

## **New Models for Religion in Public: Interfaith Friendship and the Politics of Scriptural Reasoning**

**By Jeffrey W. Bailey**  
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It is a cold and blustery Wednesday evening in central London when I step off a crowded sidewalk and enter a small, medieval church tucked between upscale shops and a Victorian pub. Passing beneath the 15<sup>th</sup> century exterior, I find myself in an unexpectedly open, light-filled space of medieval stone and modern glass. The church, one of the oldest in London, was reduced nearly to rubble by an IRA terrorist bomb that exploded outside its doors in 1993. Today, however, daringly modern architecture meets restored medieval pillars, and a new sign stretches across the front door: St. Ethelburga's Centre for Reconciliation and Peace. It was opened by church and city leaders three years ago as a testimony to the new possibilities that can emerge out of the horrors of religious violence. Today it is a bustling center for lecture series and study groups focused on religion and politics.

A dozen or so community leaders from around London start to wander into the center, as well, and begin to chat over cups of coffee. A remarkably diverse group is gathered, including an attorney from a large London law firm, a political lobbyist, a corporate teams consultant, a Muslim college chaplain, a professor from the University of London, a woman rabbi, and a research scientist.

The group eventually makes its way over to a large table, and nearly two hours of discussion marked by debate and laughter follows. The conversation veers from economics, to the nature of citizenship, to London politics. One look at those who have gathered—many of them deeply involved in the business, political, or educational life of the city—might lead one to think this is a meeting of a neighborhood council or local Chamber of Commerce. Except for one thing: selections from the Hebrew Bible, the New Testament, and the Qur'an sit open before each person. Those present read the passages, debate their meanings, and attempt to apply the texts to the world around them.

"I thought most Christians read this as justification for supporting their government's policies," says a Muslim participant at one point, looking up from his text. The group has just finished discussing a passage from the Hebrew Bible, and is now beginning to consider the passage from Matthew's gospel in which Jesus instructs his questioners to "render unto Caesar what is Caesar's".

"I was taught that in my church growing up, actually," says one woman, a bit sheepishly. She is a Christian, and a city attorney.

"I wonder if Jesus isn't saying something a bit more subversive than 'be a good citizen'?" asks one of the Jewish participants, a university lecturer whose background in rabbinic studies frequently sheds light on the New Testament texts. "Perhaps Jesus is actually making a larger point about an alternative economic system?"

To most observers, this looks like a Bible study. What's unusual, however, is that it is happening in a public space, and the participants are Jewish, Christian, and Muslim. And while profound differences emerge over the course of conversation, one belief the participants hold in common is this: resolving religiously-rooted political tensions will not be attained by the further avoidance of religion in public, but by learning to actually have better, *more* religious conversations in public life.

### **A Growing Movement**

The practice in which these London community leaders are engaged is known as Scriptural Reasoning. They are part of a growing movement of people who want to protect

religiously plural societies, while simultaneously encouraging religious commitments to enter more deeply into public discourse. Such aims might appear paradoxical, especially for generations who were taught that only the emergence of secular liberalism, with its privatization of faith, rescued the West from seventeenth-century “wars of religion”. But that way of narrating history has been increasingly challenged. And, practically speaking, voices from all sides of the religious and political spectrum have begun to recognize—not least because of the increased presence of Islam in Western societies—that a purely secular, liberal approach to public discourse is not a sustainable way forward for an increasingly religious world.

The question for many, of course, is what such a discourse would look like. If we can no longer conduct public debates according to the “objective” language of “self evident truths”—if we don’t share ways of reasoning that purport to cut across religious and cultural distinctions—how can political debate move forward? How can laws be passed if representatives reason differently about the common good? When Muslims argue for Sharia law in Western society, when Christians argue from the Bible about sexual ethics, or when secularists evoke constitutional privacy laws in defense of abortion rights, a post-Enlightenment public square sounds positively tribal—an argumentative free-for-all. Can such a diverse society truly flourish? Can such different groups find ways to talk to each other?

Scriptural Reasoning (often referred to as SR) is a practice that is being increasingly drawn on in an attempt to navigate such diversity. The practice has been central to recent gatherings of political and religious leaders in Qatar, Karachi, Berlin, and Washington, DC. The Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, and the Anglican Bishop of Durham, N.T. Wright, are promoting SR as a key practice for Muslim-Christian-Jewish relations in England. There are established Scriptural Reasoning groups at universities such as Duke, Virginia, Colgate, Cambridge (England), and Cape Town (South Africa). Meanwhile, religion’s largest academic body, the American Academy of Religion, recently began devoting sessions to the exploration of Scriptural Reasoning at its annual meeting. An introduction to SR even featured significantly in the inaugural festivities of Princeton Theological Seminary’s new president, Iain Torrance, last spring. And grass root approaches to SR are beginning, too; local groups of clergy and laypeople are beginning to meet under the auspices of the newly-formed Children of Abraham Institute.

### **Scriptural Reasoning in Action**

But just what is SR in practice? At root, it is the group study of scriptural texts from the three Abrahamic religious traditions. At any given meeting, with roughly equal numbers of each faith represented, passages from the three scriptures are read. A theme (say, debt relief) usually relates the texts together. A few introductory comments about a scripture passage are made by a member of that faith, and then the entire group attempts to understand what the passage is teaching, and how it ought be applied to today’s context. At times this requires slow, patient work, especially to unpack the underlying logic to the way a faith has historically interpreted a passage. The same is then done with texts from the other two scriptures, and at the end the three texts are brought into dialogue with each other. Many questions ensue, but not only from representatives of other faiths; it is not unusual that members of the *same* faith disagree over the interpretation of their own scripture. In addition, great insight is often brought by a member of a different faith to the scripture being studied. Adding to the richness of conversation is the fact that members of different faiths may, at the same time, share similar cultural or academic backgrounds. All of which means that the lines of agreement cannot be easily predicted in any SR session.

It is obvious that putting scripture at the heart of interfaith dialogue has certain advantages. The Hebrew Bible, the Old and New Testaments, and the Qur’an are foundational to each faith’s worship, community life and ethics; major developments simply cannot happen without deep reference to their scriptures. But what is most striking about SR’s study of scripture

is that vexing gaps or lacunae in various texts are not regarded as “problems” to be quickly resolved by reference to, say, modern critical methods. Rather, they are taken to be divine invitations to human creativity and reason in making sense of the passage. (Thus, while historical-critical questions are not avoided in the discussions—many SR practitioners are trained in historical criticism—neither are they privileged over other interpretive concerns.)

Advocates of SR claim that the richness of conversation is directly tied to the fact that the scriptures—versus “concepts”—are at the center of the dialogue. Instead of neatly tying things up into entrenched positions, they suggest, scripture has a way of provoking new ways of thinking and unexpected insights that are especially productive in an interfaith setting.

## **New Beginnings**

I first meet Peter Ochs at a small gathering of graduate students and faculty at the University of Cambridge. Ochs is one of the Jewish founders of the Society for Scriptural Reasoning, a professor of Modern Judaic Studies at the University of Virginia, and a primary impetus behind SR’s development. At the meeting, he talks about the possibilities for an “Abrahamic theo-politics”, and the group questions him as to the role Scriptural Reasoning might play. His friendly manner belies an intellectual intensity, and after each of his rapidly-delivered answers, he says to his questioner, “But what do *you* think?” He seems determined to make things conversational, and positively lights up when someone disagrees with him. He talks about his hope that new ways of religious reasoning among people of faith might emerge. “People assume that problems among religious groups arise out of religious differences. So, to bring such groups together, they try to avoid religion altogether and turn to some supposedly shared interest, like economic development,” he says. “Our assumption is the opposite: that religious people like each other because they *are* religious. They are moved by piety, discipline, and love of God to pursue similar ends and find solutions.”

Scriptural Reasoning began over twenty years ago when Ochs and a group of Jewish scholars, including Robert Gibbs (University of Toronto), Laurie Zoloth (Northwestern University), and Steve Kepnes (Colgate University), grew frustrated over divisions between scripture study and modern scholarship. They began to read scripture together in ways that drew on both modern philosophy and Talmudic tradition. This meant being attentive to contemporary issues, while actively seeking deeper levels of meaning that might be disclosed in scriptural texts. “We start with the question, What does it mean to encounter God?” says Ochs. “We presume that God is everywhere in our lives, and very accessible—God literally pours in on the world. And reading scripture is central to that encounter. But encountering God in scripture doesn’t necessarily translate into clear propositional forms with single, static meanings. Individual words of scripture generate broad *fields* of meaning. That doesn’t mean we eschew the plain sense of the words of scripture—not at all. But we assume that there are deeper, contingent meanings in scripture yet to be disclosed within the particular time and place of the seeker.” Scripture study, in other words, actually brings about new and surprising kinds of reasoning that would not occur apart from that engagement with scripture. And the insights generated may well have application beyond the boundaries of one’s faith.

## **Studying with Others**

Things began to take on an interfaith dimension when two Christian theologians, David Ford and Daniel Hardy, began to attend the lively study sessions that these Jewish scholars held at the American Academy of Religion in the early 1990s. “We saw ways of reading scripture that seemed enormously generative,” says Ford, Regius Professor of Divinity at the University of Cambridge. “We also saw an overlap between the way they were reading scripture and Christian, postliberal approaches to scripture some of us had learned at Yale under Hans Frei.”

Ochs, Ford, and Hardy also felt it was crucial that Jewish-Christian relations deepened in light of the Holocaust, and in 1996 they formed the Society of Scriptural Reasoning. Muslim scholars soon joined, as well. “We knew as soon as we began,” says Hardy, who was the director of Princeton’s Center for Theological Inquiry at the time, “that we needed the Muslim voice to be part of this. The challenge, of course, was that large parts of Islam have not encountered modernity in the same way as Judaism and Christianity. So the Muslims who joined us early on were deeply committed to their faith, but also very aware of the multiple challenges of Islam’s relation to Western modernity.”

Members of the Society for Scriptural Reasoning hope to include, in time, other religions in their ranks. The current Abrahamic focus in part lies in the obvious affinities the three faiths share. But nearly all SR members say that the practice can and should involve other faiths, as well. “We see that SR is beginning to work outside of Jewish, Christian, and Muslim faiths, now—with Hindus and Buddhists that are text-based, for example,” notes Ochs. “We also see that certain strands of secular rationality are more compatible with SR than others.”

Whether SR is, in fact, compatible with non-religious reasoning remains an open question for some, however. Jeffrey Stout, Professor of Religion at Princeton University and president of the American Academy of Religion, is a leading interpreter of religion and American political life. His most recent book, *Democracy and Tradition*, has been widely praised for its exploration of democracy and religious commitment. He is, in many respects, affirming of the approach SR takes. “I’ve made a habit of attending SR sessions at the American Academy of Religion,” he says “and I have found those sessions impressive and rewarding.” But as to whether his own non-religious stance is compatible with SR, he notes, “They try their best to make me feel welcome, but the ground rules aren’t really designed to bring non-theists like me into the discussion. It’s pretty clear that I’m an interloper.” Still, he notes, “I don’t say that as a criticism. It would be foolish to expect this group to accomplish all of the bridge-building that needs to happen.”

## **Reconciling Difference**

In addition to SR’s relationship with non-religious reasoning, a frequent question is the way in which SR navigates the competing truth claims of each faith. Is there a hope that consensus will be reached—a kind of broad, Abrahamic “third” way beyond the particularities of each faith? Basit Koshul, a Muslim who teaches at Concordia College in Moorhead, Minnesota, says, “Past experience taught me that most interfaith forums were basically ‘interfaith-less’ forums where agnostic Muslims, Christians, and Jews met to confirm each others’ agnosticism.” Upon joining a SR group while a doctoral student at the University of Virginia, however, he says, “I discovered that each of the three traditions confidently asserted its claims to uniqueness and universality—but didn’t view these claims as being obstacles to genuine dialogue.”

Scriptural Reasoning is a far cry, then, from any John Hick-inspired search for lowest-common-denominator, all-roads-lead-to-the-same-place consensus. It relentlessly believes that each faith must go deeper into its own tradition, and not ignore the real differences that exist. At the same time, it believes that one must engage in increasing depth with those of other faiths. This simultaneous concern for both particularity and encounter means that SR avoids philosophical attempts to resolve the conflicting claims of each faith. The resolution of such important questions of truth is not unimportant; but for now, the anticipation of such resolution qualifies as an eschatological hope.

How such tensions are maintained in practice looks something like this: a group of Jews, Christians, and Muslims gather around a table to study scriptural texts from all three traditions. All participants engage with equal zest in the study of all three scriptures, while acknowledging that only one scripture holds authority for any one participant. Furthermore, the actual sessions of SR typically do not occur in a synagogue, church, or mosque; SR attempts to reconceive its meeting space as a shared “tent of meeting” (cf. Genesis 28). The use of “tent” imagery for SR is

intentional, as it suggests a contingent, transitional, non-established space in which SR sessions takes place. SR is, in other words, an experimental context to explore new forms of interpretation, dialogue and friendship.

All of this means that, in any SR session, it is not clear who is the “host” and who is the “guest”. If a group was studying only one of the scriptures, or meeting in a particular faith house, things might be more defined. But “the fact that all three faiths are present, in a shared space outside the three houses, and that all three scriptures are being studied mutually, means you end up with a three-way mutual hospitality,” notes Ford. “Each is host to the others and guest to the others as each welcomes the other two to their ‘home’ scripture and traditions of interpretation.”

### **The Importance of Friendship**

While Scriptural Reasoning usually does not lead to consensus, it *does* often lead to trust and friendship. “It is ultimately all about friendship,” says Ochs. “In fact, we found that the more we studied scripture with those outside of our faith houses, the friendships we developed opened us not only to deeper lessons from our scriptures, but also to deeper friendship with God.” Hardy concurs. “This is one of the most important things to understand about Scriptural Reasoning,” he says. “Mutual hospitality is more than learning to argue in courtesy and truth, although that’s part of it.” Talk of friendship serves to underscore a core eschatological hope shared among the three faiths—that God has an ultimate purpose of peace among all. “It is this kind of hope which actually provides a deeper foundation for honest disagreements,” he says.

Ford, a Christian theologian, is candid about the impact of his long-standing friendship with Ochs, a devout Jew. “I have been endlessly amazed at the generativity of our friendship,” he admits. “He has changed me as only a real friend can. I find his passionate argumentativeness liberating. Some of the deepest moments have been when Peter, with his insistent yet disarming directness of questioning, has pressed at the differences between us as Jew and Christian. I do not know how to articulate at all adequately what has happened at such times: it is a paradox of not reaching resolution yet becoming better friends, and knowing this has somehow to do with God.”

Participants in SR claim that it is only in the development of interfaith friendships that some of the most important conversations can take place. One active participant recalls an SR session he was part of several years ago. “We were reading and discussing certain Hebrew scriptures,” he says, “and one of the Jewish participants in our group suddenly broke down and told us how painful it was to hear the way Christians were interpreting ‘his’ texts. Some of the pain being expressed, I think, was the realization that these were texts which did not only belong to the Jews, but to others, as well—and that their readings could paradoxically exclude his identity as a Jew. It really helped us realize the real-world implications for how we read each other’s texts, and how vulnerable we feel when others are interpreting our scriptures in certain ways.”

### **Revisoning Religion and Politics**

It has been suggested that SR is not only a model for interfaith dialogue, but a new model for political discourse, as well. Scriptural Reasoning, for example, departs from modern political theory in that, while agreements are sought where possible, it does not try to theorize in advance what the grounds of such agreement might be. Nicholas Adams, a lecturer at the University of Edinburgh (Scotland) says, “SR is a practice that can be theorized about, but it does not start as ‘theory’ one then attempts to put into practice.” Instead of basing SR on some theory of universal understanding as in the modern period, he says, SR observes that such understanding just *happens*, and proceeds on that basis. It is content to acknowledge that, while there may be certain basic conditions for understanding or agreement, one does not need to be able to *specify* those conditions.

“I like SR’s emphasis on practice,” affirms Stout. “It’s a mistake to think that communities are always bound together by shared beliefs and theories. Shared activities often matter more. Often the best way to establish a community is to get different sorts of people doing things with one another.” The shared practice of scripture study accomplishes this kind of community formation in SR groups.

A primary concern of SR, therefore, is practical: to create space in which the “deep reasonings” of a community can be made more public than they are at present. “Deep reasonings,” notes Adams, “are not just the grammar or vocabulary of a tradition, but the way their use gets handed down from generation to generation.” And while deep reasonings of the three Abrahamic traditions are hardly a secret (most mosques, synagogues and churches willingly admit guests, and most religion scholars publish their work in journals), Adams notes that “the quality of public debate between members of different traditions is dangerously low. Most public debate concerns ethical issues such as the beginning and the end of life, or the permissibility of certain sexual behaviors. But where are the public contexts for *really* understanding why a tradition argues the way it does?” Through mass media outlets like television one is treated to sound bites, not deep reasonings; instead of understanding, he says, the medium encourages the over-dramatizing of rival claims. Scriptural reasoning, by way of contrast, aims to carve out the space and time necessary for deeper discussions to occur.

Stout believes that SR’s emphasis on friendship with those of other faiths is similar to groups that attempted to overcome racial divisions in the 1960s. “SR reminds me of a civil rights organization I joined as a teenager,” he says. “To join, you had to sign up with somebody from another race. Just the process of finding someone to join with was a life-changing experience for many of our members. And we ended up being thrown into the midst of each other’s lives just because we were doing things together.”

But in religion’s understandable reaction to an ideological secularism, Stout cautions against overstating the case. “One theme that I keep encountering in SR sessions,” he says, “is the idea that there’s something called modern discourse, which operates according to rigid rules dictated by secular liberalism. I think this idea is inaccurate. American political discourse has always been a free-wheeling, relatively chaotic affair, and religion has almost always influenced it significantly. There have been particular institutions that have been dominated for a while by secular liberalism, but it’s a mistake to generalize on the basis of those examples.”

Therefore, he notes, “it’s important not to paint an overly pretty picture of religion when arguing against” secularism. “The fact is that our religious traditions—like our secular traditions—combine benign and malignant impulses. That’s one reason all of this needs to be talked through in a self-critical, democratic spirit. We need one another in part because we need interlocutors to help us own up to the malignant impulses in our own traditions.” He views SR as an example of this kind of democratic accountability at work. For example, he notes that “any interpretation of the Exodus story that authorizes a once-oppressed people to cleanse the landscape of its opponents or oppress them is bad for freedom and democracy. A good thing about an SR session on the Exodus story is that anybody who wanted to interpret the Exodus story in that way would have to answer objections from the Muslims in the room.”

## **Signs of Hope**

At the St. Ethelburga’s Centre for Reconciliation and Peace in London, I sit down with William Taylor, a Fellow at St. Ethelburga’s who has overseen the center’s implementation of SR in London. Just recently, the British Home Office elected to give funding toward the development of SR across the city. The plan is to train imams, rabbis, ministers, and various community leaders in its practice as a way of deepening social ties. “Once you have called by at the local mosque a few times, expressed ‘solidarity’ with the imam and taken away a few flyers on the

Five Pillars, what's next?" Taylor tells me. "People of different faiths are aware that we need to get to know one another, but it's not always clear how to begin the conversation."

I ask him what he thinks the long-term potential of SR is. It's too soon to say, Taylor thinks. The practice is still in its infancy. What is most exciting to him, however, is that it offers the possibility of a genuinely new approach to political debate in an increasingly religious world. "Scriptural Reasoning gives us a model for political disagreement that can be considered productive, even without reaching consensus," he says. "Politics often looks to overcome debate by looking for some 'position' or statement people can assent to. But those kinds of agreements are usually pretty thin, and generate little sense of loyalty. Here we observe a group of people with deep differences finding unexpected areas of agreement, and surprising friendships developing amidst those remaining differences. We need those signs of hope in today's world."

As we talk, I gaze around St. Ethelburga's—modern walls of glass on one side, the restored, medieval core of the building on the other. It is hard to remember that only thirteen years ago the building lay crumbled beneath the brutalities of religious violence. Today the small but airy space is full of newness and architectural surprise. It is the perfect metaphor, in many respects, for Scriptural Reasoning's own aspirations. It, too, occupies a small space in the world of religion and politics—small groups of people sitting with their respective scriptures, hoping to understand each other and, perhaps, encounter God in the process. It, too, believes that old and new, traditional and modern, should not be kept separate, but can be joined in surprisingly illuminative ways.

The challenge, of course, is creating the space, both literal and figurative, where such encounters can take place. Taylor takes me to the back of St. Ethelburga's, behind the main building. Here they had once hoped to build a reception hall, but they ran out of money before the final phase could be completed. The space sat empty for nearly two years. Just recently, however, a wealthy donor who has observed SR in practice contributed funds to construct a purpose-build space for Scriptural Reasoning sessions to take place.

Walking out back, I am surprised to find that the structure is a large, free-standing, Bedouin-style tent. A literal "tent of meeting"—a shared space where Jews, Christians, and Muslims can read their scriptures, reason together, and in the midst of such shared practices, become friends.

In contrast to the large, solid buildings of London around me, however, the tent looks small, even fragile. I can't help but wonder: what might it look like pitched alongside those other emblems of Western society—the U.S. Capitol Building, for example? Or the gaping hole where the World Trade Center once stood?

Could such a small tent, almost unnoticed against structures so massive, be a sign of hope? Only time will tell.

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## **SIDEBAR: An Interview with Peter Ochs**

**By Jeffrey W. Bailey**

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### **How was Scriptural Reasoning birthed?**

Well, I would want to say that SR was birthed out of Scripture 2,000 years ago. Of course, that's a particular way of reading history. But I really think that SR arises not so much from a foundational beginning as from the particular logic of scripture itself. In essence, I think SR is a return to how the primary community has tended to read scripture throughout history. It's a

Midrashic way of reading scripture—a Talmudic form of reasoning—that was dominant in rabbinic times, but interrupted by Modernity.

**Were you introduced to this growing up?**

No, I grew up in a very assimilated family. I wasn't introduced to this way of reading until I was in Jewish seminary. But it was a form of reading that, looking back, I had been desiring all my life. So, that said, I am not trying to privilege this way of reading. I'm simply saying it's the way I learned it. Now, I should note that this way of reading diminished somewhat in the 6<sup>th</sup> century, when we began to see more literalistic readings coming to the fore. But Scriptural Reasoning is rooted in Midrashic, Talmudic assumptions that understand scripture as a mode of the Divine word, of God really speaking. This is in contrast to the flat, modern ways of reading in which, for example, historical critical questions are dominant. In time, I discovered that this way of reasoning corresponded to certain modes of reasoning in Christianity and Islam, too, as seen in figures such as Karl Barth or Muhammad Iqbal.

**Just what is this mode of reasoning? Can you describe it?**

I think to describe it I first have to highlight one of the starting assumptions of SR. It turns on the question of, What does it mean to encounter God? SR works with a particular assumption that God is everywhere in our lives, and very accessible. So SR starts by saying “no” to a kind of agnosticism that says God is largely inaccessible. SR believes God is encountered in everyday life; God literally pours in on us. On the other hand, encountering God does not mean we can walk away with neat, individual statements about “what we now know”. Scripture is not merely some plain-sense—albeit sacred and holy—meanings. Rather, scripture is a mode of instruction in how to have a “thick” way of knowing God. Scripture tutors us in a different mode of relating.

**So SR is primarily a practice.**

We recover certain truths by practicing really basic things we've all learned to do, like Bible study. But Bible study doesn't mean reducing things to some flat, common-sense approach only. We *do* hold onto a common-sense approach, but the qualification in that is that it's the “common sense” of a particular community. It's the practices of simple folk who have been raised reading the Bible. Often the best people with whom to do SR is not academics, but with regular folks who have been raised reading and listening to the Bible, who have received some basic socialization into the world of scripture. So it's a return to the practices in which our earliest communal socialization took place. This means that SR has to begin in a particular house of faith, and usually a particular denomination. It's rooted in radical particularity. The interfaith nature of SR simply cannot exist if its participants are not deeply rooted and trained within a particular house of Judaism, Christianity, or Islam.

**How does this kind of reasoning fit with the dominant reasoning that exists in Western public discourse today?**

First we have to realize that a version of Enlightenment rationality has been adopted as the dominant mode of public discourse in our culture. So, at a public university or a U.S. government ethics board, for example, only certain ways of talking about the world are acceptable.

One way to deal with this is to be strategic. When we are working in a public setting that adopts an Enlightenment standard of what is “rational,” we might ask, “What is the best way we can communicate here, while still keeping our beliefs intact?” The best example of that approach

today is the case Jeffrey Stout makes in his book *Democracy and Tradition*. Stout is trying to move discourse beyond an either-or approach to what counts as rational. He's opening things up in relational, conversational ways and saying, "Look, if we want people who have been formed according to different rationalities and communities to be able to contribute to the common good, we need to really understand where they are coming from." Stout offers a kind of secular apologetic for letting us into the conversation.

A second approach would be to do our work as though we were on a desert island: just working on our own practice and waiting.

### **Where does the approach of Radical Orthodoxy fit into this?**

On one level they appear to take the second approach, conducting theology on its own terms. But since they end up combating the dominant environment so aggressively, writing as if you are either with them against them, there ends up being no middle ground, no mediating approaches.

### **What's the approach that SR tries to take?**

At times we may take either of the first two approaches. But ideally, we try to find a third way. We try to make use of the best of the public discourse, but then show how the gaps in that approach, the broken bits, can only be fixed by drawing on much more ancient resources. This is where I think philosophical pragmatism, especially that of Charles Peirce, is so helpful. You could say we draw on scripture as a resource for the pragmatic repair of current models of rationality.

### **What would be an example of this?**

Take prayer. Why is talking about prayer not allowed in public discourse? Is it not a great deprivation and impoverishment to not be able to speak of prayer in a natural way? The majority of the world's population prays every day. But I know that talk about prayer wouldn't be natural in a public place like the University of Virginia. But what if talking about prayer—since everyone does it—became a more normalized way of speaking, a way we didn't have to be apologetic about? Would that not bring a degree of reality and richness to our public discourse that we're now lacking?

### **But what of secular people who hear that and think "theocracy"? Or at least suspect you're trying to push your religious discourse onto them?**

Well, it means we have to return to that first category I talked about, and be more strategic. I probably wouldn't speak in quite so overt a way if I were with those who wouldn't understand it, or would think "theocracy" when they heard it. That's why you need different modes of talking about these matters. If I were with a group that would think that, I'd probably want to bring in Jeff Stout and tell them, "talk to this guy!" Jeff could help them get to know us. Different situations call for different ways of approaching these things.

### **How important to you think Scriptural Reasoning is to politics in the West?**

I think it's crucial. Not that SR itself is crucial, but whatever SR-type equivalents are, I think it's very important. I think SR brings a strategy for peacemaking, not only because of post-colonial Islam's response to the West (and, of course, Israel and Judaism, too), but because the secular model of the West is now exhausted. It no longer has a real future. We have to figure out ways of

letting religion back in to the public sphere. Secular pluralism says religion is bad for freedom or democracy or tolerance; SR says that's not the case at all, and that to have any hope of achieving peace, we can no longer push religion off to the side or into some private belief system. That is simply not an option for the world today, and certainly not for Islam. SR says, let's go back to religion and have serious conversations about the heart of our belief systems.

There are lots of ways of making the case for this with different groups of people. I was talking with 200 middle-school history teachers about SR. And with them I made a simple anthropological argument: it's good to know about other people, their beliefs and values and habits. And a crucial way of doing this is reading and attempting to understand those texts which are most formative for those communities.

SR is not a quick fix, however, and should not be thought of as such. Right now the most important step for SR is to continue in the practice of it, and reflecting on just what is the logic at work here. Practically, it means engaging with the public through our educational institutions—not just in universities, but in our school systems, too. There is all kinds of application where SR-type activities could be done in school systems of a wide plurality of beliefs that would profit from this.