to hear entails the ability to hear *something*, something that is not restricted to what is in one's own head.

On the other hand, those who speak against the ability of one to "prove" the existence of God or to otherwise argue people "into the kingdom" via apologetics also have a valid concern. There is a basic epistemological problem with the idea that one can "prove" such things as the existence of God in that human arguments are too weak a vehicle to accomplish such a thing. Theodore Mueller, whom Montgomery quotes in the essay above, makes this point when he writes:

> Christian theology is the ability to exhibit, or preach, the Gospel, but not to prove it true by human arguments of reason or philosophy. . . . Let the Gospel be made known, and it will of itself prove its divine character. Christian apologetics has therefore only one function: it is to show the unreasonableness of unbelief. Never can it demonstrate the truth with "enticing words of man's wisdom."[14]

Proof, which involves something that is irrefutable, is unachievable because there is always a way to refute a statement.[15] Rather, what is the chief concern of the anti-apologists is the transformative character of the Gospel. It conveys a special power, a "divine character" that will demonstrate its own veracity and convey its own, non-rational proof directly. Here again, the idea of a triadic sign dissolves the epistemic problem. The formation of the interpreter is crucial to how the sign is understood, and this formation is a product of many experiences that occurred prior to any discussion being held in the present. The root problem is unbelief, and unbelief goes to the heart of the interpretive stance that a none or a done might take to Christianity. What becomes crucial is the attractiveness of the Gospel message, those of a proclamatory, anti-apologetic bent would emphasize; and simply demonstrating this attractiveness in what one says and does is itself a form of persuasion and can be used by the Spirit to change hearts and minds. To hear a sound one must have ears. He who has ears to hear, let him hear.

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In a triadic understanding of the sign, in Gospel outreach one is left with the realization that legitimate, factual concerns a non-believer might have need to be addressed; yet addressing such concerns is not yet sufficient for the proclamation of the Gospel. This quite pragmatic understanding refuses to take a hard line for or against apologetics because ultimately the point is that one must become all things to all people in order by all means to save some. Much of the internal debate surrounding apologetics within the LCMS and elsewhere is intractable because of a failure of philosophical categories or the ability to conceive the world differently. In a worldview governed by the modernist divide between objective truth and subjective truths, interminable debate is the norm because the one set of claims empowers the other. The more one insists on objective truth, the more material the subjectivist has to object. Conversely, the objectivist is increasingly anxious in the face of the relativistic subjectivist, fearing that without purely objective claims, the world descends into anarchy and chaos. This is to say that both views are parasitic upon the other; to mix metaphors, the debate is like a snake eating its own tail. A philosophical paradigm, such as that embodied in the concept of a triadic sign, serves the church well in providing categories that show how this strong subjectivist/objectivist dichotomy should be abandoned in favor of a paradigm that transcends, while encompassing the legitimate concerns of both.

The Relevance of Richness

For the past two years, I have taught an experimental course of my own design at CUP. It is entitled "Can Religion be Rational?" It explores the way in which believers of the so-called "Abrahamic" religions (though Christianity has pride of place) reason. It is not content, however, simply to present "healthy" modes of religious reasoning; it also explores when religion "goes bad." The course begins by problematizing religion by reading a selection from Richard Dawkins, one of the champions of the aggressive New Atheism, who objects to all religion on the grounds that it demands blind faith and claims that even moderate religion leads to violent extremism.[16] This context provides the students, most of whom tend to be from the nones and dones, with a popular and powerful critique of religion and gives voice to many of their concerns. The course then moves on to a series of case studies in which an instance of religious extremism is presented, such as the Westboro Baptist Church (WBC) and the Islamic State (IS), and juxtaposes these with thinkers such as Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Fazlur Rahman. In each case, we examine examples of how they justify their beliefs in order to get a sense of how they reason to get data to determine if their reasoning is rational or not. The course then moves on to a theoretical element that provides the students with the tools to reflect upon the data presented in the case studies before repeating the exercise specifically regarding the role of Scripture in primarily Christian theology.

The structure of this course is based upon the understanding of a triadic sign as outlined above. It first recognizes and validates the concerns that the nones and dones bring to religion, understanding that their interpretations of reality arise from their experience and their habits of thought and action. What they see and hear regarding Christianity is simply different than what the Christian sees and hears. When Christians speak about the grace of God, many of the nones and dones do not hear it as at all comforting but rather as a story akin to a fairy tale designed to placate people who are mired in an irrelevant and irrational belief system. By looking into the reasoning of even extremists such as the WBC, they quickly come to realize that this perception does not reflect the rationality demonstrated there. They encounter new data and a new way of seeing the world by simply portraying how someone else thinks, and they see that even the WBC demonstrates a rational approach—*if* one accepts their premises. Bonhoeffer, too, is discovered to be far from weak-minded or irrational, and it is very apparent that the type of habitual thought processes he demonstrates are also rational, but in a much more complex and nuanced fashion than that of the WBC. The Westboro Baptists are comfortable only with a "literal" understanding of Scripture, where "literal" refers to whatever a text means to them on its face. Bonhoeffer is able to deal with the plain sense of Scripture, but he is also able to make subtle connections and engage in more figural or symbolic interpretation. The theory portion of the course, which explores issues related to a semiotic understanding of reality in much greater depth than I have been able to

develop here, then provides an explanation of what is going on in their interpretation of the WBC and Bonhoeffer, and by extension, also in their own heads.

The net effect of this course has been relatively consistent. Most students generally come in either only tangentially interested in understanding religion or with outright hostility toward it, particularly Christianity. These same students have generally left with a deeper appreciation for and openness to religious thought, and many have expressed desires to learn more about what Christians believe, while others have expressed their desire to get involved again in the church in which they grew up.

The point of relating my experience with this course is to emphasize that it is formed around a semiotic approach to reality, particularly recognizing the role of the triadic sign in thought. It presents the nones and dones with patterns of thought and action with which they are unfamiliar, but which are incredibly rich and nuanced approaches to reality. Exploring these deeply produces in the students, even the skeptical ones, new habits of interpretation simply by observing how others reason. In general, I rarely have to deal with explicit intellectual objections about the reality of God, the trustworthiness of the Bible, the facticity of the resurrection, etc., in this course. The way these intellectual objections are typically formulated become largely irrelevant to the students' manner of thinking when approached with a semiotic model of understanding that takes into account the triadic sign. What is relevant is the way in which thinkers like Bonhoeffer, Luther, and others approach faith and their life with God. The students see not only that they demonstrate a reality-based approach (thereby taking into account the concerns of the apologist/objectivist) but that they also serve as exemplars of a powerfully attractive manner of living in this world and that their faith in Christ is part and parcel of such living (thereby taking into account the concerns of the anti-apologist/subjectivist). In short, the course attempts to make rich the experience of religion to those who have none, as well as to those who have spent a considerable amount of their spiritual resources in dismissing religion as shallow and unthinking. A richness that takes account of the depth of religious faith and connects it to real life cannot be easily dismissed. Richness is relevant, and a semiotic understanding helps one understand why.

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This semiotic approach is not restricted to the classroom.[17] Individuals and congregations can model such an understanding in their interactions with the nones and dones as well. The point is to engage in a practice that gives people the opportunity to have new patterns of

thinking inculcated in them, and this mostly takes place holistically, by totally engaging them in doing something that results in transformation. Indeed, the communal life of the congregation is key to forming individuals who reflect the mind of Christ in their own lives to the point that they can productively interact with those who have no religion or those who are done with it. Such is the case because habitual patterns of interpretation (Peirce's interpretant) are formed not in isolation but in community. So how do we become the type of community that forms this type of person? How do we participate as the body of Christ in forming the mind of Christ in our parishioners?[18]

While there is no single answer to these questions and no "silver bullet" that will reform congregational life, there are directions that can be taken that are more or less promising in helping to form the type of rich rationality that I describe. One approach is to be quite literally unapologetic about being who we are as Lutherans. It entails embracing the pattern of thought that has been handed down to us and living that out in new ways, given the changed cultural situation in which we find ourselves. By imbibing deeply from the Lutheran tradition, our habits of thought and action (interpretants) become so formed that we are able to perceive God's love (object) through the various signs He gives, such as water, bread, wine, brothers and sisters in Christ, etc. We then can act as living signs to the nones and dones because our words and deeds portray God's love and, through our relationships with them, forms the nones and dones to be able to perceive such love by creating new interpretants in them.

> We then can act as living signs to the nones and dones because our words and deeds portray God's love and, through our relationships with them, forms the nones and dones to be able to perceive such love by creating new interpretants in them.

Perhaps the most visible and tangible aspect of such a reclamation of our tradition occurs via reaffirming a liturgical pattern of worship, one that feeds all the people from the very young to the very old. The liturgy is not just the work of the congregation; rather, it is better understood as the very breath of that congregation. It is done in response to what Christ has done. It is breathing out our sins and breathing in the Gospel; it is receiving God's gifts and returning our thanks.

The depth of Christian reflection that has gone into the liturgy is breathtaking and should not quickly be dismissed. It is richly biblical and rooted in a Christian identity, and it demonstrates to all present just who and what this Christian community is, what Christianity is all about. Too often, we run away from it because we think it is off-putting; but what is frequently overlooked is that, as the expression of so many Christians before us, it is deeply "authentic" and serves as an identity-marker of who we are. Just recently, a student came up to me in frustration. This

student had recently visited a Catholic liturgical service as part of an assignment for a course I teach, and she was deeply impressed by the seriousness with which they took the liturgy. As the child of a wiccan and a Roman Catholic and firmly in the "spiritual but not religious" category, this student's frustration centered around why Christians would give up the richness of their heritage—a heritage that the student described as beautiful—for "Christianity-light." Instead of hiding their heritage, she wanted Christians to be more like who they are, not less in a bid for relevance.

My words above regarding the role of the liturgy can be easily misinterpreted. To clarify, the liturgy is one major element that forms people who are capable of living out the tradition faithfully in new circumstances; it is not the only one. Moreover, the role of the liturgy can and has been frequently misunderstood. It would be wrong to approach it in a type of *ex opere operato* fashion, as if merely performing it is sufficient. The idea of "do a good liturgy and they will come" or "it is all about faithfulness," to the exclusion of actively participating in God's mission, is deeply misguided. This is not to say that faithfulness is somehow secondary; it is to say that being faithful entails actively reaching out to the people in front of us and not just waiting for them to come to us.[19] One cannot avoid the responsibility to rightly engage the world with the Gospel, even if doing so makes the Church look quite different than it has in the past. The liturgy is one way to give Christians the resources to see the world with eyes and ears that are faithful to the tradition but also open to hearing the cries of those who struggle today and to be able to respond with the depth and richness of the Gospel message.

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Intentional cross-generational ministry within the congregation is another practice that reflects a semiotic approach to knowledge. Such a ministry focuses upon the entirety of the community by connecting each member with the other, from the oldest to the youngest. These connections have incredible benefits for the young in making them feel at home in the congregation, as well as for the old in giving them the opportunity to help and pass on what they know to a new generation. The young see how the world has not entirely changed from what it was in the past; and the old see how it is, in fact, quite different but not unrecognizable. These relationships highlight how the same world is in view (the objectivist pole), even as what stance one should take to that world (the subjectivist pole) is very much in play. By learning about the experience of the elderly, the younger people are exposed to new models for how they might approach their lives and address the contemporary challenge of the nones and dones. Getting to know people of different generations

and their life experiences quickly makes it apparent that there is no one right way to handle any given situation; life is just too variable. Of course, this variability does not mean that it does not matter what you do. Far from it. There are better and worse ways of responding to life. This is to say that through these types of relationships, both the objectivist and the subjectivist ways of relating to the world are shown to be insufficient. What is portrayed is a better way to view the world by being faithful to the past, yet flexible enough to deal with the present. This approach helps to form individuals to think richly even if they do not know that formation is occurring.

By deliberately using a semiotic approach to thinking about ministry, the possibilities of outreach can be multiplied. It is my hope that these few examples from the classroom and from the congregation help to show the benefits of a semiotic understanding for planning the way forward in mission and to serve as models for how such ministry could occur. The point is that thinking semiotically helps one to focus intentionally on the spiritual, intellectual, and emotional formation of the Christian by insisting that it is this formation that will allow them to engage others with the Gospel fruitfully. This formation occurs not just through what is taught, but by what is caught through everyday practice. A semiotic approach helps Christians recognize the importance of publicly accessible evidence along with the quite rational objections the nones and dones bring to such evidence. It empowers Christians to handle this evidence by demonstrating a manner of thinking that is neither pandering to the concerns of the nones and dones nor a simple confrontation and refutation of positions. Rather, living and teaching in a manner that faithfully responds to evidence can help to demonstrate a new way of being in the world that might be seen to be attractive.

There is much more to say. I hope that this brief, thumbnail sketch of a different way of understanding the typical relationship between evidence and faith, objectivism and subjectivism, might open up creative, new ways of approaching a generation that has little use for the Church and finds the Gospel nearly incomprehensible. In short, we need to find new ways to share the Gospel in our relationships with others, particularly the nones and dones, that do not run down the well-worn paths that are so easily ignored as just more typical Christian boilerplate. Perhaps the impulse that has caused Pope Francis to take a very different public stance to such issues as homosexuality and divorce might serve as a tentative guide. For him, the teachings or the doctrine of Catholicism have not changed, but the recognition of the humanity and integrity of

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the other has begun to take center stage over their simple reassertion. Perhaps we, too, should take the lived experience of the nones and dones more seriously and recognize it for what it is—a challenge that goes to the very roots of how we know what we know. Perhaps we, like them, also need ears to hear.

Endnotes

[1] See http://www.patheos.com/blogs/godlessindixie/2015/03/27/the-nones-vs-the-dones/. There is considerable literature on the phenomenon of the "nones" and "dones," and further fleshing out of these categories beyond my brief comments is not the burden of this essay. For additional research-based information, see: Kaya Oakes, *The Nones are Alright: A New Generation of Believers, Seekers, and Those in Between* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2015); Josh Packard and Ashleigh Hope, *Church Refugees: Sociologists Reveal Why People are Done with Church but not Their Faith* (Loveland, CO: Group Publishing, 2015); and Linda A. Mercadante, *Belief without Borders: Inside the Minds of the Spiritual but not Religious* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014). For some easily-accessed analysis, see
http://www.patheos.com/blogs/godlessindixie/2015/03/27/the-nones-vs-the-dones/;
http://www.pewforum.org/2012/10/09/nones-on-the-rise/;
http://www.huffingtonpost.com/david-briggs/nones-are-someones-in-vib_b_7314554.html;
http://holysoup.com/2015/07/29/theyre-almost-done-with-church-and-more-conservative/;
http://holysoup.com/2015/07/22/the-churchs-hidden-back-door/;
http://www.amazon.com/Church-Refugees-Sociologists-reveal-people/dp/1470725924;
http://thewartburgwatch.com/2015/06/22/the-dones-faithful-church-refugees-and-the-dechurched-project/; http://www.patheos.com/blogs/workcited/2015/06/how-to-really-understand-the-pewreport-church-refugees-by-josh-packard-and-ashleigh-hope/;
https://www.goodreads.com/work/quotes/43600463-church-refugees-sociologists-reveal-why-the-dechurched-left-and-what-t.

[2] I do not say this by way of critique but by way of description. It is, of course, true of most people that they aspire to a certain set of ideals that are not currently actual in their lives.

[3] This is, of course, a not-so-veiled reference to the true offense of the Gospel, which is Christ crucified (1 Cor 1:23). Rather than being offended at this, many young people are offended at Christianity for other reasons, real and perceived. This is the type of offense that Paul commands us to avoid in the same letter (1 Cor 10:32–33).

[4] While this manner of speaking may strike some reader's ears as discounting the role of the Spirit in conversion, such an interpretation misses the point. Speaking of the attractive character of a Christian's spiritual *habitus* is just to describe the enfleshed means that the Spirit uses to effect faith, no less than speaking of how water, bread, and wine are means that the Spirit uses to forgive sins and unite the believer with Christ.

[5] It is important to note that I am here speaking of how people might describe theoretically how they go about outreach. If I had more space, I would argue that most people who are sufficiently formed within the Lutheran tradition do not, in practice, follow a theoretical description that only focuses on apologetics or one that completely eschews giving evidence for what they believe in favor of a purely parochial proclamation. This is to say that there is a felicitous inconsistency (to borrow one of Pieper's best terms) between the way Lutherans actually practice outreach and the manner in which they describe what they do when they encounter nonbelievers.

[6] Deely is one of the most important living semioticians and has traced this history in great detail in many places. For perhaps his most comprehensive treatment, see 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). Other related books include the first two of his "Postmodernity in Philosophy Poinsot Trilogy": *Augustine and Poinsot* (2009) and *Descartes and Poinsot* (2008), both published by the University of Scranton Press. The third volume, *Peirce and Poinsot*, is forthcoming.

[7] Peirce's thought has become increasingly popular during the second half of the twentieth century, though many still balk at its complexity. For a representative sampling of his thought, see Charles Peirce, *The Essential Peirce: Selected Philosophical Writings, Volume 1 (1867–1893)* and *Volume 2 (1893–1913)*, edited by Nathan Houser, Christian Kloesel, and the Peirce Project (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1992 and 1998).

[8] Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, trans. D.W. Robertson, Jr. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1958), 34, II:1.

[9] Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, trans. Roy Harris (Chicago: Open Court Classics, 1972).

[10] For example, see Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakrvorty Spivak (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974).

[11] Not all Structuralists are caught up in this debate, as Paul Ricouer has taken structuralist insights in fascinating directions as found in the jointly-published work: André LaCocque and Paul Ricoeur, *Thinking Biblically: Exegetical and Hermeneutical Studies*, trans. by David Pellauer (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998).

[12] To finish this exercise, the representamen is the "stop" sign itself, and the object is the Department of Transportation's insistence that cars come to a state of zero forward kinetic energy at a particular intersection.

[13] John Warwick Montgomery, "Lutheran Theology and the Defense of Biblical Faith," in *Faith Founded on Fact: Essays in Evidential Apologetics* (Newburgh, IN: Trinity Press, 1978), 152.

[14] J. Theodore Mueller, *Christian Dogmatics* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1934), 71.

[15] Mathematics may be the only human endeavor where true proof is possible.

[16] "But my point in this section is that even mild and moderate religion helps to provide the climate of faith in which extremism naturally flourishes." (Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* [New York: Mariner Books, 2008], 303.)

[17] In fact, I would insist that most of our practice, when it is healthy, already reflects a semiotic understanding. This is because the way we interpret the world is best described via Peirce's triadic sign, and so we simply approach the world in this fashion. What is more difficult and where people frequently go wrong is in the description of what we do. Here is where the problem lies, and so it is one of my primary goals to help people to see that how we describe what we do does not match up well with what we actually do.

[18] Questions of this type need to serve as the starting point for congregations that seek to minister to an increasingly areligious population, not questions such as: "What programs can we create to bring in more people?" "How can we recover the way we were in the past?" "What will meet the felt needs of people?" "How can we make the Gospel relevant?" There are many other questions of this type, and all largely miss the point that we need to reform our own minds before we can hope to portray the mind of Christ to others.

[19] The semiotic model I develop above insists upon the idea that practice, what we do together during church, is part and parcel of the formation of the interpretant or how the individual sees the world. Therefore, practice is not something to be regarded as neutral. It situates one within the world and forms one to think Christianly.