

SCRIPTURAL REASONING AND THE DISCIPLINE OF CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE

MIKE HIGTON

Introduction

In the fourth Pope John Paul II Annual Lecture on Interreligious Understanding at the Angelicum in Rome in 2011, David Ford drew attention to the deep relationship possible between two dynamics of post-Vatican-II Catholic theology: the engagement with scripture called for in *Dei Verbum*, and the engagement with other faiths called for in *Nostra Aetate*. Deep calls to deep, according to Ford, and the journey deeper into the scriptural sources of one faith receives additional impetus when undertaken alongside journeys deeper into the scriptural sources of others.¹

In this article, I will ask whether and how Christian doctrine, and Christian doctrinal theology, can fruitfully become part of this relationship. I will begin with a brief comparison between two recent inter-faith practices, Comparative Theology and Scriptural Reasoning.² The former, as developed by Francis X. Clooney, SJ, draws sustenance from the kinds of scriptural reading that have come to the fore in post-Vatican II Catholic theology, but is also able to delve into an eclectic range of non-scriptural texts in a variety of genres and registers—and approaches doctrinal questions by means of extended contemplative attention to the texts in which they are broached.

Mike Higton

Department of Theology and Religion, Durham University, 16 South Bailey, Durham, DH1 3EE, UK

Email: mike.higton@durham.ac.uk

¹ David Ford, "Jews, Christians and Muslims Meet around their Scriptures: An Inter-faith Practice for the 21st Century", available online at <http://www.interfaith.cam.ac.uk/en/resources/papers/jpii-lecture>; last accessed 29 August, 2012.

² Michael Barnes, "Reading Other Religious Texts: Intratextuality and the Logic of Scripture", *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, 46:3 (2011), pp. 389–410.

In Comparative Theology, the primary site for wrestling with doctrinal questions is in the internal dialogue of the comparative theologian's own rumination, albeit fed by the experience of live inter-faith dialogue. By contrast, Scriptural Reasoning is a practice in which the primary form of engagement is in live conversation, albeit fed by the internal deliberation of the individuals involved. In Scriptural Reasoning it has proved much harder to make doctrinal questions a focus for discussion or in other ways to expose doctrinal commitments directly to the rigours of the encounter. Two questions therefore emerge from this comparison. Does Comparative Theology's success in addressing doctrinal questions depend upon the ability of the Christian comparative theologian to set the agenda, and to arrange his reading of the texts of other traditions around it? And, is there a way in which doctrinal questions can appropriately be addressed in Scriptural Reasoning, where both the agenda and the modes of conversation by which it is pursued are subject to constant negotiation between participants from multiple traditions?

The bulk of the article focuses on the second question. I look more closely at what is meant by "doctrine" and by "doctrinal theology", and propose that doctrinal theology itself be envisaged as a practice of devout scriptural reading. Renewed engagement with scripture since Vatican II has, after all, deeply shaped Catholic doctrinal or dogmatic theology—not simply in the sense that such theology now draws more intensively on the results of biblical exegesis and criticism, but in the sense that the practice of such theology is (for some, at least) becoming inseparable from the kind of ruminative, contemplative steeping in scripture found in *lectio divina*. Doctrinal claims belong in the context of such reading: they emerge from it and discipline its continuation, and they are properly understood by tracing that emergence and participating in that continuation.

I then argue that, if Christian doctrinal theology is understood in this way, what is needed for Christian doctrinal questions to be exposed to the rigours of Scriptural Reasoning dialogue is simply the presence in that dialogue of Christian doctrinal theologians steeped in the practices of scriptural reading that constitute their discipline and that no additional focus or mode of discussion is required, beyond the intense attention already central to Scriptural Reasoning: attention to the way the words run in particular scriptural texts.

I finish by noting that the existence of Christian doctrinal theologians steeped in the practices of scriptural reading that constitute their discipline cannot be taken for granted—and suggest that the experience of Scriptural Reasoning might indicate one practical way in which that steeping might be further pursued: in cells of argumentatively devout discussion of Christian scripture, analogous to Scriptural Reasoning groups, but made up of people committed to the discipline of Christian doctrinal reading. Such cells would meet to explore together (and disagree about) how the reading of scripture is properly disciplined by doctrine—what those doctrines mean as forms of

such discipline, and where such disciplined reading leads. Such a practice might form Christian scriptural readers in whose habits of reading Christian doctrinal commitments would be made more fully present to the Scriptural Reasoning conversation: those commitments would, as it were, be closer to the surface of their reading practices. It might also provide a context in which the implications of readings explored in Scriptural Reasoning could be appropriately tested, making practical sense of the claim that, for Christian readers, Scriptural Reasoning is an inter-faith discipline within a Christian discipline of devout reading.

Scripture, Inter-faith Engagement—and Doctrine?

Dei Verbum concludes with the aspiration that “by reading and study of the sacred books . . . the treasure of revelation, entrusted to the church, [may] fill human hearts ever more and more”, such that “we may hope that . . . [the church’s] spiritual life will receive a new impulse from increased devotion to the word of God”.³ Ford notes that this deeper engagement with scripture has been visible in many ways in the subsequent life of the Catholic Church, and draws particular attention to its liturgy, and to the renewal and world-wide spread of *lectio divina*. In Luke Dysinger’s words, *lectio divina* is

a slow, contemplative praying of the Scriptures which enables the Bible, the Word of God, to become a means of union with God. . . . [It] enables us to discover . . . an increasing ability to offer more of ourselves and our relationships to the Father, and to accept the embrace that God is continuously extending to us in the person of his Son Jesus Christ.⁴

It is, in other words, a means of plunging deeper, by means of Scripture, into the particularity of the Christian faith, or of taking that particularity more deeply to heart.

On the basis of his experience of Scriptural Reasoning,⁵ Ford claims that such a scriptural journey deeper into Christian particularity, into Christian *difference*, does not need to be achieved at the expense of, or in opposition to,

³ DV, 26.

⁴ From Luke Dysinger’s widely circulated description of *lectio divina*: “Accepting the Embrace of God: The Ancient Art of *Lectio Divina*” (1990), available online at <http://www.valyermo.com/ld-art.html>; last accessed 29 August 2012.

⁵ There are plenty of descriptions of Scriptural Reasoning in the literature, and I will assume that the basic form of Scriptural Reasoning discussion of scripture is understood. See David F. Ford and C. C. Pecknold (eds), *The Promise of Scriptural Reasoning* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), especially the essays by Ford, Kepnes, Adams and Quash. See also Mike Higton and Rachel Muers, *The Text in Play: Experiments in Reading Scripture* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2012). For a more popular introduction, see the materials on <http://www.scripturalreasoning.org>. Note that there are other websites bearing similar names which are not affiliated to Scriptural Reasoning movement referred to in this article.

the deeper engagement with other faiths called for in *Nostra Aetate*. In fact, the opposite turns out to be true: the two “deeper” (“going deeper into the faith of others [and] deeper into one’s own faith”) can animate and impel one another. When members of one faith read its scriptures devoutly, ruminatively, and prayerfully in company with members of other faiths reading their own scriptures in similar ways, a sustainable conversation becomes possible in which the scriptures and reading practices of each faith are thrown into relief, questioned, tested, and explored. Such conversation is impelled rather than impeded by attention to the animating particularity of each faith.

In practice, however, one limit has been discovered in the conversations of Scriptural Reasoning. Bringing explicit doctrinal statements to the conversation tends to kill it—though not because they cause disagreement (there is plenty of disagreement in Scriptural Reasoning, and it is not normally regarded as a problem to be overcome). In my own experience in several Scriptural Reasoning groups, there have been occasions when two or more of the Christian participants have discussed some facet of a passage in explicitly doctrinal terms, and the other participants have inevitably become spectators, removed from the flow of the conversation (just as in, say, an explicitly legal discussion between two Jewish participants, Christians might tend to become spectators). Such moments work as asides, eddies of “in-house” speech curling off from the main flow of the conversation, but it has proven difficult in practice to find fruitful ways—ways that allow a continued intensive conversational interchange across faith boundaries—of bringing explicit doctrinal discourse into the heart of Scriptural Reasoning discussions. References to formal Christian doctrine have therefore been infrequent, irregular, and fragmentary in Scriptural Reasoning discussions of particular scriptures, and in most conversations *about* Scriptural Reasoning, even on the lips of Christians from doctrinally-shaped traditions.

The situation with Comparative Theology is rather different. In his recent apologia for the practice, Francis Clooney discusses its relation to doctrine or dogma. Comparative Theology “does not disrespect doctrinal expressions of truth” but

neither does it merely repeat doctrinal statements as if nothing is learned from comparative reflection. Rarely, if ever, will comparative theology produce new truths, but it can make possible fresh insights into familiar and revered truths, and new ways of receiving those truths.⁶

Elsewhere, he says that doctrinal claims “need to be tested and purified through interreligious, comparative, and dialogical practices”, while

⁶ Francis X. Clooney, SJ, *Comparative Theology: Deep Learning Across Religious Borders* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), p. 112.

insisting that “[a] proper theology is always the work of believers who may be expected to adhere to the truth of their faith positions as expressed theologically”.⁷

Comparative Theology’s distinctive feature, over against some other practices of doctrinally-focused inter-faith dialogue, is that it does not abstract doctrinal claims from the differing practices of religious reading within which they are made. Its operating assumption is that doctrinal claims belong in the context of such reading, that their meaning is properly grasped only by a meditative tracing of the ways they emerge from and are handled by relevant religious texts. Comparative Theology’s basic practice, then, is extended ruminative reading of texts from two or more religious traditions, placed alongside one another, in the light of the traditions of religious commentary in which the course of such ruminative reading within each tradition is displayed.

The range of texts explored by Comparative Theology is wide and eclectic—much wider than the scriptural canons that provide the bread and butter of Scriptural Reasoning discussion. Comparative Theology explores scriptural texts, commentaries, liturgies, philosophical treatises and more, its only restriction being its tendency to focus on texts that have been the subject of repeated ruminative reading within their own traditions. A particular Comparative Theology exploration

ordinarily starts with the intuition of an intriguing resemblance that prompts us to place two realities—texts, images, practices, doctrines, persons—near one another, so that they may be seen over and again, side by side. In this necessarily arbitrary and intuitive practice we understand each differently because the other is near.⁸

Live dialogue—“[l]iving interaction among people of different faiths”—is an important accompaniment to this process,

[b]ut even a seriously theological dialogue among learned believers is not enough. The comparative theologian must do more than listen to others explain their faith; she must be willing to study their traditions deeply alongside her own, taking both to heart.⁹

Clooney therefore says, in the introduction to one Comparative Theology exploration, that it

is not filled with accounts of firsthand theological conversations, although I have engaged in more than a few over the years. Rather, it

⁷ Francis X. Clooney, SJ, *Hindu God, Christian God: How Reason Helps Break Down the Boundaries between Religions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 11.

⁸ Clooney, *Comparative Theology*, p. 11.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

reflects the interior dialogue, more common in theological circles, that occurs when theologians read and ponder what they read.¹⁰

It is this interiority that makes possible Comparative Theology's relatively greater ability to treat matters of doctrine, in comparison to Scriptural Reasoning. The individual theologian, who intuitively senses an intriguing resemblance that might be worth pursuing, can set his own agenda; he can organise the ruminative reading that is the heartbeat of Comparative Theology's method around his perception of resemblance, and explore assiduously whatever texts allow him to probe it more deeply. It is this freedom to explore wherever the resemblance leads that makes possible the remarkable achievements of Comparative Theology—and, where the resemblances intuited are doctrinal, it is this freedom that makes possible its fresh insights into doctrinal claims.

This interiority is also, however, the reason why Comparative Theology's success in approaching doctrinal claims cannot easily be matched by Scriptural Reasoning: when the agenda, the texts studied, and the modes of discourse preferred are subject to constant negotiation between the members of multiple traditions who participate in Scriptural Reasoning, it has proved impossible to organise the conversation around a perceived doctrinal resemblance, to select texts that allow that doctrine to be kept in the foreground, and to bring the conversation back regularly to a doctrinal register. It would be impossible, for instance, to arrange a Scriptural Reasoning symposium on God around the questions that organise Clooney's *Hindu God, Christian God*: "Is there a God who is maker of the world? Can God's true identity be to some extent known? Can God become embodied? Is revelation the norm by which to judge religions?"¹¹ Certainly Scriptural Reasoning groups could choose to study scriptural texts that, to an eye informed by Christian doctrine, seem to treat these themes—but the wisdom of experienced practitioners of Scriptural Reasoning is that the attempt to frame the discussion of those texts in these terms, and the attempt to return to these questions (in however nuanced a way) as the touchstone of the study, kills the conversation.

¹⁰ Clooney, *Hindu God*, p. 10. Comparative Theology therefore coheres most easily with forms of Christian doctrinal theology in which such an interior dialogue is the primary form taken by devout reading. Cf. Dysinger's claim that "the most authentic and traditional form of Christian *lectio divina* is the solitary or 'private' practice" even if there are also "many different forms of so-called 'group lectio'" which have their own usefulness as "means of introducing and encouraging the practice of *lectio divina*", but which "should not become a substitute for an encounter and communion with the Living God that can only take place in that privileged solitude where the biblical Word of God becomes transparent to the Very Word Himself—namely private *lectio divina*" (Dysinger, "Accepting the Embrace of God").

¹¹ Clooney, *Hindu God*, p. 12.

If we are to understand the potential relationship between Scriptural Reasoning and Christian doctrine, we will have to travel by another route—and the first step on that route is a closer examination of what we mean by “doctrine”.

The Discipline of Christian Doctrine

When I speak of “Christian doctrine”, I mean, first of all, to refer to doctrines as statements of Christian belief, that are corporately acknowledged, and that function as an authoritative code—a discipline—for Christian speech and practice, or to crystallise and express the disciplined form of such speech and practice. Paradigmatically, one might think of doctrinal statements in creeds, as the statements of councils whose abiding authority is acknowledged, or as liturgical declarations providing corporate summaries of faith.

Christian doctrine is discussed in the academic discipline (to use the word “discipline” in a second sense) of doctrinal theology or systematic theology. Doctrinal theology is not itself doctrine, though it might from time to time have contributed to the formation or formulation of doctrine. Much that is said in doctrinal theology will not itself be an authoritative statement of belief, corporately acknowledged, and much of it will not succeed in authoritatively disciplining Christian speech and practice, or expressing their existing disciplined form. Rather, doctrinal theology is that scholarly practice by which doctrine is examined, tested, and expounded, and its connections to Christian speech and practice explored.

Even if we stick to these definitions, however, Christian doctrine is no one thing. The forms and locations of authoritative statement, the forms and locations of corporate acknowledgement, and the processes by which the authoritative doctrinal disciplining of practice and speech takes place, have all differed from time to time and place to place. The history of Christian doctrine is a history not only of changing doctrinal claims, but of the changing nature of doctrine—and of changing construals, amongst doctrinal theologians, of that nature.

Any attempt by a doctrinal theologian in the present to construe the nature of doctrine—to provide an account of the kind of discourse that Christian doctrine is, its proper location and function—cannot simply be descriptive. Different construals will highlight different features and tendencies in the history of Christian doctrine and in its present operation, and organise the whole field around them. So, for instance, a Lindbeckian postliberal and a proponent of analytic theology might approach the Christological definition produced at the Council of Chalcedon rather differently, prior to any detailed engagement with its content. Each would take it to be a different kind of text, functioning in a different kind of way, and properly subject to differing kinds of analysis; each would be able to appeal to real features of the history of Chalcedon, and would need to downplay others. Each construal would

enable and organise a different programme of doctrinal theological work, exploring, testing and expounding the Chalcedonian definition in different ways—and it is unlikely that there would be any knock-down argument available to dictate a choice between the two approaches.

What I offer in the remainder of this section is one such construal of the nature of doctrine. The construal that I favour is easiest to see against a foil—a contrast model that is perhaps no more than a straw man. One can imagine a construal of Christian doctrine in which it would be the authoritative summarising and organising of the data found in the sources from which doctrine is properly drawn (let us say scripture, tradition, reason, and experience, appropriately weighted and ordered). Christian doctrine would be the yield of these sources, and to hold fast to these doctrines would be a significant part of what it is to know God.¹²

Against that foil, Christian doctrine can be thought of as a discipline within the discipline of Christian living. Christian life can be thought of as itself a form of discipline, where that word is being used in a third sense to name a spiritual regimen by which holiness is pursued. Christian life can be thought of as a discipline by which deeper and fuller knowledge of God is received and pursued—and Christian doctrine can be construed as a disciplining of that discipline. To know God by means of Christian doctrine is not so much a matter of understanding and affirming those doctrines as it is a matter of accepting their discipline—a matter of moving in the direction that doctrine marks out. To say this is not to abandon the idea that doctrinal statements are true, of course. They have the capacity to guide into truth only if they respond to and get hold of the way things truly are; but their truthfulness is properly grasped by accepting their discipline; they are true insofar as they guide truly.

This basic construal of doctrine can be elaborated in more than one way. A fuller account of doctrine—a theology of doctrine, as we might call it—would need to consider Christian doctrine as a disciplining of scriptural reading, a disciplining of worship, and a disciplining of ethical action, and possibly more. Here, however, I am pursuing only the first of these aspects: Christian doctrine not as a summarising and organising of the yield of scriptural reading, but as a guiding and impelling of an ongoing practice of delving into scripture.

The basic practice here is, in the broadest sense, *lectio divina*; it is what Paul Griffiths has called “religious reading”.¹³ To read religiously is to read “as a lover reads, with a tensile attentiveness that wishes to linger, to prolong,

¹² This is similar to the “cognitive–propositionalist” account of doctrine described (and rejected) by George Lindbeck in *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster, 1984)—though my purpose is somewhat different from his.

¹³ Paul J. Griffiths, *Religious Reading: The Place of Reading in the Practice of Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); see also the discussion in Clooney, *Comparative Theology*, pp. 58–59, and in Michael Barnes, “Reading Other Religious Texts”.

to savor, and has no interest at all in the quick orgasm of consumption".¹⁴ It is reading in which

the work read is understood as a stable and vastly rich resource, one that yields meaning, suggestions (or imperatives) for action, matter for aesthetic wonder, and much else. It is a treasure-house, an ocean, a mine: the deeper religious readers dig, the more ardently they fish, the more single-mindedly they seek gold, the greater will be their reward. The basic metaphors here are those of discovery, uncovering, retrieval, opening up: religious readers read what is there to be read, and what is there to be read always precedes, exceeds, and in the end supersedes its readers. There can, according to those metaphors, be no final act of reading in which everything is uncovered, in which the mine of gold has yielded all its treasure or the fish pool has been emptied of fish. Reading, for religious readers, ends only with death, and perhaps not then: it is a continuous, ever-repeated act.¹⁵

Such reading is a curriculum, a form of pedagogy—and it is a form of pedagogy that is comprehensive, unsurpassable, and central: for the religious reader, *everything* falls within the compass of this pedagogy, there is no moving on from it to some higher or deeper curriculum, and it is held to give the reader's life its most basic orientation.¹⁶

Such reading requires an extravagant and open-ended commitment from the reader. There is no ground on which a reader may stand to survey multiple candidates for such commitment before choosing the most fruitful; the very criteria by which fruitfulness can be identified will be shaped by this reading. Nor is it an experiment that the religious reader designs for him- or herself; he or she submits to a discipline—to what Griffiths calls

the presence of some acknowledged constraints upon what and how religious readers should read and compose, as well as (by entailment) upon the kinds of conclusions that can properly be drawn and taught from this reading and composition.¹⁷

Doctrine is, under the aspect that I am considering, precisely such a set of acknowledged constraints upon the reading of scripture—a set of rules for reading that have emerged from the practice of such reading and that shape its continuation. Christological doctrine, for example, will be understood as

¹⁴ Griffiths, *Religious Reading*, p. ix.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 7–13, 67.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 63.

just such a set of rules for reading—a set of constraints guiding Christian readers into a more penetrating reading of the gospels, for the sake of their conformity to Christ. Christological doctrines teach Christians, for instance, to read the gospels in such a way as to acknowledge who the acting subject is when they read of the actions and passions of the man Jesus of Nazareth. One has not understood Chalcedonian doctrine well when one has learnt to manipulate the conceptual machinery of natures and persons that it sets into motion; one has understood Chalcedonian doctrine well when one has begun learning how it teaches one to read pronouns and active verbs in the gospels, how to read statements of Christ's weakness alongside statements of his power, how to read claims about our sharing in Christ's death and resurrection—and one is Chalcedonian when those practices of reading have become habitual shapes in one's continuous, ever-repeated practices of devout reading.

These practices of reading are not primarily solutions to problems in the text, as if their adoption allows a relaxation in attention to the difficult ways that the words run; they are disciplines by which one's nose is held against the grindstone of the text, bindings by which one is disabled from holding the text at arm's length.

Living within doctrinal discipline is considerably more widespread than is technical understanding of doctrine (indeed, there might be a smaller overlap between the two than we doctrinal theologians would care to admit). Someone may have a technical understanding of doctrine, and enjoy firm intellectual assent to it, who does not live by its discipline; equally, someone may be formed into habits of reading that lie within this discipline without being schooled in technical understanding of the doctrine, or without being able to connect their habits to the words they speak in the creed each Sunday. The latter, not the former, is the one who understands the truth that doctrine teaches. A Christian who knows how to read the gospels well, when measured by the standards of doctrinal discipline, lacks nothing of the knowledge of God that could be supplied by a deeper understanding of those standards—though the fact that some in a community have a deeper understanding of those standards may well prove to be a contribution to keeping the discipline alive.

Christian doctrine disciplines holy reading for the sake of that holy living which is knowledge of God. The reading that it promotes is, however, as fundamentally corporate as the living. One learns to read more richly—to fish more ardently, seek gold more assiduously, mine more deeply—by reading in the company of others. One learns to read, for instance, by the light of those whose lives have become commentaries, and who by inhabiting and embodying the Christian discipline of reading teach what it means to read well.

One also learns to read in the company of those who read *differently*, who unsettle and question the readings one has settled with, whose ways of

reading differently lead one in new directions within the inexhaustibility of scripture—they send one back again to the text, to look more deeply. But one's doctrinal discipline shapes (or should shape) one's reception of another's reading; it holds one accountable to the wider community of reading, and to the tradition of religious reading that one is called to inhabit—a pattern of testing and discernment provided to ensure that Christian readers are not led back from deep water into the shallows.

If Christian doctrine is construed in this way, the question of its relation to Scriptural Reasoning can be transformed. Instead of asking whether it is possible, without inhibiting the flow of Scriptural Reasoning practice, to bring Christian doctrine into it, one can ask whether it is possible for the practice of Scriptural Reasoning to become, for its Christian participants, part of their discipline of Christian doctrinal reading. If Christian doctrinal discourse functions to discipline ongoing scriptural reading (not simply to codify and express its results), then to bring those disciplined forms of scriptural reading into Scriptural Reasoning discussion *is* to bring doctrine into those conversations. That is not to say that one thereby brings the discourse of doctrinal theology—the explicit discussion of doctrinal claims—into the discussion, so that those claims are directly examined and questioned by the other participants. But it does mean that one can participate in Scriptural Reasoning quite directly *as* someone under doctrinal discipline. The real substance of Christian doctrinal deliberation can therefore be present in those dialogues, and can be exposed to the questioning and challenge that those dialogues bring.

Does it make sense, however, to regard the practice of Scriptural Reasoning as, for its Christian participants, part of their discipline of Christian doctrinal reading—a discipline within their primary discipline? At first blush, this must sound like an imperialist gesture on the part of Christian participants: an attempt to define the whole practice in terms that are obviously exclusive to them. In order to understand why this is not so—or at least why it does not *need* to be so—we have to understand more clearly what role is played in Scriptural Reasoning by attempts to make sense of it, to *theorise* it, essayed from within each of the participating traditions.

Scriptural Reasoning as a Christian Discipline?

It has often been said that Scriptural Reasoning is a practice before it is a theory, and that whilst it is a stable and sustainable practice, its theorisation is piecemeal and secondary.¹⁸ Obviously, this does not mean that practitioners don't have all sorts of thoughts about what they are doing, why they are

¹⁸ Ford's essay in *The Promise of Scriptural Reasoning* is, for instance, "offered as only one portrayal of something that has already evoked many other descriptions and is constantly producing more" ("An Interfaith Wisdom: Scriptural Reasoning between Jews, Christians and Muslims" in Ford and Pecknold (eds), *The Promise of Scriptural Reasoning*, p. 2).

doing it, and what are its limits; nor does it mean that they don't share and discuss those thoughts. Equally, it does not mean that the practice is not organised in part by means of more or less detailed instructions and descriptions, nor that in some circumstances those might include quite detailed explanations and justifications. A theory of Scriptural Reasoning, in the sense intended here, would be some well-articulated account of the nature, purpose and limits of this practice, offered to and broadly accepted by the majority of the community of practitioners, and used by them to regulate and explain the practice, such that the practice and some version of this account would thenceforth tend to come packaged together. Furthermore, to count as a theory, the account will need to go beyond practical guidelines for organising the practice and descriptions of its typical progress, and will offer reasons for the shape of the practice that are not themselves couched in terms of the practice. So, if someone says, "We find that keeping the focus of the discussion firmly on the text in front of you helps the conversation flow", that is not in this sense theoretical. If, however, someone says, "A focus on the texts keeps the conversation flowing because scriptural texts are inexhaustible", that *is* theoretical—though unless it becomes part of a more comprehensive and well-articulated account of the practice, and is broadly accepted by the community of practitioners, so as to tend to come packaged with the practice, it still will not count as a theory of Scriptural Reasoning in the required sense.

The absence of this kind of theory of Scriptural Reasoning can, in part, be traced to the process of Scriptural Reasoning's emergence. It emerged through happenstance and friendship,¹⁹ and only then did the practice that had emerged prompt a restless and ongoing task of theoretical reflection; theorisation was from the start playing catch up, trying to make sense of a practice whose evolution and spread outstripped it.

The absence of a full theory of Scriptural Reasoning is not, however, simply a matter of delay, as if there were a widespread acceptance amongst practitioners that some of them were working towards such a theory, but that the theoretical work had not yet caught up with the practice. Nor is it a matter of a simple refusal to theorise, as if Scriptural Reasoning practitioners were reticent before a mystery—though there has certainly been discussion in the past amongst Scriptural Reasoning practitioners about the difficulty of capturing Scriptural Reasoning conversations in theoretical terms without flattening them into unrecognisable dullness.

Far more fundamentally, the lack of a theory is due to the fact that Scriptural Reasoning is an inter-faith practice in which participants are welcomed to take part *as* faithful and committed members of their own

¹⁹ See the works cited in note 5, amongst others. In this, too, Scriptural Reasoning resembles Comparative Theology: Clooney says that he does not "theorize inclusion" but prefers "the act of including" (*Comparative Theology*, p. 16).

religious traditions; it does not require those participants to speak in a different voice for the sake of this practice. Indeed, one practical discipline that has shaped the practice has been an insistence upon subjecting any purportedly religiously neutral account of Scriptural Reasoning to the scrutiny of practitioners from the three participating traditions, and to encourage each of them to question that account from the standpoint of their own tradition. In such a context, the hope for a single theoretical account offered to and broadly accepted by the majority of the community of practitioners, and used by them to regulate and explain the practice, looks like a chimera, unless one has confidence in the existence of a generic Abrahamic voice (and little in the practice of Scriptural Reasoning encourages such confidence).

Simply put, then, Scriptural Reasoning is a practice that calls forth not one account of itself, but three: Jewish, Christian, and Muslim (or, rather, *at least* three, since disagreements within traditions have often been as prominent as disagreements between them). The theorising of Scriptural Reasoning has therefore tended to be a conversation between multiple theorisations—multiple forms of account-giving, accountable to different traditions, interrupting and questioning one another, without any stable consensus emerging.²⁰ The practice of Scriptural Reasoning does not wait for the resolution of this conversation, nor do most practitioners seem to be expecting such resolution.²¹

An account of Scriptural Reasoning in relation to the discipline of Christian doctrine is a move in this multiplayer game of account-giving. It is resolutely *not* a generic account of Scriptural Reasoning, equally usable by Jewish and Islamic participants, or the increasing numbers of participants from other traditions. It will not even be an account that is generically acceptable to all Christian participants; it will be an account that makes sense of Scriptural Reasoning in relation to one of the primary discourses of a certain kind of Christianity. It is, however, *only* from such irreducibly one-sided accounts that the ongoing theorisation of Scriptural Reasoning is woven.

To say that, from the point of view of a certain kind of doctrinal Christianity, Scriptural Reasoning can be seen as a discipline within the discipline of Christian doctrine is not to exclude the possibility that very different Jewish, Islamic and other accounts might be given. It is, rather, to *invite* such alternative accounts—and the existence and sustainability of the practice does not rest upon our ability to settle the differences between

²⁰ More neutral accounts have been offered from time to time, but they have tended to become sparser, more plainly descriptive or heuristic as time has gone by, and none of them has become by consensus a handbook for Scriptural Reasoning.

²¹ Compare, once again, Clooney in *Comparative Theology*. It is clear that Comparative Theology is, for him, a Christian discipline, but one with “close analogues in other traditions” (p. 80). On the other hand, he does also insist that “there is nothing essentially Christian about comparative theology as I describe it” (p. 11).

them.²² The practice of Scriptural Reasoning is not defined by a single account, but negotiated between accounts.

The forms of reading practised in Scriptural Reasoning are not invented and sustained purely for the purpose of this conversation; nor are they simply forms of “reading in general”, independent of any specific religious tradition. They are formed in the overlap and interaction between the practices of religious reading (and the accounts of those practices) brought to the process by the participants. Of course, as a sustained practice, Scriptural Reasoning inevitably forms its participants in certain recognisable habits that are specific to Scriptural Reasoning, but those habits are formed in the context of a mutual hospitality. I, as a Christian reader of Christian scripture, ask how I can invite others to share in my practice of reading, just as I am invited to share in theirs. I do not ask them to share my beliefs about the nature and authority of my scriptures, nor about the ground or purpose of reading, just as I am not asked to share theirs. We do, however, ask each other to share in the forms of attentiveness and exploration that are appropriate when we are faced by passages of our own scriptures and asked to focus on them as deeply as we are able.

I participate in Scriptural Reasoning as a Christian reader, just as the others around the table participate as Jewish or as Islamic or other kinds of religious readers: we bring into the discussion our own religious ways of construing the texts in front of us, and look for those construals to become part of a conversation in which multiple construals are offered, and each is tested against the words of the text.

In this process, I am not asked to treat the other readers as if they were Christian readers, subject to Christian doctrinal discipline. Doctrinally-tested *reception* of suggested readings is nevertheless mandatory for me—and if a new reading of one of my scriptural texts emerges in a Scriptural Reasoning session, there remains a task of establishing whether and how far I as a Christian reader can pursue that reading beyond the session (I read, after all, as someone accountable to a community and a tradition of reading, and doctrine is the form of that accountability). That does not mean, however, that I can only hear suggestions about this text from those who themselves acknowledge the same doctrinal discipline. My doctrinal discipline is supposed—as I have said—to drive me to the text, keep my nose to its difficulties and questions; it is not meant to allow me to dispense with attention to the text, nor sanitise the text for my consumption. It is an axiom of my doctrinal discipline that there is nothing to fear from looking again at the text—and to read with others who are differently disciplined, if our focus is on the

²² It may be that such alternative accounts will also take the form of identifying Scriptural Reasoning as a particular discipline within a more basic Islamic or Jewish or other discipline, or it may be that this discipline-focused framing does not travel well across religious borders; that will be for other participants to determine.

scriptural texts in front of us and on the way their words run, is a natural accompaniment to that discipline.

Indeed, such reading with others can function as a proper accompaniment to my discipline precisely *because* those others differ from me. It is when another member of the group sees something in the text that I have not seen that their reading becomes a challenge to me to look again, to look more closely. It is the areas of unexamined agreement between us that make the words of the text difficult to see.²³ Someone who differs from me in their reading of this text, and who is willing to argue that difference on the basis of its words, becomes for me an agent of the way the words run—not because I am compelled to agree with them, but because I am compelled to look to see if I can see what they see, and to understand why it is that I differ.

Of course, participation in Scriptural Reasoning means that I devote time to reading the scriptures of others with them, just as they read mine with me. The Qur'an, for example, is not a text that I can read religiously, in the full sense, even if for the sake of this practice I try to read it seriously and attentively. It is not authoritative for me, and does not become authoritative in the course of this practice. Yet, reading this text shapes the way that I read my own scriptures; I see my scriptures differently when I see them alongside the Qur'an. This is, however, something more, and somewhat different, from simply reading the Qur'an for myself in a comparative frame of mind. I read with others who read this text religiously—who are serious about reading it more and more deeply, whose reading of this text shapes their lives, who seek to be exposed to the challenge of this text as they read, and who read to learn how their world is judged and blessed in the text. They are serious about the devotion that this kind of reading takes, the intensity, the time-taking discipline (even if our disciplines differ drastically); they are serious that this is a form of reading that requires prayer (even if our prayers differ, and we will not in most circumstances pray together). It is precisely because I read the Qur'an in company with others who read it as religiously as I hope to read the Bible that I am made to see echoes and contrasts, analogies and distinctions, challenges and attractions between their text in their hands and mine in mine. In other words, from the point of view of my doctrinal discipline, it is not simply the general difference of these others with whom I read that matters, but their specifically *religious* difference. Far from requiring me to assimilate the other participants to my own religious identity, offering an account of Scriptural Reasoning from the perspective of Christian doctrinal discipline requires that I attend to their unassimilability as religious others.

²³ Clooney, in *Comparative Theology*, pp. 76–77, explains his own decision to privilege similarities.

Coda: Deepening the Discipline of Christian Doctrine

Scriptural Reasoning, then, can make sense as a discipline within my discipline—a discipline of inter-faith engagement within my Christian discipline of doctrinally-governed scriptural reading; it drives me deeper into that Christian doctrinal discipline precisely by means of an engagement with those who live within different religious disciplines.²⁴

This claim, however, only makes full sense if the “Christian discipline of doctrinally-governed scriptural reading” is flourishing, and if it provides the real practical context within which my participation in Scriptural Reasoning sits. I have spoken confidently above of a doctrinal theology that does not simply draw upon the results of biblical exegesis and criticism but is becoming inseparable from the kind of ruminative, contemplative steeping in scripture found in *lectio divina*; I have spoken of doctrines as claims that emerge from such reading and discipline its continuation. Such an approach to doctrinal theology is, however, a work in progress rather than an accomplished fact of the present theological scene.

The most urgent question that arises from a consideration of the relationship between Christian doctrine and Scriptural Reasoning is not, therefore, about the propriety of supplementing doctrinal reading with a practice of inter-faith reading; it is about the depth and resilience of the practice of doctrinally-disciplined reading itself. Am I, as a Christian doctrinal theologian who would expose my doctrinal understanding to the testing and purification made possible in this inter-faith encounter, deeply enough formed in practices of devout scriptural reading and in fine-grained attentiveness to the connection between doctrinal claims and those practices of reading? If I am not, then my doctrinal understanding will be inappropriately insulated from the challenges of reading with others; it will not be questioned and tested and cast into new light by their insistent differences, and neither will my religious difference from them be as fully present in the dialogue as it could and should be.

In order, then, to make sense of the practice of Scriptural Reasoning as a discipline within my Christian discipline of doctrinally-governed scriptural reading, I would need to attend to the practices within which doctrinally-governed scriptural reading is nurtured—and understand more fully what it means to take doctrine as a set of rules that have emerged from such practices and that shape their continuation. I might attend to the renewal in recent decades of *lectio divina* itself, or to the practice of exegetical preaching, or to catechesis, or to certain kinds of ecumenism, or to the Faith and Order deliberations of my denomination, or to many other contexts. Each of these practices can be a context within which doctrine makes sense, and within

²⁴ This is, of course, the sense it makes to me as a Christian participant; it may make very different sense from the perspective of other participants.

which the discipline of doctrine is learnt—and Scriptural Reasoning will make sense as a discipline within the discipline of doctrinally-governed reading just to the extent that it can take its place alongside these other practices, as one more context within which such reading is wrestled with, tested and explored.

Approaching such an account of doctrine from the direction of Scriptural Reasoning, however, raises one intriguing possibility. Of course, the existence of Scriptural Reasoning is not by any means the primary reason for providing the kind of account of Christian doctrine that I have sketched. Nor is this way of thinking about doctrine exhaustive: I said earlier that a fuller account of doctrine would need to consider Christian doctrine not only as a disciplining of reading, but also as a disciplining of worship and of ethical action, and possibly more. The existence of Scriptural Reasoning, and the desire to find a way in which it can impinge upon Christian doctrine, is but one additional and contingent impetus to the development of such an account. The existence of Scriptural Reasoning, and the possibility of its connection to doctrinal reading of scripture, does nevertheless suggest one additional way in which the deepening of doctrinal reading might proceed.

Unlike Comparative Theology, Scriptural Reasoning is insistently and irreducibly social. The journey deeper—into one's own faith, and into understanding of the faith of others—is driven by continually renewed encounter with the living and unpredictable otherness of multiple interlocutors: by all the things they say, and all the ways they read, that one could not have arrived at for oneself. This suggests that Scriptural Reasoning might cohere with a form of Christian doctrinal reading that was itself more insistently and ineradicably social than any account of "interior dialogue" as the primary form of doctrinal theology can allow.

Approaching the nature of Christian doctrine from the direction of Scriptural Reasoning therefore raises a question. Is it possible to envisage a form of Christian doctrinal theology one of whose fundamental practices would be group reading of scripture: small groups of differing Christians meeting for prayerful and argumentative reading of scripture together, exploring (and disagreeing about) how such reading is properly disciplined by doctrine—about what those doctrines mean as forms of such discipline, and about where such disciplined reading leads? Is it possible to imagine a form of Christian doctrinal theology which would involve extended engagement in something that looked a little like intensive *intra*-faith Scriptural Reasoning?

If some such form of corporate, doctrinally-disciplined reading were to be sustained, and if it were to have enough density as a practice to become habitual, it could become another source of a deep doctrinal patterning in its participants' reading of their scriptures, in this case a patterning established and explored by means of lively argumentative conversation over scripture—and so it could shape very directly the ways in which its participants went on to read in the similarly lively dialogues of Scriptural Reasoning, as well as

providing a context in which readings proposed in Scriptural Reasoning could be appropriately tested, and their doctrinal implications explored. Such a development would, I think, provide (more directly and intensively than has been possible hitherto) a bridge between the other Christian practices within which the discipline of Christian doctrine lives and the lively sociality of Scriptural Reasoning conversations—and it would give new practical form to my claim that, for Christian readers, Scriptural Reasoning is an inter-faith discipline within their Christian discipline of devout doctrinal reading.

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