

A HANDBOOK FOR SCRIPTURAL REASONING (SR)

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Abstract

The essay includes twelve “rules” to define the nature and goals of the practice of Scriptural Reasoning (SR). These rules are intended for heuristic and pedagogic purposes to introduce Scriptural Reasoning to those who have little experience in and knowledge of the practice of SR. The rules emerged from my observations of SR practice and taken together the rules are meant to be a guide or “handbook” for future SR practice.

In what follows the reader will find twelve “rules” that I have set forth to define the nature and goals of the practice of Scriptural Reasoning (SR). The rules are authored by one person who cannot be seen to represent the diverse views of the many people who participate in SR activities. However, given these limitations, this Handbook is written for heuristic and pedagogic purposes to introduce Scriptural Reasoning to those who have little experience in and knowledge of the practice of SR. These rules were presented to the SR Theory Group at Cambridge University in May of 2004 where I received extensive comments. I use the notion of a “rule” rather than a “principle” or “statement” because SR is first a practice and then a set of ideas and a theory. The rules emerged from my observations of SR practice and taken together the rules are meant to be a guide or “handbook” for future SR practice.

After presenting the twelve rules in list form, I return to each rule to explicate it in more detail. I then conclude with a brief description of how SR is done. The description focuses more on necessary conditions and attitudes than rigid steps and instructions.

A. TWELVE RULES OF SCRIPTURAL REASONING (SR)

WHAT IS SCRIPTURAL REASONING?

- 1. SR is a practice of group reading of the scriptures of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam that builds sociality among its practitioners and releases sources of reason, compassion, and divine spirit for healing our separate communities and for repair of the world. Thus, SR theory aims at a scripturally reasoned triadic response to the problems of the world that is motivated and sustained by the healing and divine spirit of scripture.**
- 2. Participants in SR practice come to it as both representatives of academic institutions and particular “houses” (churches, mosques, synagogues) of worship. SR meets, however, outside of these institutions and houses in special times and in separate spaces that are likened to Biblical “tents of meeting.” Practitioners come together in these tents of meeting to read and reason with scriptures. They then return to their academic and religious institutions and to the world with renewed energy and wisdom for these institutions and the world.**
- 3. SR begins with the scriptural sense that the human world is broken, in exile, off the straight path, filled with corruption, sickness, war and genocide. SR practitioners come together out of a sense of impoverishment, suffering, and conflict to seek resources for healing.**
- 4. SR is neither about the roots of Christianity in Judaism nor the roots of Islam in Jewish and Christian traditions. SR is also not about academic Jewish-Christian-Islamic understanding. SR acknowledges Abraham (and Adam before him) as a source figure for the three monotheistic religions, but SR does not seek to reduce or dissolve these**

religions into some universal Abrahamic faith. Rather, SR is about serious conversation between three religious traditions that preserves difference as it establishes relations.

THE REASON OF SCRIPTURAL REASONING

5. SR is the thinking that occurs when scripture is taken up and discussed by a group of interpreters. It therefore works through both the reasoning that is implicit in scripture and the reasoning that practitioners, as interpreters, bring to scripture. But, most importantly, scriptural reasoning is the reasoning that is “disclosed” as members engage in dialogue about scripture.

6. SR functions with a triadic semiotic that assumes that meaning arises out of the relationship between the sign, referent and community of interpreters (in Peirce’s terms, the “interpretant”) that reads the text. This type of semiotic transfers hermeneutic power to scriptural reasoners who bring their knowledge of scripture and its traditional interpretations and the academic disciples of history, sociology, and philosophy, with them when they meet to read together.

7. SR includes moments of reflection on group practices of reading that collect, summarize, and organize the insights that are generated. These acts of reflection will take the form of commentary and rules rather than systematic philosophies or theological treatises. Further “second order” reflections on the summaries of SR sessions by individual scholars contribute to the ongoing development of SR theory. The triadic form of its practice means that SR theory developed by a scholar of one monotheistic tradition will necessarily address the other two traditions.

8. The final stage of scriptural reasoning is the application of SR to the problems and issues that inspired SR practice in the first place. This final stage of SR involves bringing SR into the world to heal it. This is scriptural reasoning in action. It is scriptural reasoning as peace-making.

WHY MONOTHEISMS?

9. SR begins with the scriptures of the Monotheistic religions because the initial members of the SR community came from the traditions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. SR also begins with Monotheisms because some of the most grave problems that plague today’s world are generated by tensions between Jews and Muslims and Christians. SR members believe that there are overlooked resources within the religious traditions that can have an ameliorative effect on these tensions.

10. In including Islam and the Qur’an as an equal partner in SR discussions, SR intends to move beyond the popular “clash of civilizations” thesis that pits a “Western Judeo-Christian civilization” against a “Non-Western and Anti-Modern Islamic civilization.” SR attempts to move beyond this clash of civilization thesis by focusing on the mutual respect for scripture in the three Monotheistic traditions and by recapturing the human values, traditions of learning, and devotion to God that these scriptures each espouse and give rise to.

OUR TIME AND THE END TIME

11. SR seeks a “third space” between anti-modern religious fundamentalism and modern liberalism. SR shares some of the epistemological moves of philosophical postmodernism that is critical of the modern reliance on the rational subject and the attempt to discover

universal principles that could substitute for particular traditions of knowing and living. Yet SR is wary of the nihilistic ideologies that emerge from some deconstructivist forms of postmodernism. SR members sometimes refer to themselves as “postliberal,” in that they seek to retain liberal democratic values and the liberal dedication to the alleviation of suffering throughout the world, while recapturing a positive public role for the particular traditions of thought and living that are present in the Monotheistic scriptures.

12. SR is liturgical and eschatological in that it anticipates an end time in which all the children of Abraham will live together in peace. Yet SR members believe that Jews, Christians, and Muslims can participate in something of that end time by entering into “tents of meeting” in which members of the three traditions read their scriptures together in an atmosphere of respectful dialogue and friendship.

B. AN EXPLICATION OF THE RULES

What is SR?

1. SR is a practice of group reading of the scriptures of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam that builds sociality among its practitioners and releases sources of reason, compassion, and divine spirit for healing our separate communities and for repair of the world. Thus, SR theory aims at a scripturally reasoned triadic response to the problems of the world that is motivated and sustained by the healing and divine spirit of scripture.

SR is a practice before it is a theory. It properly can only be known in its performance. The performative dimension gives SR a time bound and context specific characteristic. This means every SR event is dependent upon the specific time and place and the particular group of individuals that assemble to practice SR. The primary texts of SR sessions are the Hebrew Bible, the New Testament, and the Qur'an. These texts are primary because they constitute the originative and contemporary sources of the separate religious communities. SR regards these books not only as texts but as scripture and this means that they are regarded as living sources of divine interaction with humanity. SR members believe that the religious traditions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam remain central vehicles through which the presence of God is known and experienced.

Although religions and Western religions, in particular, contain more than scriptures—e.g. symbols, doctrines, and saints—we begin with scriptures. We do this, most simply, because Jews, Christians and Muslims share common narratives and they share a common respect for scripture as fundamental documents of revelation and religious foundation.

Beginning with scriptures, which are by definition closed canons, imposes a helpful limit which yields a set body of initial texts that can easily be worked with. However, we readily turn to secondary scriptures from the Midrash and Talmud, the works of the Church Fathers, the Hadith and Tafsir, and a host of exegetical texts from all three traditions.

Participants in SR have found that reading scriptures together builds sociality between members. SR members come to seek and expect sociality and friendship to deepen with successive SR sessions. The friendships and sociality that develops around SR sessions should not be confused with a conflict free sphere full of easy agreements and consensus. But SR does hope to engender respectful conversation across differences and it has shown itself to be able to forge hospitality and friendship not in spite of, but because of difference.

2. Participants in SR practice come to it as both representatives of academic institutions and particular “houses” (churches, mosques, synagogues) of worship. SR meets, however, outside of these institutions and houses in special times and in separate spaces that are likened to Biblical “tents of meeting.” Practitioners come together in these tents of meeting to read and reason with scriptures. They then return to their academic and religious

institutions and to the world with renewed energy and wisdom for these institutions and the world.

Participants in SR come to it being trained, formed by, and often teaching in two dominant institutions of learning: the University and the Religious Seminary. The double training and double allegiance to both the University and the Seminary with their distinct and overlapping canons of truth, methods of study, and traditions of learning, is part of what makes SR unique. This dual allegiance means that no science, no philosophical system of truth, no form of artistry, no spiritual discipline, is, from the outset, ruled out or rendered “foreign” to SR. This dual allegiance of SR means that it can hope to take advantage of the best of the traditions of liberal learning and move between and across the destructive contemporary divisions: secular and sacred, modern and traditional, material and spiritual.

Given that SR members are specialists in their academic fields and worshippers in religious communities, most SR members have an allegiance not only to a religious tradition in general, e.g. Islam and a field in the academy, e.g. philosophy, but to a particular form of a religious tradition, e.g. Anglicanism and a particular movement (or, as Nicholas Adams refers to it, as a “seminar”) in their academic discipline e.g. phenomenology. Furthermore, members of the same religious tradition may be formed by vastly different academic methods. And members of different religious traditions may share the same allegiance to a particular academic method. This leads to creative cross-cutting relations among scriptural reasoners and interesting “temporary alliances” where members of different religious traditions may find themselves closer to each other on the basis of an allegiance to a shared academic method of study than they are to members of their own religious traditions.

There is, however, a crucial distinction between religious traditions and an academic methodology. Where an academic methodology can be shared across the religions, (i.e. a Jew, a Christian and a Muslim may all share the methodology of phenomenology) the scriptures of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam remain tied to their traditions and scriptures and their traditional interpretations cannot be “shared” among Jews, Christians, and Muslims in the same way. For example, Jews, Christians, and Muslims can all read the Qur’an, but the assumption of SR is that the Qur’an cannot be pulled out of the matrix of tradition, family, community, worship, learning, and belief that the Muslim stands in. In this sense, the Muslim holds an authority over the text as its lover and teacher that the Jew or Christian does not possess. And the same situation holds with the Jew in relation to the Torah and the Christian in relation to the New Testament.

Whatever the religious and academic affiliation of SR members, SR meetings take place in spaces and times that are set apart from the formal confines of individual religious and academic institutions. Members of the Society for Scriptural Reasoning like to refer to these spaces, figuratively, as “tents of meeting” to convey the sense of a marginal and transitional sacred space where institutional restraints are temporarily relaxed and experimental forms of scriptural interpretation and reasoning can be developed.

3. SR begins with the scriptural assessment that the human world is broken, in exile, off the straight path, filled with corruption, sickness, war and genocide. Scriptural reasoners come together out of their sense of the human sickness and the economic, communal, and spiritual impoverishment of the world to seek resources for healing.

More than anything, SR is motivated by a global awareness of the predominance of human suffering. Although there is an assessment of the contemporary world, we see parallels in our scriptural traditions which also grew out of a sense of the moral, spiritual, and material collapse of the world as described in Genesis, in the Gospels, and in the Qur’an. We do not take these scriptural assessments as prophecies of our contemporary predicament or simple portraits of our contemporary world, but as signs that our scriptures are fundamentally concerned with the worldly realities of human suffering and centrally focused on addressing that suffering.

SR members join together out a desire, as people of faith and knowledge, to address human suffering in all of its variations. For Robert Gibbs and Laurie Zoloth, this means that SR is primarily a form of ethics. Human suffering and its alleviation establishes the ultimate criterion of the truth of SR. This is a pragmatic criterion that means that the truth of SR will be shown in its ability to help heal the suffering in the world.

4. SR is neither about the roots of Christianity in Judaism nor the roots of Islam in Jewish and Christian traditions. SR is also not about academic Jewish-Christian-Islamic understanding. SR acknowledges Abraham (and Adam before him) as a source figure for the three monotheistic religions, but SR does not seek to reduce or dissolve these religions into some universal Abrahamic faith. Rather, SR is about serious conversation between three religious traditions that preserves difference as it establishes relations.

SR is not a purely historical exercise in tracing the later Monotheistic traditions back to earlier forms. It also does not seek to find “underlying conceptual unities,” “overarching principles” or “universal essences” into which the scriptures and traditions can be dissolved. It is not about developing and applying objective methods and models for understanding “the nature and thought” of the religions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. In attempting to move beyond these objectives, SR seeks to move beyond much modern scholarship in the study of religion and much liberal interfaith dialogue.

SR attempts to articulate and preserve the separate identities of each of the three religions as it builds a dialogue that is tuned to the pressing ethical issues of the contemporary world.. SR assumes that the individual traditions constitute, in George Lindbeck’s terms, unique “cultural-linguistic” religious systems that maintain internal principles and mechanisms of coherence. This means, at a minimum, that when a word is used in a religious tradition it can best be defined by a series of words and terms from the religion in which it sits. Thus, even though the same term appears in one or two or three religions, it will necessarily carry a unique ‘semantic aura,’ a set of cognates and uses, that is specific to its use in a particular religious “language-game.”

Beginning with scriptures and following scriptural forms of reasoning, gives SR a way of preserving forms of religious expression that are unique to each of the three traditions. SR does not avoid historical, philological and documentary analysis of scripture, indeed, it recognizes these forms of scholarship as crucial to the task of establishing the historical context, semantic horizon and rhetorical forms that scriptures employ. But SR only begins with these forms of scholarship and then seeks to move beyond them to engage both the traditions of religious exegesis and the current practitioners of SR that take up the scriptures in their group readings.

Beginning with scriptural forms of reasoning is also intended to move inter-faith discussion away from conceptual and doctrinal categories of analysis. These categories often force the complex religious traditions into artificial and abstract theological concepts and dilute the complexity and specificity of the cultural-linguistic religions systems. Given the highly developed tradition of theology in the Christian tradition, inter-faith dialogue based on conceptual analysis tends to favor Christianity and to force the other traditions to speak in its terms. Scriptural reasoning is not against theology or philosophy, but it endeavors to use scripture to find a new/old philosophical idiom that is better attuned to religious particularity and a more supple tool to lead to a more rich and complex and sensitive inter-faith dialogue.

The Reason of Scriptural Reasoning

5. SR is the thinking that occurs when scripture is taken up and discussed by a group of interpreters. It therefore works through both the reasoning that is implicit in scripture and the reasoning that practitioners, as interpreters, bring to scripture. But, most importantly, scriptural reasoning is the reasoning that is “disclosed” as members engage in dialogue about scripture.

SR recognizes that reason is a central tool of human liberation. But its practitioners believe that they need to reason better, more wisely, more thoroughly. SR practitioners believe that they need to find a form of reason that is neither abstract nor purely utilitarian, but is a reasoning of the heart. They need to find a form of reason that is simultaneously a practical moral reasoning that, in the words of David Ford, might be best expressed simply as “wisdom.”

For this wise form of reasoning we look to scripture. In scripture we find a form of reasoning that is the beginning of wisdom. The reasoning of scripture is built out of the language--the grammar, the semantics, the rhetorics and poetics, the narrative and law-- of scripture itself. In Jewish terms, this is the “*psbat*” or plain sense meaning of scripture. Reason in scripture is not only embedded in the language of scripture, but it is embedded in human persons, communities, peoples, geography, and history. This suggests that scriptural reasoning itself is embodied reasoning. And it is precisely because scriptural reasoning is embodied that it is such a transparent medium to relate human suffering. But scripture does not only relate human suffering. The plain sense meaning of scripture is also theological. As Daniel Hardy emphatically puts this, scripture is about God and about God’s healing interactions with humans; and thus scriptural reasoning is a form of theology. SR is about faith, providence, hope, creation, judgment, mercy, salvation and redemption. And it is about these theological notions as they are taken up in scripture.

Scriptural reasoning about God is not traditional theology. Since SR follows the *psbat* of scripture, its theology is necessarily tied to a language, narrative, and law that is not self-evident. Scripture is full of ambiguities, gaps and lacunae. And, as we see in the literary devices of parables and allegory, scriptures appear to even be purposefully vague. As purposefully vague texts, scriptures then require interpretation. Given this, scripture requires us as readers to add our human reasoning to the divine reasoning of scripture.

I have used the notion of adding human reason and creativity to the divine reason of scripture. But this is a somewhat artificial way of talking about the process of scriptural interpretation. In the actual practice of scriptural reasoning it is not clear what is human and what divine. In the spontaneous moment of insight into and across scriptures, participants are overtaken by the movement of the spirit that many recognize as a disclosure of truth.

6. SR functions with a triadic semiotic that assumes that meaning arises out of the relationship between the sign, referent and community of interpreters (in Peirce’s terms, the “interpretant”) that reads the text. This type of semiotic transfers hermeneutic power to scriptural reasoners who bring their knowledge of scripture and its traditional interpretations and the academic disciples of history, sociology, and philosophy, with them when they meet to read together. This semiotic model initiates a critical and creative dialogue between the set of political and social values implicit in scriptures and the values that SR members bring with them to scripture.

Peter Ochs has argued that much of contemporary biblical scholarship utilizes a dyadic sign/referent model for assigning meaning to scripture. This means that each semiotic sign refers to one object or concept. Interpretation is then a matter of determining the one meaning through historical scholarship, philology, or a variety of literary methodologies. Most critical biblical scholarship prioritizes the original audience of historical period in which the text was written and thereby historicizes textual meaning. This process locks the meaning away into its ancient historical period. Looking at scripture as a historical document also assures that the theological element in scripture is either ignored or severely truncated. Indeed, as R.R. Reno has suggested, one can look at much modern biblical scholarship as an attempt to wall off scripture from theology.

The triadic semiotic model includes the figure of the interpreter in the semantic equation. This recognizes the primary function of a sign as medium of communication. In this view, scripture is not a dead memorial to the past, but a living message, a call, that sounds through the ages up until

today. On the triadic semiotic model, the meaning of scripture is only known as it is heard and used by a contemporary reader and a contemporary community of interpreters.

Aref Nayed has suggested that when SR practitioners read scripture they each bring their own “internal library” with them. This library starts with knowledge of Arabic, Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek and includes historical information, theology, modern and postmodern philosophy and science. It also includes previous readings of the texts and hearings of it in ritual and liturgical contexts and, finally, understandings of God, the present historical moment, and the reasoner’s own personal life.

In bringing their libraries and awareness of the contemporary world to the act of interpreting scripture, SR practitioners necessarily bring new questions and problems to the ancient texts. Where the ancient scriptures are written in societies that assumed the institutions of patriarchy, slavery, and monarchy, SR members bring contemporary feminist and democratic sensibilities to the texts that challenge and radically question them. This initiates a process of dialogue between the traditional texts and modern values. However, the experience of participants in SR sessions has been that these new questions breath new life into the ancient scriptures. In addition, participants find that their questions are illumined in startling clarity and contemporary problems addressed by the wisdom and guidance of the scriptures aroused and renewed. Although SR will challenge the presuppositions of patriarchy, slavery, and monarchy in the traditional text, it finds that the overarching scriptural values of freedom, redemption, salvation, and divine mercy can serve as powerful engines of hermeneutic creativity for the re-interpretation of scripture. Scriptures present powerful narratives and parables of societal transformation that work, analogically, to both critique and confirm the contemporary attempt to initiate human liberation and healing.

7. SR includes moments of reflection on group practices of reading that collect, summarize, and organize the insights that are generated. These acts of reflection will take the form of commentary and rules rather than systematic philosophies or theological treatises. Further “second order” reflections on the summaries of SR sessions by individual scholars contribute to the ongoing development of SR theory. The triadic form of its practice means that SR theory developed by a scholar of one monotheistic tradition will necessarily address the other two traditions.

After a creative session of scriptural interpretation in which the spirit moves as it wills, the process of SR moves into a purposely reflective moment in which the interpretations that have been brought, discovered, and created are collected together and organized. The reflective moment in scriptural reasoning is necessarily an analytic, comparative, synthetic enterprise. Here, practitioners of SR come together, after the interpretive event, to structure the various interpretations which group text study has engendered. The act of collecting and analyzing interpretations is not aimed at producing a single meaning for the texts read, but will issue in a multiplicity of different often conflicting interpretations that generate a number of “hypothetical” and provisional meanings. Scriptural reasoners often assemble the readings along a series of continuums that stretch from one kind of interpretation to the other. Since they are dealing with at least three scriptural texts, creative triadic schemata might be employed or a web of interactive meanings may need to be constructed. Beyond this, scriptural reasoners often seek to place interpretations in the wider contexts of Jewish, Christian, Islamic and various academic hermeneutical traditions.

Further reflections on SR reading sessions conducted by individual scholars produce more traditional forms of religious, philosophical, and theological research and scholarship. These will lead to articles and books on a vast array of subjects related to SR from individual studies of scripture that seek to display the forms of reasoning implicit in them, to studies of the forms of reasoning of ancient and medieval interpreters, to studies of scriptural economics and politics, to practical applications of SR to social issues. Taken together, this can be considered the work of SR theory. The uniqueness of this theory is that it emerges from collective practices of reading that attempts to use scriptural reasoning to address matters of urgent ethical concern. Beyond this SR theory is

distinguished by commitment from members of each religious tradition to do their scholarship in the context of and in relation to the other two traditions. Thus, the triadic structure of SR is carried into SR scholarship. This means that SR theorists believe that all constructive religious thought in the monotheistic traditions today must reflect the complex interactions of the traditions through history and especially in the present and into the future.

8. The final stage of scriptural reasoning is the application of SR to the problems and issues that inspired SR practice in the first place. This final stage of SR is bringing SR into the world to heal it. This is scriptural reasoning in action. It is scriptural reasoning as healing and as peace-making.

Because scripture requires human reasoning to be added to it to yield its meaning, scripture places a burden upon its readers. This is the moral burden of carrying forward God's reasoning, God's word, into our lives and into the world. But as texts of communities that were given in public acts of revelation, the burden of carrying the word of God is a collective one, one that is to be born by a community of interpretation. We are accustomed to bearing God's word in our own individual communities. However, one of the unique aspects of SR is that scriptural reasoning is carried to a mixed community of Jewish, Christians, and Muslims scholars with training both in academic and traditional discourses of interpretation. Here, the reason implicit in scripture is refracted in multiple ways and here a highly creative and mixed community of inquiry joins to receive and carry forward the reasoning of scripture to new forms of ethical action in the world.

Given their expertise as word-smiths, teachers, philosophers, and theologians, SR practitioners view themselves as second order technicians of systems of knowledge and spirit. Peter Ochs speaks of first order religious and secular systems as orders of formation and maintenance of the human world. Priests, doctors, social workers, politicians and economists, run the world and "fix" its problems on the basis of the given systems of knowledge and spirit that they have been trained in. These first order practitioners make sure that the systems of health, economics, law, government, education, and moral guidance work effectively. Yet there are times when the first order systems no longer work well. There are times when we face problems that our given systems of knowledge and order cannot adequately address. At such times, more thorough application and better understanding of the given systems will not serve to fix the world's problems. At these times, second order technicians must be called in to repair the first order systems upon which the human world stands and is maintained.

SR members recognize that they are not only living in a time of upheaval and transformation but, more importantly, that, as philosophers and theologians, they are called to assume the role of second order technicians of knowledge and spirit. To distinguish themselves from philosophers and theologians who function as teachers of the given systems of human order, and to highlight the extent to which they see scriptures as guiding their work, many SR members like to refer to themselves as scriptural reasoners who read scriptures together in order to repair given systems of repair. What this formulation of their relation to the world suggests is that they do not always intervene directly in the world like doctors, social workers, politicians, and pastors do. Yet they believe that we can play a crucial role, precisely as readers, thinkers and writers, in helping to repair the world.

A fundamental conclusion of this way in which the SR relation to the world and is conceived is that SR is not here to overthrow the given systems of knowledge and the sacred but to "repair" and thus reform them. This follows, at least in part, from a sense that the "new" systems of world order--e.g. nationalism, humanism, socialism--that were innovated in modernity, failed, at least partially, because they sought to overthrow the "old traditions" instead of continuing and reforming them. Each of the revolutions of modernity were followed by a reign of terror in which a totalitarian system was established to oversee the institution of the new and supposed liberating order. The model of repair and healing attempts to preserve continuity with our cultural treasures of

truth-seeking and spirit as we move forward to adapt our traditions to the humans needs of the contemporary moment.

Why Monotheisms?

9. SR begins with the scriptures of the Monotheistic religions because the initial members of the SR community came from the traditions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. SR also begins with Monotheisms because some of the most grave problems that plague today's world are generated by tensions between Jews and Muslims and Christians. SR members believe that there are overlooked resources within the religious traditions that can have an ameliorative effect on these tensions.

A simple answer to the question of why Monotheisms? is that these are the traditions that SR members know best and these are the traditions that give them life and energy and knowledge to want to repair the world. But beyond this, SR takes from Monotheism its sense of a moral mission to the world. The moral meaning of the One God is that all humans are in his image are therefore of infinite worth. The moral meaning of Monotheism is that the God of the universe cares for the entire world and that as people of God humans have responsibilities for the healing of the world. The comprehensive obligation to the entire world brings Jews, Christians and Muslims together in a shared task.

SR does not claim that the non-Monotheistic religions are false or incapable of serving the goals that we have set. Indeed, as members of the great universities of the world, with experts in all of the world's religions and cultures, SR practitioners recognize that pejorative and stereotypical characterizations of the "other" religions as "pagan," or "primitive," or "atheistic" are both unfair and inaccurate. These formulations force the complex religions of the world into monotheistic categories which necessarily distort them. Since SR is intrinsically scriptural, it necessarily is less appreciative of non-literate religious forms. However, SR member Oliver Davies has stressed the distinctive power of oral expression and Davies has argued forcefully that the practice of SR is precisely the attempt to move the written word into the oral in the moment of dialogue and interpretation. Furthermore, most religions do include scriptural forms and SR members have and will continue to move beyond the borders of Monotheistic scriptures by reading Buddhist, Hindu and other scriptures with representatives of these traditions.

10. In including Islam and the Qur'an as an equal partner in SR discussions, SR intends to move beyond the popular "clash of civilizations" thesis that pits a "Western Judeo-Christian civilization" against a "Non-Western and Anti-Modern Islamic civilization." SR attempts to move beyond this clash of civilization thesis by focusing on the mutual respect for scripture in the three Monotheistic traditions and by recapturing the human values, traditions of learning, and devotion to God that these scriptures each espouse and give rise to.

After the Holocaust and the Second World War and with the establishment of the State of Israel, Christians and Jews have drawn closer together. Especially in the United States, one hears of a common "Judeo-Christian tradition." Since 9/11, a formulation that has significantly shaped academic and popular discourse on the relationship between contemporary Islam and the West is that "Islam" and the "West" are two entities that are completely and fundamentally alien to each other. This, in turn, means that perpetual conflict between the two entities is not only inevitable but also natural. This line of reasoning is most coherently and systematically developed in the "clash of civilizations" thesis.

In contrast to the reasoning underpinning the "clash of civilizations" thesis, SR endeavors to demonstrate that there is an intimate philosophical, cultural, and religious affinity between "Islam" and the Judeo-Christian "West." One way illustrating this affinity is to demonstrate the shared commitment to scripture and its study in the three traditions. Contemporary "Islam" and the

contemporary “West” can best appreciate their own contemporary predicament by critically but empathetically studying the primal religious scriptures of the other. Both contemporary “Islam” and the “West” are facing daunting challenges brought on by global capitalism, consumerism, environmental disasters and increasing ethnic and religious tensions. It is simple to present the challenges that modernity or “postmodernity” presents to both the West and East through the clash of civilization thesis. But the reality is that the West is also plagued by the conflict of fundamentalisms and secularization and the West harbors within it all the horrors that it chooses to project into the Islamic world. In other words, as Basit Koshul has argued, there is a “clash of civilizations” that is occurring in the West itself. By engaging Islam in SR as an equal partner SR members attempt to address the large issues of religion, secularism and war that are plaguing the planet together.

Our Time and the End Time

11. SR seeks a “third space” between anti-modern religious fundamentalism and modern liberalism. SR shares some of the epistemological moves of philosophical postmodernism that is critical of the modern Cartesian reliance on the rational subject and the attempt to discover universal principles that could substitute for particular traditions of knowing and living. Yet SR is wary of the nihilistic ideologies that emerge from some deconstructivist forms of postmodernism. SR members sometimes refer to themselves as “postliberal,” in that they seek to retain liberal democratic values and the liberal dedication to the alleviation of suffering throughout the world while recapturing a positive public role for the particular traditions of thought and living that are present in the Monotheistic scriptures.

The hermeneutical openness of SR to a multiplicity of meanings for scripture separates it from a fundamentalist or literalist hermeneutics. SR opposes fundamentalist attempts to isolate particular religious traditions from other religions in the contemporary world to reinforce triumphalist claims of superiority. SR cherishes the modern liberal victories for religious tolerance and human rights, but it assails the wholesale attacks on religious traditions that are also associated with secularism. SR seeks a “third” position between fundamentalism and secularism that some of its members have referred to as “post-liberal.” Postliberalism follows certain post-enlightenment epistemological moves that have attempted to open up narrow notions of rationality as syllogistic logic. This includes an appreciation for the philosophical import of language, texts, symbols, and art as well as an appreciation for alternative systems of logic suggested both by older religious traditions and contemporary philosophies of science with its uncertainty principle, quantum physics, and multiple-factor computer modeling.

SR appreciates the sociological description of our contemporary world as entering a stage of “postmodernity” in which the philosophical, political, and social institutions of modernity have been surpassed. Although Postliberalism shares some of the epistemological moves and sociological descriptions of postmodernism, it should not be confused with “postmodernism” as an ideology. Postliberalism shares the sociological description of the contemporary world as after or “post” modern. This description holds that the Western world is beyond the great modern metanarratives of Marxism, Free-Market Capitalism, Individualism, Colonialism and Ineluctable Progress. Postliberalism favors postfoundational epistemologies and there are some affinities between these epistemologies and those favored by postmodern thinkers. Yet many postmodern thinkers have taken their critiques to the edge of radical doubt where all absolutes and all notions of rationality, selfhood, humanism, and religion are undermined. Postmodernism thus, easily creates a vacuum into which either anti-modern fundamentalism or crass secularism and consumerism can rush in. Thus, Postmodernism as an ideology, represents the something that SR resists, and postmodernity as a sociological description, represents the contemporary situation to which SR attempts to respond.

Although the term “postliberalism” is congenial to SR, the movement could equally be called “post-conservative.” This means that as SR endeavors to return to scripture and its traditions of

interpretation and wisdom it does not seek to restate traditional religious authority and deadly conflicts between different religious traditions. Instead, SR endeavors to carry forward the traditions of truth and the word of God into the contemporary situation to repair and heal it. SR attempts to preserve the liberal values of modernity as it carries these values forward into a postmodern world.

12. SR is liturgical and eschatological in that it anticipates an end time in which all the children of Abraham will live together in peace. Yet SR members believe that Jews, Christians, and Muslims can participate in something of that end time by entering into “tents of meeting” in which members of the three traditions read their scriptures together in an atmosphere of respectful dialogue and friendship.

The eschatological dimension of SR practice recognizes that while in the SR “tent of meeting” people whose communities are otherwise at war with each other are sitting down in peaceful conversation. The generosity, friendship, and sense of divine spirit that are released recall to SR members messianic images of the universal recognition of the kingdom of God. This brings us to the liturgical aspect of SR. The word “liturgy” must be used with caution since SR is clear that it does not seek to create some new syncretism of Monotheistic religions and some new amalgams of Jewish, Christian, and Muslim liturgies. Yet there is a ritual and liturgical aspect to SR in the sense that SR practitioners adhere to a reverential attitude toward the scriptures they study and the persons they engage with in study. Also, SR practice follows a series of ideological and practical rules and SR sessions are often started and ended with a formal reading of scripture. SR members often take meals in common before and following SR sessions. Finally, the liturgical aspect of SR can be seen in the belief that many SR members have that an ideal future time, a time of inter-religious peace, is anticipated, “glimpsed” and even “participated in” through SR practice.

Imagining SR practice as a glimpse of the end time is extremely powerful because, as with all eschatological thinking, it necessarily has implications for the present. The new eschatology of SR calls into question some of the exclusivist and triumphalist aspects of the traditional eschatologies of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam in which one religion triumphs over the other two. One practical result of face to face SR readings of eschatological texts of the three monotheistic traditions is that it becomes harder to maintain eschatologies that expect to overcome the religious particularities of each tradition. This allows for the re-imagining of a new type of end-time in which universal peace is won through preserving the particularity of the other instead of obliterating it. Here, the end-time can function as the ideal that pulls the traditions along with it to a future time of human fulfillment, a reign of justice and peace and communion with God. Reading scriptures together as a form of eschatological thinking also recalls past times of rich interaction between Jews, Christians, and Muslims and a beginning time of creation in which the world and the human was created as very good.

C. HOW SCRIPTURAL REASONING IS DONE

Given the rules, how is scriptural reasoning actually performed? First of all the conditions for the possibility of scriptural reasoning must be present. This requires participants who are at once dedicated to their religious traditions, knowledgeable in both the discourses of traditional interpretation and contemporary social and human sciences and willing to read their scripture with others outside their traditions. Before SR sessions begin, thought must be given to the scriptures that will be read. SR practice has been to choose texts from the three traditions that focus on a common figure, e.g. Abraham, or a theme or issue, such as hospitality, or creation, or sacrifice or usury. Scriptures of the Hebrew Bible, New Testament, and Qur’an are the primary texts, but materials from secondary sacred literature are also employed. In SR sessions members are not heavily handed about “themes,” as they find that quickly new themes and issues arise and we want to be free to follow these wherever they lead.

After texts are chosen, attention must be given to where the sessions will be held, what kind of room will be used, and how the tables and chairs are to be set up. Scriptural reasoning requires space for small intimate groups of about 6 to study together as well as a room to bring the small groups together for plenary sessions. Each small group should have representatives of each of the three traditions and it is best to have each tradition represented by more than one person. It is preferable to find a “neutral site” that is not associated directly with one religious tradition, but SR sessions have taken place in Christian, Islamic, and Jewish institutions with good results. However, if these settings are used, it is important that the home tradition not attempt to take special prerogatives in setting or limiting the agenda of the meetings.

It is important to set aside adequate time for both the development of scriptural interpretation and building human relations between interpreters. Multiple two hour sessions work well and small sessions for in-depth study should be followed by plenary sessions in which groups share with the whole group the processes and conclusions that were reached in their small sessions. SR sessions often begin in plenary with brief presentations by knowledgeable participants of historical context, textual problems and overviews on each text that will be studied. It is common practice to begin a small session by reading the chosen scriptures out loud and then a text from one or sometimes two texts from different traditions are focused on. Following small group session will address the text from the other traditions and also reflect on the relations between the scriptures. Time is also needed for reflection on the insights gained and attempts to draw these insights together into patterns and conclusions.

Each session requires a convener and this person should have both knowledge of SR theory and experience in SR practice. Note takers are also needed. Egalitarian principles of speech must be respected and protected. This means that the voices of women and men, senior and junior members, critical text scholars and theologians, and representatives of the different traditions are treated equally. To safeguard the cardinal rule of an egalitarian speech situation the convener may have to exercise her authority and intervene in the discussion to quiet a particularly strong voice or bring out a quiet one.

No single religious framework and no single methodological approach to the scriptures is privileged. It is the scriptures that hold the place of privilege and they and not the convener or individual participants are to be placed at the center of discussions. When scriptures are placed at the center they readily become sources of insight, community, and guidance. Respect for the scriptures, however, should not limit interpreters from subjecting them to text critical analyses. However, text critical methods are often turned to early in an SR sessions to clarify issues of language, history, and the context and then study moves outward to more general and comparative forms of analysis. As mentioned in the above rules, later sessions of SR include reasoned and critical reflection on the free-flow dialogue on scripture. It is helpful for note takers to share the results of smaller sessions with the larger plenary group. Final sessions in plenary will then involve attempts to pull together the variety of interpretive discoveries for discussion of SR as a second order reflective endeavor and for conversations on the practical applications and implications of SR.