

Project Report:
Interfaith Engagement and Ministerial Training—Scriptural Reasoning as a Test Case
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I.

Theological Education Institutions (TEIs) teach Christian theology as part of training women and men for lay and ordained ministry. The ministry that those trained in TEIs will go on to do will, of course, take place in specific situations with their own particular dynamics. Those undergoing a course of ministerial training today, in 2019 in the United Kingdom, are quite conscious of the reality that contemporary Britain is a religiously plural place: students will not be ministering in a context dominated by Christianity, but in a situation in which there are many adherents of other religious traditions. Even if the nature of one's situation does not dictate or entirely determine how one goes about the ministry to which one is called—those in ministry ought to have something definite to say to their context that does not simply mirror back the situation into which they speak—it is still important to register key facts about one's situation and to factor them into reflections on how to engage in ministry.

One of the significant ways in which TEIs have responded to our religious plurality is by teaching on this topic and encouraging dialogue between Christians and members of other world religious traditions. Some good work has already been done to think through the challenges that attend equipping students to undertake interfaith dialogue. In this connection, a noteworthy study is *Interfaith Engagement and Theological Education* (2016) by Ray Gaston and Kat Brealey. This study concluded that slightly more than half of the TEIs surveyed reported that they delivered some teaching on interfaith matters. But the authors also highlighted how many institutions were still wrestling with the relative priority to assign interfaith teaching and how best to deliver instruction on this topic. One of the goals of Gaston and Brealey's work was to make TEIs aware of the range of resources and approaches to interfaith dialogue that were available to them. They also noted some curricular issues: there was by no means a strong consensus among TEIs on what sort of modules were best for interfaith teaching (whether standard term-length modules or briefer, more focused ones), or on who ought to present the teaching (whether internal or external members of staff).

The present project took the work of Gaston and Brealey as a point of departure and sought to supplement their effort by expanding the range of interfaith approaches of which TEIs are aware, and by considering further some of the practical questions to which the authors of the previous study helpfully drew attention as well as a further question that was especially crucial in the context where this project was carried out. There were three areas of focus for this report. (1) The focus was on Scriptural Reasoning (SR), offering a pilot study of how it could be taught at one TEI (Wycliffe Hall in Oxford), and making the conclusions of this effort readily available to the wider TEI community. SR is a well-established form of dialogue, but it was not included in Gaston and Brealey's study. (It was not excluded in principle. It simply did not work out logistically for a representative of this approach to participate in their study.) So this project aimed to present it as a further option for TEIs to consider. (2) In the process of thinking about how to teach SR, with special reference to Wycliffe but with a view toward SR's relevance to other TEIs, this project also aimed to think about the curricular issues mentioned in the previous paragraph. At Wycliffe, SR was presented through a brief, focused module that took place over the course of a single week, and for this module, the teaching was done by both a Wycliffe tutor (myself) and an associate

tutor, who is based mainly at an external institution. (3) A final issue to which this study attended in attempting to present SR as a form of dialogue that may be useful to those training for ministry is the relationship between the practice of dialogue and the Christian practice of offering witness or testimony to God from one's own faith perspective. There are prima facie tensions between dialogue and witness/testimony. How might they be negotiated?

In the balance of this report, I summarize how we went about presenting SR to students at Wycliffe, assess the experience in light of the three main issues just underlined, and offer some questions for further reflection. I recommend reading this report in conjunction with both the module outline that has been published on the Presence and Engagement website and the brief summary of Scriptural Reasoning and the Rose Castle Foundation that is also on the same website.

II.

Our study introduced Wycliffe Hall ordinands to SR through sessions forming part of what is called an Integrated Study Week (ISW). ISWs are brief modules that take place either at the beginning or end of a term. They function to round out Wycliffe's core curricular offerings, often dealing with practical issues (e.g., death and dying) or more specialized academic issues than students encounter in the main curriculum (e.g., theological hermeneutics). Wycliffe has for some years been running an ISW that focused only on Islam, aiming to provide students with a brief orientation to this tradition without explicitly addressing the issue of dialogue between Christians and Muslims. Islam had been a special focus for many years due to the tradition's rising profile in Britain and our students' consequent need to understand it. Because this group of students was also being presented with teaching on dialogue, the new ISW was called Islam & Christian-Muslim Engagement. The overall module was coordinated by Dr Richard McCallum, an associate tutor at Wycliffe and a Senior Fellow at the Centre for Muslim-Christian Studies in Oxford. He did some of the teaching himself, but he put together a rich program on the history, thought, and practice of Islam, while also pointing out to the students the Jewish roots of the tradition.

Students doing this module were taught about SR and given a chance to experience it through three sessions during this ISW. The first was an introduction to the theory and practice of SR, the second was a training unit on how to engage in SR, and the third was an actual experience of SR-style dialogue with a group of Muslims. It proved impossible to gather together a group of Jews who might also have participated in SR with us, but Islam is certainly the other religious tradition that our ordinands have most on their minds, as they know that it has a major and growing presence in Britain, including in contexts where many of them will actually be ministering.

Most of the students participating in this ISW had had no experience prior to it of any form of interfaith dialogue, nor had they had any teaching on it. Some of them reported being suspicious of the whole idea of dialogue because they presumed that the very act of dialogue becomes possible only when those taking part are committed to the parity of all religious traditions. In my previous teaching at Wycliffe, I had encountered a range of attitudes toward other world religions. Some vocal students were especially wary of Islam, thinking that Muslims were necessarily hostile to Christians, and that Christians should engage with Muslims only for the sake of attempting to convert them, not for the sake of broader dialogue with them that might have other goals, including simply becoming more informed about

traditions of which one is not a part. Having had this experience, I felt that I should make sure to address those concerns in the way that I presented SR as a form of dialogue. I was aware that otherwise, the teaching could be met with incomprehension and a great deal of resistance. It was my own deep conviction that SR contained within itself resources that could address the concerns I anticipated on the part of the students. In the assessment section of this report (III), I consider how successful this effort turned out to be.

It is beyond the scope of this brief report to offer a full summary of SR. Even the three sessions on SR in the ISW itself were intended only to give students a taste of something they might delve into more deeply in their own ministries. But I will present some detail on what SR actually is here in order to provide a context in which the assessment of the project might make sense.

At the most basic level, SR involves small groups of people, usually between three and twelve, gathering to discuss their respective scriptural texts and issues that arise out of them. Those involved are usually Muslims, Jews, and Christians—or at least this is how the practice of SR originally took form, though it has expanded now to include other world religions as well. Those taking part in small-group scriptural study have extracts from the scriptures of each tradition in front of them. Usually this amounts to just a paragraph from each text, which is dedicated to a common topic, say, God, hospitality, or peace. These extracts are selected by the group's convenor, who may draw upon packets that have been devised by the Society of Scriptural Reasoning and are publicly and freely available on the official SR website. Groups meet for around an hour (though some sessions may be longer or shorter) and discuss each text in turn, beginning with one and ultimately covering all three during the life of the group. Ideally, the people involved are part of these groups on an ongoing basis and get to know one another over the course of time. In the case of this study, this did not prove possible, as the SR event was a one-off occurrence. But there were and are opportunities in Oxford for those who would like to engage in SR on a regular basis to do so. There is a regular SR group that meets at one of the Oxford colleges, and the Centre for Muslim-Christian Studies in Oxford hosts something similar.

For each of the three texts that participants discuss, the group goes through the following process. The texts are initially read aloud. This typically happens via a translation, though there may also be a printed version of the texts in the original languages to consult. In the case of our group, the original biblical languages were read out, and our students also had a chance to hear the Koran Arabic intoned by a skilled reader. Following the reading of the text, the group's convenor offers an introduction to it, covering such things as where in a larger narrative this unit of textual material occurs, who is speaking, and other points of background that can illuminate the passage under discussion. The facilitator begins the discussion by asking how the text strikes people. There is then open discussion among all the members of the group. Those for whom the text is sacred scripture (e.g., Jews for the Hebrew Bible, Muslims for the Koran, or Christians for Christian Scripture) speak about how the text is read in their own tradition, but others also react to the text and discuss how they see it. There is an effort in SR to avoid having the tradition who sees the text as sacred dominate the discussion of that text or dictate the terms on which others read and interpret it. The idea is that all who are involved are entitled to interpret the text in ways that make sense to them.

As the discussion unfolds, in a way that can never be predicted in advance, the facilitator attempts to have the group observe certain ground rules, which are intended to make the

discussion as fruitful as possible for all of those involved. To begin with, as this is *Scriptural Reasoning*, and not simply an entirely open-ended discussion of the generic topic of concern of all of the texts, the convenor should attempt to keep discussion centered on the texts themselves. The purpose of the group is to see what the texts have to say and what sort of reasonings have grown out of them in the traditions that are represented by those who constitute the group. In addition, the convenor will try to create an atmosphere where participants who wish to do so can offer witness or testimony in the way that they speak about the text that is sacred to them. But at the same time, SR dialogues are not the time for overt, formal calls for a response to the text. This would disrupt the flow of the dialogue and should accordingly be avoided. Furthermore, when participants speak, they are expected to speak as members of their own religious traditions. For instance, if one of the texts under discussion were John 1, there is nothing at all stopping a Christian from giving a trinitarian interpretation of the text. In fact, that sort of reading would be expected, for it reflects the history of reception of this text in the Christian tradition, starting in the early centuries after the time of Jesus and continuing until today. But participants do not need to feel the pressure to speak as official representatives of their tradition. To mention the Christian tradition once more specifically, if one is not ordained or a bishop or a formal leader of one's church, that in no way restricts the sort of comments that one might feed into the larger discussion. Finally, SR participants should have at least some familiarity with the text from their own tradition, and should make reference to how a reading of it makes a difference for their lives, but they do not need to be experts or professional scholars in order to participate in SR.

Given that SR is this sort of an approach to dialogue, I took pains in the three sessions to underline that it is what might be called a particularist approach to interfaith discussion. That is, it definitely does *not* call upon participants to shed their own convictions as the discussions begin. Discussants are, on the contrary, asked to interact with one another as Christians, or as Muslims, or as Jews. Whatever they are, they are expected to be that and to speak on that basis. That is really the only way for dialogue to be interreligious and for the members of these traditions to engage with one other as such. This implies that the goal of SR is not to articulate whatever the lowest common denominator is among the three traditions, representatives of which are speaking with one another. Interlocutors are not boxed in in this way. It is entirely expected that participants will learn about other traditions precisely as those that are different from one's own. Discussants have the chance to develop relationships, and even friendships, across lines of difference as they take part in SR. If they participate over a period of time, they will probably also come to understand their own tradition better than they did initially, having a clearer sense of other traditions with which to compare it. And, though they are not restricted to working toward a lowest common denominator, participants ought also to develop a sense of how they might work together with members of other traditions in efforts to foster the common good.

These are lofty goals, of course, and obviously not all of this was going to happen through just a single session of SR. But I was keen to see what would happen. In order to assess the sessions, I collected formal feedback from the students in the group as well as making my own observations about what was taking place in the time that we had together.

III.

The student surveys revealed that they either had a more positive view of interfaith dialogue as a result of the SR sessions, or they already had had a positive view of it even before the sessions. Before the sessions, two students reported that they had a "positive" view of

interfaith dialogue, one said he was “interested but inexperienced,” while two had a negative view of dialogue. The more positive students indicated their positive views were reinforced by the session. And, tellingly, the students who were negative or essentially undecided stated that afterward they were much more positive. One commented about how the sessions had affected their stance toward dialogue: “Definitely more positive. I think relationally it’s very helpful, though I think it would take many hours to achieve much more ‘fruit.’” Another wrote in a similar vein in response to the same question, “Yes—would love to do much more of it!” The undecided student commented in response to this question, “Grateful for the opportunity, and I would like to do more in future ministry.” There was also a question on the student survey about why attitudes had been changed, if they had been. There, essentially all the students wrote that changes were due to both the teaching and the experience together. If I had a chance to do this teaching again, I would like to ask the students to expand on that final point. It would be interesting to know more about *why* the teaching or experience changed their view or strengthened their conviction that dialogue can be a positive thing. It is difficult to get students to write extensive comments on surveys after they have already been concentrating on teaching and new experiences for some time. But ideally it would be good to know more about the causes of the changes that were reported.

It hardly needs to be said that these surveys had a small sample size. There is a pattern observable in what these students said: none were more negative after the sessions, some were more positive, and others had a basically positive stance toward dialogue (if not SR specifically) reaffirmed by the ISW. I can add to this data, which is admittedly taken from a small group, that I felt no resistance from those who took part to the teaching I was offering or to the whole idea of dialogue. I decided before the third session to give students the option of taking part in the SR discussion or not if they did not want to be part of it for whatever reason. All of the students who listened to the teaching elected to participate in SR. From all of this, I would submit the following about SR and the teaching of TEI students. At least for this group of students, some of whom were suspicious of dialogue initially, SR can be perceived by them to be something worth doing, and even something that deserves to be integrated into how they do ministry. Nothing that emerged from the student survey, and nothing that I observed myself as I was teaching, supports the conclusion that SR does not belong on the menu of possible options that TEIs consider as they develop programs to teach interreligious discussion. The pilot program I did suggests that it should certainly be considered as among the ways forward. For institutions that are like Wycliffe in the relevant ways, being part of a similar strand of the Christian tradition, it may well be the particularistic approach of SR, and the focus on scripture in the dialogue, that makes this seem like a viable form for interfaith dialogue to assume.

For the student surveys, I chose to focus on questions about SR specifically and what students’ attitudes toward dialogue were before and after learning about it and engaging in it. I did not include questions on the survey about the curricular issues that are mentioned in the introduction of this report. But I did come away from this teaching experience with some of my own conclusions on the fundamental issues, if not on all the details. My conclusion pertains to the priority of the curricular issues rather than to what the answers ought to be for all TEIs where such questions are live ones. That conclusion is that the quality of teaching and experience of dialogue is far more important than who performs the teaching or the format in which it is delivered. In the SR session itself, I could not help but see that what made the experience a powerful and interesting one for our students was that we were fortunate to have a group of Muslims who were generous enough to take time to meet us, friendly in their personal manner, deeply informed about their own tradition, and experienced

in SR and similar styles of interreligious discussion. It was the participants who made the group discussion compelling. In theory, the same event could have happened during the term, or it could have been that the three sessions were spaced out over the course of a couple of weeks. At least from my point of view as a teacher and the person formally evaluating the sessions, it very much seemed to me that the primary challenge for a TEI would be whether it can put on an event that is illuminating and inviting for students. TEIs must, of course, also think about format and teaching personnel. They cannot simply opt out of deliberating about those questions, as decisions on them have to be made, and they may as well be made well. But my own view is that those questions are secondary to the quality of events and teaching that they might offer to students.

For the issue of how witness/testimony ultimately relates to dialogue, I essentially chose to finesse it in the teaching. I did not put a great deal of focus on it explicitly, as doing so would have taken a fair amount of time, and the sessions were intended to be merely introductory. I made the assumption at the outset that engaging in dialogue does not conflict in principle with what probably all of my students would have taken as the Christian mandate to offer witness/testimony to members of other traditions, at least when the context is right for that to happen. In the course of the first session, I told the students that I was assuming that they wanted to witness/testify to adherents of other systems, but that would not be the main focus of what we were doing in the ISW itself. And I told them that SR is not the place for overt and explicit calls for people to respond to scriptural texts. What I did not do was to attempt to “solve” the issue in a theoretical sort of way that would add something to the existing literature on the topic. As I was devising the teaching materials, going that far did not seem necessary for our sessions to be successful. Nothing that happened in the sessions themselves made me regret that decision. It would have been attempting something overly ambitious to tackle that issue in this teaching setting. In TEIs belonging to certain sub-traditions of the Christian faith, where the imperative of witness/testimony looms large, students are bound to wonder about how that relates to the dialogues they could potentially join. My own experience of this project gave me the conviction that a full solution to this issue is not necessary. One might well make due with a few key assumptions that might ultimately form part of a larger theory addressing the questions fully in a suitable format.

IV.

This project made what I would submit is a small but real step forward in helping TEIs consider how to handle interreligious teaching. In the section above, I have summarized and interpreted the data in the student survey. And I have given my own perspective as the leader of these sessions on some of the issues that the survey did not raise explicitly. On the basis of both of these things, I have given some conclusions about the potential viability of SR in TEIs, the relative importance of the curricular issues, and the degree to which the witness/testimony-dialogue relationship has to be entirely sorted out before good teaching on dialogue can happen, even among students who are part of traditions that stress witness/testimony. There are, though, some remaining queries that could be worth pursuing in the future.

If it were possible to study further the issues of SR in TEIs, would a larger sample size confirm the conclusion here to the effect that students can gain a more positive view of it by learning about it and taking part in it? How much more data would it be ideal to have on this question? The results of this study seem to warrant already that TEIs would at least consider this mode of dialogue as among those that they might teach in the future. It would also be

good to know, as I indicated already, more about precisely why my students changed their minds. We know that it was through both the teaching and the experience. But which aspects of it were especially powerful? Why did they change their minds in a relatively short period of time? Some suggestions were made in the sessions about how dialogue might be part of the students' future ministries. For instance, it was suggested that convening an SR group might be a good way to get to know members of other religious traditions, and even leaders of these groups, in one's parish, especially as one is beginning a term of ministry there. But it would be interesting to know what the ordinands really plan to do in the future and how things will play out.

My own conclusion regarding the curricular issues was that they are important but not of primary importance, being subordinate to considerations of quality. But I can offer some more specific reflections on some of the practicalities of the teaching as I delivered it, in coordination with the associate tutor. These topics invite fuller consideration by others. A key worry one might have about our mode of delivery—a short-term, concentrated module organized by an external affiliate staff member—is that it could seem to communicate to the students that the issues discussed in this ISW are unimportant. If they are important, why not teach on them during the term? If they are really so crucial to doing ministry in a pluralistic context, why not have a full member of staff serve as the main person putting the module together? I did not actually hear anyone voice those questions as I was planning or delivering the teaching, yet I could see where students could easily be moved to ask these questions. My main response is still that *what* is provided trumps questions of *by whom* and *in what format or time period*. If these latter questions are indeed not of ultimate importance, perhaps part of a satisfying answer to them would be to allow TEIs to think about them in relation to their own contexts and priorities. Maybe a TEI where a large percentage of students are preparing to do ministry in urban and highly pluralistic contexts might consider promoting the importance of teaching on dialogue by having it done as a main module rather than a supplementary one, or by having a primary member of the teaching staff deliver the instruction. Maybe a TEI that does not sense this to be central to its mission could justifiably give more priority to other topics. There may well be room here for TEIs to exercise discretionary judgment on these curricular issues, though clearly interfaith dialogue should continue to be a significant priority across the TEI community now and well into the future.