

Grassroots Scriptural Reasoning on Campus

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This paper comes out of the presentation and practice of Scriptural Reasoning at the annual meeting of the National Association of College and University Chaplains at Duke University in February 2010. We would like to extend our thanks to Paul Sorrentino for inviting us to speak. We are also grateful for the helpful comments of SR participants at the NACUC conference, and of colleagues at the American Academy of Religion Theologies of Religious Pluralism seminar (Cohort One).

Scriptural Reasoning (hereafter, “SR”) is a practice of fellowship and study among Muslims, Jews, and Christians, developed over sixteen years and now practiced by approximately twenty groups in North America and the United Kingdom. While SR began in an academic setting, it has expanded into a civic, community practice, largely in the United Kingdom but with a growing number of community groups in the United States. The founders of SR believe that university chaplains and campus ministers could become the most important guides in the practice of SR as an interfaith and civic practice. Chaplains and campus ministers are not only deeply connected with diverse groups within their own campus, but are as likely to have strong links with change-agents in the larger community. We believe that chaplains can become loci of SR teaching for other campus professionals, students, and faculty, as well as area clergy and their congregants, and area activists.

For chaplains working in multi-faith settings, SR can be an important tool. Chaplains face two key, inter-related challenges: they are given the charge to create community, whether inter-faith or intra-faith, and in so doing they must find ways of meaningfully understanding difference without asking participants to compromise or dilute deeply held religious convictions. Many groups have found that space in the idea of faith-in-action - where each participant is working towards a vision of a renewed world. In this case, the idea of social justice is brought to the fore, and an interfaith community is built around this shared ethic.

But how do we find a safe, mediated space to explicitly communicate to each other what moves us spiritually, our convictions about God and the human condition? More importantly, can we find a space to agree to disagree, honestly, even vehemently, not just on the details but even on the foundational issues of what it means to be faithful? What do I really mean by social justice? What do you mean by salvation? And finally, can we do this in the most beautiful manner, with care and compassion, or, as the Qur’an suggests, “dispute in ways that are most beautiful” (16:125)?

As a practice, Scriptural Reasoning is the communal reading of sacred scriptures in small groups – opening our sacred texts to others for conversation from the heart, and modeling a fellowship that sees difference as rich and illuminating. As a process, SR is relationship, through the medium of sacred texts. The Abrahamic traditions emphasize the importance of the reading and interpretation of scripture as the foundation on which traditions are constructed. Within each of the three communities,

there are myriad theologies of scripture and interpretive approaches to the text – this can even include a conscious rejection of the primacy of scripture - but it cannot be doubted that the Children of Abraham continue to hold scripture as a central motif in their relationship with the transcendent. The Qur’an describes Jews and Christians as *ahl al-kitab*, family of scripture, and drew on this common feature to bind these traditions in fellowship to the new seventh-century community forming around the Qur’anic message. In SR, we agree on the importance of scripture as the foundation on which our traditions are constructed. We also agree that our scriptures are the most profound source of what each of our religious traditions claims to offer us: peace.

Most importantly, SR recognizes that we each bring to our interfaith encounters some prior convictions about scripture, and that we interrogate the other by way of these convictions and the interpretive categories they foster. SR does not penalize participants for having a prior text. What this practice does is unsettle our interpretive framework, the application of our interpretive categories to other traditions. It forces us for a brief period to step out of that framework and gain an unexpected insight into another tradition and most surprisingly, into our own tradition. In some sense, the boundaries of the text, and “rules of engagement”, provide a safe space to experience that dislocation: participants know that once they exit the charmed circle, they are free to process the experience within the bounds of their home tradition(s).

The elements of SR practice are simple. Minimally, there is a table and three chairs. On the table are small translated excerpts from the three Abrahamic scriptural canons: Tanakh, New Testament, and the Qur’an. After some introduction to the scriptural passages and their plain sense, participants read the passages aloud and then question one another about puzzling or surprising features of each verse, sometimes each word in a verse. They note grammatical constructions, changes in tone, or shifts in the narrative structure. While participants may bring in observations from other textual or extra-textual sources, conversation is always brought back to the texts at hand. The texts are the anchor.

If the participants belong to any of the three scriptural traditions of reading and worship, each invites members of the other two traditions to read each canon as it were “their own”. While a facilitator is present to help discussion move along, no one acts as an authority on the meanings of any of the canons, and no one assumes knowledge of how people from another tradition, or from their home tradition(s), will interpret a particular passage. At the same time, participants are welcome to speak explicitly from a faith perspective, while recognizing that theirs is only one of many interpretations of the passage in question. No one speaks too much or too little, but all share their wonderments and ideas about what a passage may mean, and each listens to the other. No sincere lines of reading and discussion are excluded.

Helped along as needed by the facilitator, discussion typically focuses first on one scriptural canon. Brief selections are chosen so that the group has ample time to discuss each word and verse in the selection and time, as well, to pursue certain lines of reading and response around the group until the verses seem to have stimulated several lines of interpretation and all participants have had time to voice their insights. The texts are brought into conversation with one another, so that the conversation builds between the participants and between the texts. A non-intrusive but skilled facilitator will often find it helpful to keep two or more of the compelling lines of interpretation going. We call

such lines “scriptural reasonings,” since they tend to display what we consider the entire group’s lines of reasoning about a given perspective on a given verse or passage.

In many group sessions over years of SR practice by many different kinds of readers, we have noticed that the “reasonings” that emerge from study circles show the influence of each tradition, of each discipline of study (if the participants are teachers or students of such disciplines), and of each participant’s reading style. But we have also observed that, if a group is well-facilitated, no one of these voices and approaches dominates the reasonings and that each pattern of reasoning belongs to no one tradition or discipline. Each of these reasonings “belongs” to the specific SR group that generated it and to all the texts being studied: each is in this sense an “Abrahamic scriptural reasoning,” neither Jewish nor Muslim nor Christian alone, but an expression of what readers from all three traditions may generate, together. It is a direction of reasoning to which each different opinion or claim has made its contribution. The reasoning “belongs” to the group and its intersections: it is beyond individual owners. It is a movement across the borders of each individual and each tradition but preserving the particularities of each. It is important to note that participants may not share the same reading of any verse. The reasoning does not present a group “opinion” about some scriptural belief or ethic or theo-political challenge. The goal of SR is not to articulate a consensus or “position statement” on “how the Abrahamic traditions may agree.” The process of group reading and reasoning is an end in itself: an instance of shared inter-Abrahamic study and reasoning that is multivocal. But the process is generative in that it creates circles of fellowship that continue beyond a given session of reading. It also tends to open new insights into each canon and new levels of understanding, however tentative, across canonical borders.

These fellowships and openings are among the expanding, rippling effects of SR study: effects of peace, we hope, not in the sense of agreement or consensus, but of growth in bonds – or even the faintest tissue – of relationship, communication, a sense of more deeply overlapping commitments to the ways and mysteries of the Creator and the mysterious ways of love.

As a Muslim participant in SR, I (Homayra) take inspiration from traditional Sufi and Illuminationist¹ ideas of knowledge and being. According to significant intellectual currents within the Sufi tradition, our existence itself is relational. That is, we exist only in relationship to Being, and real dialogical human relationship is how we experience that existence in relation. We are only alive in relation. In dialogical relationship, we seek to know the other. In the Illuminationist tradition, real knowledge of another does not function according to a subject-object dichotomy. Knowledge by correspondence can never grasp the reality of the other. Real knowledge is an experiential mode of cognition. This is knowledge through presence (*huzur*), when absorption in witnessing the other is so complete that no perception of witnessing remains. Presence and witnessing express a mode of knowing that leads to an illuminative experience of reality in the other: in that relationship, for a brief period, the knower becomes what she knows. The act of witnessing each other does not mean that we must believe in the same things or engage in the same practices. Rather, this moment of profound relationship with one another also brings us to a deeper level of clarity with regard to what differentiates us from each other – a knowledge of difference that does not breed fear, but ignites a desire, a loving curiosity, to understand what is important to the other. In my eyes, this is what it means

for two people to address each other with Martin Buber's Thou, rather than view each other as objects to be utilized or possessed. Following Buber, "real community... originates and continually renews itself as a group of people participating in and around a dialogical center" (Kramer 2003, 81). Genuine community cannot be based only on our feelings about a particular person, but rather arises through the willingness to enter into a transformative relationship. But this type of relationship, according to Buber, does not come about just through institutionalized social relations or collective action, which in the end, is still the pursuit of a need or interest. Rather, it comes about through real listening. For genuine listening to occur, there must not only be the I (the dialogical person), the Thou (the unique other) but also the "between" – the realm of the interhuman. True existential relationship is found in that interhuman space (Ibid. 76-7). This space cannot arise without a living center (an Eternal Thou). Each participant creates a dialogical relationship with the center, and consequently, with each other. For Muslims, this is reminiscent of Sufi orders centered on a living teacher; the presence of the teacher, which brings the sacred into the world, is the Thou through which each disciple relates fully to the other. In the practice of SR, the Thou, the living center, is the text.

Finally, these truly dialogical relationships are, for most of us, brief flashes – SR, practiced over a period of time, creates the conditions for these to occur. Scriptural reasoning was first practiced among groups of scholars, or, more recently seminarians, graduate students and chaplains – that is, groups with training or expertise in at least one of the sacred texts in questions. In the past five or more years, however, SR has been introduced, increasingly, to "grass roots" members of local communities and congregations and to student groups, from secondary schools to universities. While university chaplains have unique access to all of these potential participants, college-aged students are, of course, of primary concern to them. During our NACUC conference, participants expressed considerable interest, for example, in discussing the ethical dimension of engaging college-age students in scriptural text study. How do we meet the challenge that, while students may hold one or more of these texts sacred, we cannot assume any specific level of expertise, proficiency, or even familiarity with any scriptural tradition? Are we sensitive to the fact that the college years are a delicate time in the spiritual formation of individual students? Can we facilitate SR study groups in a way that attends to the sensitivities, at once, of students from secular backgrounds and from religiously traditional families? Students who have recently been dislocated from their birth-families may be uniquely challenged by the intensity of inter-religious study and conversation.

To introduce textual resources for responding to such questions, we chose the theme "Commanding Love/Obedience to God" for our SR study sessions at the NACUC conference. We felt this issue would be of particular interest to chaplains, and even more so to chaplains in a college or university setting, who are working with an age group that may not react well to commandments of any sort! As students face periods of questioning and crises of faith, and chaplains are given the charge of guiding them through these encounters, can young people be commanded to love God? Commanded to love others? What does command mean? Is there wisdom in commanding?

From Tanakh (Hebrew Scriptures), for example, we examined such texts as Deuteronomy 6:

1 These are the commands, decrees and laws the LORD your God directed me to teach you to observe in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to possess, 2 so that you, your children and their children after them may fear the LORD your God as long as you live by keeping all his decrees and commands that I give you, and so that you may enjoy long life.

3 Hear, O Israel, and be careful to obey so that it may go well with you and that you may increase greatly in a land flowing with milk and honey, just as the LORD, the God of your fathers, promised you. 4 Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. 5 Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. 6 These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. 7 Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. 8 Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. 9 Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates. 10 When the LORD your God brings you into the land he swore to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, to give you—a land with large, flourishing cities you did not build, 11 houses filled with all kinds of good things you did not provide, wells you did not dig, and vineyards and olive groves you did not plant—then when you eat and are satisfied, 12 be careful that you do not forget the LORD, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery (New International Version).

From out of the twelve circles of study at the conference (with about nine folks in each circle), we heard such dialogues on Deuteronomy as this one:

- “How can love be commanded? What will students say about that?”
- “But this is a command of the heart, like ‘love me!’”
- “But are we not free to say yes or no to love?”
- “But this is a different beloved, is it not? An infinite one, whom one loves as life.”
- “Does one not have to be within this religion to read the text that way?”
- “Perhaps each student-reader would have a different yet parallel way of speaking about this love of life.”

Among the other questions that were deeply explored: what does it mean to love God with “strength”? Why is love expressed in such an embodied manner? What is the relationship between love of God and action in this world? What is the ethical import of receiving from God in return “good things you did not provide” and “wells you did not dig”?

From the Qur’an, we examined such texts as Surah al-Najm 53: 33-62:

³³[Prophet], consider that man who turned away: ³⁴he only gave a little and then he stopped.³⁵Does he have knowledge of the Unseen? Can he see [the Hereafter]?

³⁶Has he not been told what was written in the Scriptures of Moses ³⁷and of Abraham, who fulfilled his duty: ³⁸that no soul shall bear the burden of another; ³⁹that man will only have what he has worked towards; ⁴⁰that his labour will be seen ⁴¹and that in the end he will be repaid in full for it;⁴²that the final goal is your Lord;⁴³that it is He who makes people laugh and weep; ⁴⁴that it is He who gives death and life; ⁴⁵that He Himself created the two sexes, male and female, ⁴⁶from an ejected drop of sperm; ⁴⁷that He will undertake the second Creation; ⁴⁸that it is He who gives wealth and possessions; ⁴⁹that He is the Lord of Sirius; ⁵⁰that it was He who destroyed, in their entirety, ancient 'Ad ⁵¹and Thamud, ⁵²and before them the people of Noah who were even more unjust and insolent; ⁵³that it was He who brought down the ruined cities ⁵⁴and enveloped them in the punishment He ordained for them? ⁵⁵Which then of your Lord's blessings do you deny? ⁵⁶This is a warning just like the warnings sent in former times. ⁵⁷The imminent Hour draws near ⁵⁸and only God can disclose it. ⁵⁹Do you [people] marvel at this? ⁶⁰Why do you laugh instead of weeping? ⁶¹Why do you pay no heed? ⁶²Bow down before God and worship! (trans. Abdel Haleem 2008)

From out of the study circles, we heard such dialogues as this one:

- “It seems to me that this command is connected to God’s role as Creator, God’s complete control, and the unpredictability of God and the final Hour. Where is our autonomy?”
- “But it is up to each individual to realize this relationship for herself, and a promise is given that each soul will be repaid for what she has worked towards. Therein lies the power of human beings.”
- “But we need guidance in order to love – does that mean we cannot love of our own volition? Why do we need to be “warned?””
- “Perhaps we need to discover the love that was always there. We are being warned about a lack of seriousness towards the importance of this short life as a tool for discovery. Even while humans are commanded to weep instead of laugh, God is the one that creates the laughter and the weeping... Worship creates awareness of the hidden workings of God – or perhaps, God is to be found in the act of worship...”

Discussions of this kind ranged over broad expanses of opinion and belief and reading and response. There was significant energy, some perplexity, many opinions and many discoveries. Our own two sets of ears also heard something else that was displayed not within individual opinions, but through the patterns of interaction among all the texts and around each circle of study: That the deepest responses to the questions we raised earlier – about the ethics of sharing SR with undergraduates – are offered through the very activity of scriptural study and fellowship more than through the specific text readings and interpretations offered by individual participants. If SR is to serve the good, then it must be facilitated and nurtured in a way that moves each circle of study to

offer open and caring hospitality to each and all participants: the religious and the non-religious, from this background and that, the learned and the not so learned. The “formula” for such study is simple: a table, chairs, two or more sets of texts from the different canons, some variety of participants, a sensitive facilitator (or two), a spirit of respect for all texts on the table and trust that, however challenging the verses may at times appear, persistent and open dialogue and careful word by word study will in time – we pray! – open each fellowship of study to mutual care and friendship and open each participant to the possibility of simultaneous affection (at the very least, deep respect) for the wisdoms he or she brought to the study *and* those encountered anew around the table of study.

Bibliography

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Notes

¹ The Illuminationist, or Ishrāqī, tradition was founded by the Persian philosopher Shihāb al-Dīn Yahya Suhrawardī (d. 1191). It is argued that Suhrawardī conceived Ishrāqī philosophy "as a distinct, systematic philosophical construction designed to avoid the logical, epistemological and metaphysical inconsistencies which [he] perceived in the Peripatetic philosophy of his day" (Ziai 1996, 438).