

**‘DEEP CALLS TO DEEP’**  
**The Practice of Scriptural Reasoning**

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INTRODUCTION

I recently led a study day at the annual conference for the heads of all the Anglican Religious Communities in Britain. There was a wonderful array of Abbots, Abbesses, Priors, Ministers both Provincial and General, and many others present. They wanted to be stimulated to think again about the role of scripture in the Church, and (more particularly) in their own communities. One of the points made repeatedly in our discussions was that many religious houses, whilst centred deeply on prayer and the eucharist, have allowed the study of scripture to fall into neglect. When it does take place, it is predominantly the individual religious who ‘studies scripture’, meditating alone with his or her Bible. Aside from recitation of the psalms and the lections in worship, there is little if any *communal* engagement with scripture – and its use in worship is in any case a thing distinct from *study*.

It is not only the ‘catholic’ tradition that faces worries about the quality of scripture study in the life of the Church today. Many of those gathering in the Deep Church group in London come from charismatic and/or evangelical backgrounds, and feel that their traditions while professing to be ‘biblically based’ often engage with scripture in a relatively superficial way. This can be because a strong doctrinal paradigm acts to preempt a sustained attentiveness to the possibilities and nuances of a text – the reader already ‘knows’ what she is going to find; she thus hears what she expects to hear. It can also be because scriptural texts are deployed in relative dissociation from each other (in bite-sized chunks, used for very specific pastoral or teaching purposes, and thereby prematurely instrumentalized), or else through very controlled forms of association with specific other passages or verses (again, it is often doctrinal concerns that dictate which associations are considered legitimate).

‘Bible Studies’ in the contemporary church often manifest precisely an evasion of scripture, rather than a willingness to take it seriously. This is true at every level of the Church’s life: I saw exactly the same symptoms in the Bible Study groups of senior

bishops at the Lambeth Conference in 1998 as in many student or parish groups. Broadly, two tendencies tend to emerge – neither of them wholly satisfactory. The first is the reduction of scripture to propositional statements, which are then deployed as authoritative *descriptions* (of the world, human beings, the facts of sin and redemption, or whatever), or else as irresistible *ethical instructions or injunctions*. As a mode of reasoning which works from the establishment of clear first principles and then works out from them, this approach to scripture might be described as rather like ‘deductive’ reasoning. The other dominant tendency – even more prevalent in my experience – is one which uses the reading of scripture as an occasion to tell stories about oneself and one’s own religious experience. Scripture is thus made a vehicle or opportunity for self-expression, rather than being read as something with its own internal ‘logic’ and power to resist and reconfigure the reader’s expectations and understanding. As a mode of reasoning which seeks to derive judgements from experience, this might be likened to an ‘inductive’ approach to scripture.

It needs to be said that both modes of reasoning with scripture have something good at their core. Scripture does, for Christians, offer authoritative descriptions of the world, and helps to shape new ethical ways of being in it (this insight is what the ‘deductive’ style of approach is a response to); and scripture also elicits from its readers a recognition that the truths it witnesses to are most profoundly also *their* truths; and that the Spirit moving in their lives is the Spirit who was moving in the lives of the first apostles – in other words, it is the same Spirit who animates and inspires both scripture and the Christian heart (this is what the ‘inductive’ style of approach is a response to). But too easily, these uses of scripture fall into being just that: *uses*. The ‘deductive’ approach turns the Bible into an instruction manual for life, and not infrequently ends up haranguing people with extracts from it (or distillations of it) in order to achieve certain kinds of ecclesial conformity. The ‘inductive’ approach degenerates into a pious exercise in personal sharing that may have all sorts of therapeutic outcomes but doesn’t in the end move beyond its initial premises – the judgements already come to, and the experiences already interpreted - because nothing in the text itself is allowed to challenge, contradict or criticize them. It is not surprising, perhaps, that many Christians (my monastic audience included) have been turned off Bible Study completely. But this is because Bible Study is too often not really *study*, which is marked first and foremost by a kind of expectant attention – a spiritual ‘listening’, from which the religious understanding of

obedience derives its real meaning. And in neither of the extreme forms of ‘deduction’ and ‘induction’ outlined here is there anything really and deeply communal going on. The extraction and application of propositions, on the one hand, and the practice of reading one’s own experience into the text (*eisegesis*) can just as well go on without anybody else needing to be around.

Inadequate though the labels are, the oppositions in the Church conventionally sketched as being between ‘conservatives’ and ‘liberals’, or between ‘traditionalists’ and ‘progressives’, have some echo in the way that scripture is read and related to. The ‘deductive’, or propositional, use of scripture is often associated with conservative evangelicals and their emphasis on biblical ‘teaching’ (this focussed generally on ‘what the Bible says’ more than on ‘how the Bible says it’, even though that too could be instructive in its own way if attended to properly). The ‘inductive’ use of scripture – its use as an occasion for giving expression to experience – is often associated with a liberal approach, especially when the terms of the encounter between scripture and experience are set wholly by experience (scripture is useful *when* and *insofar as* it helps illuminate or confirm my experience, and not otherwise). In actual fact, it is very common to find both approaches being used alongside each other, in a mixed economy, by the same people – and an evangelical or charismatic ‘conservative’ in pietistic vein is as likely to adopt the ‘inductive’ mode at certain points as a ‘liberal’. Nonetheless, the unreconciled juxtaposition of the two, wherever it is found, represents a problem so long as it remains unaddressed. Scripture itself is done an injustice to by it, and the loss is to Christian believers who ought to be nourished deeply by scripture, at every level of their being, and who instead are being deprived of so much of its nutritional goodness by the fact that it is too processed before they partake of it.

What this chapter aims to do is to suggest just one possible way beyond the impasse. It is born out of a very particular experiment in the study of sacred texts which has academic beginnings but is now rooting itself as a practice in grass-roots communities in London and other cities around the world. It is a practice of co-reading scriptural texts from the three ‘Abrahamic’ traditions – Judaism, Islam and Christianity – by small groups of devoted practitioners of those three faiths, and its name is Scriptural Reasoning (SR). In a way that I hope to show in this chapter, it has fascinating continuities with ancient ways of relating to sacred texts in all three traditions – many of

which are revitalized by SR and will be instructive to Christians today who are frustrated by the instrumentalized or ‘thin’ approaches to Scripture they find around them. But more than this, it disrupts in a healthy way the habits of reading that Christian people can have allowed themselves to get into – stale oppositions between ‘liberal’ and ‘conservative’ readings; over-doctrinalised readings; readings that in one way or another take the text too much for granted. The introduction of an ‘other’ (or more than one ‘other’) to the activity of studying scripture within a particular tradition can have radical and helpful effects, many of which are precisely a deepening of the relation of a particular tradition’s scripture readers to their own scriptures. A deeper relationship to scripture would certainly be a good thing for many contemporary British Christians – as they themselves will recognize. My contention here will be that one, perhaps unexpected, way to achieve this is in letting a ‘depth’ encounter with another religious tradition (one that is also centred on scripture) act to open up new depths or recover old ones in our own tradition – to let ‘deep call to deep’, without this implying any kind of syncretism or watering down of commitment or devotion in the name of a multi-faith synthesis.

One of the heads of a religious order at the study day I led confessed to a remarkable event. The near collapse of his community, for financial and other reasons, had led its members collectively to decide on a process of discernment to which scripture study – study as a community and not just as individuals – was made central. He said it effected the most extraordinary renewal of their common life and their sense of purpose. In microcosm, this is an example of what at crucial points throughout the Church’s history has proved to be necessary when faced with crisis: a return to deep and sustained immersion in scripture, in a mode governed by serious and patient listening. If there is something of a crisis in the Church today – and at any rate a marked unease amongst both catholics and evangelicals about whether they are really doing justice to the gift of the Bible – then it seems a good time to return to it in new and imaginative ways. SR, as I hope to show, offers one such way.

#### MARKS OF SCRIPTURAL REASONING

As I outlined above, SR is a communal practice of reading the sacred texts of the three Abrahamic faiths. The texts mainly come from the Bible and the Qur’an – but

occasionally also hadith, patristic commentary, and rabbinic commentary. The participants are mainly members of the three religious traditions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. As a mode of study it has been developing for over ten years, and originates in the collaborative work of textual scholars and philosophers/theologians from Britain, the US, the Middle East and elsewhere who have found that joint study across the Abrahamic traditions generates valuable new resources for meeting contemporary challenges. For example:

- in a scholarly context it bridges the gap between text scholars/philologists on the one hand (often concerned with what the texts *meant* at the expense of what they might *mean now*) and theologians (often too quick to generate doctrine and ethics at one remove from close reading of scripture itself);
- it avoids being merely eisegetical (mere play with the texts, or projection onto them) – on the contrary, it is deeply respectful of the texts’ own integrity and history, it draws on the ‘internal libraries’ of scholarly tradition and history, and requires of some members of each group some proficiency in the original languages of the texts; yet at the same time it avoids being merely an act of academic excavation – on the contrary, the texts are read in recognition of their distinctive religious intention and content, their capacity to address the reader and not just be addressed *by* him or her, their capacity to *reveal*; SR is therefore both a scholarly and a religious activity at once;
- it thus recovers a lost ‘vocation’ of scholarship – namely, to serve wider human flourishing and shape wisdom that is life-giving and reparative; it challenges the idea that places of study in modern society should simply be ‘knowledge-factories’, dedicated to the acquisition of mere facts aside from considerations of value.

These are all virtues of SR that are particularly evident and prized by its academic practitioners. But SR is now developing a life in new places that are (perhaps refreshingly) unpopulated by scholars – for example, in regular sessions at the St Ethelburga’s Centre for Peace and Reconciliation in London at which members of churches, mosques and synagogues (lay and clerical) come together for text study. As in the academic setting (though in different specifics) the value of SR in such a ‘grass-roots’ context includes some very practical effects. In a culture that is ‘disastrously dominated

by the view that religion is not just the problem *historically* but is inevitably and *always* the problem in public discussion',<sup>1</sup> SR indicates that the religions might in the end be better at healing their own conflicts *religiously* than any secular alternative based on 'neutral criteria' legally embodied and enforced. And in a culture whose mass media 'tend to over-dramatise rival claims'<sup>2</sup> at every turn, SR patiently demonstrates a way in which the 'deep reasonings' of a particular tradition can be made public and, sometimes, shared by others. A further very practical effect of SR is its offer of a new and welcome paradigm of encounter in a rather stale situation for inter-faith dialogue – a paradigm that is a genuine alternative to the (theoretical) idea that all religious systems are instances of a universal type, and that asks them to find common agreements at the level of concepts (whether ethical or metaphysical). In contrast to this model, it invites the participants to be themselves in pursuing an activity they are all familiar and at home with within the life of their respective religious traditions: the reading of scripture. It thus creates a ground for meeting between the Abrahamic faiths which is not neutral (justified by some fourth rationale external to the three). The resources for dialogue open up from *within* each of the traditions, as the participants pursue an activity native to those traditions. The difference, as I have already hinted, is that this reading is interrupted and illuminated in new ways by taking place in the presence of readers from the other two religious traditions. These others are invited to co-read, to ask questions and become contributors to the process of suggesting possible answers to the questions - and one of the common consequences of this is that the texts open up unexpected meanings for those whose sacred texts they *are*, even at the same time as participants from the other Abrahamic traditions learn more about a text that is *not* theirs.

### *The Tent of Meeting*

If it is not neutral ground, then the ground (or 'space') of encounter made possible by SR is perhaps better described as *mutual* ground. We have sometimes called it the 'tent of meeting' – a virtual space created by the scriptures and their readers when engaged in the practice itself. Peter Ochs, Professor of Modern Judaic Studies at the University of Virginia, and one of the founders of SR, writes as follows:

[W]e invite members of our society to imagine that the place where we gather to study together is a Tent, like Abraham's or Moses', but built of scriptural images

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<sup>1</sup> Nicholas Adams, 'Making Deep Reasonings Public', in *Modern Theology* (forthcoming, 2006); my emphasis.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

rather than skins or cloth. It is a tent of the imagination, that is, but a real tent nonetheless: we really construct it (through speech, imagination and reasoning); it is built out of materials we really find in the world (narratives from our scriptural traditions), according to time-tested methods of building (the methods of community formation we inherit from our religious traditions); and it really gathers us together (around shared practices of study, united by a common purpose), protects us from the world outside (whatever would distract us from our attention to the texts we study, to one another, and to the work this study propels us to undertake) and yet frees us for responsibility in the world.

Our images of this Tent of Meeting derive from our readings of scriptural narratives about the tents, or modes and places of encounter, associated with Muhammad, with Jesus, with Moses, and, above all, with Abraham. Abraham's tent is not the only model, but it is the most vivid, because Abraham is the eponym of our gathering, as a gathering of the three children, or religions, of Abraham and also because the image of Abraham's hospitality to others – rushing, with Sarah, to offer hospitality to his three visitors – is the image we hope guides us in extending hospitality to one another.<sup>3</sup>

As with various 'tents' depicted in the scriptures, this tent is not a permanent home for the participants; it is a mobile and provisional space. But, as Ochs points out, this does not prevent it from being a place of hospitality, reconciliation and friendship – and for each tradition it may be a place of encounter with God. In the tent, all are asked simultaneously to be hosts and guests as they meet: to be invited into the readings and reasonings of others, and to admit others into their own readings and reasonings, and in each case to practise the attentiveness to the other that is appropriate to hosting and being hosted. They are asked to take mutual responsibility for the success of the encounter, and the imperative for this is not justified on the basis of a thin and generalized notion of 'tolerance', but on terms that the particular texts and traditions of each faith themselves provide.

A typology of meeting places is at work here as the context of SR's image of the tent. Alongside the tent there are also, in SR's typology, 'temples', which represent strongly centralised (often hegemonic) 'places' – sometimes literal and geographical, sometimes metaphorical (a teaching authority, a ritual). The 'temple' stands for the instinct in all three religions at various times to restrict and limit where God can be encountered – and in the construction of such 'temples' the traditions try to locate authority more precisely, and to define their self-understanding more clearly. They function, broadly speaking, in an exclusivist way, though in the name of a reinforcing of identity that is often regarded

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<sup>3</sup> Daniel W. Hardy, Peter Ochs, David F. Ford, 'The Tent of Meeting' (unpublished paper, 2003).

as imperative. The temple does not sit easily alongside the tent! It reaches for fixed structures and definitive permanence.

But then there are ‘houses’, which represent the on-the-ground places of intra-religious gathering for each of the three traditions – day by day, week by week. These are the mosques, synagogues and churches of the respective traditions, and although they (like the traditions’ various attempts at temples) can claim to be key places of identity formation and sustenance, they (unlike the temples) function in a distributed and local way, and cannot be as pristinely exclusive of contact with other gatherings of people. In their houses, religionists of the three traditions are fully themselves (it is in their houses, for example, that they normally study their scriptures), but because they are embedded in local situations, houses are often bases from which Jews, Christians and Muslims have to make sense of their environment and their neighbours, especially in situations of racial and religious diversity like those in most modern cities.

Houses are reaffirmed by SR as crucial to the integrity of the three traditions. They are normative, and entry into the tent is at no point intended to weaken people’s sense of belonging to their houses:

[W]e assume that each scriptural reasoner belongs, first, to a ‘House’ – whether Jewish, Christian or Muslim – and to the specific tradition of scriptural text-interpretation, language, history and social behavior that informs and sustains it. Whatever might lie beyond such a ‘House’, and how Jews, Christians and Muslims may find this together, will remain supplementary to participation in this ‘House’. Of course, it is also true that further acquaintance with whatever lies ‘beyond’ will influence the practices of orthodoxy in the ‘Houses’.<sup>4</sup>

The practices of the tent do not override the practices of the house – whether the modes of scripture study or the forms of worship or the types of socio-political organisation that characterise the common life of Jews, Christians and Muslims respectively. The point is that these ‘internal’ practices can be enriched and enlarged by the practices of the tent. The tent can be a blessing to the house. This will be especially true when the representatives of each tradition, present in the tent, are able to imagine that each of the others will have ‘gifts . . . to reveal, illuminating, promising and life-giving’.

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

The house is a place that is often ready to welcome visitors from the other traditions, but that means that in the house, one tradition is always the host and the others are guests, whereas (as we have seen) in the tent, all are hosts and all are guests. This creates quite a different sort of dynamic. It heightens reciprocity, which is one of the key marks of SR.

### *Interrogative Reading*

Part of what stimulates the energetic labour that is SR are the tensions that arise (or the gaps that open up) between the texts being studied. The texts - especially when read in each others' company - present difficulties of interpretation.

This is, from the point of view of SR, a very positive and exciting thing. It's often also one of the significant ways in which, for Christians coming to SR study for the first time (and Muslims too, in my experience), it feels very different from the sort of scriptural study they are used to. This is because modern, western Christians have a strong internal imperative to find the 'right' meaning, the 'right' interpretation, and then all to agree on it. The felt pressure to agree is partly because of an idea we have that Christian life is about being nice to each other (and avoiding or eliminating conflict in our relationships), and the felt pressure to find the 'right' meaning is partly because we have imbibed a very strong modern idea that the meanings of the texts we regard as authoritative should be clear, single and unambiguous. But in these respects, we may have much to learn both from our own tradition (especially in pre-modern times, as I hope to show below) – a tradition in which multiple meanings have for centuries been expected from scripture, and rejoiced in – and also from the Jewish tradition, which has a sophisticated account of how texts can yield *a vast range* of meanings, and a robust account of how argument is the best way to make it happen. SR owes a great deal to this Jewish tradition, and it is one of the liberating things about SR for those of other traditions – one of its 'blessings'.

SR, writes Nick Adams, 'does not privilege agreement over disagreement'.<sup>5</sup> In other words, and in a rabbinic vein, which itself positively celebrates the *intra*-scriptural challenges of the Hebrew Bible, it sees the *inter*-scriptural challenges of reading across Jewish, Christian and Muslim traditions as signs of the generosity of our scriptural texts, and not simply as regrettable problems. Why talk about 'generosity' in this context?

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<sup>5</sup> Adams, *op. cit.*

Because debate over the texts creates a community of argument and collaborative reasoning. ‘Scripture challenges us with empty spaces and lacunae into which each interpreter can place herself in the discovery of meaning’, as one Scriptural Reasoner, Steve Kepnes, puts it in a handbook to the practice.<sup>6</sup> But the point is that this is never something we do alone; we do it *together*. The texts are together *creative* of a community of discussants. And this may be a more desirable, flexible and time-sensitive ‘product’ of the texts than any body of doctrine would be. The participants in SR are not asked to come to agreements that can always be summarized in propositional terms. They are not first and foremost concerned with agreement on ‘doctrines’. High quality argument may in the end be as valuable a ‘product’ of SR (if that is a suitable term to use at all) as any agreed statement would be, and a more desirable thing to transmit to those who enter the tradition which this practice generates. I sometimes catch myself imagining what it would mean for my own church (the Anglican Communion) if at least as much as achieving agreed statements it saw its task as improving the quality of its disagreements, and if it saw part of its best and most generous legacy to future Anglicans as being the transmission of these high-quality debates. To be given a debate might be as enriching as to be given a doctrine. That is after all what is achieved by the passing on of midrash in Judaism. But that is a discussion for another occasion – it serves here merely to illustrate one of the things the activities of the *tent* are able to offer back to the activities of an individual religious *house*.

Another key part of the Jewish legacy, offered to SR (and with equivalents in Muslim traditions of mystical reading of the Qur’an, and Christian notions of the multiple senses of scripture) is connected with this readiness to disagree productively. The expectation of plural meanings that can be argued over is linked to the idea of ‘depth’ reading of scripture – and perhaps best encapsulated in the Jewish distinction between plain sense meanings of the texts (*‘peshat’*) and deep sense ones (*‘derash’*). The rabbis said of scripture: ‘Turn, and turn it again, for everything is contained in it.’<sup>7</sup> This gives scripture a central role in the believer’s search for wisdom, and the presumption here is of its plenitude – its inexhaustible ability to yield new meaning - so long as one engages deeply enough with it. The prescription for ‘turning’ commends an active process of seeking (which is what *derash* means): a life of examining scripture from every angle. There can

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<sup>6</sup> Steven Kepnes, ‘A Handbook of Scriptural Reasoning’ (unpublished, 2003).

<sup>7</sup> M. Avot 5:26

be nothing casual or cursory about this process; being open to the deep meanings of scripture means bringing our lives to the text and the text into our lives. Deep sense reading is quite compatible with plain sense reading (plain sense being often, though not always, associated with what might be called the 'literal sense' of the text, and identified with the intention of the author in the original context of composition). It can exist in addition to it, and deep sense readings can be several, both at any one time, and also over time. Deep sense readings open up a level of 'possibility' in the texts that allows other seemingly latent meanings to emerge in addition to the plain sense - perhaps through their encounter with new situations over time that affect what they are able to 'say'. Such encounters often extend rather than reduce a scriptural text's capacity to speak, even when its author could not have envisaged the future circumstances that would have such effects on it (and cause it to effect so much). In deep sense readings, the readers find themselves 'taking the plain sense seriously but going beyond it, linking it with other texts, asking new questions of it, extending the meaning, discovering depths, resonances and applications of it that have not been suggested before'.<sup>8</sup> I will come back to this later, in the context of a concrete illustration of SR practice.

This mode of approach to scriptural study, so characteristic of SR, can be described as *interrogative*. SR injects an interrogative mood into the reading of sacred texts. This happens at various levels. At one level, the asking of questions is almost inevitably the first thing that happens in an SR study group – it is one of the obvious effects of putting members of different faiths in front of the texts of traditions that are not their own. They want to know what these texts *mean*, and how they are made sense of by those whose texts they are. If the first thing that happens in an SR session is a disquisition aimed at foreclosing all possible questions about the text, something has gone seriously wrong. In such cases the disquisitorial voice should be interrupted! In normal SR practice, there is always someone who is given the responsibility of introducing the text – in order to direct people to some of its interesting features, to set it in context, to highlight any important or contested words, and so on – but this person's role is not to 'give all the answers'. He or she should be laying out questions as well. And when the first interruption comes, that will usually be a sign that the real business of the session has begun.

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<sup>8</sup> Hardy, Ochs and Ford, 'The Tent of Meeting'.

At another level, those whose text it 'is' ought also to be adopting an interrogative attitude towards it. Often the questions of the other religionists can help them to do this, as they will not always have an answer to such questions, and this will get them questioning hard themselves. These moments of losing one's hold on the text are very common in SR, and they are often described as moments when the text seems to collapse or to explode. In a session that is working well, this can be the beginning of an extremely creative re-engagement with the text, and with a participant's own identity in relation to the God whom she believes has given her the text and wants her to wrestle with it. But this requires a general 'permission to speculate' in relation to the text, which does not always come as easily to Christians and Muslims as it does to Jews, and has to be learned. There can be a vigorous time of proposing solutions to the problems the text has thrown up – or ways of reconstructing it after it has apparently 'collapsed' or 'exploded'. One's co-readers from the other traditions are often surprisingly helpful in the reconstruction process.

And at another, and profoundly important, level, the text should be allowed to interrogate *us*, and not just *we* it. This taps into something basic to all three traditions, all of which know that their texts shape and sift them, and are not just objects to be enquired into, or instruments to be used for human purposes. This is an important reminder – and maybe a reassurance - to those who might be tempted to think that the interrogative and speculative mode of SR means that the text is simply being conjured with in a sort of imaginative game-playing. The text itself sets terms for what is valid and what is not – hence the close attention to what fields of meaning the words of the texts actually have in their traditions. And there is a respect for the text as revelatory in the terms of its tradition, as a source of challenging and illuminating speech by which its readers are addressed. To quote Steve Kepnes again, it is a principle of SR 'that the texts are to be placed at the center of our discussions and to be treated with respect as sources of revelation, community, and guidance. To use a phrase from Martin Buber, the text is to be regarded as a "Thou" capable of addressing us as its expectant readers'.

#### SOME EXAMPLES OF SCRIPTURAL REASONING IN PRACTICE

Because it is a practice and not just a theory, it seems appropriate to try to communicate some of what I have been saying about SR with reference to actual scriptural texts and

their interpretation in SR sessions. In what can only be one or two examples, for want of space, I hope nonetheless to be able to illustrate some of the features of SR I have been setting out so far. Of course the caveat needs to be inserted that no description can capture the ‘eventness’ of SR; there is always a sense in which ‘you had to be there’ – in the same way as is true of so many other religious practices.

*Mark 3:31-35*

We looked in one session at texts about kinship (Genesis 2:24-25 and 13:8-12; Mark 3:31-35 and Ephesians 6:1-4; Qur’an 11:42-48), and were exploring the tension, if it is one (certainly the *distinction*), between ‘natural’ and ‘spiritual’ family that some of our texts raise. The distinction seems to be drawn very starkly indeed by Jesus in Mark 3 inasmuch as he constitutes for himself a ‘family’ whose membership is based on ‘doing the will of God’, and he prioritises this family over his blood relations – mother, brothers and sisters who wait outside for him. (‘Looking at those who sat around him, he said, ‘Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.’) This appeal to a kinship based on faith in God had strong resonances in the Qur’anic texts.

Jesus seems to ‘explode’ the natural family – but is it as simple as that? Does the natural family cease to have any significance after this, or is it reappraised by being reassembled and set in a different context? Under interrogation from a Jewish participant at the table, a new possibility, a different reading, of the text’s words about the family was proposed – one that was less ‘either-or’, and deeply indebted to midrashic thinking. By analogy with the distinction between ‘*peshat*’ and ‘*derash*’, we might see here a distinction made between plain sense family and deep sense family (the former = ‘natural’, the latter = ‘spiritual’). As the midrashic tradition well knows, and as I have indicated already in this essay, plain and deep senses are not in competition; on the contrary deep sense reading depends on there being a plain sense at all, and the plain sense is not set aside when deeper meanings are also mined. So maybe in this passage from the Gospels the plain sense family is having its own deeper meaning opened to it by Jesus’s words – not in order to be replaced, but to be enhanced and re-envisioned in a set of relations to God’s will and purpose that might otherwise be overlooked or neglected. And sure enough, we are told that Jesus’s natural family (the *peshat* family) were *seeking* him – which is, as we have seen,

what *derash* means. *Peshat* seeks *derash* (*pesbat* ‘*derashes*’), not in order to replace itself but in order to fulfil itself.

### *Judges 11*

We talked in another session about living alongside ‘others’ – whether defined religiously, racially, morally, or in some further way. What range of responses to such others do our scriptures open up? What range of options is meditated on? We may kill them, or marry them, or co-opt them . . . the list could go on. Jephthah is an illegitimate child (I don’t think we know whether he is the product of a liaison with a non-Israelite prostitute, but if so he is *additionally* illegitimate), and lives ‘liminally’ in the land of Tob, surrounded by the disenfranchised and disaffected. His apparent acknowledgement of gods of other nations (‘should you not possess what your god Chemosh gives you to possess?’ v.24), and his unnecessary readiness to offer his own child as a sacrifice to win the Lord’s favour, suggest a dangerous liminality too. And yet, he is the instrument of the Lord’s purposes nonetheless, and Israel needs him.

Of course, the sacrifice of his daughter, made necessary by his vow to YHWH, has the effect of ending his line once his strategic purpose has been achieved – and maybe the Book of Judges’ sense of *realpolitik* is giving us here an acknowledgement of what remains true in our day: in order to retain a sense of our own ‘clean-handedness’ we need to co-opt liminal figures to do our dirty work for us, and then we feel the need to cut them off again: to deny them.<sup>9</sup> What does YHWH think of this; is he complicit? Are the land of Tob and its inhabitants (*‘tov’* = ‘good’, but it’s full of ne’er-do-wells) a good or a bad thing?

Another way of looking at it: the bringing in of Jephthah from ‘outside’ opens up new possibilities for Israel that would not otherwise have been there, though it does not require them to stop being Israel. Is one of the effects of Scriptural Reasoning that it brings in from ‘outside’ our own religious traditions the readings and reasonings of others in such a way that new possibilities are opened up for *us* in relation to our *own* texts that would not otherwise exist, but that do not require us to deny our own

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<sup>9</sup> This is a point owed to Luke Bretherton, who was present at the session.

traditions? (Nor necessarily to attribute some revealed or authoritative status to the readings and reasonings from ‘outside’ that is equivalent to our own.)

On this reading, Jephthah plays the role of an ‘interrupter’, and we may recall how important the role of interruption can be in SR. Interruption often initiates an interrogative turn in the discussions, and the release of speculative creative energy to deal with the issue or the question raised. And the effect of this is often a deepening or enrichment of one’s identity in relation to one’s own tradition, through the agency of a voice from outside it.

Another example of such interruption might be the role played by Moses’s father-in-law, Jethro, in counselling him to appoint helpers to help him with the exhausting task of judging all the cases being brought to him by the people of Israel (Exodus 18:13-27). Moses is performing a divinely-appointed task, as a servant of the God of Israel. Jethro, though he is Moses’s relation by marriage, is *not* an Israelite. And yet his interruption, and his constructive suggestions for repair of Moses’s execution of the duties of his own religion, enable Moses to serve his God better – and who is to say that it was not precisely God’s intention to use the interruptive outside voice to just this end?

In SR, the texts and traditions – and the *people* – of the other traditions often prove capable of having just such deepening effects on one’s own. Deep calls to deep, and rather than the result of such inter-faith exchange being a ‘thinning out’ of commitment, or intensity in the inhabitation of one’s tradition, it is a deepening yet further.

#### ASSESSMENT OF SCRIPTURAL REASONING

Having looked in some detail at the practice of SR, I want in this section to return to the questions opened up in the introduction to this chapter, and ask in particular what the Church might have to learn from SR in the way it encourages Christians to relate to their Bibles.

Needless to say, one very obvious suggestion might be for Christians, where they are able to, to study their scriptures with Jews and Muslims in some of the ways I have sketched here. But that will not always be possible for ordinary church-goers, and in any case SR

is not meant to be a substitute for study *within* traditions (just as the tent is not meant to be a substitute for the houses).

However, one interesting effect of SR on those who have been involved with it regularly, as a matter of fact, is that it has revitalised scriptural study within the houses through the development of groups that study texts together in all-Jewish, all-Christian and all-Muslim settings in ways that are modelled on SR methods. The Jewish group Textual Reasoning (TR) in fact predates SR, though new participants have come into it through the portal of SR; but there are now also Qur'anic Reasoning groups (QR), and in Cambridge an all-Christian Biblical Reasoning group (BR). I cannot speak for the TR or the QR groups, but I can for BR. Obviously in many ways BR is Bible Study, and shares many of the features of Christian Bible Studies all over the place. But in other respects it has a quite distinctive and refreshing 'feel', and this it owes to SR. I will try to summarize some of what that 'feel' is.

*First, it proceeds in a way that has been reminded of 'depth' readings in its own tradition.* There are particular analogies to be drawn here with the ancient Christian tradition of *lectio divina* – a slow, contemplative praying of scripture which is still alive in the monastic tradition. In a way that recalls the rabbinic injunction to 'turn, and turn it again', *lectio divina* involves reading and re-reading a single passage of the Bible in the expectation that new levels of meaning will open up each time. The text will be internalised – *ingested* and *digested* in a way that is often compared explicitly with eucharistic participation. And like the sacrament, this way of relating to scripture is viewed as a God-given means of uniting us with him.

Thus, in a manner that stands in stark opposition to our contemporary culture's habits of speed reading, the practice of *lectio divina* will begin with us 'taking in the word' (a model here is provided by Mary, 'pondering all these things in her heart'). The text may be a verse or a portion of a verse – even just a word or two. We gently repeat it (*meditatio*), allowing it 'to interact with our thoughts, our hopes, our memories [and] our desires',<sup>10</sup> the whole process leading eventually to prayer (*oratio*), as loving dialogue with God and consecration of our will to him, and to contemplation (*contemplatio*), as delighted rest in God's presence. In this way, the same simple text elicits responses from its readers at

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<sup>10</sup> Fr Luke Dysinger, OSB, 'Accepting the Embrace of God: The Ancient Art of *Lectio Divina*', <http://www.valyermo.com/ld-art.html>.

multiple levels. These levels of response are rather like the different ‘moods’ of speech. There is necessarily, of course, the *indicative* relation to the texts’s plain sense (establishing the surface ‘what’ of what it is saying). But then the *subjunctive* mood comes into play in the process of meditating upon the text’s present possibilities. Where are the ‘coulds’ and ‘mights’ of this text for us now? How might Christ the Word be touching our own situation, today, in this text? The *imperative* mood can be discerned when engagement with the text leads to an experience of our being ‘called forth’ into a new task or activity – a new ‘mission’. And the *optative* mood – the mood in which we express desire – is emergent when our relationship with the text awakens longings, aspirations, hopes, and sheer delight in God. In this last mode, we may find ourselves ‘consecrating projects and hopes to Christ’,<sup>11</sup> or setting all other goals aside except that of being in God’s transforming embrace for its own sake.

SR-influenced Christian Bible Study (BR) converges in important ways with this tradition of *lectio divina*, particularly when *lectio divina* is practised in a communal setting, and its fruits shared continually in a community of life – the different interpretations and insights that are generated by the practice encountering one another and interacting. The convergence between SR-influenced BR and *lectio divina* is most evident in the determination to ‘go deeper’. The openness to multiple layers of meaning – deep senses of the text – is as positively legitimized by *lectio divina* as it is by SR, and this has a freeing effect, without leading to a free-for-all. The point is not to *solve* the text, nor to come to a definitive agreement with each other on what it means and what its implications are. It is to let it be rich.

So, then, this depth sensitivity is the first way in which BR has a different ‘feel’ from the frustrating thinness of much Bible Study – and it is wholly in line with ancient Christian practices that have as much to teach as ever. *Second, and connected with this depth sensitivity, BR proceeds in a consciously interrogative mode* – and with all the dimensions of interrogation I outlined earlier. Here of course is yet another mood of speech to be added to the mix of the indicative, subjunctive, imperative and optative! In interrogative mode, we question each other, the text is questioned *by* us, and the text questions us in return. As I hope to have shown in discussion of SR, the interrogation of one’s scriptures can have the effect of making the all-too-familiar texts of one’s tradition ‘strange’ once again. This heightens

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<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

one's 'pitch of attention' to one's own texts (to quote the poet Geoffrey Hill<sup>12</sup>). It can therefore lead one to a more vigorous engagement with those texts, such that one's relationship to them is deepened. And at the same time as it enables a process of sensitization to scripture (our own and others') to go on, it also enables a process of sensitization to those around us with whom we read. It issues in growth in mutual understanding, and in friendship.

*Finally – and again connected with the foregoing points – this mode of relating to scripture can have the effect of breaking up stale oppositions between 'liberal' and 'conservative'.* It invites a mode of reasoning that is neither analogous to the narrowly 'deductive' type, nor the loosely 'inductive' type, as I outlined them in the introduction to this chapter. It does not seek to reduce the Bible to assured principles from which judgements are then made, nor does it decide on the basis of experience what can or cannot be concluded with certainty from the Bible. If anything, this third mode of reasoning, encouraged by SR, is (if the philosophical jargon can be forgiven) analogous to *abduction*, described by the pragmatist philosopher C.S. Peirce as follows:

Its occasion is a *surprise*. That is, some belief, active or passive, formulated or unformulated, has just been broken up. It may be in real experience or it may equally be in pure mathematics, which has its marvels, as nature has. The mind seeks to bring the facts, as modified by the new discovery, into order; that is, to form a general conception embracing them. . . . This synthesis suggesting a new conception or hypothesis, is the Abduction . . . it is shown to be *likely*, in the sense of being some sort of approach to the truth, in an indefinite sense. The conclusion is drawn in the interrogative mood . . .<sup>13</sup>

The analogy with scripture study I want to draw here is premised precisely on the *surprising* aspect of scripture – its tendency to 'break up' or 'break open' the presuppositions we have about what it will or won't say, and thus to break us its readers open too, releasing us into a receptive mode of imaginative engagement. To take scripture with absolute seriousness as that which will take the lead in our encounter with it (as any good 'conservative' will want to do), and yet to come to it with a radical openness that lets it say new and multiple things (as any good 'liberal' will want to do) - and in both cases not seek to shut down this surprising newness but to respond

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<sup>12</sup> Geoffrey Hill, 'What Devil Has Got Into John Ransom?' in *The Lords of Limit: Essays on Literature and Ideas* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), pp. 128-29; he is himself borrowing the phrase from John Crowe Ransom. My thanks to David Mahan for pointing me to this.

<sup>13</sup> C.S. Peirce, 'A Syllabus of Certain Topics of Logic' (1903), in Nathan Houser and Christian Kloesel (eds.), *The Essential Peirce: Selected Philosophical Writings* Vol. 2, (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1998), p. 287.

creatively to it with the energetic conjecturing of conceptions that try to do it justice – this is to do something like abductive reasoning with scripture. Because the truth of God and the world to which scripture points us is so deep and so rich, and because we are meant to keep going back to scripture to find the ever-more of what it has to say to us in each new circumstance of our lives, then it is quite proper that this abductive mode of reasoning will always be (as Peirce puts it) ‘indefinite’.

An enrichment of scriptural study in our present circumstances will release energy for the Church, and for individual Christians, in a much needed way – not least energy and means for overcoming a good many of our current unhappy divisions. This enrichment will happen if the Church can let scripture be as rich in meaning as it presses to be for the believer – to receive it in full measure, pressed down and overflowing – with an attitude that looks to scripture as an authoritative ‘Thou’ and yet questions it and ‘imagines with it’ vigorously. To get the most out of this scriptural enrichment, the Church will need to be re-traditioned in certain key ways; that means being resourced from ‘internal libraries’ of our own, as well as open to the ‘libraries’ of other traditions which may – as so often happened historically – have preserved insights that our own traditions once had but then lost. SR’s ‘genius’, and one of its main gifts to the houses that participate in it, is this simultaneous opening of the houses to other traditions and re-traditioning of them in their own, and as Peter Ochs suggests, it is possible to experience this as a taste of eschatological promise:

As members of various ‘Houses’, we acquire our religious identities through our tradition’s Scriptures, historical memory, ongoing involvements, and eschatological anticipations. In other words, our religious identities are temporally formed . . . The Tent of Meeting, however, represents an *eschatological* ‘space’, since it offers an opportunity now in this world for participants in the three traditions to taste at least one aspect of the future they otherwise only pray for in their separate Houses: they encounter each other with their traditions, and all three are gathered before God in a single space in such a way as to re-place conventional boundaries between them, where in some way there is ‘neither Jew nor Greek’, one might say, or no separation between the lands of the nations. Stated differently, the Tent of Meeting enables participants in the three traditions to occupy a space in which their respective histories, traditions and languages do not provide strict boundaries, and are not sources of exclusion. In this space, they know the possibility of the convergence of their histories, traditions and languages as a divine – not only a human – project.<sup>14</sup>

This is a heady vision, and a reminder of SR’s roots as an inter-faith practice. It is to be celebrated by the churches for its own sake, precisely in those terms. But it can also be

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<sup>14</sup> Hardy, Ochs and Ford, ‘The Tent of Meeting’.

looked to, as I hope this essay has shown, as a resource for stimulating another process of repair and hope – one unfolding within the churches and their different strands of churchmanship. There is reason to hope that a return to scripture can be the stimulus to a ‘convergence of . . . histories, traditions and languages’ here too, and that this healing can also be felt as ‘a divine – not only a human – project’.