

SCRIPTURAL REASONING

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What is Scriptural Reasoning

- Scriptural Reasoning is a novel and contemporary approach to inter-faith dialogue which assigns scripture at as the most significant role in a conversation.
- Believers of a faith engage in the practice of reading, listening and reflecting on scripture as part of their faith or ritualistic practice, however in SR, in addition to their own faith scripture, adherents of different faith come together to engage with scriptures of each others faith.

What is SR (Continued)

The aim of SR is to for people of different faiths to come together to find a solution to the world challenges through the healing understanding of divine scriptures.

Believers of different faith come together and dialogue through a “shared sense of mutual hospitality”. Within this hospitality, individuals function simultaneously as hosts with their own scripture and guests with other faiths scripture. Thus it engages individuals in its most easiest and organic form of sharing, reading, understanding and reflecting together on each others scriptures.

The Roots of Scriptural Reasoning

Scriptural reasoning developed from a unique Jewish practice of textual- reasoning.

The architects of textual reasoning are Steven Kepnes, Peter Ochs, and Robert Gibbs, originating from the 'Academy of Jewish Philosophy.'

The History of Scriptural Reasoning

Scriptural Reasoning began in the early 1990s in North America as 'Textual reasoning'.

Jewish philosophers and scholars established a tradition of meeting together to understand the Rabbinic texts at the university convention. The aim of this forum was to reflect upon the core understandings of the Torah in the present and future and reflect on its interpretations in different disciplines.

In mid 1990's the group was joined by their Christian friends who were so motivated by the process that they decided to extend it for interfaith dialogue. Gradually Muslim colleagues too were encouraged to participate thus giving birth to the process of interfaith SR.

It was initially started in UK, but gradually it spread to the Atlantic and to non-academic groups as well.

Who can participate in Scriptural Reasoning?

- Anyone with a passion for scripture.
- Preferable at least two people from each of the participating religion.
- The individuals may not be official representatives of their tradition.
- Need not have a religious education / academic background.

Method

Few scholars (6-8) from at least three different faiths can meet in a peaceful place regularly for approximately two -hour sessions.

Scriptural text from the traditions that the scholars belong to could be brought along. A theme could be identified (it could be an issue, or a concern related to which the scriptural text could be identified and brought by the groups)

One member of the group is selected as the facilitator of the group who ensures that the discussion is steady, and everyone gets a fair chance to speak and be heard.

Before the formal SR, the participants may spend time in thoroughly studying their scripture texts along with its commentaries and other related background readings.

But during the formal SR sessions only small samples of the texts are to be studied. All traditions and scholars enjoy equal authority. Only the scriptures are given significance. Each scripture is treated with equal respect as sources of revelation, adherants and instruction.

Participants start by analyzing a single text, they try to make sense of the grammar and syntax of each verse and how it could be understood by traditional and academic scholars. All participants are encouraged to share their thoughts on the text which may interest them as challenging, surprising or precarious.

Participants are encouraged to address the challenges from their understanding derived from any source of knowledge. The debate can go around the table gently regulated by the facilitator. Such discussions bring about measures to overcome the challenge but also give rise to related challenges. Some discussions continue without culmination between different texts and verses. The groups may at times concentrate on a couple of lines of discussion, which brings about 'scriptural reasoning'. The aim of this exercise is not to arrive at any eventual answer, but it is 'reasoning'. Models of reasoning arise contributed by all scholars which thus cannot be ascribed to any one individual, tradition, philosophical discipline.

Guidelines for Scriptural Reasoning

1. Focus on the texts
2. Original languages to be used only to expand conversation, and not to close dialogue
3. Feel invited to explore others' texts
4. Be a good listener giving others space to explore and express their ideas and thoughts.
5. If you do not understand, be honest and state it respectfully as you are not expected to be an expert on your own scripture or do not agree to others thoughts,
6. Refrain from generalizations.
7. Be present: Psychologically and physically even when it is others turn to speak.
8. Be respectful in handling all the texts

Guidelines for Introducing Texts

**Keep it
brief**

**Emphasize
on the
verse**

**It is not
required
to
'unpack'
the text**

Where? Tent/House



Contemporary SR:

Cambridge Inter-faith Programme (CIP) and
the Rose Castle Foundation

Beyond Muslim, Jewish and Christian dialogue- . In the UK and worldwide, SR practice now involves Sikhs, Buddhists, Hindus, Daoist, and many other faith communities.

International: This includes communities which are affected by religion-related tensions and conflict such as Nigeria, Palestine, Israel, Pakistan and India

Religious literacy in schools- Three Faiths Forum has worked with students with primary and secondary school, CIP has also been a key supporter of a research project called 'The Story Tent', an interesting method introducing young children to different religions and inter-faith dialogue.

it is practised in **hospitals, chaplaincies, prisons, businesses and various local community contexts**

What Is Unique about SR: ‘Disagreements’

Disagreements are a part of SR practice as it deals with differences in the perspectives and interpretations of people from different religious backgrounds.

However, it is experienced study of different scriptural texts has brought **about astonishing, and effective and extraordinary new insights.**

Thus Ben Quash comments, that **“Disagreement is an opportunity, rather than a problem.”**

He quotes the practice of SR practice to be closer to Jewish practice as compared to the Cristian practice. In the Christian tradition there is a pressure to reach a right interpretation, whereas in the Jewish tradition it is understood that the text is rich with multiple meanings and it believes that the best way to to know them is through argumentation.” (Quash 2006)

SR is not striving for consensus, but the persuasion that is respectful and enriching through differences of perspectives

Thus, Scriptural reasoning engages dialogue which confirms to **respectful disagreement, “friendly competition,”** (Geddes 2004 : 99), and **“a harmony of opposing voices”** (Lindbeck 2002).

What makes SR practice unique? –Contd-

is that people of all faiths can read and discuss each others texts on an equally without having to be uncommitted to their own own faith obligations.

- **Inter-religious hospitality** : which offers a response to adherents who believe their role to be gatekeepers for their own scriptures. In SR practice, they are led to acknowledge that they do not exclusively own their scriptures – **they are not the experts on its final meaning**” (Ford 2 007: 280).

- Every scripture academically and studied and critiqued inter-religiously. Processivity, Protectiveness over scriptures or exclusivity is not tolerated in an interfaith SR practice.

Exemplar Resource Pack for SR

Example: Fasting

- Quran The Cow, 2:183-5, English translation: Abdel Haleem
- New Testament Matthew 4: 1-4, English translation: NRSV
- Hebrew Bible Isaiah 58:4-7, English translation: JPS 1985

Example 1, SR
**Inter-faith Pedagogy for Muslims and Christians: Scriptural Reasoning and
Christian and Muslim Youth Work.**
Tom Greggs, University of Chester

- September 2007 : Britain's first Christian and Muslim Youth Work Course
- The University of Chester funded a one-year project in pedagogical research on the co-teaching of Muslim and Christian Youth Work students.
- Third Year degrees, Students join Theology, Religious Studies for training in theory and for practical training through SR - where both Christian and Muslim students work together.
- ✓ Questionnaires,
- ✓ focus group work and
- ✓ participant interviews
- Text selected: cross-generational family relations : Luke 14:25-35 and Quran 31:12-19).

Issues

1. Could be perceived as denial or betrayal of that exclusivity
2. Fear of the pollution of the outsider.
3. Exclusivist members perceive the unity of participants engaged in inter-faith dialogue as a form of external liberalism which endanger traditions of individual faith communities.
4. This exercise is more valuable for extremist of exclusivist or the ones who reject liberal pluralism, however it is most challenging to involve them.

Practical Problems

- Muslim students assumed it could be a predominantly Christian agenda which might not take Quran as seriously (due to reasons uniformity)
- Christian students were fearful of pollution of the outsider with reference to Jesus words as being 'the way, the truth and the life', and his forewarnings against false prophets who would follow him.
- Muslim students fearful of - Christians' universalising tendencies.
- Muslims students were notified of a fatwa issued by the London Sharia court 2007, which legitimized this enterprise.

Insights and Surprises through discussions

- A: Muslim participants uncomfortable with the Christian understanding that Jesus asked people to hate. - In Islam the idea of forgiveness and the perspective of Jesus's character of prophet.
- C: 'maybe it was ... drilling home the point that God might ask you to do something that is really, really, really hard, and you've got to be prepared to do that'.
- F: I've been listening to the particular about the word 'hate' – ... I've just realised that this whole thing, in the passage, maybe the best way I can understand and relate from the Islamic viewpoint – and it might make sense, I'm not saying it will, but it might make sense in terms of this word being used here, and it doesn't seem appropriate here. But there's a narration of the messenger, and there's a few narrations, or there's a lot of narrations where the companions they would go to the messenger and in a discussion they would ask him something, you know, he would ask them, you know, one of the methods of teaching
- Thus SR offers the opportunity to understand ones faith from the perspective and to understand that perspective from his/her own faith.

Conclusion of the Research- (through semi structured Interviews): Benefits of utilizing the text

- Participant A stated: 'I think to learn about other religions and faiths you have to go back to the primary text and without that it would have been virtually impossible to sort of learn about Islam without looking at what their text says about their religion...'
- Participant B stated: 'I would have been completely lost if I didn't have the texts...'
- One participant articulated several benefits to using texts: because of the meaning of the texts to different people here, it [scripture] can help, it bridges a gap in some ways because it's something to focus on – if everyone focuses on the same thing relationship can happen around that focus, so you can talk with people you may not usually talk to. Also, because of what it is, it can help you reflect on what you believe and why you believe it and it breaks some of the barriers you place on your own head before you even meet people (Participant C)
- Participant D noted the potential that the texts have for stimulating dialogue, and for identifying commonalities between the texts and faiths:
- it's a catalyst for the dialogue – anybody can just sit down and talk about things but when you start talking more about the differences then the scriptures, the divine texts, like I said they have a lot of commonalities and if we should work on the commonalities because really we know what the differences are, and they're very few and far between but they're no cause for friction ... (Participant D)
- Another participant was vocal about the surprise s/he had about how easy it had been to stimulate discussion of the texts: 'The thing that stood out was how easy it was for us to actually discuss the texts' (Participant F). Given the centrality of scripture, and the endless depths of its interpretation, for the Abrahamic traditions, this is hardly surprising.

Positive Outcomes (For Students)

SR provides a non-essentialist approach to learning about other faiths

While essentialists teach students to think in binaries, teaches its participants in relational terms.

Related to this, scriptural reasoning allows for a truly learner based, and peer-to-peer learning approach to pedagogy

It gives us the understanding of the reality that societies are intertwined even if they possess separate histories. Thus, instead of learning about different(Islamic and Christian) civilizational history, students should be taught to think of civilizations being “transformative, reflexive, and fluid entities”

SR provides a potential for discussions and expressions, which allows students to perceive that faiths have different worldviews and each individual relate uniquely with their faiths.

- Allows to experience both insider- outsider approach

Example 2

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YrsHQz5heW0>

- Scriptural reasoning | Justice in Islam, Christianity & Judaism
- Bridges Foundation.

OUTCOME OF SR

**Learning and
understanding**

**Exploring
differences**

Friendships

Positive Outcomes:

Inter-religious hospitality offers a response to believers who act like security guards or gatekeepers for their own scriptural tradition. “ ‘Native speakers’ hosting a scripture and its tradition need to acknowledge that they do not exclusively own their scriptures – **they are not the experts on its final meaning**” (Ford 2007: 280).

Scriptures have a public character; they are accessible to everyone. Possessive claims are not acceptable in the practice of scriptural reasoning. Nonetheless, an expression of practical wisdom that “the hosts are to be questioned and listened to attentively as the court of first (but not last) appeal” obtains (Ford 2007 : 280).

This practice it is not the striving for consensus that is primary but the conviction that differences of opinion can also be enriching when discussed in a respectful way. Following the Jewish tradition of Havruta, scriptural reasoning involves a form of dialogue that revolves around **respectful disagreement, “friendly competition,”** (Geddes 2004 : 99), **“a harmony of opposing voices”** (Lindbeck 2002).

Ben Quash formulates this as follows: **“What is taught here is that dramatic tension between a plurality of perspectives is not always a sign of failure in the human appropriation of truth; it may be the disclosure of a deeper level of truthful reality than our rational minds are accustomed to allow us to appreciate”** (Quash 2006a : 412).

Criticisms of SR

Consistency:

It is understood that striving for consensus may lead to superficiality, however even when there is too much diversity, when a verse is reflected upon in many perspectives, it dilutes the consistency and the meaning of the verses. (Lambkin 2010 : 51).

Lack of Critical depth:

In time of constant change in theology it is desirable to clear of individual hermeneutical obligations and beliefs (Stiver 2003 : 175), however SR brings rise to diverse reflections by various theoreticians , but that also dissuades discussions on critical depth of the verse.

SR would become more credible when enough time is spent when the verses are thought through in depth.

Few considerations suggesting need for further reflection on SR:

Depth of critical engagement a requirement:

Post liberalism suggests that particularity of religious meanings are understood through engaging intratextually. It is important to acknowledge that deep reflections and reasonings bring comprehension to religious scriptures. Thus, only by deeply engaging with a tradition, one will be able to understand and evaluate the scriptural text of another tradition

Too much focus on commonalities:

Individual differences among religions give identities to different religious traditions. SR should not become a place where pluralist interreligious dialogue the focus may shift too much to commonalities between the religions.

CONCLUSION:

Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, Hardy asserts that scriptures are the fire of the Abrahamic traditions, a fire that can both consume and warm.

Scriptures are no doubt sources of conflict, but are “sources of reason, compassion, and divine spirit for healing [these] separate communities” (Kepnes 2006: 370).

Thus it is a reason religious leaders must develop practices that are able to channel the warmth of the scriptural fire.

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