



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 Reading Together
(*Christianity and Islam*,
pp. 68-75)

Suggested Article:

📖 First Steps in Under-
standing
(*Christianity and Islam*,
pp. 89-93)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to:
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Christian Reflection

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Reading Together

While many good books can tell us the facts “about” Judaism and Islam, we can learn some deep truths “from” these Abrahamic traditions by engaging in Scriptural Reasoning. We may broach even the hard issues among these faiths in an atmosphere of friendship, humility, and mutual respect.

Prayer

Scripture Reading: 1 Timothy 4:11-16

Responsive Reading (2 Timothy 3:14b-17)

Continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it, and how from childhood you have known the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.

All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.

Reflection

When interfaith dialogue is merely “‘making nice,’ – instructing one another in basic elements of the faiths involved, stressing commonalities, and agreeing how wonderful it is that we share basic moral values,” notes Kristen Lindbeck, it leaves the important and sometimes painful questions unaddressed. “Many Christians wonder if Muslims are saved, or are certain that they are not. Muslims are often taught that the doctrine of the Trinity is a polytheist corruption of the true faith of the prophet Jesus.” We’d like to talk with Muslim friends about ethics and faith in government, business, and schools. “Do we trust the people from other faith communities enough to frankly discuss such issues in their presence? Usually not.”

Scriptural Reasoning groups take a different approach to dialogue. In church, community, or academic settings, SR brings Jews, Christians, and Muslims together to read scripture and pray. “After participants in SR have experienced on-going trust for weeks or months, they can broach even the hard issues between and within their faiths in an atmosphere of friendship, humility, and mutual respect.” How exactly how do SR groups work? Though there is no simple recipe, it is important to:

- ▶ *focus on scripture reading and prayer.* “The encounter with scripture ...ensures that participants are looking together at something beyond personal opinion.” Framing the session with prayer reminds them “that in the presence of revealed scripture we are also in the presence of the Revealer.”
- ▶ *engage in small-group discussion.* A three-way discussion of scripture by Jews, Christians, and Muslims is especially valuable, Lindbeck says, because the Abrahamic faiths “inform one another in overlapping ways: Christianity and Islam are proselytizing majority religions; Judaism and Islam are strongly parallel in their understanding of God’s Oneness; Christianity and Judaism have longer experience with the challenges of modern society, modern



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science, and the separation of church and state." The faiths speak related religious languages about God and ethics. Though not agreeing on every point, they share a basis on which to begin discussion.

- ▶ *allow spontaneous exploration.* SR groups assume "because scripture is revealed by an Eternal God, it is open-ended. God is still speaking to us in the text," says Lindbeck. "Yet Scriptural Reasoning is not relativistic; participants explore and listen to scripture, ask questions of others, and look within themselves and their own faiths."

Jews, Christians, and Muslims are "people of the book," who have been formed and nourished by reading scripture. While America's founding fathers "rightly proposed the separation of church and state,...their nineteenth- and twentieth-century followers encouraged the more debatable separation of religion from politics and they harmfully demoted faith to a purely private matter, divorced from public ethics, education, social justice, and economics." SR is a way of listening to scripture, suggests Lindbeck, which can put "God's will back into...the public discourse of society in an open-minded, open-ended way."

Study Questions

1. What features of Scriptural Reasoning are attractive to you as a new form of interfaith dialogue? Do you have concerns about its goals or methods?
2. What checks SR from being either relativistic or syncretistic?
3. Do you agree that "Scriptural Reasoning can include more of the full spectrum of each faith, from liberal to conservative, than usually occurs in general interfaith conversations"?
4. With what attitude of mind and heart should we approach scripture, according to "Open My Eyes, That I May See"? Is this attitude appropriate for Scriptural Reasoning?

Departing Hymn: "Open My Eyes, That I May See"

Open my eyes, that I may see
glimpses of truth Thou hast for me;
place in my hands the wonderful key
that shall unclasp and set me free.

*Silently now I wait for Thee,
ready my God, Thy will to see,
open my eyes, illumine me,
Spirit divine!*

Open my ears, that I may hear
voices of truth Thou sendest clear;
and while the wave notes fall on my ear,
everything false will disappear.

Refrain

Open my mouth, and let me bear,
gladly the warm truth everywhere;
open my heart and let me prepare
love with Thy children thus to share.

Refrain

Clara H. Scott (1895)

Reading Together

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Responsive Reading	Responsive Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1 and 4	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To introduce Scriptural Reasoning as a form of interfaith dialogue.
2. To consider how a three-way conversation may add perspective and open up the dialogue among traditions that share a long and often tragic history.
3. To discuss establishing a Scriptural Reasoning group with Muslim and Jewish friends.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 8-9 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Christianity and Islam (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested article before the group meeting. Locate the departing hymn “Open My Eyes, That I May See” in your church’s hymnal or on the web at www.cyberhymnal.org.

Begin with a Story

“Past experience,” writes Muslim philosopher Basit Koshul, “taught me that most forums were basically ‘interfaith-less’ forums where agnostic Muslims, Christians, and Jews met to basically confirm each others’ agnosticism.” However, when he joined the Scriptural Reasoning group, he says: “It was not long before I discovered, to my elation, that this particular ‘interfaith’ forum was unlike any other that I had known. The unique character of this forum was due to the three fundamental presuppositions on which it was based: (1) each of the three traditions confidently asserts its claims to uniqueness, as well as universality; (2) at the same time it does not view this claim as being an obstacle to genuine dialogue; because (3) this dialogue is centered on the Revealed Text” (*Christianity and Islam*, p. 70).

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude with a prayer that members’ eyes will be illumined by God’s truth as they study Scripture together, and that their hearts will be open to sharing this rich experience with Muslim and Jewish friends.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read 1 Timothy 4:11-16 from a modern translation.

Responsive Reading

The leader begins and the group reads the lines in bold print.

Reflection

Even though Scriptural Reasoning is a recent movement—the National Society of Scriptural Reasoning was organized in 1995 and its online Journal began in 2001—its methods will be very familiar to many Christians: small groups meet to read and discuss scripture passages together in a prayerful context for the purpose of moral discernment. The twist is that Jews, Christians, and Muslims are invited to participate in the group and the passages selected for discussion may be from either the Qur’an or the Bible. Kristen Lindbeck recommends Scriptural Reasoning as a richer form of interfaith dialogue.

Lindbeck responds to concerns that SR may be either relativistic (“There’s no objective truth, just what you or I happen to believe about the text”) or syncretistic (“The truth is whatever combination of doctrines and views that we select from the Abrahamic traditions”). Encourage members to discuss these and any other concerns they may have about Scriptural Reasoning.

How can we prepare for SR? Our personal experience in personal and group Bible study and prayer is fundamental. To develop more knowledge of the vocabulary of Islam, see Dale Walker’s suggested readings in “First Steps in Understanding.” For specific guidance on designing a SR experience in a congregation, school, or community, see the Children of Abraham Institute (CHAI) website, www.people.virginia.edu/~pwo3v/chai/pages/communityintro.html.

Study Questions

1. Members may agree that SR is attractive because: (1) participants learn *from* other religions, not merely *about* them; (2) as they begin to trust one another and build friendships, participants can address the hard questions that divide them; (3) the Abrahamic faiths share a religious language and a desire to learn God’s revealed truth; (4) study sessions are focused on a scripture passage (not personal opinion) and the discussion is manageable; (5) participants encourage one another in the authority of scripture and model how to discern God’s truth through prayerful reading and discussion of it.

Do members think other features are attractive? Do they have concerns? Do they think the discussion will be productive? Do they worry about which passages to discuss, or whether they are “expert” enough to discuss them with Jewish and Muslim friends? Are they comfortable looking for truth in passages from the Qur’an?

2. We should distinguish relativism—the belief that there is no objective truth, only personal “truths”—from the virtue of being teachable, humble, and open to correction. SR avoids relativism by insisting that God reveals truth through scripture. Another real danger is syncretism—the result of simply combining various beliefs and practices from the three Abrahamic religions. Lindbeck writes that “participants need not give up a belief that their faith among the three has the truest understanding of God’s will; all that is required is openness to the idea that God cannot be limited by human understandings of truth.” Christians, for example, would use God’s revelation through Christ as a “lens” for interpreting the beliefs and practices of Judaism and Islam.

What other resources can help check a temptation toward relativism and syncretism in SR? Members might mention the deep commitments of other SR participants, the guidance of Christian mentors, and the teaching of a congregation.

3. Participants only need to agree they worship the same God, says Lindbeck. SR allows “each faith to understand the others in its own terms: for many Muslims to understand the Jewish and Christian revelations as precursors to the revelation of Islam; for many Christians to understand all salvation, even that of non-Christians, as mediated by Christ; and for many Jews to understand Christianity and Islam as worship of the God of Israel by the nations of the world.... [This means that] participants can present the power and beauty of their own faiths without apology, and without proselytizing or fear of being accused of proselytizing.”
4. The first two verses emphasize that we must be teachable—with God-opened eyes and ears to recognize the truth that God sends. The refrain reminds us that our illumination is a gift we receive rather than a reward we earn: “Silently now I wait for Thee, ready my God, Thy will to see.” We must be discerning as we listen for the new truths that will fit together with the old like the “wave notes” of a melody. We must be ready to share with others the “warm truth” we have heard—gladly speaking the truth in love. This dual attitude of being teachable yet courageous to speak, when framed in the context of recognizing that God is the Revealer of truth, is appropriate for discussing scripture with Muslim and Jewish friends.

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison, or silently and meditatively as a prayer.