

An Interfaith Interpretative Model

Scriptural Reasoning

UWTSD

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History and Background:

- ❖ Scriptural reasoning is a particular form of interreligious dialogue; it was developed from textual reasoning exclusive to the interpretation of Jewish philosophy and texts.
- ❖ Postmodern thinkers from the “Academy of Jewish Philosophy,” Steven Kepnes, Peter Ochs, and Robert Gibbs are the founders of textual reasoning.
- ❖ In 1994, academic scholars of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, joined together to experiment a dialogue across the three Abrahamic scriptural traditions. After five years of biannual study on the focus of the Tanakh, bible and Qur’an, they discovered the best method for studying across difference, and it’s what’s known today as Scriptural Reasoning.
- ❖ Two centres have maintained its vibrant practice
 1. The Scripture, Interpretation Practice program at the University of Virginia, led by Peter Ochs.
 2. The Cambridge Interfaith Programme led by David Ford at Cambridge University.



Methodology:

- ❖ Scriptural Reasoning groups usually consist of six to nine scholars or students of Judaism, Christianity and Islam.
- ❖ A balance in participants and samples of texts is considered between the three traditions.
- ❖ At the moment, this practice has not been theorised into an encompassing theological, philosophical and hermeneutical framework, and fixed rules are not prescribed for these meetings.



Methodology:

A scriptural reasoning meeting is usually organised in the following manner:

1. A theme, image or an issue is chosen by a small committee.
2. Short passages of sacred texts (sometimes commentaries) relating to the chosen topic is selected from the three traditions. Participants receive the selected texts before the meeting and study them on their own.
3. A meeting takes place and generally takes a few days. Discussion is led by a facilitator who ensures that everyone has an equal opportunity to share, question and interpret. Three presenters will always read the text aloud, and for those who are unfamiliar with the text, they will give a brief introduction on its context and importance in the faith tradition. Participants discuss the passages one at a time and are invited to comment on any text that appears challenging and problematic. Authority is not in the hands of any individual during the meeting; interpretation and reflection are not attributed to one voice, but a collective work. The goal of the session is not to formulate answers, but to have an open and interactive discussion on the possible meanings of the text from different perspectives.



Methodology:

A scriptural reasoning meeting is usually organised in the following manner:

4. Within each tradition, an important place is reserved for “deep-reasoning”. This term is introduced by Nicholas Adams.

He says that *“deep reasonings” are not merely the grammars and vocabularies of a tradition, but the relatively settled patterns of their use transmitted from generation to generation. It concerns the histories of interpretation of scripture and histories of their application to particular problems in particular times and places.”*

(Adams 2006b: 398)



Methodology:

“Rules of Conduct” to consider for successful SR dialogue:

Catherine Cornille once stated that the main challenge interreligious dialogue faces is in finding a good balance between commitment to one’s own religion and openness to the other. Although there are no fixed rules in SR dialogue, but scriptural reasoners claim that a form of practical wisdom can make their interactions more fruitful.

For this matter, David Ford has advised the following guidelines:

1. “Recognition of the sacredness of the others’ scriptures”
One should acknowledge the sacredness of the scriptures other than one’s own.



Methodology:

“Rules of Conduct” to consider for successful SR dialogue:

2. “Interreligious hospitality”

The hosts of a scripture and its tradition should not hold ownership of their scriptures or see themselves as the experts who have the final meanings of the text. It should be acknowledged that the scriptures have a public character and are accessible to everyone.

3. “Respectful disagreement and friendly competition”

Scriptural Reasoners should understand that they need not be striving for consensus, differences in interpretation can be enriching if discussed in a respectful way. SR is a form of dialogue that is not particularly looking for a harmonizing reading, quite the opposite, hermeneutic diversity is appreciated here.



Purpose of Scriptural Reasoning:

Scriptural reasoning is understood to be a post secular project, an alternative to secular liberalism that encourages privatization of faith as a solution to interreligious conflicts. Being a new model that pushes religion out of the private sphere, SR rejects the social marginalization of religious traditions and promotes authentic interreligious conversation in the public domain.



Purpose of Scriptural Reasoning:

Exploring Differences

- ❖ The purpose of SR is not about seeking agreement; rather, it's about exploring the differences in interpretations across faith boundaries and learning to improve the quality of disagreement.
- ❖ Allowing participants not only to appreciate the common ground shared, but also to develop open-mindedness towards different views.
- ❖ It is only through the exploration of differences can the three Abrahamic faiths find their profound interdependence.



Purpose of Scriptural Reasoning:

Developing Friendships

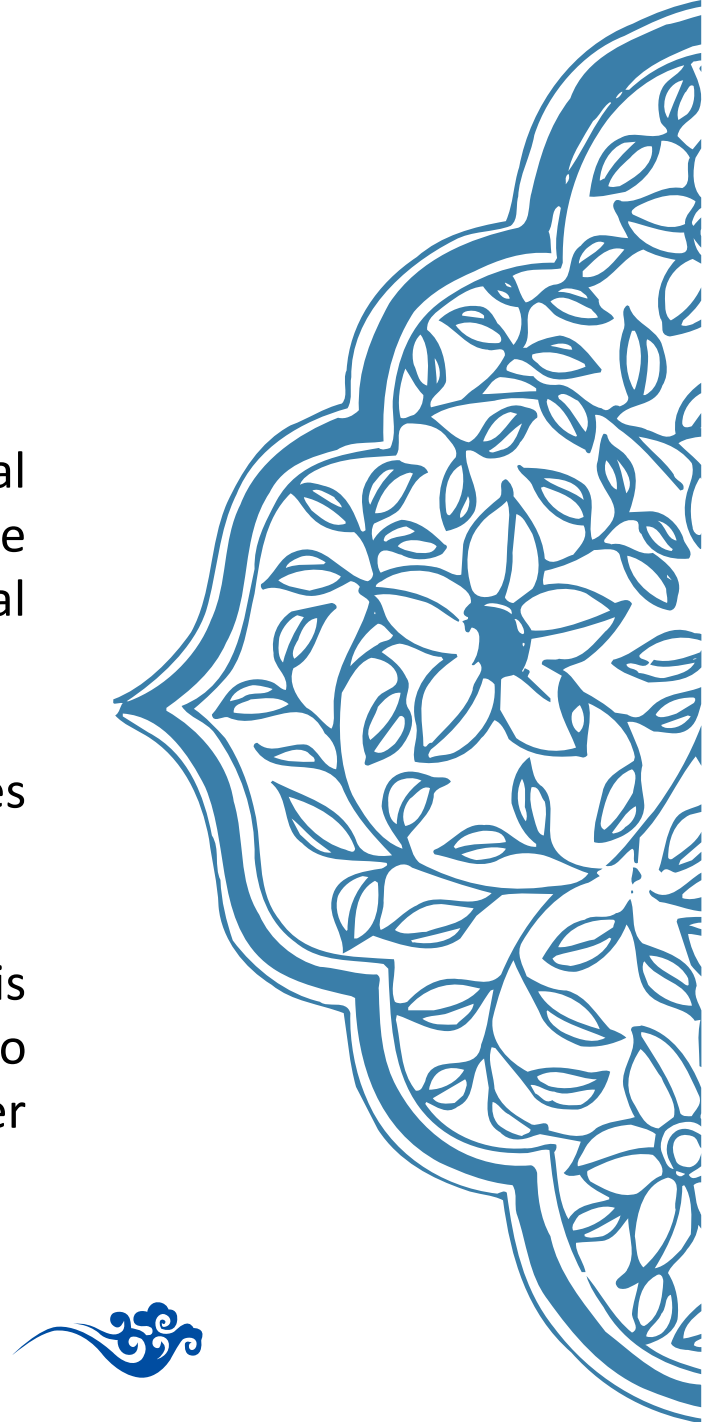
- ❖ Through an appreciation of differences and understanding of common values, lasting friendships are developed between the members of different traditions, and stereotypes of the “other” are overcome.
- ❖ Participants could join their effort and draw on the wisdom of their different traditions to solve issues and concerns in their communities. As a result, strong community bonds are developed.



Key Feature of Scriptural Reasoning:

Particularism

- ❖ SR is opposed to the liberal pluralist perspective; a form of post liberal particularism is embodied in SR. Its dialogue emphasises the irreducible particularity of each religious tradition, without searching for universal essences or conceptual unities in the scriptural interpretation.
- ❖ As described by Lindbeck, religions are irreducibly particular like cultures and languages.
- ❖ The uniqueness of this practice is its democratic character; every text is studied and critiqued interreligiously, no particular tradition is allowed to make possessive claims to know the one true meaning of the text under study, everyone has equal voice.
- ❖ Disagreement is not a problem, but rather an opportunity for new findings.



Areas for Further Reflection

Three are nominated here:

1. **Post liberalism**: Moyaert has doubts about the presentation of SR as a post liberal particularist project. There are situations where different doctrinal systems are uncommensurable and dialogue could not go further than mutual affirmation; sometimes scriptural reasoners seem content with this limitation. This behaviour contradicts the open-ended and wisdom-seeking nature that SR practice proposes.



Areas for Further Reflection

2. **The theology of religions:** Scriptural reasoners have not formulated a kind of theology of religions for this practice. The theology of religions always seems to concern intra-Christian dialogue, but the question of salvation does not justify the otherness of the other faiths. SR intends to focus on the wealth of various scriptural traditions, but the precise relationship between the various scriptural traditions is yet to be verified.



Areas for Further Reflection

3. **Interreligious dialogue in a wider sense:** Kepnes once stated that SR members have and will continue to move beyond the borders of monotheistic scriptures by reading Buddhist, Hindu and other scriptures (Kepnes 2006:378). But would this broadening change the whole dynamic of SR? The focus might then shift from the sacred texts to the ethical command where the other non-Abrahamic religions can also involve themselves. If this becomes the case, Moyaert poses the question: how would SR then differ from the more liberal approaches to dialogue it once criticised?



An Implementation of Scriptural Reasoning

Scriptural Reasoning with Israelis and Palestinians

In October 2010 the Cambridge Inter-Faith Programme, in conjunction with Three Faiths Forum Middle East, commissioned the one year long implementation of Scriptural Reasoning interreligious seminars for Muslims, Jews and Christians in Israel. The objective was to assess the use of SR in the Israeli context and to offer reference for the use of SR in other public dialogue contexts.

The seminars were held on a series of ten facilitated sessions for groups of students (from 20 to 40 students per group) over the course of one year at Hadassah Hospital, Ein Karem, and Kaplan Medical Centre in Rehovot. The decision to trial SR in hospitals was in response to the government's plan to train doctors and nurses in Cultural Competency.



The SR Approach

- ❖ To promote fruitful and friendly exchange of religious ideas and values, in order to strengthen mutual understanding and self-understanding of respective religious identities, so that practices of peaceful coexistence can possibly be achieved in the workplace.
- ❖ The Three Faiths Forum Middle East has taken a politically neutral position on the Israeli and Palestinian conflict.
- ❖ Not a comparative study, but to explore together through the lens of personal interpretative framework.
- ❖ The form of playing games and role plays appropriated to the hospital context was employed; this method really relaxed suspicions and fostered friendship between the fellow students.

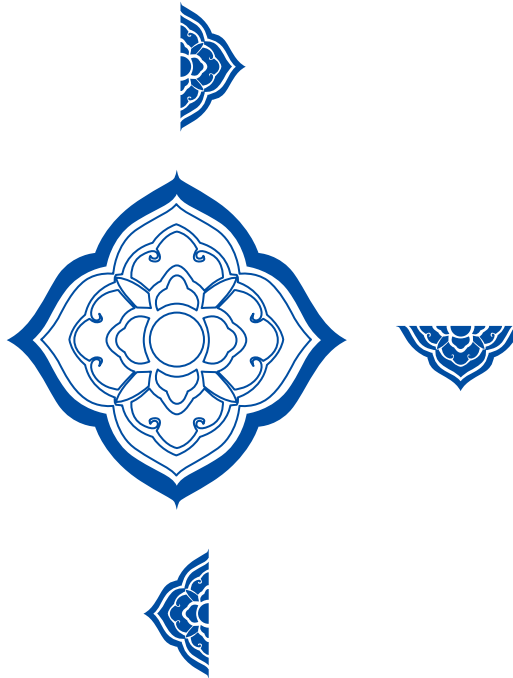
Key elements in the Feedback

❖ *Studying Torah with Christians and Muslims was at first challenging, but in the end eye-opening; the role-plays were great fun. The interreligious dialogue has made some rethink the way they view others in Israel and their interactions with them in hospitals when they become doctors and nurses.*

❖ *Not having to deal with the conflict issues was a relief; talking and meeting people from other faiths has gradually helped erase the hatred for some.*

❖ *Reading and discussing the scriptures of the three traditions with fellow students opened their eyes on the way they understand their own scriptures.*

❖ *Very interesting seminars; not just learning about the fellow students and their religious values, but also how to relate to the patients of different religious beliefs.*





Result



This particular scriptural reasoning programme has enabled participants from different religious communities to explore the identities, thoughts and practices of themselves and of the other. It is fair to say that it has made a positive contribution towards enhancing community cohesion in the region.



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Thank You

For Listening !

