



The Mahle Lectures

A Publication of Hamline University's Public
Lecture Series in Progressive Christian Thought

Volume 2
Issue 1 *Interreligious Peace Building Through
Study, Year 1*

Article 1


October 2024

The Promise of Scriptural Reasoning

David F. Ford

University of Cambridge, dff1000@cam.ac.uk

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.hamline.edu/mls>

 Part of the [Biblical Studies Commons](#), [Christianity Commons](#), [Islamic Studies Commons](#), [Jewish Studies Commons](#), [Other Religion Commons](#), and the [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Ford, David F. (2024) "The Promise of Scriptural Reasoning," *The Mahle Lectures Journal*: Vol. 2: Iss. 1, Article 1.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.61335/2997-0172.1021>

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.hamline.edu/mls/vol2/iss1/1>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@Hamline. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Mahle Lectures Journal by an authorized editor of DigitalCommons@Hamline. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@hamline.edu.

The Promise of Scriptural Reasoning

Cover Page Footnote

This keynote lecture, "The Promise of Scriptural Reasoning," by Dr. David F. Ford was given as part of the 2024 Mahle Lecture Series in Progressive Christian Thought, Year I of the theme: "Interreligious Peacebuilding Through Study." It is published as part of The Mahle Lectures Journal, an archival journal of the this lecture series, with Dr. Ford's permission.

Mahle Lecture in Progressive Christian Thought

Mahle Lecture series 2024: Interreligious Peacebuilding Through Study

Keynote Lecture 16 April 2024

The Promise of Scriptural Reasoning

David F. Ford

Regius Professor of Divinity Emeritus, University of Cambridge

Co-Chair, Rose Castle Foundation

Opening Remarks

It is very good indeed to be with you this evening...

I have long thought that small American liberal arts colleges are among the best forms of education in the world...

For me, it is especially good to be here at a college that has had the imagination to initiate a programme on ‘Interreligious Peacebuilding through Study’, and is beginning it with a lecture under the heading of ‘Progressive Christian Thought’.

I am a Christian who tries to think as wisely and creatively as I can—that would be my idea of what progressive Christian thought is: the attempt by Christians to think wisely and creatively. And I have tried to do that in conversation with a wide range of people—fellow-Christians of various sorts, members of other religious communities, and people who would not identify themselves as religious at all.

Then, ten years ago, I took part in an exciting initiative, the founding of the Rose Castle Foundation. Led by our Founding Director, Sarah Snyder, we have renovated an 800-year old castle, Rose Castle, in the Lake District of North-West England as our home base, and are dedicated to reconciliation and peacebuilding in various forms, especially interreligious peacebuilding. We run programmes in Europe, North America, the Middle East and Asia that aim to form people from different sides of conflicts and divisions as reconcilers and peacebuilders.

Our formation is called ‘The Rose Way’. This includes both the usual skills and practices that any good programme in the field of peacebuilding should teach, and also two other distinctive elements.

One is the ‘Twelve Habits of a Reconciler’. These are habits (or virtues, or characteristic practices) that we have found in the people we most respect as reconcilers and peacebuilders. They are: *curiosity, empathy, creativity, lament, hospitality, humility, vulnerability, generosity, gratitude, stewardship, forgiveness, and hope.*

The other is Scriptural Reasoning, which I am here to speak about. All of our Rose Castle Foundation interreligious programmes include the practice of Scriptural Reasoning, and we have found it to be extraordinarily fruitful. I hope that you too will experience this.

So, you can see that to be invited to address you on ‘The Promise of Scriptural Reasoning’, in the context of your programme on ‘Interreligious Peacebuilding through Study’, and in a named lecture about progressive Christian thought, goes right to the heart of my interests, experience, and long term commitments.

Summary

In what follows I want to do two things.

First, I will say something about my experience of Scriptural Reasoning, its origins, its character, and its spread up to now.

Second, I will reflect on the future and promise of Scriptural Reasoning, culminating with an expansive vision of its potential.

1. Scriptural Reasoning: its Origins, Character, and Spread

Scriptural Reasoning has been, and continues to be, one of the most formative and repeatedly surprising experiences of my life.

The origins of Scriptural Reasoning were in a group of Jewish philosophers, theologians, and text scholars who practised what they came to call Textual Reasoning. They had become dissatisfied with the way in which Jewish academic thinking tended to divide into ‘two mutually exclusive areas of inquiry, each impoverished by the absence of the other’¹—one concerned mainly with historical or literary-historical text studies, the other mainly with philosophy that did not give voice to the sorts of reasoning through texts that was at the heart of rabbinic Judaism. They formed their own group in 1991, and, soon after they began meeting, Peter Ochs, one of their founding members (who is, happily, with us here this week) invited myself and my friend, my father-in-law, and co-author, Daniel (Dan) Hardy (then the Director of the Princeton Center of Theological Inquiry, where Peter was a member)² to sit in on their meetings.

¹ Peter Ochs, ‘Behind the Mechitsa: Reflections on the Rules of Textual Reasoning’, (*Journal of Textual Reasoning* 1, no. 1 (2002): 47-103. <https://doi.org/10.21220/s2-zq3t-mz15>) p.49.

² Formerly Van Mildert Professor of Divinity in the University of Durham, UK.

Neither of us had experienced anything quite like this before. There was passionate intensity; deep learning, ranging from biblical scholarship through the whole history of rabbinic Judaism up to today, and including liturgical practice; philosophy of many sorts—ancient, modern and postmodern; arguments that could become so sharp that you wondered how relationships could survive them; but then also humour, laughter, and a sense that relationships were more than surviving—they were deepening; and always an alertness to the three contexts of the participants: Jewish community life, academic life in colleges, universities and seminaries, and life in the contemporary Western world, however that is to be described—I tend to think of it as a complex and dynamic late modern pluralism, which is both multi-secular and multi-religious, with plenty of hybrids, and varies greatly from one country to another.

One day there was a seminal moment. As Dan Hardy and I were leaving a meeting of Textual Reasoning, and saying how good it had been, Peter Ochs said to us, ‘Yes, but you are not Jewish. We need something different!’ So, some of the Textual Reasoning group (which continued as a Jewish group) joined with us and other Christians to form Scriptural Reasoning. (The name Scriptural Reasoning was simply a way of simultaneously connecting it with the intensive discussion around their texts that the Jewish group called ‘reasoning’, and differentiating it from the Jewish-only practice by calling it ‘scriptural’ rather than ‘textual’.)

Soon after this, there was another seminal moment when a Muslim group, that included one of Peter Ochs’ doctoral students, Basit Koshul,³ joined us, and passages from the Qur’an joined passages from the Tanakh and the Bible on the table in our study sessions.

As those of you who took part in the workshop led by Peter earlier this evening will have found out, Scriptural Reasoning is basically quite simple and straightforward. We gather in groups, and we study together short extracts from our scriptures on a particular theme. Today, we studied... Over the years we have learned what tends to work well in enabling good quality conversation around the texts on the table, and have developed a set of basic guidelines.⁴

For much of its first two decades the practice of Scriptural Reasoning was mostly Abrahamic.⁵ It spread geographically to many countries—now, thirty years later, it is being practised in North and South America, Africa, Asia, Australia, and Europe. Within colleges, universities, and seminaries, it has been part of undergraduate and postgraduate programmes, has generated many research projects and doctoral dissertations, and has drawn on other departments and disciplines beyond theology and

³ Currently a Professor of Sociology in Lahore University of Management Studies, Pakistan.

⁴ <http://www.scripturalreasoning.org/guidelines-for-scriptural-reasoning.html> hosted by the Rose Castle Foundation.

⁵ Though in fact participants often self-identified as Jewish, Christian or Muslim, there were many fruitful Scriptural Reasoning sessions in which others who did not so self-identify have played a full part.

religious studies, including the visual arts, Greek and Latin classics, literature, economics, history, international relations, languages and linguistics, law, music, medicine and nursing, philosophy, politics, regional studies, and social anthropology.

It also spread to settings beyond colleges and universities, including seminaries, local congregations (synagogues, churches, mosques, etc.), schools, prisons, hospitals, a range of civil society contexts, leadership programmes, business and financial services settings, and peacebuilding and reconciliation projects. I have had the privilege of playing some part in practising it in all of those settings, usually by direct participation, sometimes by helping to facilitate it.

And, besides spreading around the world and into a variety of academic and non-academic settings, it has also spread beyond Judaism, Christianity and Islam, notably in India through Hindu participation, and in China, where Scriptural Reasoning is being practised with texts from six traditions—Buddhism, Confucianism, and Daoism besides Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

Chinese Scriptural Reasoning

I want to say something more about Chinese Scriptural Reasoning, partly because it is worth knowing about, but also in order to lay the basis for some of the things I will say later about the promise of Scriptural Reasoning.

The background to the beginning of Chinese Scriptural Reasoning was the visit by the Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, to China in 2006. During the visit he engaged with the Religious Studies Departments in a number of Chinese universities, and in 2008 he hosted several professors from those departments at a symposium in Lambeth Palace in London. I was one of the academics in the United Kingdom invited to join the symposium, and my paper was on Scriptural Reasoning.

The Chinese respondent to my paper was a very remarkable academic, Yang Huilin, Professor of Comparative Literature in Renmin University in Beijing. He had never met Scriptural Reasoning before, but he understood at once how closely it could be related to his own academic and religious interests. It could be seen as a dimension of his core discipline of comparative literature (which for me was a new way of categorising it among academic fields), and also as combining several of his wide-ranging engagements: with hermeneutics, comparative religion, philosophy and reasoning, theology, translation, exegesis, the history of Christianity in China, and the various ways in which the religions have responded to both modernity and whatever one decides to call the twenty-first century—what I have just described as our ‘complex and dynamic late modern pluralism, which is both multi-secular and multi-religious’. In the Lambeth Palace symposium, Yang Huilin was extremely perceptive in both his comments and his questions. But I had no idea that, in addition, a seed had been planted.

I only realised it when, months later, I received an invitation to serve on the Academic Board of a new organisation, the Institute for Comparative Scripture and Interreligious Dialogue (ICSID) in Minzu University, Beijing. The Chair of the Board was Yang Huilin. Soon after, I heard from Peter Ochs that he too had been invited to join the Academic Board of the Institute. Since then, Peter and I have both been to Beijing and other Chinese cities to do Scriptural Reasoning, and there have been significant developments in China, involving both universities and seminaries, related in various ways to Scriptural Reasoning.⁶ [Refer selectively to note?]

There are many fascinating aspects of Chinese Scriptural Reasoning, but I want to focus on four that are, I think, especially important for the future of Scriptural Reasoning wherever it is happening.

First, there is the desirability of creative improvisation based on knowing the local setting well. Yang Huilin not only saw the potential in going beyond the Abrahamic traditions to engage with Buddhist, Confucian, and Daoist texts. He himself also had the range and depth of academic interests, and the network of fellow academics, to enable a distinctively creative Chinese development of Scriptural Reasoning. He had studied historical analogies to Scriptural Reasoning involving both Abrahamic and non-Abrahamic religions within China, and he drew on these in shaping Chinese Scriptural Reasoning around the texts of six religious traditions.

Second, there is the desirability of a primary institutional setting. Both Peter Ochs and I had learnt this. Peter had formed a distinct graduate programme, ‘Scripture,

⁶ Most recently I delivered an unpublished paper entitled, ‘Chinese Scriptural Reasoning as a Form of Contextual Sinicization’ at a seminar of the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences on the theme of ‘The Bible & Sinicization: Translation and Interpretation of the Bible in Today's Context’, sponsored by the Institute of Religious Studies, Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences, the Center for the Study of the Sinicization of Religions in China (Shanghai), the National TSPM & China Christian Council, the Shanghai Center for the Studies of Religion and Culture (CSRC), and the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences Think Tank Foundation, November 23-24 2023.

I have contributed the Foreword to what I consider a landmark book, *Advanced Scriptural Reasoning in China. A Collection of Papers* Edited by You Bin and Miikka Ruokanen (forthcoming). The participants in this project of scholarly Advanced Scriptural Reasoning are specialists in academic research in the five faith traditions in China: Prof. Han Xing (Confucianism), Prof. Yin Zhihua (Taoism), Prof. Wei Shan (Buddhism), Prof. You Bin (Christianity), and Prof. Li Lin (Islam). The five are both scholars and followers of their respective faith traditions. The topics covered in the book are: ultimate reality; humanity and life; the relation between humanity and divinity; happiness; community; spirituality; worship and liturgy; law of life; nature; and the future. I have served on the academic board of a project that has produced another forthcoming co-authored volume on *The Relevance of Faith-Based Values in Modern Chinese Social Life*. The contributors are: You Bin, Miikka Ruokanen, Gao Yuan, Tang Wenming, Paulos Huang, Gai Jianmin, Zhang Lu, Gao Dawei, Wei Shan, Zhang Xuesong, Chen Yongtao, Jiang Miao, Li Lin, and Heidi Hirvonen.

There is also a forthcoming *Festschrift* for Yang Huilin, edited by Jing (Cathy) Zhang and David Jasper to be published by Baylor University Press, to which my contribution is ‘Yang Huilin and the Promise of Chinese Scriptural Reasoning’, on which I have drawn directly for this lecture.

Interpretation, and Practice’, in the University of Virginia Department of Religious Studies; and in 2002, with direct input from Peter, Dan Hardy, and Dr Aref Ali Nayed, in Cambridge University we had formed the Cambridge Interfaith Programme, which is represented this week here in Hamline by Dr Daniel Weiss (whose doctoral dissertation was supervised by Peter Ochs, and who has been pioneering Scriptural Reasoning-related initiatives in Cambridge University for many years). Yang Huilin decided that the appropriate Chinese institutional setting would be Minzu University, the university in Beijing that is especially related to minority ethnic groups—the many millions of non-Han Chinese. These ethnic groups are very diverse religiously, and Minzu University already had a strong department of religious studies, with Professor You Bin (whom I knew from a sabbatical he had spent in Cambridge) as its head of research, and many staff and students from different religious traditions. So Yang Huilin initiated and found funding for the Institute for Comparative Scripture and Interreligious Dialogue. Yang and You Bin also saw the potential in bringing Scriptural Reasoning together with Comparative Theology, as developed in Harvard University by Francis X. Clooney, who was also invited to join the Academic Board of ICSID.

Third, there is the desirability of full participation by those who self-identify with the religious traditions whose texts are being studied. Significantly, Yang Huilin himself does not identify with a particular religion. I would describe him as a sympathetic and empathetic outsider who recognises the importance of religions in China and in the rest of the world (it is estimated that over 85% of the world’s population are directly involved with a religion); who appreciates that, if universities are to engage with the reality of our twenty-first century world, then they need to study religion well; and who is committed to being what one might call a statesman of the field in China. This has involved close cooperation with academics who do identify with particular religious traditions. In this regard, it has been instructive to see how Scriptural Reasoning has developed in China. In an early international project inspired by Scriptural Reasoning, *The Relevance of Faith-Based Values in Modern Chinese Social Life*, some of the Chinese participants were religious studies academics who did not identify with the traditions they studied; in the most recent ‘Advanced Scriptural Reasoning’ project all of the participants are committed within the traditions in whose texts they are specialists.⁷

Fourth, and perhaps most important of all, there is the (very hard to describe, let alone to define) spirit or ethos of Scriptural Reasoning, that dynamic of lively interactive and intensive conversation around rich texts, in which surprises repeatedly happen. I vividly remember my first experience of doing Chinese six-text Scriptural Reasoning in Minzu University in Beijing in 2012. I realised, as the conversation intensified: this really does work! I recognised many of the dynamics that I had known elsewhere, and was especially impressed by the well-mannered courtesy of the participants, the sense of mutual, attentive hospitality between those of different religions, and the quality of engagement with the details of the texts. There was also

⁷ See above note 6.

the humour—bursts of laughter around the large table, which my interpreter from Chinese to English often found extremely difficult, or impossible, to translate. For me, this echoed my first experience of Textual Reasoning, the attractive character of which I have already tried to describe. In particular, there was a delight in exploring the infinitely rich meaning of texts for their own sake—as Jews say, ‘*l’shma*’—for the sake of the Name, for God’s sake.

In the recent Advanced Scriptural Reasoning project I saw this delight, and wonder at the richness of meaning, reflected in the topics that the group had chosen for their studies: *ultimate reality; humanity and life; the relation between humanity and divinity; happiness; community; spirituality; worship and liturgy; the law of life; nature; and the future*. Those are the sorts of topics that are worth exploring for their own sake, and without any necessary utilitarian or instrumental purpose. They encourage the stretching of imaginations, minds, and hearts within and between traditions, and they open up the possibility of what for me has been one of the greatest gifts of Scriptural Reasoning: what I call *multiple deepening*, as one finds oneself drawn deeper into the texts of one’s own tradition, deeper into the texts and wisdoms of other traditions, deeper into relationship with those around the table, deeper into the world and the creation that we share, and deeper into commitment together to our common future.

2. The Future and Promise of Scriptural Reasoning

I now turn to the future and promise of Scriptural Reasoning.

I have laid a foundation already through selecting four key elements from the history of Scriptural Reasoning in China, and it is worth saying more about these, because I see each of them as essential to a good future for Scriptural Reasoning. I will treat them in reverse order, and then move on to other elements.

(i) Spirit and Ethos—Delight and Deepening

It is hard to overemphasise the importance of delight and deepening in the exploration together of meaning for its own sake. This is doing Scriptural Reasoning *l’shma*, which in the theistic traditions means for the sake of God. This is what Peter Ochs, in what is the best book so far written on Scriptural Reasoning, *Religion Without Violence: The Practice and Philosophy of Scriptural Reasoning*,⁸ calls ‘formational Scriptural Reasoning’. There can be all sorts of worthwhile practical implications of Scriptural Reasoning, which I will discuss in a while; but unless at its heart there is something that is not primarily instrumental, not dominantly about using it for some finite—even very worthy—purpose, then something essential and deep is lacking. In Abrahamic terms, it is about studying in the name of God, for the sake of God, for the glory of God, for love of God.

⁸ Peter Ochs, *Religion Without Violence: The Practice and Philosophy of Scriptural Reasoning* (Eugene OR.: Cascade, 2019)

The paradox is that when Scriptural Reasoning is done in this spirit all sorts of practical outcomes do tend to follow. But they are often unpredictable, the surprising results of what can happen between people who are all in their different ways committed above all to God, and who trust that, because of who God is, and who and what God has created, there are infinite heights and depths to be explored.

(ii) Participation by the Religiously Committed

Scriptural texts can and should be read by anyone and everyone, and in academic settings, in the fields of religious studies, theology, philosophy of religion, and so on, we are used to being in classes that reflect the pluralist character of our societies, multi-secular as well as multi-religious. This is, in my opinion, a very good thing. There are very few spaces in our societies where genuine meaning-seeking engagement across the differences in beliefs, values, and core commitments can happen. This impoverishment is often made worse by the silos and bubbles encouraged by the algorithms that often decide where our attention is focussed through our computers and smart phones. Scriptural Reasoning in colleges and universities can help to create much-needed spaces of encounter across differences.

But, as they discovered in China, there is also particular value in the committed, long term, mature members of religious traditions doing Scriptural Reasoning together. Scriptures can be read at many levels, and the deeper one has gone in one tradition through study, understanding, knowledge of the wisest figures, knowledge of the great debates and disputes, meditation, prayer, worship, and more, the more fruitful is likely to be one's conversation with those of another tradition who have done likewise.

So the future of Scriptural Reasoning needs spaces where the full range of people in our pluralist world can engage with each other around scriptural texts. But it also needs to gather at its table those who are less likely to find such pluralist environments attractive. To put it crudely (in terms that I will shortly reject in favour of terms that I think are much preferable) interfaith engagement has often been more attractive to those who are labelled as 'liberal', it has often been avoided by those who are labelled as 'conservative', and scorned (in favour of less conversation and more direct action) by those labelled as 'radical'.

My alternative to 'liberal', 'conservative', and 'radical' terminology draws on one of the most important religious events of the twentieth century, the Second Vatican Council of the Roman Catholic Church (1962-66). That had three fundamental concerns. One was a return to the deepest sources of Christian faith, especially the Bible. The French term they used for this was '*ressourcement*' - re-sourcing. The second was a concern to relate faithfully and realistically to the modern world, seeking to discern as wisely as possible what in it to reject, what to welcome, and what to attempt to transform. The Italian term they used for this was '*aggiornamento*', bringing up to date—a critical and constructive engagement with life now. The third was a commitment to wide-ranging dialogue—across the divisions among Christians (what is called Christian ecumenism), across religious

differences, and across the Christian-secular differences. The Italian for this was ‘*conversazione*’, and the accounts of the sessions of the Council in Rome give a sense of extraordinary liveliness and intensity of discussion in both formal and informal settings, as cardinals, bishops, theologians, observers from other churches, and others had the conversations through which some epochal documents emerged—not least about interreligious relations.

If, instead of those rather worn-out political, non-scriptural, and often unthinkingly polemical terms such as liberal, conservative, or radical, we were to describe ourselves and each other in relation to *ressourcement*, *aggiornamento*, and *conversazione*, we might have richer, more respectful terms which could genuinely help in mutual understanding across our differences. Instead of ‘conservatism’, we might see a certain set of concerns about being true to the deep sources of a tradition, and being alert to how a tradition can be compromised, undermined, or corrupted by modern fashions, forces and ideas. Instead of ‘liberalism’, we might see a desire to do justice to the realities of modern life, and to the truth and humaneness of many modern ideas, without abandoning the depths of our sources. And, instead of ‘radical’, we might see prophetic challenges generated simultaneously out of both the heart of our scriptures and the urgency of the crises facing us today, leading into daring prophecy and action. And, if such redescriptions help to enable more respectful understanding of how people can genuinely and with integrity come to such very different positions when faced with the huge, complex issues raised by *ressourcement* and *aggiornamento*, then one obvious consequence is to engage in wisdom-seeking *conversazione* together.

When I came to know Textual Reasoning, it did strike me that this Jewish group embodied those three dynamics of Vatican II: they were going deeper into the sources of Rabbinic Judaism, especially Tanakh and Talmud; they were steeped in modern and postmodern philosophy, and seeking ways of being Jewish in the aftermath of the Shoah, the greatest trauma of their history; and they were in intensive conversation across the internal divisions of Judaism and between very different academic, ethical, and political commitments. This triple dynamic has at its best also characterised Scriptural Reasoning, and part of the promise of Scriptural Reasoning for the future of our religious traditions lies for me in sustaining all three of them: *let us keep engaging with the deep sources, let us try to relate with wise discernment to the world as it is today, and let us engage in intensive, wisdom-seeking conversation across our deepest differences.*

(iii) **Institutional Creativity and Commitment**

It is fascinating how, in the thirty years of its existence, Scriptural Reasoning has time and again inspired people to join together in long term programmes, organisations, and institutions. I have already mentioned the Institute for

Comparative Scripture and Interreligious Dialogue in Minzu University in Beijing, the Scripture, Interpretation and Practice programme in the University of Virginia, the Cambridge Interfaith Programme, and the Rose Castle Foundation. But there are others too. I will choose just four and then welcome the newest.

One is in Germany in the University of Tübingen. There for the past eight years Scriptural Reasoning has been established as a regular programme that has brought together the Centre for Islamic Theology, the Faculty of Protestant Theology, and the Faculty of Catholic Theology, now consolidated as the Tübingen Hub (SR-TüB). Under the leadership of Lejla Demiri, Professor of Islamic Theology, the team is developing collaborations with local and international scholars worldwide, and is creating more Scriptural Reasoning (inter-faith) as well as Textual Reasoning (intra-faith) opportunities. It is now the leading Scriptural Reasoning centre in continental Europe.

Last year there was a very happy milestone moment in Tübingen when the University awarded the prestigious Lucas Prize to Peter Ochs for his work in Scriptural Reasoning and philosophy. Peter was there for the big celebration, and he and I also took part in a series of Scriptural Reasoning sessions with staff and students.

Meanwhile in Chile Dr Rocio Cortes, whose doctoral dissertation in Notre Dame University was on Scriptural Reasoning, has been working from her base on the staff of the Pontifical Catholic University of Chile on promoting Scriptural Reasoning in South America with the support of her university. A grant enabled her to turn part of her dissertation into a manual for interreligious dialogue to be used in pastoral, school, and university settings, and she has formed an interreligious team (Jewish, Christian, Muslim, and Mapuche—bringing indigenous religion into the conversation) to create more material which has been used in schools, universities, and local religious communities.⁹

Here in the US there have been developments in both universities and seminaries.

In the University of Chicago Divinity School, one of the founders and shapers of both Textual Reasoning and Scriptural Reasoning, Professor Laurie Zoloth (a leading bioethicist), has taught a regular course in Scriptural Reasoning for many years. Her book published last year, *Ethics for the Coming Storm: Climate Change and Jewish Thought*,¹⁰ is strongly influenced by more than thirty years of Textual Reasoning and Scriptural Reasoning. It might be described as a Jewish book for everyone, prophetically proposing a way of dealing with the greatest global crisis of our time with the help of an ethic of truth-seeking, hospitality, and responsibility to those most in need. Zoloth knows how to go deep, deep enough to find the sort of spiritual and moral energy, inspiration, and practical wisdom that might have some

⁹ See Appendix for a recent communication from Dr Cortes. ADD

¹⁰ Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2023.

hope of dealing with such an overwhelming threat. There will be a summer school on ‘Religion and Climate Futures’ in Cambridge later this year (sponsored jointly by the Cambridge Interfaith Programme and London School of Economics ‘Global Pluralities’ programme), in which a core practice will be Scriptural Reasoning, and Laurie Zoloth will be a leading contributor (if the birth of a new grandchild does not summon her elsewhere!).

In Virginia Theological Seminary, Professor Katherine Grieb (a New Testament scholar, and Director of the Center for Anglican Communion Studies) has been leading the introduction of Scriptural Reasoning. The Seminary has especially focussed on spreading the practice by training Jewish, Christian, and Muslim facilitators in Scriptural Reasoning with a view to peacebuilding and reconciliation, and the Rose Castle Foundation has been collaborating with them in this.

Much else is happening in the US, but the newest development is the one I want to celebrate especially now: here in Minnesota, Hamline University is becoming the institutional home for the *Journal of Scriptural Reasoning* and is also launching this two-year programme on Interreligious Peacebuilding Through Study. This fittingly combines two essentials for the future of Scriptural Reasoning: continuing thoughtful, interdisciplinary academic discussion of the practice and its future; and following through its potential to help shape a healthily plural world.

(iv) **Creative Improvisation Based on Local Knowledge**

That is an appropriate point from which to move on to a fourth key element for the future of Scriptural Reasoning, which was the first discussed in relation to Chinese Scriptural Reasoning: creative improvisation based on knowing the local setting. I am intrigued by how this has been happening in one place after another, whether in Chile, China, or Charlottesville, Chicago, Cambridge, or Cumbria. Each of them has seen this combination of imaginative and practical innovation informed by sensitive understanding of their particular situation.

And now, here in Hamline, a fresh example is happening. It is, I think, significant that it is your Chaplain, Rev. Dr. Kelly Figueroa-Ray, who is leading this, because chaplaincy is deeply connected with the next two elements in the promising future of Scriptural Reasoning that I want to deal with, beyond the four already discussed. These are formation and peacebuilding.

(v) **Formation**

Formational Scriptural Reasoning is at the heart of the practice. In relation to Jewish, Christian and Muslim scriptures it is at least three people around a table with three short texts from the Tanakh, the Bible and the Quran relating to a chosen theme, and enough time to give a short introduction to each, pay attention together to each in turn, and reflect on how the three interrelate. It is extremely difficult to describe what happens in such a group—I think the best written account of it so far is by Professor

Mike Higton of Durham University in UK who has a chapter on ‘What Is Scriptural Reasoning?’ in his co-authored book with Rachel Muers, *The Text in Play*.¹¹ Higton draws on an actual session of Scriptural Reasoning to compose a fictional script of the dialogue in a session, and then he comments on what has been happening.

But the difficulty of describing it underlines a vital truth about Scriptural Reasoning: it is primarily a practice, and to understand it you really need to take part in it. In other words, *it is learned by apprenticeship, by actually doing it in the company of people who are more experienced in it*. It is hard to overemphasise how important such apprenticeship is for the future of Scriptural Reasoning. Any initiative hoping to receive what Scriptural Reasoning can promise needs above all to be committed to learning it by doing it. This is how formation in Scriptural Reasoning happens, and such apprenticeship, like any worthwhile formation, takes time. You need far more than one session. After three decades of taking part, I can testify that my apprenticeship is still continuing, learning continues, and there is still surprise after surprise.

To anyone thinking of beginning to take part, or having just had a taster session, I would therefore say three things:

First, treat it as an apprenticeship that can open up to you new experiences, insights, and skills, and through which you may emerge with new or transformed habits, fresh wisdom, and unforeseen friendships.

Second, as with many other really worthwhile things in life (such as learning an academic discipline, bringing up children, staying healthy, or becoming a person of prayer) be willing to be committed long term, and persevere through any early problems or off-putting experiences.

And third, as I have said earlier, do it in the first instance *l’shma*, for its own sake, for God’s sake, because engagement with these texts and these people is utterly worthwhile in itself, whatever the overflows in other ways.

But that is by no means to downplay the importance of the overflows, to which I now come.

(vi) Reparative Reasoning in Peacebuilding, and a Healthily Plural ‘Ecology’: Conversation, Collaboration, Covenantal Commitment

Formational Scriptural Reasoning can and should lead into Reparative Scriptural Reasoning, whose purpose is to relate the practice to areas of academic, religious, or other spheres of life in which there are problems, divisive conflicts, or other pathologies. The promise of Scriptural Reasoning is that both can go hand in hand.

¹¹ Mike Higton and Rachel Muers, *The Text in Play*.

Reparative Scriptural Reasoning is about repair. In an article on this in 2013,¹² Peter Ochs envisioned a network of Reparative Scriptural Reasoning groups. He fully affirmed the fundamental importance of Formational Scriptural Reasoning.¹³ But he also saw that, if Scriptural Reasoning is done ‘for God’s sake’, then the God for whose sake it is done is also utterly committed, as we should be, to repairing what goes wrong in universities, religious communities, and societies.

The possibilities for this are endless, but the thing to be said now is that this conception confirms the wisdom of the commitment here in Hamline to interreligious peacebuilding through study shaped by Scriptural Reasoning. In line with this, I want, in conclusion, to suggest the vision of a social ‘ecology’ that for me has emerged from three decades of Scriptural Reasoning and ten years of involvement with the Rose Castle Foundation’s work in forming reconcilers who are on different sides of conflicts.

The vision is of a healthily plural society. In societies such as the United States and the United Kingdom we have no choice about whether or not to be pluralist in many ways, not least in being multi-religious and multi-secular, with many hybrids. Our pluralism is simply a fact, and it can, of course, go disastrously wrong. The challenge is how we can become more healthily plural.

I think we need three key essentials in dealing with our differences, and Scriptural Reasoning can make a contribution to each.

First, there is *conversation* across our differences in settings where trust can grow over time. Scriptural Reasoning has again and again demonstrated that it can help this happen, and its spread can enable our religious pluralism to become much healthier.

Second, this trust, communication and mutual understanding can result in all sorts of *collaborations* for the common good, and for jointly engaging in some of the repair work that is urgently needed in so many areas of society. This too has been one of the results of Scriptural Reasoning.

But the essential that I want especially to commend to you is one that goes beyond conversations and collaborations. It is what I call *covenantal commitment*. Each of the Abrahamic traditions has its own strong concept of covenant. Covenantal commitment is about our relationship to God above all, but also our relationships with each other before God, and in response to the love, compassion, justice, and wisdom of God. The promise of Scriptural Reasoning between Jews, Christians, and

¹² Peter Ochs, ‘Re-Socializing Scholars of Religious, Theological, and Theo-Philosophical Inquiry’, in David F. Ford and Frances Clemson (Editors), *Interreligious Reading after Vatican II: Scriptural Reasoning, Comparative Theology and Receptive Ecumenism* (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2013) pp. 201-219.

¹³ His summary of its benefits is instructive: ADD

Muslims includes an invitation into new forms of covenantal commitment to each other, into open-ended long term relationships of trust.

I see these taking two main forms.

One is in groups, organisations, institutions, and other forms of long term, stable commitment to each other for the sake worthwhile purposes. I have named just some of these that have already resulted from Scriptural Reasoning. There is no reason why such combinations of social and institutional creativity and faithfulness cannot multiply, and contribute to improving the health of our pluralist societies.

The second form of covenantal commitment is in friendship. For so many of us in Scriptural Reasoning, one of its most precious gifts to us is new friends. Given the differences, these are often surprising friendships. Nicholas Adams has written that the most striking thing about Scriptural Reasoning is ‘not consensus but friendship’.¹⁴ We remain deeply different, disagreeing on much, but we can become friends, we can become committed to each other, through thick and thin, with a covenantal quality of commitment. And ‘through thick and thin’ it needs to be. This is not a comfortable commitment; it is, rather, a challenge to make daring friendships. As Jim Fodor writes, in his profoundly wise contribution on friendship and Scriptural Reasoning to the Festschrift for Peter Ochs, such friendships can demand courage (I am sure that will find that to be true here in Hamline), and, he says, ‘The experience more often than not is as freshly exhilarating as it is disarming and unsettling, as deeply and hopefully alive as it is penitent and sobering. In an inter-faith context... the meaning of friendship is thrown up for reconsideration in ways that are unfathomable.’ That has been my experience, in both delight and pain. And Jim Fodor, who himself has been such a faithful friend within the community of Scriptural Reasoners, concludes his chapter: ‘To be enjoined by friends in the practice of Scriptural Reasoning is to participate in and enact—in modest but nonetheless genuine ways—God’s work of redemption. It is to be drawn into the work of *tikkun olam*’¹⁵—the healing of the world.

The promise of Scriptural Reasoning is utterly bound up with that sort of covenantal commitment.

¹⁴ Nicholas Adams, *Habermas and Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006) p.243.

¹⁵ Jim Fodor, ‘*Phronesis*, Friendship, and Scriptural Reasoning’ in Mark Randall James and Randi Rashkover (Editors), *Signs of Salvation. A Festschrift for Peter Ochs* (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2021)