



Inter-faith Pedagogy for Muslims and Christians

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Introduction

The University of Chester offers unique faith-sensitive provision for Youth Work training. Alongside an established course in Christian Youth Work, September 2007 saw the introduction of Britain's first Muslim Youth Work Course, which is professionally (JNC) accredited by the National Youth Agency. Both the Christian and the Muslim Youth Work degrees integrate the theory and practice of youth work with Christian or Islamic values and contexts. In the third year of their degrees, students also join students in Theology, Religious Studies and Combined Honours degrees for part of their theoretical training. This determines that Theology and Religious Studies provision at Level 6 in Chester must be sensitive to the presence of religious insiders from two different religious traditions, studying alongside those who are engaging in studying comparative religion simply for academic interest and without any applicative element to the engagement with the subject. In order to support curriculum development for these students, and also in order to facilitate pedagogical research arising from the unique situation Chester finds itself in with regards to the teaching of members of other faith communities, the Learning and Teaching Institute at Chester

funded a one year project in pedagogical research on the co-teaching of Muslim and Christian Youth Work students.¹ This project involved a pilot scheme, trialling 'scriptural reasoning' (the joint reading of scriptures together) as a means of facilitating dialogue between the students, with questionnaires, focus group work, and participant interviews as part of the research. The identities of the participants have been made anonymous for the purposes of all resulting reports and articles.

This article arises from aspects of that research, drawing on the data acquired from the pilot and questionnaires. It seeks to set out some of the complexities and issues found in this pedagogical setting, arising from theoretical and empirical study; to outline one mode of engagement that has the potential to facilitate inter-faith pedagogy (that of scriptural reasoning); to discuss the application of this method to the higher education classroom; and to outline some of the findings of the pilot scheme with regards to this method of study.

Recognizing some of the issues

As with many Departments of Theology and Religious Studies, the Department of Theology and Religious Studies at the University of Chester seeks to offer a 'dual track' approach to the study of religion.² The 'Theology' aspect takes a traditional insider-based approach, thinking from within the tradition. This thinking from within can either be in terms of an Anselmian *fides quaerens intellectum*, or else a thought experiment in which students of no faith seek fully to immerse themselves in the Christian tradition in order to seek to understand it from within (to 'stand in their shoes', so to speak). The 'Religious Studies' aspect of the discipline seeks, rather, to think from an 'outsider' perspective, seeking to have academic distance from the subject studied, and to focus on the otherness of the other, trying not to allow one's own beliefs to impact on the empirical description of that other.³

Navigating the relationship between these two approaches to the study of religion and the religions is complex enough when there is only one largely homogeneous insider group.⁴ In the case of the UK, this majority insider group has traditionally been Christian. Teaching this group alongside 'secular' students, who are studying comparative religion from an outsider perspective, can bring enough challenges with regards to assumptions made about truth claims and about methodological approaches to the discipline. However, if we then add into this the complexity of a second insider group, studying alongside insiders from another faith, and alongside those who seek to have an outsider approach, the need to think about group dynamics and methodological assumptions for pedagogy becomes intensely complex. Furthermore, in an age in which emphasis should be placed on the student as learner,⁵ attentiveness to the starting point of the students in our classrooms determines that questions of method are more than simply abstract discussions between researchers about the best possible means of study, and are instead issues that relate to the student as a learner.

These issues exhibit themselves in an even more complex way in Chester's situation because of the applicative element of the study of the subject for those students who are taught and learn alongside those who are studying primarily for a theoretical grounding in the discipline. These Muslim and Christian Youth Work students are training to become professional youth workers, and the theological and religious element of their training is provided in order to make them 'faith sensitive' in the exercise of their profession. This determines that their study of theology and religion is with a purposively applied focus for their future careers. This applicative aspect also determines that as well as an insider descriptive approach to theological study, the youth workers have a formative approach to theology as a discipline, seeking to explore not only what theology has said, but what it might, can and should say for the given contexts in which they are working.⁶ Thus, in a Level 6 class at Chester, there are likely to be two different faith groups with insider approaches, some of whom will have an applied bent to their studies, alongside those pursuing an outsider approach to the discipline. Our present curriculum structure for Level 6 determines that there are 'insider' approach papers in Christian theology (including systematics, feminist theology, environmental ethics, and medical ethics); and 'outsider' approach papers in religion and culture, ritual, and minority faith communities. However, there are currently no clearly 'insider' papers for those of other faiths than Christianity who are studying their own religion. There are also no papers which allow for a comparative or dialogical 'insider' approach.

Were this pedagogical situation not complex enough, the need for students to engage with different faiths has rarely been more pressing than in this generation. In a post-September 11th and 7th July world, this engagement with other religions cannot for many learners? perhaps especially those of faith? singularly be in a distanced, theoretical and comparative way. It is also necessary to recognize the imperative for people of faiths to think about the relationship that they have with members of other faith communities. This involves creative engagement with faith traditions, seeking fresh insights into the ways in which faith communities should understand themselves in relation to the religious other.⁷ Furthermore, within this need for creative engagement between faith traditions, it is necessary for teachers to aid students in learning how to engage in inter-faith dialogue. Indeed, of the students surveyed by questionnaire for the Chester pilot,⁸ all but one strongly agreed that inter-faith dialogue is important for contemporary society (the one remaining student 'agreeing' but not 'strongly agreeing' that this was the case). All students also agreed or strongly agreed that it is necessary to learn alongside members of other faiths in order to become better at inter-faith dialogue; that Muslims and Christians should be taught how to engage in inter-faith dialogue; and that Muslim and Christian Youth Worker students should be taught community cohesion tools. The desire from learners in Chester to acquire tools which seem crucially important for religious peoples of the 21st century was marked.

Facilitating this learning is no easy task, however, for the lecturer. I have elsewhere outlined some of the complexities involved in (especially exclusivist) members of faith communities engaging in inter-faith dialogue.⁹ These include the following issues. First, many religious people (especially in monotheistic faiths) understand their faiths in what is traditionally referred to as an exclusivist manner,¹⁰ and to engage and dialogue with the religious other may be a denial or betrayal of that exclusivity: inter-faith engagements might be seen to undermine particularity or to relativize a uniquely considered or revealed perspective on the divine. This is related to, second, a fear of the pollution of the outsider. Third, there is the danger that exclusivist members of faith communities perceive that which unites those engaged in inter-faith dialogue as being some form of external liberalism to the claims and traditions of individual faith communities.¹¹ Fourth, while clearly public and political dimensions to inter-faith dialogue exists, this dialogue cannot be engineered or directed by the state or secular powers and agencies, but should?for sake of authenticity (linked to point three)?arise from within the community of faith. Fifth, the very people for whom it is most necessary to engage in inter-faith dialogue are those for whom it is most difficult?those who reject liberal pluralism.

A number of these themes were very clearly evident in the preparations for the pilot. Indeed, it was necessary to have a discussion for over an hour with each set of participants to allay fears that they had about the engagement in the project. While the students thought that engagement in inter-faith was important, there was a considerable amount of discussion surrounding themes of exclusivity, and what seemed to be issues associated with the pollution of the outsider and a perceived political agenda that underlay the project. For example, a number of Muslim students stated that they felt that inter-faith dialogue was a predominantly Christian agenda, associated with liberal forms of Christian belief, which sought to undermine the taking seriously of the Qur'an for reasons of homogeneity. Christians expressed fear of pollution of the outsider in terms of Jesus' statement that he was 'the way, the truth and the life', and his warnings against false prophets who would follow him. The students' concerns and anxieties were plain to see, and this was before the pilot had even begun. Particularly acute among the Muslim participants was a fear?as a religious minority?that this enterprise was a Christian exercise arising from Christians' universalizing tendencies. Indeed, alongside group discussions, there were a number of telephone conversations with Muslim participants, and it was useful to notify them of the fatwa issued by the Shari'a Court in London in 2007, in order to provide legitimacy for the particular enterprise that this project was engaged in from a Muslim perspective.¹²

The various complications and asymmetric issues with engagement in inter-faith were further demonstrated in the responses to several of the themes raised in the questionnaire. Several notable and complexifying issues became apparent in participant response. One of the most interesting of these involved the radical inclusivity and exclusivity of monotheism. While all participants strongly agreed that there was only one God, there was complete variance in response to the statement 'I believe Christians and Muslims pray to the same God'. In response to this, three participants (27%) responded with 'strongly agree'; three participants (27%) 'agreed'; two participants (18%) 'disagreed'; and two participants (18%) 'strongly disagreed', with one respondent not answering. Furthermore, the

division between agreeing and disagreeing did not take place along faith lines: both Muslims and Christians agreed and disagreed with this statement, rather than (for reasons of supersession etc.) one group of faith members agreeing and the other not. It is clear from this response that even monotheism cannot be used as a uniting principle for peoples of faith in one God. In fact, even those who agreed with the statement concerning Muslims and Christians praying to the same God might not necessarily be affirming a uniting principle in this: for some, even praying to the same God need not preclude that the other prays in a manner which is idolatrous? something akin to 'obviously we pray to the same God because there is only one God, but **you** tell lies about God'. These are deeply complex issues, and there will always be a certain level of differentiation and asymmetrical relationality between both faiths and individual faith practitioners. Bringing people of different faiths together will always involve a variegated approach to the otherness of the religious other.

Some of these difficulties were expressed in the semi-structured interviews following the pilot. One participant (Participant A) commented: 'it's been tough because I've had to ask some serious questions, like, I've got this faith but I've never really looked into any other faiths.' There are clear faith and existential implications attached to students engaging in inter-faith dialogue. In recognizing this, it is necessary not to undermine the identity and faith commitments of the students, and to be sensitive to these and the issues the students believe they face. Indeed, in the questionnaire, all but one participant strongly agreed with the statement 'I want my faith commitment to be taken seriously in the academic modules I will study in the 3rd year'. Furthermore, while five participants (45%) strongly disagreed with the statement 'I am nervous about studying alongside members of different faiths, and atheists and agnostics in my 3rd year', the remaining students were dispersed in their response to this statement across the remaining categories (strongly agree, agree and disagree).

In designing trial material, therefore, for a pilot scheme to teach Muslim and Christian students together, it was necessary to think about issues of legitimacy for the enterprise from a faith perspective; issues of particularity and the capacity to affirm identity; issues relating to applied approaches to study; and issues of how to deal with the complex spread of assumptions and how to avoid essentialism regarding individual faith communities.

Finding a practice based way forward? Scriptural Reasoning

In order to address these concerns and to follow a practice based and student centred approach to learning which modelled methods that can be used in community cohesion,¹³ it was decided that we should pilot a scriptural reasoning model for learning inter-faith dialogue.

Scriptural reasoning is a method which originated with (among others) Peter Ochs, David Ford and Daniel Hardy. Drawing on the model of engagement between Jewish philosophers (called 'textual reasoning'), scriptural reasoning offered a mode of engagement for members of Jewish, Christian and Muslim communities with each other which did not involve any rejection of deeply held faith commitments in order to enter some 'shared' (liberal) secular space, that relativizes truth claims, undermines faith commitment and under-plays difference. Steven Kepnes summarizes the practice of scriptural reasoning as follows:¹⁴

SR [scriptural reasoning] is a practice of group reading of the scriptures of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam that builds sociality among its practitioners and releases sources of reason, compassion, and divine spirit for healing our separate communities and for repair of the world. Thus, SR theory aims at a scripturally reasoned triadic response to the problems of the world that is motivated and sustained by the healing and divine spirit of scripture.¹⁵

The practice of scriptural reasoning revolves around a shared sense of mutual hospitality in order to facilitate the dialogue. In this mutual hospitality, there is a simultaneous engagement in being the host (with one's own text) and the guest (at someone else's sacred text). The practice is, therefore, in its simplest form, the shared reading of sacred scriptures by people of faith together.

This practice was initially undertaken at the American Academy of Religion, and there is still a 'Scriptural Reasoning ? University' Group which meets before that conference, and for a few days each summer in Cambridge. However, the practice has spread tremendously throughout the USA and the UK, in various forms to fit the needs of the communities engaging in the practice.¹⁶ What is continuous in all of the versions of the practice is a commitment to the reading of the scriptures of others before God for the sake of the world. This means that the texts are not simply read in a modernist, historico-critical manner (as in the manner of singularly outsider study), but are read as living texts which provide (variously and differently) the theological basis for the speech of each of the traditions of the book (i.e. insiders) present at the table. The dominant concern is, therefore, primarily hermeneutical.

In order to explain this practice, scriptural reasoning is sometimes spoken of figuratively in terms of the biblical image (present in all three Abrahamic traditions) of the tent of meeting. This is an image drawn from the provisional tent which features throughout the Torah. Jewish participants point to the etymology of the Hebrew word *mishkan* (tent or tabernacle), which combines the meanings of both *shakhen* (a neighbour) and *Shekhinah* (Divine presence or glory). The image of the tent is used in order to point to a provisional place in which neighbours and strangers may become friends, and indeed even angels are entertained.

This image of the tent is used in a non-competitive way with the image of a house. The term 'house' is used figuratively in this interfaith practice as a term for the institutional places of worship for the participants in scriptural reasoning (the synagogue, church and mosque). That the tent exists in a non-competitive relationship to the houses is important in two ways. Firstly, scriptural reasoning does not seek to supplant the houses, or to remove individual faith commitment, exclusivity or particularity, but rather to enable genuine conversation as conversation between people who share similarities but also differences. There is no requirement to give up any deeply held faith commitments; indeed, such commitment is affirmed. This determines that, secondly, as opposed to the modernist assumption that religion should either be a homogeneous glue that binds people together, or that?if heterogeneous?it should be replaced by a non-religious secular space, scriptural reasoning seeks to allow for a space in which particularity is needed and welcomed: particularity does not stand in aggressive opposition to dialogue and conversation but is required for dialogue and conversation.¹⁷ As Taylor puts it:

Rather than turning aside from our differences in an attempt to preserve some putative peace (not really peace at all), it is precisely through exploring these differences together that we learn the meaning of our profound interdependence.¹⁸

Kevin Hughes also discusses these issues in his *The Premises of Scriptural Reasoning*.¹⁹ Outlining the problems that are often assumed to exist as the result of religious difference, Hughes offers the following diagnosis:

Too often it is assumed, both by experts in conflict resolution and diplomats alike, that religion is always the problem and never part of the solution to the inter-ethnic and inter-religious conflicts raging in the world today. This assumption is strengthened by the observation that usually it is the most fervent adherents of a religious tradition who initiate or at the very least exacerbate these conflicts.

However, he goes on to offer a different set of hypotheses, of which the fourth to eight are:

- That, after centuries of terrible conflict, political and religious, this civilization introduced a competing model: an effort to achieve religious peace by eliminating religious difference, either through secularization of religious elites or through assimilation of any two of the Abrahamic religions to the cultural and political of the other one;
- That, while the modern model has made some lasting contributions to inter-religious peace, it has also given rise to the most destructive inter-ethnic and inter-religious conflicts the world has ever known;

- That there is strong evidence that the modern model cannot simply correct its own errors;
- That the modern model must therefore be repaired and supplemented by additional models;
- That scriptural reasoning offers one such model.

Scriptural reasoning seeks, therefore, to offer the possibility of dialogue based on the affirmation of each individual participant's faith commitment through the mutual hospitality offered to each other. This involves a commitment to both reaching out to members of other faiths and a commitment to dialoguing with them, simultaneous to a commitment to one's own particularity and faith for that reaching out and dialogue to be remotely meaningful.

In practice, this activity of scriptural reasoning normally arises in the form of small groups (ideally 6-8 people), with roughly equal numbers of each faith present. The group is convened by a person who facilitates the discussion and often ? though not necessarily ? chooses the texts (normally reasonably short ones) in consultation with members of the various faith traditions. Taylor helpfully summarizes the tasks of the convenor as follows:

- Hold the boundaries for the particular sessions (these include time boundaries as well as people boundaries)
- Help the group choose the order in which it will read the texts
- Help keep the discussion in SR mode ? e.g. interrogative and text based
- Be mindful of group processes and help the group interpret these (you may need some help with this)
- Make sure the group chooses its themes and texts for the following session²⁰

The sensitive issues that are inevitably present in such discussions determine that the convenor is crucial to the successful engagement in scriptural reasoning, especially for those new to the practice. It is impossible to describe any group and its individual dynamics, and each will vary considerably from group to group. As Kepnes puts it:

SR is a practice before it is a theory. It properly can only be known in, its performance. The performative dimension gives SR a timebound and context-specific characteristic. This means that every SR event is dependent upon the specific time and place and the particular group of individuals that assemble to practice SR.²¹

However, a useful sense of the period of time for a discussion might be between an hour and an hour and a half. It is hoped that a by-product of scriptural reasoning is the building of sociality between members, with friendships and relationships arising from the shared study and dialogue.

Scriptural reasoning certainly seeks to have an applicative nature and purpose in reply to the questions which prompted engagement in it in the first instance. However, none of the preceding discussion seeks to suggest that scriptural reasoning is not an academic practice which is suited to the academy.²² The aspect of 'reasoning' determines that there is a need for due attention to be paid to the 'reasoning' (academic) process within these dialogues. Peter Ochs describes this aspect of scriptural reasoning well:

- Study is a group as well as individual activity. Good scholars display social as well as strictly intellectual virtues. These include extending hospitality to fellow learners, listening, and speaking to the heart as well as mind.²³
- The primary intellectual virtue is reading well. Group study should focus, first, on a religion's primary scriptural sources, as they appear to have been received by their early reception communities and as they are scrutinized by text-historical scholars. Group study should focus, secondly, on the ways these sources are received by contemporary communities of practitioners.

- Group study should address at least two different scriptural sources and scriptural traditions. After introductory instruction by specialists and representatives of each tradition, all scholars/students should contribute equally to the work of discussing and interpreting all of the sources. This work should move gradually through all appropriate Levels of study: from philological, semantic and rhetorical studies to intra-scriptural readings to comparative interpretations of the source texts' societal, ethical, and theological implications.
- Comparative interpretations should be stimulated by a range of interests: from formal studies of hermeneutical and narrative patterns, to ethical and theological dialogue among the traditions studied, to the implications of such studies for addressing contemporary intellectual and societal debates.²⁴

While the practice is undertaken by people of faith from the perspective of faith, this practice of study is congruent with other traditional forms of study based on an Anselmian *fides quaerens intellectum* method of theological inquiry. It thinks rationally from a tradition, and recognizes that modes of reasoning arise from within different traditional dialogues.²⁵ However, it recognizes that others (from different faiths) may be simultaneously pursuing such concerns also. As MacIntyre puts it, there is a need to recover from the Enlightenment:

a conception of rational enquiry as embodied in a tradition, a conception according to which the standards of rational justification emerge from and are part of a history in which they are vindicated by the way in which they transcend the limitations of and provide remedies for the defects of their predecessors within the history of that same tradition.²⁶

Engaging, therefore, in theological study of texts does not undermine the process of reasoning, and may indeed help to underscore the need to recognize the danger of the modernist meta-narrative. Nor does this focus on tradition determine that dialogue is impossible. MacIntyre advocates that there is no necessary follow-on that one tradition cannot 'hear or be overheard by those of another. Traditions which differ in the most radical ways over certain subject matters may in respect of others share beliefs, images, and texts.'²⁷ Furthermore, in the context of scriptural reasoning one might see this at play in a two-fold sense: first, a recognition of a shared sense of being 'traditioned' (and thus a shared sense of suspicion with regards to certain aspects of the Enlightenment project?undermining particularity and difference); second, specific aspects of the traditions that are shared (narratives and texts). Indeed, the use of scriptural texts as a means of facilitating dialogue arises precisely out of such a possibility of hearing and sharing traditions. Similarly, Kepnes further justifies the use of scripture as the primary text of study and inter-faith dialogue as follows: 'We do this, most simply, because Jews, Christians and Muslims share common narratives and they share a common respect for scripture as fundamental documents of revelation and religious foundation.'²⁸ Dialogue in this form is both possible and has a place within the academic curriculum.

Applying to the HE context: localizing the theory

Scriptural reasoning exists in many forms. Its nascence was among professors of philosophy and theology, but as a model it provides exciting possibilities for application in different settings. However, design of a credit bearing course utilizing this method requires rethinking for a classroom setting. There have already been movements in this direction (especially in ethics and philosophy) at the Universities of Toronto, Virginia and Northwestern.²⁹ However, the unique focus of Chester University, in which the project under discussion was based, required a primarily practice based approach with theory integrated for students training to be youth work professionals, alongside those undertaking the course for purely academic purposes. For this reason, it was decided that issues relating to young people and ministry would be explored through the simultaneous study of each other's texts by Muslim and Christian students.³⁰ The module and materials designed needed to be fully learner based, seeking to practice first and reflect upon the practice later. Furthermore, the situation in Chester is such that there is not a large presence of Jewish students in a department with a twin Christian and Muslim foci.³¹ Therefore, the practice for the specific context of Chester required

reinterpreting for the co-teaching of just two of the Abrahamic peoples.

The model of scriptural reasoning required applying, in other words, to the particular context both of British Higher Education and the teaching of undergraduates, and of the Chester situation in particular. The application of this method to the particular setting was trialled in a pilot scheme—a two session day of scriptural reasoning, using materials devised for a Level six course, followed by semi-structured interviews with the participants.³² The texts chosen were around the theme of cross-generational family relations (focussing primarily on Luke 14:25-35 and Surah 31:12-19). To facilitate using the method in a British HE setting with Muslim and Christian students, a number of steps were taken to enable scriptural reasoning to be applied in this particular context.

Firstly, it was necessary to have 'in house' discussion and reasoning in preparation for the 'in tent' dialogue discussion. Having been devised by academic professionals, scriptural reasoning often jumps this first step as those involved usually have enough familiarity with their own texts to engage in dialogue immediately. Dealing with undergraduate learners, the assumption of this knowledge was not possible. Thus, in the pilot, the Christians met together with an academic as a discrete group prior to the dialogue, and the Muslims did the same. This was a useful revision to the normal practice of scriptural reasoning. During the pilot, there were, for example, questions about the exact Greek word used for 'hate' in the Luke passage, and about the use of the first person plural when God speaks in the Qur'an. Such questions require someone more 'expert' to help to guide the conversation. As a result, the time was divided between separate 'in house' discussion of the text, and a full dialogue following that discussion. Students were instructed, however, to follow an interrogative approach to their own texts in their in house discussions: they were asked to think about what **questions** they would like to bring in order to open the text up to study and dialogue, rather than to close it down with any closed, singular exegesis. At the end of this in house discussion, they were asked to assign ten minutes to reading the text from the other faith, and to cite some questions that they would like to ask. Each group assigned a **rapporteur** to bring the discussions to the inter-faith table.

Secondly, there was the need for a short introduction of the texts by one participant to the other group. Because of the lack of familiarity that Christians had with the Qur'an and Muslims had with the New Testament (indeed, all participants admitted to never having read the other faith's scripture), it was thought advisable to have a short two to five minute report of the 'in house' discussions that had taken place from the **rapporteur**. This provided a useful way into dialogue and discussion. From this, there were certain issues pointed towards that were considered as potentially helpful to discuss around the texts. In these, a brief summary of the text and where it fit into the larger section of scripture was given. This was followed by a summary of the sort of questions that were asked by in house participants. The Christian **rapporteur**, for example, pointed to some of the questions that they had posed about the New Testament text as follows:

Is it possible to lose something if you never really understood you had it? If you follow Christ blindly without understanding what He's asking you to do, understanding the purpose in what you're giving up, are you really understanding anything? Are you losing anything, or are you just going along going, 'I'm a Christian'?

To aid further the preparation for dialogue, a number of students in the interviews that followed the pilot suggested that if this were a method used as part of a course, it would be useful to have exegetical preparation, or directed reading of commentaries or scholarship. Academic participants in scriptural reasoning often refer to their 'internal libraries'—the scholarship they have to hand in the discussion of texts. Part of the purpose of study for undergraduates and postgraduates is to acquire these 'libraries', and the suggestion of academic preparation was a useful one that will certainly take place in a full course.

Thirdly, there was a need for strong pedagogical leadership to correct and interrogate in order both to facilitate the dialogue and to keep focus. This differs from certain other forms of inter-faith engagement in which there is usually reticence at the idea of there being an 'expert'. However, as a pedagogical activity, the co-ordinator was needed both

to keep the pace of the discussion flowing and to answer technical questions. For example, the co-ordinator on a number of occasions during the pilot commented, 'we should try to move on'; and there were questions about terms such as 'ecclesiology' and about translation issues and historical contexts. Participants also needed to be helped by the co-ordinator to recognize when they were adding interpretation to the text and when they were giving factual statement. Furthermore, breaking down the text into manageable chunks was an important part of the work of the co-ordinator, to assist the students' capacity to deal with the full unit of text. The guidance of a group leader (in the instance of the pilot, a doctoral student, though this could easily be a lecturer) was helpful for dealing with the complexities and sensitivities in the group discussion.

Fourthly, since the focus was the faith-based youth work professional, following the engagement, there was a need to relate the discussion to practice based approaches and to young people. A number of participants commented on the benefits of applying the texts. Participant G stated, for example: 'I think it's good because it relates to youth work as well which I quite liked about it'. The students thought that discussing issues to do with the way in which the faiths discussed relations between generations was a really beneficial thing to do: they saw that there were direct consequences to the advice they might give to young people as reflective practitioners. They also realized that some of the issues that young people from the different faiths might face would be comparably similar. Furthermore, they recognized that in settings in which there were young people from different faiths, the method of scriptural reasoning might be a good one with which to facilitate inter-religious / inter-community discussion around these (and other) themes.

Sixthly, there was the recognition that for an academic course theoretical reflection is required upon the practice which has been engaged. Syllabuses in the US which have followed a scriptural reasoning approach have also recognized the need for this. Courses in the University of Virginia have added this theoretical element by looking at international relations, and in the University of Toronto, philosophy, theology and hermeneutics have been used. Given Chester's particular focus, the theoretical components will be applied theology and conflict mediation.

The above themes seek to demonstrate how a method of engagement which avoids some of the potential pit-falls of inter-faith dialogue might be utilized in the British HE setting in order to facilitate the teaching and learning of Muslim and Christian students together, and their capacity to learn a practice based model of inter-faith engagement. The pilot not only allowed opportunity to explore some of these themes, but offered the potential to reflect upon issues that the students raised and to think further about the possible developments of any such course.

Benefits of scriptural reasoning for inter-faith pedagogy

There are considerable benefits to this kind of approach to inter-faith pedagogy. A number of these have been alluded to in response to some of the problems outlined above. However, it is worth indicating them at this juncture.

Usefully, this method provides a non-essentialist approach to learning about other faiths. The discussions were able to illustrate the variety of approaches to the faiths that the different members of the communities held. For example, during the pilot, participants F and G spoke of 'arising from the discussion of carrying Christ's cross?' various traditions with in Islam about Jesus' death. Participant E at one point wanted to make it known clearly that he had not heard of one of these traditions. This potential for variety and the recognition of relationship seems to respond to Samman's desire for a non-essentialist mode of teaching Islam (and could equally be applied to Christianity):

While essentialists teach students to think in binaries, teach your students to think in relational terms. Teach them that societies, far from having separate histories, are intertwined and that we must acquire a contrapuntal imagination to capture such a reality. Instead of teaching them Western Civilisation and Islamic Civilisation, one being our history while the other is their history, teach them to think of civilisations as transformative, reflexive, and fluid entities.³³

The potential for discussion and for various opinions to be expressed by the different participants allows students to recognize that there are different instantiations of any religion, and that individuals will all relate differently to their faith.

Related to this, scriptural reasoning allows for a truly learner based, and peer-to-peer learning, approach to pedagogy. Students begin with the texts and are able to discuss and ask questions themselves about what arises from the texts. There was in all of the discussion during the pilot a certain need for 'ground clearing' and clarification prompted by the students themselves. Numerous initial questions surrounded very basic themes. There was also the clear opportunity to learn by questioning, demonstrated in the discussions. Christians reading the Qur'an were confronted with a number of issues that they wished to ask their Muslim peers to answer. 'Who is Luqman? I don't know' (Participant A). 'Does God, the Spirit as we know, lay on Luqman granting him the wisdom [in a way] that it wouldn't on others?' (Participant C). 'Again it might just be me not knowing the text at all, but it says "we granted this wisdom", but that might just be a basic...' (Participant A). In this, it was also necessary to have a coordinator to encourage participants to ask what might have seemed obvious questions, and to ask for explanation of terms, such as '**tawhid**', that not all participants would understand. But crucially, students were able to learn from each other, and to learn as they were prompted by the texts to ask questions.

The approach of scriptural reasoning also allows for both an insider and an outsider approach simultaneously. Muslim and Christian students are simultaneously both insiders to their own tradition and outsiders to the other faith, learning more about their own faith (in light of the other) as well as the faith different to their own. For the Christian participants, for example, the need to discuss the texts with Muslim participants led the students to open up to new questions and new perspectives in terms of having to think carefully about what questions might be asked of their own text by other participants. Participant A stated, for example: 'what does carrying your cross mean?' Participant C overtly admitted to the difference that reading texts with members of other faith communities brought to the reading of their own sacred scripture: for example, 'I probably looked at it completely out of context with the rest of it, and I almost looked at it, as in, is it a rhetorical question?'

Furthermore, this dual aspect to learning also led to a strong recognition of the place of perspective. Indeed, discussing the Qur'anic texts, the Christian participants clearly recognized both the unavoidability of perspective, and thus the need for awareness of perspective during discussions. Participant C stated:

Can I quickly say something before we start? ... As we do have an understanding of Abraham, even if it's a Christian understanding of Abraham ... I don't know how to do it, but I think it's important to recognize that we will have a perception one way when we read the Abrahamic text, well they're both Abrahamic, but the one specifically about Abraham's life, I think it's important to think about this almost with a separation from our own. ... At least at first so that we can be ... I can't think of the word.... Fully open with it, fully accepting what it's saying, otherwise we'll come at it from our own understandings ...

Within this respect and noting of perspective, there were some surprising moments. One of the most notable of these in the pilot for Christian students was the Muslim discomfort with the idea of Jesus telling anyone that they had to hate. The Muslims were wanting to offer a higher Christology than the Christians. Participant E's comments were very enlightening about the differences between the traditions:

I think the word 'hate' here is slightly hard, harsh, for Jesus ? may God be pleased with Him ? to say, because He's always known, in our traditions, as a man of mercy, a man of greatness. He's a man who would say if someone slaps you on one side of the face, turn your face so that he may slap you on the other.

Having discussed the verse more, however, the participants were able to come to a greater level of understanding

around a shared figure for both traditions. Participant B described the verse in the following terms: 'maybe it was ... drilling home the point that God might ask you to do something that is really, really, really hard, and you've got to be prepared to do that'. This led to the Participant F (a Muslim) being able to affirm:

I've been listening to the particular about the word 'hate'?... I've just realized that this whole thing, in the passage, maybe the best way I can understand and relate from the Islamic viewpoint?and it might make sense, I'm not saying it will, but it might make sense in terms of the word being used here, and it doesn't seem appropriate here. But there's a narration of the messenger, and there's a few narrations, or there's a lot of narrations where the companions they would go to the messenger and in a discussion they would ask him something, you know, he would ask them, you know, one of the methods of teaching

This indicates the potential scriptural reasoning has to allow students to understand from the perspective of the other, and to understand that perspective from one's own.

The potential for comparative study was also facilitated through the study of the texts. When the Christians read the Qur'an, there was the constant comparison to the Bible. Participant A's statement was indicative of several moments during the dialogue: 'The first thing that struck me is that one of the 10 commandments [says] do not honour anyone above God, it's sort of like that is a similarity: do not ascribe your divine powers to anything beside God.'And similarly: 'Again [it's close to] that parallel, with the "honour your father and your mother"?"be grateful towards me and towards your parents but remember with me all journeys end." So that's sort of like two of the commandments in one there...'(Participant A). This was not, however, at the exclusion of recognition of difference: 'I think that's the big difference between the two texts really, the Christian text focuses a lot on us, on what we need to do, [whereas] a lot of this text is saying God is unfathomable, it's focusing a lot more on God' (Participant A).

None of this discussion took place on the basis of a relativizing or liberal agenda, moreover. It arose from deep respect of the sacredness of the scriptures of each tradition and it was conducted on the basis of a recognition of the particularity of each tradition, and the realization of the place of faith in the lives of students training to be religious professionals. Empathy, respect and particularity were all displayed. This, therefore, enabled there to be no betrayal of exclusivity, and resultantly the opportunity for those for whom inter-faith dialogue is difficult (that is those who most passionately believe in their scriptures and their exclusive truth claims) to participate. This afforded, furthermore, the opportunity for application of the texts and discussion of them in relation to young people and issues surrounding working with young people. By modelling a method of inter-faith engagement, students were also provided with practical tools for their own work within communities and with their people at a time when many divisions within communities arise around issues of religious identity.

Conclusion

In concluding this article, it is worth noting the responses of students in semi-structured interviews to the methodology employed. The benefits of utilizing the text were noted by all of the participants. Participant A stated: 'I think to learn about other religions and faiths you have to go back to the primary text and without that it would have been virtually impossible to sort of learn about Islam without looking at what their text says about their religion...'. And Participant B stated: 'I would have been completely lost if I didn't have the texts...'. One participant articulated several benefits to using texts:

because of the meaning of the texts to different people here, it [scripture] can help, it bridges a gap in some ways because it's something to focus on ? if everyone focuses on the same thing relationship can happen around that focus, so you can talk with people you may not usually talk to. Also, because of what it is, it can help you reflect on what you believe and why you believe

it and it breaks some of the barriers you place on your own head before you even meet people
(Participant C)

Participant D noted the potential that the texts have for stimulating dialogue, and for identifying commonalities between the texts and faiths:

it's a catalyst for the dialogue ? anybody can just sit down and talk about things but when you start talking more about the differences then the scriptures, the divine texts, like I said they have a lot of commonalities and if we should work on the commonalities because really we know what the differences are, and they're very few and far between but they're no cause for friction ... (Participant D)

Another participant was vocal about the surprise s/he had about how easy it had been to stimulate discussion of the texts: 'The thing that stood out was how easy it was for us to actually discuss the texts' (Participant F). Given the centrality of scripture, and the endless depths of its interpretation, for the Abrahamic traditions, this is hardly surprising.

In the coming years, it is hoped that at Chester we might develop this inter-faith approach to pedagogy based on textual study of each other's texts, designing a course which involves small group work around selected texts from the Qur'an and the Bible on themes relating to ministry and youth work. The course will contain theoretical reflection on theology and on conflict mediation, as well as deep academic hermeneutical engagement with texts. In this way, we hope to begin to take some exciting steps towards overcoming some of the many complexities involved in teaching religious exclusivists together.

Endnotes

- Thanks should be expressed to the Learning and Teaching Institute at Chester, and especially to Prof. Jethro Newton. Further thanks for their support in this project should go to Nathan Paylor (research assistant), Dr Mohammad Seddon, Dot Gosling, Sadek Hamid, Richard Turner and James Holt. Dr Rachel Muers (of Leeds University) provided invaluable comments on an earlier draft of this article, and my thanks go to her also.
- This is, indeed, reflected in there being two distinct degrees that the department offers. While there is overlap, and all students are required to take at least some core papers on the other aspect of the discipline, there is a Bachelor of Theology Degree offered and a Bachelor of Arts in Religious Studies degree offered.
- Useful literature on the relationship between insider and outsider perspectives includes McCutcheon, R., *Insider/Outsider Problem in the Study of Religion* (London: Continuum, 1999); Ford, David, *Theology: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: OUP, 2000); Lindbeck, George, A., *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984).
- Indeed, the complexity of this can be found in the original confessional nature of many departments / seminaries and theological institutions in the UK.
- See Brandes, D. and Ginnis, P., *A guide to student-centred learning* (Cheltenham: Stanley Thornes, 1996).
- On formative theology, see my *Barth, Origen, and Universal Salvation: Restoring Particularity* (Oxford: OUP, 2009), pp. 1-2; and my *New Perspectives for Evangelical Theology: Engaging God, Scripture and the World* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009), p. 9.
- A comparative and thorough engagement in related themes has been undertaken by Bob Jackson at Warwick University in relation to an ethnographic approach to the study of religions from an insider perspective. See, for example, Jackson, R., *Religious Education: An Interpretive Approach* (London:

Hodder and Stoughton, 1997); and Jackson, R., *Rethinking Religious Education and Plurality: Issues in Diversity and Pedagogy* (London: Routledge Falmer, 2004). Joyce Miller has also done some related work in Bradford, particularly with community cohesion and people becoming 'cultural navigators'.

- The eleven students involved in the pilot were all surveyed by questionnaire before engaging in the focus group. Because of two illnesses from Christian participants on the day, there were seven Muslims and four Christians involved in this. In order to even out the balance of Muslims and Christians in the pilot, a Christian doctoral student also participated on the day. The survey followed the guidance of Chrystides, G.D. and Geaves, R., *The Study of Religion: An Introduction to Key Ideas and Methods* (London: Continuum, 2007, pp. 305-7). The benefits of this aspect of the pilot was in terms of the capacity for participants to express entirely anonymously their beliefs without any fear of offending members of other faith communities or the interviewer. All students were asked to respond to a series of statements by circling either: 'strongly agree', 'agree', 'disagree', 'strongly disagree'.
- See my 'Legitimizing and Necessitating Inter-faith Dialogue: The Dynamics of Inter-faith for Individual Faith Communities', *International Journal of Public Theology*, 4/2, 2010. The following paragraph is a summary of the argument contained in this paper.
- On inclusivism, exclusivism, and pluralism, see D'Costa, Gavin, 'Theology of Religions', in Ford, D., *The Modern Theologians : An Introduction to Christian Theology in the Twentieth Century*. Second Edition (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), pp. 626-644.
- Cf. MacIntyre, Alasdair, *Whose Justice, Which Rationality?* (London: Duckworth, 1988), pp. 326-348.
- The fatwa can be accessed here: http://www.scripturalreasoning.co.uk/fatwa_english.pdf, accessed 2nd September, 2009.
- All participants agreed or strongly agreed in the questionnaire that Christian and Muslim students should be taught community cohesion tools together.
- For other summaries of scriptural reasoning, see Ford, David F., *Christian Wisdom: Desiring God and Learning in Love* (Cambridge: CUP, 2007), pp. 273- 303; Ford, D. F. and Pecknold, C.C., eds, *The Promise of Scriptural Reasoning* (Oxford: Blackwells, 2006); and Ford, David F., 'God and Our Public Space: A Scriptural Wisdom', *International Journal of Public Theology*, 1/1, 2007, 71-3.
- Kepnes, Steven, 'A Handbook for Scriptural Reasoning', *Modern Theology*, 22/3, 2006, 367. Much of the thinking that follows owes a good deal to Kepnes' article, seeking to apply his work to pedagogical settings.
- There is, for example, a medieval research group that meets in Princeton, and a civic focused group that meets in London. See here Ford, David F., 'An Interfaith Wisdom: Scriptural Reasoning between Jews, Christians and Muslims', *Modern Theology*, 22/3, 2006, 364-5, n.9.
- I have spoken elsewhere of the danger of engaging in 'in a dishonest dialogue dishonestly'. See my 'Bringing Barth's Critique of Religion to the Inter-faith Table', *Journal of Religion*, 80/1, 2008, p. 81.
- Taylor, William, *How to Pitch a Tent: A Beginners Guide to Scriptural Reasoning* (London: St Ethelburga's Centre for Reconciliation and Peace, 2008) p. 5.
- The following quotations are taken from Hughes, Kevin , 'The Premises of "Scriptural Reasoning"', *Journal of Scriptural Reasoning Forum Website*, 2006, available at: <http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/journals/jsrforum/writings/HugPrem.html> , accessed 2nd September, 2009.
- Taylor, *ibid.* *How to Pitch a Tent*, p. 14.
- Kepnes, *ibid.*, 'A Handbook', p. 370.
- The practice of scriptural reasoning hopes to allow for what Nick Adams has termed 'reparative reasoning'. See Adams, Nicholas, 'Reparative Reasoning', *Modern Theology* 24:3 (July 2008), 447-457; and Adams, Nicholas, 'Making Deep Reasonings Public', *Modern Theology* 22:3 (July 2006), 385-401. This is a philosophical term, which Adams explains in detail, but which might be summarized as 'a system of repair of

systems of repair' (Adams, 'Reparative Reasoning', 453). In other terms, one might say that there are second order ethical implications involved in engaging in the practice of scriptural reasoning: it not only facilitates dialogue, but repairs modes of dialogue to allow for the promotion of peace in the hope of healing the world.

- Cf. the cognitive approach of Piaget and Vygotsky. Vygotsky argued that a learner is a 'little apprentice' rather than a lone scientist, affirming the crucial nature of collaborative and discovery led learning. See Vygotsky, L., *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978); cf. Schaffer, H. R., *Introducing Child Psychology* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004); and Wood, D., *How Children Think and Learn*. Second Edition. (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1998).
- Ochs, Peter, 'SR as an Academic Practice', Journal of Scriptural Reasoning Forum Website, 2006, available at: <http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/journals/jsrforum/writings/OchFeat.html>, accessed 2nd September, 2009. Cf. Ochs, Peter, 'Scripture', in Ford, D.F., Quash, B., and Soskice, J. M., *Fields of Faith: Theology and Religious Studies for the Twenty-first Century* (Cambridge: CUP, 2005), pp. 104-18.
- Hence, one might see modernity as one tradition, post-modernity as another etc. On this theme more generally, see MacIntyre, *ibid.*, *Whose Justice*.
- MacIntyre, *ibid.*, *Whose Justice*, p. 7.
- MacIntyre, *ibid.*, *Whose Justice*, p. 350.
- Kepnes, *ibid.*, 'A Handbook for Scriptural Reasoning', p. 370.
- Examples of these can be found at 'Teaching Resources', Journal of Scriptural Reasoning Forum Website, 2006, available at: <http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/journals/jsrforum/teaching.html>, accessed 2nd September, 2009.
- The pilot did not involve this practice with students who do not profess a faith; this is a further project in which the PI wishes to engage. However, similarly to the way in which thinking from within is the basis for theological study for students who do not have faith, scriptural reasoning provides a mode of engagement for such thinking from within to take place, utilizing learning from earlier study of traditions (such as biblical studies or systematics). For this reason, the engagement in scriptural reasoning for students with no faith might best be reserved for Level 6, as is the case at Chester.
- This twin foci is born out of two major centres in the department?the Centre for Christian Ministry and the Centre for Applied Muslim Youth and Community Studies.
- The empirical information that follows arises from this pilot and the interviews. These were recorded and then transcribed.
- Samman, K., 'Towards a Non-Essentialist Pedagogy of 'Islam'', *Teaching Theology and Religion*, 8/3, p. 170.

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