

Organising a Scriptural Reasoning Group

Scriptural Reasoning needs to be experienced live and it is a practice best learnt by attending an existing group. As a particular kind of conversation we have found, however, that there are ways of talking and listening to each other, and to our scriptures, that lead to greater mutuality and intensity than others. What follows is an account of the way we try to set up and pursue that conversation at St Ethelburga's Centre in London.

On convening

Each Scriptural Reasoning group needs a convenor. The purpose of the convenor is essentially to "chair" the group - although the more the group chairs itself the better.

First of all, before the meeting, if the convenor of the group is also responsible for inviting participants, he or she needs to try and ensure that as good a balance of individuals from the three houses as possible is present. It may also be the convenor's responsibility to ensure that the text selections are distributed in good time.

At the beginning of the session there is always a certain amount of house keeping. It is good, for example, where the group's membership is relatively fluid to give people an opportunity briefly to introduce themselves. The group, with the convenor's steer, also needs to decide in which order the scriptures will be read. There is no reason that they should necessarily be read in historical sequential order (Jewish, Christian, Muslim) although this is sometimes helpful.

It is the convenor's main responsibility to observe the time-keeping and keep the group on track. If the overall SR session is due to last for about two hours that means that each portion of scripture will have just over half an hour devoted to it (leaving a bit of time at the end for a more free floating discussion between texts and also time to choose the theme etc for the next session) and so each "presentation" should last no more than about ten minutes, and preferably less.

The point of SR is that it is a multilayered conversation between the participants and the texts - it is not about one person assuming responsibility for explaining what Christianity or Islam or Judaism says on any given topic.



To enable this conversation to take place the convenor may need to try to keep it in the interrogative mode - that is questioning, in the spirit of a common exploration. Sometimes he or she may need to focus the group's attention back on the text under discussion. Occasionally it is helpful for the convenor to remind the group of the theme under discussion.

After a particularly intense discussion it can be good to share a moment of quiet before the final bits of housekeeping are conducted and it may be up to the convenor to hold this for everyone. Before the scriptural reasoning group breaks up it is good to have a discussion about the choice of texts, or theme, for the subsequent session. It is really the convenor's role to ensure that this happens and to try to identify the consensus in the group. If possible it is good to select a theme, or a text, that engages with something in the life of the group.

Of course, the mutual hospitality that is a hallmark of scriptural reasoning is really the responsibility of each of the participants of the group and each of the three houses in relation to one another. Having said that, these are some things to watch out for and some things to encourage as the group's convenor. For this reason, it is good if the convenor has had some experience of SR as a practice. Also of making the tea and supplying biscuits (taking account of dietary needs).

On Presenting

Scriptural Reasoning needs to be undertaken with the sacred scriptures available in their original languages, where possible. This makes possible the most authentic encounter between the faiths and group's individual members. The English texts provided on www.scripturalreasoning.org are intended as an aid for those unfamiliar with the original versions. Each Scriptural Reasoning group needs three presenters who introduce the three different sacred texts. The purpose of the presenter is to open up the portion of scripture for discussion.

Before it is "presented" and then explored by the group of reasoners, the chosen passage is read out in English. Sometimes it may also be read out in the scriptural language (for example Muslims may recite it in Arabic). The person who reads out the passage is normally someone for whom the passage is his or her sacred scripture. It is really up to the presenter to ask someone to do this.

The "presentation" is not a definitive statement on the text, but rather simply an opening gambit. Depending on the overall length of the session, it is likely there will not be more than ten minutes allocated to each presenter.



The presenter's job is to set a bit of context for the passage and open it up for discussion. Sometimes it is good to do a bit of basic plot summary - what's just happened, what's happening next - or put the passage in a bit of historical context (explain when a particular passage is thought to have been written etc).

There are often interesting and important textual/translation issues that can be noted, though if the presenter is unfamiliar with these, that doesn't necessarily matter. There is often someone in the group who can help. In fact, it is good if this is the case. Part of the experience of Scriptural Reasoning is that it is a collaborative endeavour.

There is no single set SR form for a "presentation", although there are different "house styles". For example Muslims and Jews tend to read their scriptures more from within their respective traditions (using *tafsir* and *midrash*), whereas Christians are more familiar with the moves of historical criticism. The key thing is that the reading is authentic to the presenter and his or her traditional way of reading the scripture.

There are, however, some things to watch out for. It is best where the presentation is offered interrogatively - i.e. as an extended question, or series of questions - rather than assertively, as a statement of fact. And it is generally a good idea for the presenter to be "on the side" of the passage, where the passage "speaks" to them in some way. A consequence of this is that one can sometimes feel quite vulnerable as the presenter. That is one reason why Scriptural Reasoning is so powerful.

The point of all of this is not to establish some kind of confected inter faith consensus, but to create a space for genuine relationships. This may entail disagreement as well as humour, both between the readers and the texts and between members of the Scriptural Reasoning group. The point of all of this is not to establish some kind of confected inter faith consensus, but to create a space for genuine relationships. This may entail disagreement as well as humour. In the end, however, the journey that we are on together is in response to a common summons to read our scriptures, not for some proximate or instrumental reason, but for God's sake.

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May 2007

