Sacred book club: Reading scripture across interfaith lines

by Jeffrey W. Bailey in the September 5, 2006 issue

On a blustery Wednesday evening in central London, about a dozen people from different parts of the city made their way to St. Ethelburga's Centre for Reconciliation and Peace. They included an attorney from a large London law firm, a political lobbyist, a corporate consultant, a Muslim college chaplain, a university professor, a female rabbi and a research scientist. After pouring cups of coffee, the group began a two-hour discussion marked by moments of intense debate as well as laughter. Conversation veered from economics to the nature of citizenship to London politics.

One might think this was a meeting of a neighborhood council or Chamber of Commerce, except for one thing: in front of each participant were selections from the Hebrew Bible, the New Testament and the Qur'an.

After finishing its discussion of a passage from the Hebrew Bible, the group began focusing on a passage from Matthew's Gospel in which Jesus instructs his questioners to "render unto Caesar what is Caesar's."

"I thought most Christians read this as justification for supporting their government's policies," said a Muslim participant, looking up from his text. "I was taught that in my church growing up, actually," said one woman, a bit sheepishly.

"I wonder if Jesus isn't saying something a bit more subversive than 'be a good citizen,'" suggested a Jewish participant. "Perhaps Jesus is actually making a larger point about an alternative economic system."

This looks like a Bible study. But St. Ethelburga's is a public space, not a church or temple, and the participants are Jewish, Christian and Muslim. Profound religious differences emerge over the course of conversation.

But the participants share one important conviction: they believe that the resolution of religiously rooted political tensions will be attained not by avoiding religion in

public, but by initiating more and better religious conversations in public.

Participants in this practice, known as scriptural reasoning, are part of a movement that wants to protect religiously plural societies while simultaneously encouraging religious people to enter more deeply into public discourse. Such aims might appear paradoxical to those who were taught that the emergence in the 17th century of secular liberalism, with its privatization of faith, rescued the West from “wars of religion.” Voices on 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 sustainable in a world increasingly shaped by religions.

If we can no longer conduct public debates according to the “objective” language of “self-evident truths”—ways of reasoning that purport to cut across religious and cultural distinctions—how will political debate move forward? How can laws be passed if representatives reason differently about the common good? A post-Enlightenment public square sounds positively tribal: it would mean Muslims arguing for Shari’a law and Christians arguing from the Bible about sexual ethics. Can such a society flourish? Can such different groups find ways to talk to each other?

Scriptural reasoning (SR) is an attempt to navigate the diversity. The practice has been central to recent gatherings of political and religious leaders in Qatar, Karachi, Berlin and Washington, D.C. Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams and Anglican bishop N. T. Wright of Durham (England) have promoted SR as a key to Muslim-Christian-Jewish relations in England. SR groups have been established at universities such as Duke, Virginia, Colgate, Cambridge (England) and Cape Town (South Africa). The American Academy of Religion has been devoting sessions to SR for several years. An introduction to SR was included in the inaugural festivities of Princeton Theological Seminary’s new president last spring.

At the local level, groups of clergy and laypeople are beginning to meet under the auspices of the Children of Abraham Institute. Peter Ochs, professor of Judaic studies at the University of Virginia and one of the founders of the Society for Scriptural Reasoning, encourages this trend.

“Often the best people with whom to do SR are not academics, but regular folks who have been raised reading and listening to the Bible, who have received some basic socialization into the world of scripture,” says Ochs. All SR participants must

represent a house of faith and usually a denomination. “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.”

What is SR in practice? Jews, Christians and Muslims (roughly equal numbers of each) gather to read passages from three scriptures that are usually thematically related. Sessions are not held in a synagogue, church or mosque. Instead, SR, invoking the shared “tent of meeting” imagery of Genesis 28, seeks out a neutral space. When SR participants meet outside of a specific house of faith, studying all three scriptures together, they create “a three-way mutual hospitality,” says Christian theologian David Ford, another cofounder of the Society. When it is not clear who is the host and who is the guest, “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.”

In a typical gathering, a member of one faith will make a few introductory comments about a scripture passage, and then the entire group attempts to understand what the passage is teaching and how it ought be applied today. Slow, patient work is done to unpack how a faith tradition has interpreted the passage. The same is then done with texts from the other two scriptures. At the end the three texts are brought into dialogue with each other. Many questions ensue, not only from representatives of other faiths but also among members of one faith who may disagree over the interpretation of their scripture. A member of a different faith may bring the strongest insight into a scripture that is not his or her own. 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 no one can easily predict the lines of agreement in any SR session.

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 cannot happen without reference to these scriptures. But what is most striking about SR is that vexing gaps or lacunae in various texts are not considered problems to be quickly resolved by reference to, say, modern critical methods, but divine invitations to use human creativity and reason in making sense of the passage. (Although historical-critical questions are not avoided in the discussions, neither are they given priority.)

Advocates of SR claim that the richness of conversation is directly tied to the fact that the scriptures are at the center of the dialogue. Instead of neatly pushing readers to entrenched positions, scripture has a way of provoking new ways of thinking and unexpected insights. Scripture becomes a mode of instruction in how to have a “thick” way of knowing God. It tutors its students in a different mode of relating.

SR began over 20 years ago when Ochs and a group of Jewish scholars, including Robert Gibbs, Laurie Zoloth and Steve Kepnes, grew frustrated about the gap between scripture study and modern scholarship. As Ochs puts it, SR developed from the particular logic of scripture itself: “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.”

Jeffrey Stout, president of the American Academy of Religion, has helped pave the way for SR’s work with his book *Democracy and Tradition*. Stout has tried to move discourse beyond an either-or approach to the question of what counts as rational. “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.”

Ochs applies this approach to discourse between people of different faiths. “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.”

SR participants are attentive to contemporary issues even as they seek deeper levels of meaning 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 the engagement with scripture. And the insights generated may well have application beyond the boundaries of one's faith.

The interfaith study started after Christian theologians David Ford and Daniel Hardy attended the lively study sessions that 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. "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."

In 1996, Ochs, Ford and Hardy, concerned about Jewish-Christian relations in light of the Holocaust, formed the Society of Scriptural Reasoning. Muslim scholars soon joined. "We knew as soon as we began," says Hardy, "that we needed the Muslim voice to be part of this." The challenge was that "large parts of Islam have not encountered modernity in the same way that Judaism and Christianity have. 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 hope to include other religions. "We see that SR is beginning to work outside of Jewish, Christian and Muslim faiths—with Hindus and Buddhists who are text-based, for example," says Ochs. "We also see that certain strands of secular rationality are more compatible with SR than others."

Whether SR is compatible with nonreligious reasoning remains an open question for some. Stout affirms the approach that SR takes. "I've made a habit of attending SR sessions at the American Academy of Religion, and have found those sessions impressive and rewarding." But as to whether his own nonreligious stance is compatible with SR, he says, "They try their best to make me feel welcome, but the ground rules aren't really designed to bring nontheists like me into the discussion. It's pretty clear that I'm an interloper." He adds, "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."

What about consensus among Christians, Jews and Muslims—current participants in SR? Is there hope for a kind of broad, Abrahamic "third" way beyond the

particularities of each faith?

Basit Koshul, a Sunni 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 other’s agnosticism.” After joining an SR group, however, he 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.”

The SR movement is a far cry from a search for lowest-common-denominator faith, for an all-roads-lead-to-the-same-place consensus. It insists that believers go deeper into their own tradition. At the same time, it insists that each participant engage with those of other faiths. This 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.

If SR does not lead to consensus, it does lead to trust and friendship. “The friendships we developed opened us not only to deeper lessons from our scriptures, but also to deeper friendship with God,” said Ochs. Hardy concurs. One of the most important things to understand about SR, he says, is that “mutual hospitality is more than learning to argue in courtesy and truth, although that’s part of it.”

Talk of friendship serves to underscore the 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,” Hardy says.

Ford is candid about the impact of his longstanding friendship with Ochs, a devout Jew. “I have been endlessly amazed at the generativity of our friendship,” he declares. “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 that 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 belonged not only 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.”

It has been suggested that SR serves as a model not only for interfaith dialogue, but also for political discourse. It departs from modern political discussions in that while it seeks agreement, it does not try to determine in advance what the grounds of agreement might be.

According to Nicholas Adams, a lecturer at the University of Edinburgh in Scotland, “SR is a practice that can be theorized about, but it does not start as ‘theory’ that one then attempts to put into practice.” Instead, the SR approach assumes 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.”

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 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 understanding why a tradition argues the way it does?”

Mass media outlets like television treat viewers to sound and vision bites, not deep reasonings; instead of enhancing understanding, Adams says, the medium encourages the overdramatizing of rival claims. SR, in contrast, aims to carve out space and time for deeper discussions.

“We have to figure out ways of letting religion return to the public sphere,” says Ochs. “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. Let’s go back to religion and have serious conversations about the heart of our belief systems.”

Stout acknowledges religious people’s reaction against an ideological secularism, but he sees a danger in overstating that 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.”

“The fact is,” Stout continues, “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 it in that way would have to answer objections from the Muslims in the room.”

William Taylor oversees St. Ethelburga's implementation of SR in London. The British Home Office is funding development of SR across the city, and plans to train imams, rabbis, ministers and other community leaders in SR practice.

"Once you have called 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?" says Taylor. "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."

What is most exciting, he adds, is that SR is a genuinely new approach to debate. "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 amid those remaining differences."

Behind St. Ethelburga's is a free-standing, Bedouin-style tent. It was donated to provide space for Jews, Christians and Muslims to read their scriptures together, reason together and become friends. It looks small and fragile against the solid buildings of London, but it is a powerful sign of hope.