'DEEP CALLS TO DEEP'
The Practice of Scriptural Reasoning

Ben Quash
Cambridge Inter-Faith Programme
University of Cambridge
U.K.

INTRODUCTION

I recently led a study day at the annual conference for the heads of all the Anglican Religious Communities in Britian. There was a wonderful array of Abbotts, Abbesses, Priors, Ministers both Provincial and General, and many others present. They wanted to be stimulated to think again about the role of scripture in the Church, and (more particularly) in their own communities. One of the points made repeatedly in our dicussions was that many religious houses, whilst centred deeply on prayer and the eucharist, have allowed the study of scripture to fall into neglect. When it does take place, it is predominantly the individual religious who 'studies scripture', meditating alone with his or her Bible. Aside from recitation of the psalms and the lections in worship, there is little if any *communal* engagement with scripture – and its use in worship is in any case a thing distinct from *study*.

It is not only the 'catholic' tradition that faces worries about the quality of scripture study in the life of the Church today. Many of those gathering in the Deep Church group in London come from charismatic and/or evangelical backgrounds, and feel that their traditions while professing to be 'biblically based' often engage with scripture in a relatively superficial way. This can be because a strong doctrinal paradigm acts to pre-empt a sustained attentiveness to the possibilities and nuances of a text – the reader already 'knows' what she is going to find; she thus hears what she expects to hear. It can also be because scriptural texts are deployed in relative dissociation from each other (in bite-sized chunks, used for very specific pastoral or teaching purposes, and thereby prematurely instrumentalized), or else through very controlled forms of association with specific other passages or verses (again, it is often doctrinal concerns that dictate which associations are considered legitimate).

'Bible Studies' in the contemporary church often manifest precisely an evasion of scripture, rather than a willingness to take it seriously. This is true at every level of the Church's life: I saw exactly the same symptoms at work in the Bible Study groups of senior bishops at the Lambeth Conference in 1998 as in many student or parish groups. Broadly, two tendencies tend to emerge – neither of them wholly satisfactory. The first is the reduction of scripture to propositional statements, which are then deployed as authoritative *descriptions* (of the world, human beings, the facts of sin and redemption, or whatever), or else as irresistible *ethical instructions or injunctions*. As a mode of reasoning which works from the establishment of clear first principles and then works out from them, this approach to scripture might be described as rather like 'deductive' reasoning. The other dominant tendency – even more prevalent in my experience – is one which uses the reading of scripture as an occasion to tell stories about oneself and one's own religious experience. Scripture is thus made a vehicle or opportunity for self-expression, rather than being read as something with its own internal 'logic' and power to resist and reconfigure the reader's expectations and understanding. As a mode of reasoning which seeks to derive judgements from experience, this might be likened to an 'inductive' approach to scripture.

It needs to be said that both modes of reasoning with scripture have something good at their core. Scripture does, for Christians, offer authoritative descriptions of the world, and helps to shape new ethical ways of being in it (this insight is what the 'deductive' style of approach is a response to); and scripture also elicits from its readers a recognition that the truths it witnesses to are most profoundly also *their* truths; and that the Spirit moving in their lives is the Spirit who was moving in the lives of the first apostles – in other words, it is the same Spirit who animates and inspires both scripture and the Christian heart (this is what the 'inductive' style of approach is a response to). But too easily, these uses of scripture fall into being just that: *uses*. The 'deductive' approach turns the Bible into an instruction manual for life, and not infrequently ends up haranguing people with extracts from it (or distillations of it) in order to achieve certain kinds of ecclesial conformity. The 'inductive' approach degenerates into a pious exercise in personal sharing that may have all sorts of therapeutic outcomes but doesn't in the end move beyond its initial premises – the judgements already come to, and the experiences already interpreted - because nothing in the text itself is allowed to challenge, contradict or criticize them. It is not surprising, perhaps, that many Christians (my monastic

audience included) have been turned off Bible Study completely. But this is because Bible Study is too often not really *study*, which is marked first and foremost by a kind of expectant attention – a spiritual 'listening', from which the religious understanding of obedience derives its real meaning. And in neither of the extreme forms of 'induction' and 'deduction' outlined here is there anything really and deeply communal going on. The extraction and application of propositions, on the one hand, and the practice of reading one's own experience into the text (*eisegesis*, to use the Greek term) can just as well go on without anybody else needing to be around.

Inadequate though the labels are, the oppositions in the Church conventionally sketched as being between 'conservatives' and 'liberals', or between 'traditionalists' and 'progressives', have some echo in the way that scripture is read and related to. The 'deductive', or propositional, use of scripture is often associated with conservative evangelicals and their emphasis on biblical 'teaching' (this focussed generally on 'what the Bible says' more than on 'how the Bible says it', even though that too could be instructive in its own way if attended to properly). The 'inductive' use of scripture – its use as an occasion for giving expression to experience – is often associated with a liberal approach, especially when the terms of the encounter between scripture and experience are set wholly by experience (scripture is useful *when* and *insofar as* it helps illuminate or confirm my experience, and not otherwise). In actual fact, it is very common to find both approaches being used alongside each other, in a mixed economy, by the same people – and an evangelical or charismatic 'conservative' in pietistic mode is as likely to adopt the 'inductive' mode at certain points as a 'liberal'. Nonetheless, the unreconciled juxtaposition of the two, wherever it is found, represents a problem so long as it remains unaddressed. Scripture itself is done an injustice to by it, and the loss is to Christian believers who ought to be nourished deeply by scripture, at every level of their being, and who instead are being deprived of so much of its nutritional goodness by the fact that it is too processed before they partake of it.

What this chapter aims to do is to suggest just one possible way beyond the impasse. It is born out of a very particular experiment in the study of sacred texts which has academic beginnings but is now rooting itself as a practice in grass-roots communities in London and other cities around the world. It is a practice of co-reading scriptural texts from the three 'Abrahamic' traditions – Judaism, Islam and Christianity – by small

groups of devoted practitioners of those three faiths, and its name is Scriptural Reasoning (SR). In a way that I hope to show in this chapter, it has fascinating continuities with ancient ways of relating to sacred texts in all three traditions – many of which are revitalized by SR and will be instructive to Christians today who are frustrated by the instrumentalized or 'thin' approaches to Scripture they find around them. But more than this, it disrupts in a healthy way the habits of reading that members of a single religious tradition can have allowed themselves to get into – stale oppositions between 'liberal' and 'conservative' readings; over-doctrinalised readings; readings that in one way or another take the text too much for granted. The introduction of an 'other' (or more than one 'other') to activity of studying scripture within a particular tradition can have radical and helpful effects, many of which are precisely a deepening of the relation of a particular tradition's scripture readers to their own scriptures. A deeper relationship to scripture would certainly be a good thing for many contemporary British Christians – as they themselves will recognize. My contention here will be that one, perhaps unexpected, way to achieve this is in letting a 'depth' encounter with another religious tradition (one that is also centred on scripture) act to open up new depths or recover old ones in our own tradition – to let 'deep call to deep', without this implying any kind of syncretism or watering down of commitment or devotion in the name of a multi-faith synthesis.

One of the heads of a religious order at the study day I led confessed to a remarkable event. The near collapse of his community, for financial and other reasons, had led its members collectively to decide on a process of discernment to which scripture study – study as a community and not just as individuals – was made central. He said it effected the most extraordinary renewal of their common life and their sense of purpose. In microcosm, this is an example of what at crucial points throughout the Church's history has proved to be necessary when faced with crisis: a return to deep and sustained immersion in scripture, in a mode governed by serious and patient listening. If there is something of a crisis in the Church today – and at any rate a marked unease amongst both catholics and evangelicals about whether they are really doing justice to the gift of the Bible – then it seems a good time to return to it in new and imaginative ways. SR, as I hope to show, offers one such way.

Marks of Scriptural Reasoning

As I outlined above, SR is a communal practice of reading the sacred texts of the three Abrahamic faiths. The texts mainly come from the Bible and the Qur'an – but occasionally also the hadith, patristic commentary, and rabbinic commentary. The participants are mainly members of the three religious traditions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. As a mode of study has been developing for over ten years, and originates in the collaborative work of textual scholars and philosophers/theologians from Britain, the US, the Middle East and elsewhere who have found that joint study across the Abrahamic traditions generates valuable new resources for meeting contemporary challenges. For example:

- in a scholarly context it bridges the gap between text scholars/philologists on the one hand (often concerned with what the texts *meant* at the expense of what they might *mean now*) and theologians (often too quick to generate doctrine and ethics at one remove from close reading of scripture itself);

- it avoids being merely eisegetical (mere play with the texts, or projection onto them) – on the contrary, it is deeply respectful of the texts' own integrity and history, it draws on the 'internal libraries' of scholarly tradition and history, and requires of some members of each group some proficiency in the original languages of the texts; yet at the same time it avoids being merely an act of academic excavation – on the contrary, the texts are read in recognition of their distinctive religious intention and content, their capacity to address the reader and not just be addressed *by* him or her, their capacity to *reveal*; SR is therefore both a scholarly and a religious activity at once;

- it thus recovers a lost 'vocation' of scholarship – namely, to serve wider human flourishing and shape wisdom that is life-giving and reparative; it challenges the idea that places of study in modern society should simply be 'knowledge-factories', dedicated to the acquisition of mere facts aside from considerations of value.

These are all virtues of SR that are particularly evident and prized by its academic practitioners. But SR is now developing a life in new places that are refreshingly unpopulated by scholars – for example, in regular sessions at the St Ethelburga's Centre for Peace and Reconciliation in London at which members of churches, mosques and

synagogues (lay and clerical) come together for text study. As in the academic setting (though in different specifics) the value of SR in such a 'grass-roots' context includes some very practical effects. In a culture that is 'disastrously dominated by the view that religion is not just the problem historically but is inevitably and always the problem in public discussion',[1] SR indicates that the religions might in the end be better at healing their own conflicts *religiously* than any secular alternative based on 'neutral criteria' legally embodied and enforced. And in a culture whose mass media 'tend to over-dramatise rival claims'[2] at every turn, SR patiently demonstrates a way in which the 'deep reasonings' of a particular tradition can be made public and, sometimes, shared by others. A further very practical effect of SR is its offer of a new and welcome paradigm of encounter in a rather stale situation for inter-faith dialogue – a paradigm that is a genuine alternative to the (theoretical) idea that all religious systems are instances of a universal type, and that asks them to find common agreements at the level of concepts (whether ethical or metaphysical). In contrast to this model, it invites the participants to be themselves in pursuing an activity they are all familiar and at home with within the life of their respective religious traditions: the reading of scripture. It thus creates a ground for meeting between the Abrahamic faiths which is not neutral (justified by some fourth rationale external to the three). The resources for dialogue open up from *within* each of the traditions, as the participants pursue an activity native to those traditions. The difference, as I have already hinted, is that this reading is interrupted and illuminated in new ways by taking place in the presence of readers from the other two religious traditions. These others are invited to co-read, to ask questions and become contributors to the process of suggesting possible answers to the questions - and one of the common consequences of this is that the texts open up unexpected meanings for those whose sacred texts they *are*, even at the same time as participants from the other Abrahamic traditions learn more about a text that is *not* theirs.

The Tent of Meeting

If it is not neutral ground, then the ground (or 'space') of encounter made possible by SR is perhaps better described as *mutual* ground. We have sometimes called it the 'tent of meeting' – a virtual space created by the scriptures and their readers when engaged in the

[1] Nicholas Adams, 'Making Deep Reasonings Public', in Modern Theology (forthcoming, 2006).
[2] *Ibid.*

practice itself. Peter Ochs, Professor of Judaic Studies [ref] at the University of Virginia, and one of the founders of SR, writes as follows:

> [W]e invite members of our society to imagine that the place where we gather to study together is a Tent, like Abraham's or Moses', but built of scriptural images rather than skins or cloth. It is a tent of the imagination, that is, but a real tent nonetheless: we really construct it (through speech, imagination and reasoning); it is built out of materials we really find in the world (narratives from our scriptural traditions), according to time-tested methods of building (the methods of community formation we inherit from our religious traditions); and it really gathers us together (around shared practices of study, united by a common purpose), protects us from the world outside (whatever would distract us from our attention to the texts we study, to one another, and to the work this study propels us to undertake) and yet frees us for responsibility in the world.
> Our images of this Tent of Meeting derive from our readings of scriptural narratives about the tents, or modes and places of encounter, associated with Muhammad, with Jesus, with Moses, and, above all, with Abraham. Abraham's tent is not the only model, but it is the most vivid, because Abraham is the eponym of our gathering, as a gathering of the three children, or religions, of Abraham and also because the image of Abraham's hospitality to others – rushing, with Sarah, to offer hospitality to his three visitors – is the image we hope guides us in extending hospitality to one another.[3]

As with various 'tents' depicted in the scriptures, this tent is not a permanent home for the participants; it is a mobile and provisional space. But, as Ochs points out, this does not prevent it from being a place of hospitality, reconciliation and friendship – and for each tradition it may be a place of encounter with God. In the tent, all are asked simultaneously to be hosts and guests as they meet: to be invited into the readings and reasonings of others, and to admit others into their own readings and reasonings, and in each case to practise the attentiveness to the other that is appropriate to hosting and being hosted. They are asked to take mutual responsibility for the success of the encounter, and the imperative for this is not justified on the basis of a thin and generalized notion of 'tolerance', but on terms that the particular texts and traditions of each faith themselves provide.

A typology of meeting places is at work here as the context of SR's image of the tent. Alongside the tent there are also, in SR's typology, 'temples', which represent strongly centralised (often hegemonic) 'places' – sometimes literal and geographical, sometimes metaphorical (a teaching authority, a ritual). The 'temple' stands for the instinct in all three religions at various times to restrict and limit where God can be encountered – and

[3] Daniel W. Hardy, Peter Ochs, David F. Ford, 'The Tent of Meeting' (unpublished paper, 2003).

in the construction of such 'temples' the traditions try to locate authority more precisely, and to define their self-understanding more clearly. They function, broadly speaking, in an exclusivist way, though in the name of a reinforcing of identity that is often regarded as imperative. The temple does not sit easily alongside the tent! It reaches for fixed structures and definitive permanence.

But then there are 'houses', which represent the on-the-ground places of intra-religious gathering for each of the three traditions – day by day, week by week. These are the mosques, synangogues and churches of the respective traditions, and although they (like the traditions' various attempts at temples) can claim to be key places of identity formation and sustenance, they (unlike the temples) function in a distributed and local way, and cannot be as pristinely exclusive of contact with other gatherings of people. In their houses, religionists of the three traditions are fully themselves (it is in their houses, for example, that they normally study their scriptures), but because they are embedded in local situations, houses are often bases from which Jews, Christians and Muslims have to make sense of their environment and their neighbours, especially in situations of racial and religious diversity like those in most modern cities.

Houses are reaffirmed by SR as crucial to the integrity of the three traditions. They are normative, and entry into the tent is at no point intended to weaken people's sense of belonging to their houses:

> [W]e assume that each scriptural reasoner belongs, first, to a 'House' – whether Jewish, Christian or Muslim – and to the specific tradition of scriptural text-interpretation, language, history and social behavior that informs and sustains it. Whatever might lie beyond such a 'House', and how Jews, Christians and Muslims may find this together, will remain supplementary to participation in this 'House'. Of course, it is also true that further acquaintance with whatever lies 'beyond' will influence the practices of orthodoxy in the 'Houses'.[4]

The practices of the tent do not override the practices of the house – whether the modes of scripture study or the forms of worship of the types of socio-political organisation that characterise the common life of Jews, Christians and Muslims respectively. The point is that these 'internal' practices can be enriched and enlarged by the practices of the tent. The tent can be a blessing to the house. This will be especially true when the

[4] *Ibid.*

representatives of each tradition, present in the tent, are able to imagine that each of the others will have 'gifts . . . to reveal, illuminating, promising and life-giving'.

The house is a place that is often ready to welcome visitors from the other traditions, but that means that in the house, one tradition is always the host and the others are guests, whereas (as we have seen) in the tent, all are hosts and all are guests. This creates quite a different sort of dynamic. It heightens reciprocity, which is one of the key marks of SR.

Interrogative Reading

Part of what stimulates the energetic labour that is SR are the tensions that arise (or the gaps that open up) between the texts being studied. The texts - especially when read in each others' company - present difficulties of interpretation.

This is, from the point of view of SR, a very positive and exciting thing. It's often also one of the significant ways in which, for Christians coming to SR study for the first time (and Muslims too, in my experience), it feels very different from the sort of Bible Study they are used to. This is because modern, western Christians have a strong internal imperative to find the 'right' meaning, the 'right' interpretation, and then all to agree on it. This is partly because of an idea we have that Christian life is about being nice to each other (and avoiding or eliminating conflict in our relationships), and partly because we have imbibed a very strong modern idea that the meanings of the texts we regard as authoritative should be clear, single and unambiguous. But in this respect, we may have much to learn both from our own tradition (especially in pre-modern times, as I hope to show below) – a tradition in which multiple meanings have for centuries been expected from scripture, and rejoiced in – and also from the Jewish tradition, which has a sophisticated account of how texts can yield *a vast range* of meanings, and a robust account of how argument is the best way to make it happen. SR owes a great deal to this Jewish tradition, and it is one of the liberating things about SR for those of other traditions – one of its 'blessings'.

SR, writes Nick Adams, 'does not privilege agreement over disagreement'.[5] In other words, and in a rabbinic vein, which itself positively celebrates the *intra*-scriptural

[5] Adams, *op. cit.*

challenges of the Hebrew Bible, it sees the *inter*-scriptural challenges of reading across Jewish, Christian and Muslim traditions as signs of the generosity of our scriptural texts, and not simply as regrettable problems. Why talk about 'generosity' in this context? Because debate over the texts creates a community of argument and collaborative reasoning. 'Scripture challenges us with empty spaces and lacunae into which each interpreter can place herself in the discovery of meaning', as one Scriptural Reasoner, Steve Kepnes, puts it in a handbook to the practice.[6] But the point is that this is never something we do alone; we do it *together*. The texts are together *creative* of a community of discussants. And this may be a more desirable, flexible and time-sensitive 'product' of the texts than any body of doctrine would be. The participants in SR are not asked to come to agreements that can always be summarized in propositional terms. They are not first and foremost concerned with agreement on 'doctrines'. High quality argument may in the end be a better 'product' of SR (if that is a suitable term to use at all) than any agreed statement would be, and a more desirable thing to transmit to those who enter the tradition which this practice generates. I sometimes catch myself imagining what it would mean for my own church (the Anglican Communion) if it saw its task not so much as achieving agreed statements as improving the quality of disagreement, and if it saw part of its best and most generous legacy to future Anglicans as being the transmission of these high-quality debates. To be given a debate might be as enriching as to be given a doctrine. That is after all what is achieved by the passing on of midrash in Judaism. But that is a discussion for another occasion – it serves here merely to illustrate one of the things the activities of the *tent* are able to offer back to the activities of an individual religious *house*.

Another key part of the Jewish legacy, offered to SR (and with equivalents in Muslim traditions of mystical reading of the Qur'an and Christian notions of the multiple senses of scripture) is connected with this readiness to disagree productively. The expectation of plural meanings that can be argued over is linked to the idea of 'depth' reading of scripture – and perhaps best encapsulated in the Jewish distinction between plain sense meanings of the texts (*'peshat'*) and deep sense ones (*'derash'*). [. . .] Deep sense reading is quite compatible with plain sense reading (plain sense being often, though not always, associated with what might be called the 'literal sense' of the text, and identified with the intention of the author in the original context of composition). It can exist in addition to

[6] Steven Kepnes, 'A Handbook of Scriptural Reasoning' (unpublished, 2003).

it, and deep sense readings can be several, both at any one time and over time. Deep sense readings open up a level of 'possibility' in the texts that allows other seemingly latent meanings to emerge in addition to the plain sense - perhaps through their encounter with new situations over time that affect what they are able to 'say'. Such encounters often extend rather than reduce a scriptural text's capacity to speak, even when its author could not have envisaged the future circumstances that would have such effects on it (and cause it to effect so much). In deep sense readings, the readers find themselves 'taking the plain sense seriously but going beyond it, linking it with other texts, asking new questions of it, extending the meaning, discovering depths, resonances and applications of it that have not been suggested before'.[7] I will come back to this later, in the context of a concrete illustration of SR practice.

This mode of approach to scriptural study, so characteristic of SR, can be described as *interrogative*. SR injects an interrogative mood into the reading of sacred texts. This happens at various levels. At one level, the asking of questions is almost inevitably the first thing that happens in an SR study group – it is one of the obvious effects of putting members of different faiths in front of the texts of traditions that are not their own. They want to know what these texts *mean*, and how they are made sense of by those whose texts they are. If the first thing that happens in an SR session is a disquisition aimed at foreclosing all possible questions about the text, something has gone seriously wrong. In such cases the disquisitor should be interrupted! In normal SR practice, there is always someone who is given the responsibility of introducing the text – in order to direct people to some of its interesting features, to set it in context, to highlight any important or contested words, and so on – but this person's role is not to 'give all the answers'. He or she should be laying out questions as well. And when the first interruption comes, that will usually be a sign that the real business of the session has begun.

At another level, those whose text it 'is' ought also to be adopting an interrogative attitude towards it. Often the questions of the other religionists can help them to do this, as they will not always have an answer to such questions, and this will get them questioning hard themselves. These moments of losing one's hold on the text are very common in SR, and they are often described as moments when the text seems to

[7] Hardy, Ochs and Ford, 'The Tent of Meeting'.

collapse or to explode. In a session that is working well, this can be the beginning of an extremely creative re-engagement with the text, and with a participant's own identity in relation to the God whom he believes has given him the text and wants him to wrestle with it. But this requires a general 'permission to speculate' in relation to the text, which does not always come as easily to Christians and Muslims as it does to Jews, and has to be learned. There can be a vigorous time of proposing solutions to the problems the text has thrown up – or ways of reconstructing it after it has apparently 'collapsed' or 'exploded'. One's co-readers from the other traditions are often surprisingly helpful in the reconstruction process.

And at another, and profoundly important, level, the text should be allowed to interrogate *us*, and not just we it. This taps into something basic to all three traditions, all of which know that these texts shape and sift them, and are not just objects to be enquired into, or instruments to be used for human purposes. This is an important reminder – and maybe a reassurance - to those who might be tempted to think that the interrogative and speculative mode of SR means that the text is simply being conjured with in a sort of imaginative game-playing. The text itself sets terms for what is valid and what is not – hence the close attention to what fields of meaning the words of the texts actually have in their traditions. And there is a respect for the text as revelatory in the terms of its tradition, as a source of challenging and illuminating speech by which its readers are addressed. To quote Steve Kepnes again, it is a principle of SR 'that the texts are to be placed at the center of our discussions and to be treated with respect as sources of revelation, community, and guidance. To use a phrase from Martin Buber, the text is to be regarded as a "Thou" capable of addressing us as its expectant readers'.

SOME EXAMPLES OF SCRIPTURAL REASONING IN PRACTICE

Because it is a practice and not just a theory, it seems appropriate to try to communicate some of what I have been saying about SR with reference to actual scriptural texts and their interpretation in SR sessions. In what can only be one or two examples, for want of space, I hope nonetheless to be able to illustrate some of the features of SR I have been setting out so far. Of course the caveat needs to be inserted that no description can capture the 'eventness' of SR; there is always a sense in which 'you had to be there' – in the same way as is true of so many other religious practices.