

Religion without Violence

The Practice and Philosophy of Scriptural Reasoning

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Foreword by David F. Ford



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For Juliana and Elizabeth

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

THIS IS A BOOK about how to teach and learn the practice and theory of Scriptural Reasoning (SR). As we first developed it in 1992, SR names a method for studying Scriptures across the borders of any tradition. Our prototype was a study of Abrahamic Scriptures: the Tanakh, the New Testament, and the Qur'an studied side by side, so that students, adherents, and observers of any one scriptural canon would feel welcomed to read and comment on verses of the other canons as well.¹ One of our goals was to find better methods for teaching religions by way of the study of Scripture and for teaching Scripture in a way that was enriched by both academic and traditional forms of commentary. Another goal was to find methods for peaceful encounter across religious traditions. After about five years of experimentation, we settled on a single method, which we now label "formational SR study." This method is practiced both as an end in itself and as a means of entering into a broader program of interreligious work. We often hear the term "Scriptural Reasoning" applied to this broader program. In this book, I will use the term in both senses. "Formational SR" will refer to the original practice, which remains a prototype and the single most effective exercise for introducing folks to the mind-set presupposed by all the other forms and applications of SR.²

Before September 11, 2001 and more dramatically after it, SR practitioners began to receive requests to apply their craft to matters of interreligious cooperation. As a result, many folks now hear of SR only as a peacebuilding practice or as a means of interreligious fellowship; far fewer know that,

1. More recently we extended SR to Asian scriptural traditions as well.

2. My thanks to Paola Pinzon Hernandez for assistance and editorial help on chapters 1 to 6.

from its inception, SR included a more technical practice of academic study and of textual and even logical analysis. The purpose of this chapter is to introduce SR as an effective response to interreligious conflict as well as a practice of study and teaching, both inside and outside the classroom.

SR did not develop top-down from some initial theory to a set of practical applications. It developed bottom-up from practice to theory to practice, through a series of trials and errors, and through the dynamic interrelations among each stage and feature of SR. While introducing the primary stages and features of SR, I hope this chapter also delivers some evidence of the interrelations that animate them.

THE PRACTICE OF SR: PRIMARY FEATURES

In the book of Exodus, when Moses tries to deliver the Ten Commandments for the second time, the Israelites respond with the declaration *naaseh v'nishmah!*³ Literally, their declaration means "We shall do it and understand it," but, it was more likely an idiomatic expression for "We are on the job!" or "Consider it done!" The later rabbinic sages offered a homiletic rereading: "We shall first act and then understand," on the model of the angels who respond to God's commands by declaring, "We shall act first and seek to comprehend only afterward."⁴ The Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas added a more contemporary twist: unlike modern thinkers who seek to comprehend things in the mind first before experiencing them in practice, the Israelites recognized that truly life-sustaining wisdoms must be practiced first before their meanings can be understood.⁵ We have nurtured SR in the same fashion, seeking to experiment with many forms of practice before discovering the one that best fits our goals and working over many years to refine it. We proceeded through experimentation first and only later through theoretical reflection. From the start, we guessed that we would light upon an approach that would exceed our understanding at that time: we might have to take some flights of imagination and explore new kinds of practice until we stumbled upon a good one. We would have to be patient, devoting significant time to trial-and-error research and testing until we uncovered a practice that approximated our goals. Even then, each of us anticipated a lifetime of learning when and how to refine the practice or to move on to other practices.

3. Exod 24:7.

4. *b. Šabb.* 88a.

5. Levinas, "Temptation."

Formational SR. The elements of our original practice are quite simple.⁶ In what follows, I will offer a prototype of the entire practice of what we call "formational SR."⁷ There is, prototypically, a table with at least three chairs placed around it. On the table are three small sets of verses, one from each of the three Abrahamic canons of Scripture: the Tanakh (the Hebrew Bible), the New Testament, and the Qur'an. Each of the three chairs is reserved for a student of one of these three traditions, Islamic, Christian, and Jewish. The verses appear in translation so that all the participants can read them. To begin their session of Scriptural Reasoning, the participants may read aloud together a selection from any one of the canons. Then they discuss what each of them takes to be the "plain" or self-evident sense of the words in those verses. Whatever the canon of Scripture, none of the three participants acts as authority. Together they discuss the plain sense of the verses as if they could read each verse with equal facility. Then, they gradually turn to a discussion of what seems most challenging or surprising, perhaps contradictory or even ungrammatical within the verses. The discussion continues, with each individual speaking approximately as much as every other. The discussion may naturally turn to one or two issues raised by any or all of the texts, or one or two lines of questioning. If the discussion seems to go in all directions at once, someone in the group may, appropriately, try to steer it back to only one or two primary directions or issues. A single session of Scriptural Reasoning might stop right there. Afterwards, participants get up for brief break and refreshment. A second session may turn to a second set of verses, which are reviewed in the same manner. After a while, the participants may also begin to offer observations that, in various ways, relate the discussion of this next set of verses back to the discussion of the first set. In a third such session, the third set of verses is brought into play in a comparable manner.

We discovered that formational SR works best if there are only five to nine people around the study table. We also discovered that SR takes time. A single session takes about an hour and half, and new participants are unlikely to report any significant learning until they have experienced at least four sessions. This means that one's study of SR should begin with a day or day and a half workshop comprising four or more sessions. The alternative is to participate in a group that meets for one session a week (in which case one's "breakthrough" into an initial sense of SR may take about six or more weeks) or, at a minimum, for one session a month (in which case that

6. For a most instructive introduction to SR practice, see Kepnes, *A Handbook*.

7. This is a prototype, not a strict rule; our actual practices take many different forms.

breakthrough may take six months). Participants report that, once having entered into the habit of SR practice, they are able to meet less often and still nurture the habit. Best results come from participating in a small group that meets regularly for at least two or more years.

Fellowships of SR study: When a formational SR group meets regularly, we call it a "fellowship of SR study." The basic goal of The Society for Scriptural Reasoningtm (founded in 1994) is to nurture as many SR fellowships of study as possible. Our goal is both qualitative and quantitative. The qualitative goal is to provide environments that nurture habits of interpersonal and relational learning, communicating, and reasoning. The quantitative goal is to foster so many fellowships of SR study that the habit-changes nurtured by SR will have a broader social impact. We understand this process to take years. There is no simple, top-down way to nurture the long-range goals of SR by disseminating theories. The goal is to change habits, and that can be achieved only through a slow process of socialization, just as, for example, modern Western patterns of individuated learning and cognition have been disseminated over several hundreds of years alongside models of traditionalist religious learning that were fostered to counter Western individualism. SR fosters modest changes in both individualist and anti-individualist habits of learning, resulting, we believe, in new or stronger habits of relational learning.

WHAT IS SR? SR AS A CLASSROOM

SR is known and transmitted in the doing. This takes place in an intentionally shaped environment. In the coming chapters, I shall examine the kinds of environment that have successfully nurtured SR. These include table fellowships of small groups studying aloud and in dialogue, and university (or seminary) classes that encourage integrative, dialogic study. To shape such environments requires discernment and resources. The criteria for discernment remain immanent in the practice of SR, which means that the practice itself must inform the way that sponsors of SR seek funding, plans, and materials to reshape existent learning environments into places that nurture SR study and practice. This has indeed been the case at the University of Virginia and Cambridge University, where SR learning environments were shaped by practitioners of SR: imperfectly, I trust, but sufficiently successful that the UVA graduate program in Scripture, Interpretation and Practice (SIP) and the Cambridge University Inter-faith Programme (CIP) have transmitted the practice of SR to a second and now third generation of SR teachers and learners.

My hypothesis, difficult to test, is that our efforts to build these environments are successful to the degree that they are informed by the practice and wisdom of SR. I believe, in other words, that an adequate account of what we call "the practice" of SR must include an account not only of the "face" of SR (peers studying Scripture around a table) but also of the material cultures and the sociopolitical institutions and activities that shape the body behind that face. After twenty-five years, we have gained some skill in shaping that face, but the body shapes us. To what extent can our SR practice influence that body's future? The materials out of which one builds SR environments are "found objects": the remains and the living heritage of preceding Western and Abrahamic and Asian civilizations. That living heritage includes gifts (such as healing wisdoms) but also poisons (such as tendencies to hate difference). We may offer SR as a means of distinguishing gift from poison and of helping heal those sickened by the poison, but we also recognize that, short of some end time, our own efforts will retain and transmit some of the poison. This is no reason for discouragement; it is our worldly condition! But it is reason for some sobriety about the goals of SR and, therefore, of this book.

Before SR, for example, some of us may not have perceived *how* the various scriptural canons could contribute directly to the disciplines of the university. We may previously have thought that there were only two ways: either study some canon through the tools of the modern academic sciences or else be careful to erect impassable borders between the precincts of academic and scriptural study. Now we perceive a third way: if we form environments for interactive study among several canons, then *the modes of reasoning* generated by that study may contribute directly to discussions among the academic disciplines. These modes of reasoning *do not* represent the explicit teachings, doctrines, or beliefs of any one scriptural canon or tradition, or of "the Abrahamic traditions" more generally. They do not correspond to any single form of reasoning we have encountered in the university or in any of the commentarial traditions. But we are beginning to see how they may gift us with wisdoms about what to pursue and what to avoid in the ways we practice our various academic disciplines. (I shall discuss these wisdoms in detail in chapter 3.)

Before SR, furthermore, we may have perceived only two ways that the academic disciplines could contribute to our work in the religious houses: by broadening what we know about the languages of Scripture and the logics of scriptural interpretation, or by leaving the traditions alone. Now we perceive a third way. Despite its failures to nurture non-individualistic modes of teaching and learning in the humanities, the university has provided us an example of how to work together "on" our scriptural canons

(through the modern textual sciences) and a relatively free environment for experimenting with co-curricular alternatives to this particular way of working together. Stepping outside the university classroom, but within the societal precincts of the university, we reshaped the university's model for working together into a practice of inter-scriptural study. Like the indirect contribution of scriptural canons to the model of Scriptural Reasoning, the university model of shared scriptural science made an indirect contribution to what became our inter-Abrahamic model of shared scriptural study.

WHAT IS SR? FELLOWSHIPS ACROSS DIFFERENCE

Fellowships among university or seminary students: Since the founding years of SR, many of us have brought the SR approach to our classrooms or co-curricular projects with undergraduate and graduate students. The results constitute a major topic of this book. For now, I will report only this much: I have found small-group SR study to be a significant resource for teaching and learning in almost all my courses, from Introduction to Judaism, and Introduction to Abrahamic Religions, to a broad range of classes in religious studies, theology, philosophy, and in team-taught classes on comparative traditions or on interdisciplinary approaches to belief, practice, interpretation, and reason. At UVA, to take one example, undergraduate and graduate groups have for years met monthly or bi-weekly to pursue student-led study and discussion of scriptural and commentarial texts. More recently, we have begun to extend that work into the local community, with student/community SR groups and also student/community service groups (integrating, for example, Habitat for Humanity service work with town/gown study groups in "narrative reasoning" as well as SR).

SR fellowships of clergy and religious leaders: While generated by university scholars, one primary goal of SR is promote SR fellowships in local communities. We have found that local religious leaders and clergy are excellent partners in this work and that they often value spending several months or more studying with one another before introducing the method to their congregants. Some clergy are initially more comfortable with a less challenging form of formational SR that we have dubbed "parallel Textual Reading" (we welcome suggestions for a better name!). As I note in later chapters, this is our Scripture-specific version of the most customary practice in interfaith: inter-congregational dialogue, where members of each congregation introduce and explain aspects of their religious practices to members of the other congregation(s). In our version, members of each tradition introduce and explain their practices of reading Scripture. Local

clergy councils often opt to start SR this way, turning to formational SR, *per se*, only if and when they see signs that the group seems ready for it. One typical sign is that individual group members feel comfortable reading and interpreting their "own" canons of scripture without turning to "greater experts" for approval. Another sign is that individual members feel that they can try to read the "others'" canons without apology or embarrassment: asking questions—and, finally, proposing answers—about specific words and verses rather than about the others' religion or tradition as a whole. This is when, for example, a participant who used to ask "what do Muslims believe about reward and punishment?" or "how does the Jewish tradition deal with the phrase 'eye for an eye'?" now offers comments like these:

We read in Surah 6:95, "Those who believe (in the Qur'an), and those who follow the Jewish (Scriptures), and the Christians and the Sabians—any who believe in God and the Last Day and work righteousness—shall have their reward with their Lord." I think this reference to "reward" means that these latter—the non-Qur'anic People of the Book—may enjoy life in the hereafter. But are there different degrees of enjoyment?

Or:

We read in Leviticus 24, "The one who takes the life of an animal shall make it good, life for life. If a man injures his neighbor, just as he has done, so it shall be done to him: fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth." These verses seem to contradict Exodus 24, "If men struggle with each other and strike a woman with child so that she gives birth prematurely, yet there is no injury, he shall surely be fined as the woman's husband may demand of him, and he shall pay as the judges decide. But if there is any further injury, then you shall appoint as a penalty life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot." Since the Exodus passage seems to be speaking of monetary equivalents to the damaged body part, I think the Leviticus passage represents a more literal, and perhaps earlier ruling."

When most participants begin to address the group's study texts like this, then the group as a whole begins to treat SR as a time set apart for a unique kind of study: when, for a short time, each one experiments with reading each scriptural canon as if it were his or her own. The rewards of this experiment are great, but only when a group is ready for the experiment. Otherwise, "parallel TR" works fine.

SR fellowships among members of different congregations. These fellowships tend to follow the patterns we have observed among fellowships of

clergy. One difference is that congregational groups may find it difficult to avoid leaning on what they consider the authority of their religious leaders and, sometimes even more so, of the other congregations' religious leaders. Until they are able to overcome that difficulty, congregations tend, purposefully or not, to work within the "parallel TR" style. We have found it helpful, sometimes, for clergy to introduce the various Scriptures to their inter-congregational SR group and then depart, encouraging the congregations to accept the challenge of studying each verse of each Scripture, theirs or the others', as if they were authorized to say something about. Often, a remaining challenge is that congregants feel unequally learned in the scriptural traditions and are either too shy to voice opinions or, if they think themselves learned, too eager to compensate for others' reticence by talking at length about "the true meaning" of a given scriptural passage. As I will discuss at length later, the best solution to such challenges is providing excellent facilitators for each group discussion. Someone experienced in SR and good at subtle yet firm facilitation should be present at each circle of study. Since facility at SR is an acquired habit of practice, rather than the product of good ideas, facilitating SR is a form of gentle coaching: encouraging helpful SR behaviors and gently discouraging unhelpful ones until a group gradually gets the knack of this kind of performance. SR can be a springboard for good ideas, too, but these all follow the practice rather than precede it.

SR fellowship among civic leaders: SR practitioners have not yet sufficiently pursued our original goal of moving from more inwardly directed fellowships of SR study to outwardly directed fellowships that would nurture SR study in response to local societal needs. One early vision was to nurture long-term fellowships among civic leaders from a variety of religious backgrounds (limited, of course, to individuals who believe they would enjoy hours of Scripture study). The fellowship should, first and foremost, be enjoyable for its own sake.⁸ We envisioned that, after a year or more of enjoyable SR study, a group of civic leaders would share a sense of fellowship deep enough to prepare them to respond in publicly significant ways to certain types of local social crises. Given the participants' experience in civic leadership, we might expect them already to have raised issues of public significance as fodder for their scriptural study: preparing them, all the more so, to respond to certain crises in publicly useful ways. Since there will not be space in this book to revisit the general topic of SR and civic leadership, I will devote extra attention to it now, reporting on our experience of SR and civic leadership in Cape Town, South Africa.

8. SR study fails when a notable portion of its participants value it for instrumental reasons only. Ironically, SR study appears to serve secondary ends only when performed first for its own sake.

An illustrative narrative: SR in Cape Town. In 2002, Vanessa Ochs and I went to Cape Town, South Africa to try to nurture a Scriptural Reasoning fellowship among leaders of three mutually distrustful Abrahamic orthodoxies in the city: Orthodox Jewish rabbis, Dutch Reformed ministers, and Shiite imams (at the time these were from Iran). We chose Cape Town because Anglican SR scholars from Cambridge University had previously visited there and initiated some discussion of SR. A prime contact was the delightful John De Gruchy, who served as host for much of our visit, along with faculty from the Department of Religious Studies at Cape Town University. Because of consulting work I had done with *Time*, the magazine also arranged for their African correspondent to follow us around when we were organizing the SR group. Bruce Feiler's book on the children of Abraham was a cover article in *Time* that year so the topic was hot. The new regional *Time* correspondent was there to see if something newsworthy happened.⁹

In Cape Town, there were fairly good relations between the Anglican clerics and just about everybody else, but there were great tensions between the Muslim and Jewish communities; only a few years previously there were some bombings close to synagogues. The official point of contention was news about Israel-Palestine, but there were local sources of uneasiness as well. We found it important to locate and work with clerics and university teachers from the Dutch Reformed community, because their orthodoxy was more comparable to those of the Muslim and Jewish communities. It would have been no challenge to integrate our host Anglicans to this or any kind of dialogue!

We soon attended religious services at several Orthodox synagogues in Cape Town, met the rabbis and received from some of them a modestly favorable interest in our project. It took longer to locate and develop some relations with Dutch Reformed colleagues, but there our efforts proved successful as well. The Muslim clerics, with whom we established contact via intermediaries, were initially suspicious of the endeavor, but we had some back-and-forth communication. Vague plans were set to host a closed-door meeting of some of these religious leaders. The Holocaust Museum in Cape Town offered to host this meeting, but the imams said they would not enter a Jewish space of that kind. Plans were initiated to hold the meeting elsewhere, but the day after our tentative new plan was set, the world news reported some clashes between Israelis and Palestinians in the West Bank. The imams sent us notice that because of Israel's behavior they would not meet with us. For two weeks, we were unable to restart any successful communications with leaders of the Muslim communities. Then I decided to offer a

9. Feiler, *Abraham*.

public lecture at the university on the failures of Western secularism. With the help of our hosts, we invited members of various religious communities to attend, with particular attention to those orthodox groups. I gave the lecture, was told that several young emissaries of the imams were present in the fairly large audience, and received a letter two days later indicating that the imams would be happy to attend a meeting, even if it were held at the Holocaust Museum.

About a week later, we held a meeting and it was remarkable. The museum secured a beautiful board room for the event and provided appropriate food for a luncheon. Three religious leaders each from the Muslim, Jewish, and Dutch Reformed religious communities were present, as were several of our Anglican hosts, and the often-present *Time* reporter. After some formal niceties and food, we launched directly into formational SR study of biblical and Qur'anic texts about the time that "Sarah laughed" when she learned that God would enable her to bear a son. For an hour we read the brief selections in their primary languages then in our shared English, discussing our understandings of the plain sense. Participants gradually offered personal interpretations, alongside reports on traditional readings. During the second hour, we (facilitators) asked, "Well, why then did Sarah laugh? What is it to laugh?" Responses came immediately, all around the table, with personal interjections as well as reports on the midrash, hadith, tafsir, and more recent Reformed accounts. We asked a few more questions to extend the discussion. And then the highlight of the session came. I repeated the question, "So why did Sarah laugh?" and one of the rabbis picked up the allusion that "laughter" could imply sexual arousal; the imams laughed and added comments, followed by the Dutch Reformed ministers. The mood was fully open, and so it went on through a full three hours of study: a breaking of tension, expressions of surprise that the three traditions shared such interrelated accounts of Abraham and Sarah, expressions of joy and of love of the study of Scripture for its own sake. The discussants began to exchange more technical insights and queries about uses of speech in the texts, idioms, about differences and similarities among a variety of claims from the traditional commentaries. As both Vanessa and I saw it, the group had a natural sense for SR: that the goal wasn't about sharing beliefs or concepts, but of engaging in the joy of study, wherever it might lead. We surmised that the SR study came easily to these participants because they were accustomed to somewhat comparable forms of scriptural study within their own traditions. Even so, we were surprised at the ease with which they allowed themselves to extend the play of text study across canonical borders.

I recall clearly that all of us were energized and moved by the event . . . except for the *Time* reporter. When I returned to the US and called the *Time*

editor to see what they might be writing he said, "I am very sorry that you had to be burdened with all this." "What?" I asked. "After all that time," he said, "the correspondent for southern Africa said there was nothing to report. Nothing happened." "Nothing?!" I asked. "In spite of how difficult it was to gather the folks, despite all the previous suspicions and mutual distrust? Even though this simple practice of study seems to cut through all that tension and open the possibility of sustained dialogue across such borders?" "Yes," he answered, "I'm afraid that many of our reporters still identify news-worthiness with bombs and blood."

Before we left Cape Town, this group of religious leaders agreed to meet again on a regular basis, hopefully adding some numbers. During the following year, we learned through e-mail correspondence that the new Cape Town SR fellowship met approximately every two to three months, and the process continued for about two additional years.¹⁰

Cape Town represented for us a prime example of where, when, and why we would want to nurture SR fellowships among civic leaders. We might imagine that the three-year group fulfilled some of our goals, opening pathways of dialogue among significant religious leaders in a conflict-prone region. To approach our more ambitious goals, such a group would need to be maintained for more years and facilitated by individuals devoted both to study for its own sake and (more subtly) to the longer-range goals of working for civic peace. We assume such work requires occasional intervention, as well, from SR scholars and leaders. We are now working earnestly to nurture civic SR groups in many locations, to introduce networks of communication among leaders of such groups, and to formulate and enact procedures that local and regional groups might follow to move from study to civic action and back to study again. One of my own priorities in the next several years is to work with colleagues and graduate students to make "SR and civic action" a primary rather than secondary dimension of university and seminary education (see chapter 6).¹¹

10. One of the longer lasting, not-strictly-academic SR fellowships has been the Poughkeepsie/Vassar SR group, founded in 2008–2009. Led by Rabbi Paul Golomb of Vassar Temple in Poughkeepsie, New York, the group examines scriptural issues for their own sake but also introduces local community issues as fodder for text discussion.

11. For many years, I led *A Thousand Cities*, a project to nurture an SR group in as many cities/towns as possible in the USA. That project morphed into *The Scriptural Reasoning Network* (<https://www.srnetwork.org/>) co-directed by Kevin Seidel (Eastern Mennonite University) and Jacob Goodson (Southwestern College), who also edits the *Journal of Scriptural Reasoning*. SR leaders have also experimented with a broader range of SR fellowships. Supported by government funding, for example, the *Three Faiths Forum* in the United Kingdom initiated a project of nurturing SR fellowships in London prisons, to see if Christian-Muslim SR study might reduce tensions among groups of

WHAT IS SR? A RESOURCE FOR PEACEBUILDING

Religion and Violence Today. To their practitioners, religions may be sources of peace, but contemporary public opinion voices a different view: that religions tend toward violence as much or even more than they tend toward peace.¹² Beyond opinion polls, recent studies suggest that religion is indeed a significant factor in armed conflict around the world. A 2014 PEW research report indicated that “the share of countries with a high or very high level of social hostilities involving religion reached a six-year peak in 2012. A third (33 percent) of the 198 countries and territories included in the study had high religious hostilities in 2012, up from 29 percent in 2011 and 20 percent as of mid-2007. Religious hostilities increased in every major region of the world except the Americas.”¹³ “Global Peace” as measured by the Global Peace Index (GPI) has been steadily deteriorating over the last seven years, with 111 countries deteriorating and fifty-one improving.¹⁴ Conflict has been driven by a broad range of factors,¹⁵ but interreligious animosity and violence has played a significant role.¹⁶ *Economics and Peace.org* reports, for example, that of thirty-five significant armed conflicts reported in 2013, the top two causal factors were matters of identity (twenty-one conflicts) and matters of religion (twenty-one conflicts).¹⁷

newly religious prisoners. The Forum also tested SR-like study in secondary schools throughout the UK to see if such study might reduce tensions among different varieties of Muslim, Christian, and other ethnic groups. After moving to Israel, one Three Faiths project-leader, Miriam Feldmann Kaye, has successfully instituted related forms of study among Jewish, Christian, and Muslim students in several Israeli nursing schools. For related work, see Kaye, *Jewish Theology*.

12. Public opinion is more suspicious of religions other than one's own; for example, a recent Canadian poll indicated that 44 percent of Canadians identified Islam negatively, 12 percent identify Judaism negatively: <http://angusreid.org/faith-in-canada/>.

13. <http://www.pewforum.org/2014/01/14/religious-hostilities-reach-six-year-high/>.

14. One main reason for the global decline in peace has been increased terrorist activity, driven by high profile Islamic terrorist organizations such as the Islamic State, Boko Haram, and al-Qaeda.

15. Thirty of the thirty-five armed conflicts fought last year had more than one cause.

16. Surveying the state of thirty-five armed conflicts from 2013, religious elements did not play a role in fourteen, or 40 percent. Religion did not stand as a single cause in any conflict, but 14 percent included religion and the establishment of an Islamic state as driving causes. Religion was one of three or more reasons for 67 percent of the conflicts where religion featured as a factor to the conflict.

17. <http://economicsandpeace.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/09/Peace-and-Religion-Report.pdf>. According to the report:

The share of countries with a high or very high level of social hostilities involving

What can be done to reduce religion's contribution to violence around the world? Here, public opinion has little to offer, and the diplomatic corps in both Europe and North America has had almost nothing to offer for the past century. Far less helpful, diplomats have tended to define religion exclusively as a problem and almost never as a resource for peacebuilding. Edward Luttwak traces this problem “to a certain enlightenment overreaction against the constraints imposed by premodern Christendom.”¹⁸ For Hoover and Johnston, the problem is that secularization theory almost always included prejudice as well as science.¹⁹ Antireligious secularism, by contrast, is more than an academic theory. It is a normative disposition found frequently among the Westernized intelligentsia, including many foreign affairs professionals. It assumes not only that modernization will have certain functionally subversive effects on religion, but also that secularity is the *correct* direction of history. Religion is thought to be a regressive and irrational

religion reached a six-year peak in 2012, according to a new study by the Pew Research Center. A third (33%) of the 198 countries and territories included in the study had high religious hostilities in 2012, up from 29% in 2011 and 20% as of mid-2007. Religious hostilities increased in every major region of the world except the Americas. The sharpest increase was in the Middle East and North Africa, which still is feeling the effects of the 2010–11 political uprisings known as the Arab Spring. There also was a significant increase in religious hostilities in the Asia-Pacific region, where China edged into the “high” category for the first time. The share of countries with a high or very high level of government restrictions on religion stayed roughly the same in the latest year studied. . . . The study finds that restrictions on religion are high or very high in 43% of countries, also a six-year high. . . . Pakistan had the highest level of social hostilities involving religion, and Egypt had the highest level of government restrictions on religion. . . . During the latest year studied, there also was an increase in the level of harassment or intimidation of particular religious groups. . . . Muslims and Jews experienced six-year highs in the number of countries in which they were harassed by national, provincial or local governments, or by individuals or groups in society. As in previous years, Christians and Muslims—who together make up more than half of the global population—were harassed in the largest number of countries (110 and 109, respectively).

18. He argues, “Astonishingly persistent, enlightenment prejudice has remained amply manifest in the contemporary professional analysis of foreign affairs. Policy-makers, diplomats, journalists, and scholars who are ready to over-interpret economic causality, who are apt to dissect social differentiations most finally . . . are still in the habit of disregarding the role of religion, religious institutions, and religious motivations in explaining politics and conflict. . . . One is therefore confronted with a learned repugnance to contend intellectually with all that is religion or belongs to it.” (Luttwak, “The Missing Dimension,” 8–19.)

19. This prejudice has been animated by both secularization *theory* and an anti-religious secularism. Secularization theory holds that, as modernization advances, religion recedes.

force that individuals should simply avoid: and if people do cling to it, the state should render it a private matter cordoned off from public life.²⁰

Paradigms are, however, beginning to change. Over the past two decades, secularization theory has come under increasing criticism. Catching up slowly with public opinion, academics have begun to write about the gap between persistent secularization theory and the global evidence that religion in fact never went away. Even scholars in politics and foreign affairs are beginning to take note. For example, author and *New York Times* columnist David Brooks declares himself to be a "recovering secularist":

Like a lot of people these days, I'm a recovering secularist. Until September 11 I accepted the notion that is a world became richer and better educated, it becomes less religious. . . . It's now clear that the secularization theory is untrue. . . . We are living through one of the great periods of scientific progress in the creation of wealth. At the same time, we're in the midst of a religious boom. . . . Islam is surging. Orthodox Judaism is growing among young people, and Israel has gotten more religious as it has become more affluent. The growth of Christianity surpasses that of all other faiths.²¹

Brooks recommends a "six-step program" to "kick the secularist habit," which includes accepting the fact that the secularism of many Western intellectuals is the exception rather than the norm around the globe today and resisting "the impulse to find a materialistic explanation for everything."²² Beyond his tongue-in-cheek quality, Brooks' critique of current foreign affairs policy is urgent and disturbing:

Our foreign-policy elites are at least two decades behind. They go for months ignoring the force of religion; then, when confronted with something inescapably religious, such as the Iranian revolution and the Taliban, they begin talking of religious zealotry and fanaticism, which suddenly explains everything. After a few days of shaking their heads over the fanatics, they revert to their usual secular analyses. We do not have, and sorely need, a mode of analysis that attempts to merge the spiritual and the material.²³

20. Hoover and Johnston, eds., "Religion," 1–2.

21. Brooks, "Kicking the Secularist Habit."

22. Brooks, "Kicking the Secularist Habit."

23. Brooks, "Kicking the Secularist Habit."

Interreligious Peacebuilding. About a decade and a half after its emergence in the late 1990s, a new genre of research, "interreligious peacebuilding," is beginning to bear fruits in the way it influences foreign policy analysts as well as an expanding cohort of sympathetic scholars and students. Pioneers in this genre, such as Douglas Johnston, Scott Appleby, Marc Gopin, John Paul Lederach, and Daniel Philpott, work across several fields and disciplines that were previously siloed: foreign affairs and politics, mediation and peace studies, religious studies and sometimes also anthropology, theology, and sociology and history. Appleby's *The Ambivalence of the Sacred* has served as a breakthrough text for these researchers, introducing what I take to be five leading arguments of a new paradigm in the study of religion and foreign affairs:

(1) *That religion is a unique and ubiquitous dimension of human experience, belief, and practice, displaying features that are irreducible to features of any other aspect of human experience, belief, and practice.*

Public discussion and debate would be improved if we identify religion, in general terms, as "a human response to a reality perceived as sacred. . . . Religion embraces a creed, a code of conduct, and a confessional community. The creed defines a standard of beliefs and values concerning the ultimate origin, meaning, and purpose of life it develops from . . . and finds official expression in doctrines and dogmas."²⁴ In these terms, a "religious community" is one that teaches its members a particular way to respond to the sacred. Such responses are recorded in the community's memory, in its Scriptures and authoritative teachings, and the transmission of this memory from generation to generation constitutes a "living tradition." This tradition authorizes, "argues for," what it means to be socialized as a member of this community. This tradition is "living" because authority is not a static good but an *activity* of argumentation through which each generation restates, reaffirms, and remembers what it means to be a member of this community.

In these terms, peacebuilders can recognize what we call "religion" in the way that a religious community, through all its complexity and pluralism, reauthorizes each generation to articulate what it means to respond to the sacred. Different agencies, including religious groups, can also join forces in projects of religious peacebuilding. By way of illustration, both Powers and Roht-Arriaza cite the peacebuilding practices of the Acholi in northern Uganda. "The Acholi Religious Leaders Peace Initiative in northern Uganda [was] started in 1997 by Anglican, Roman Catholic, Muslim, and Orthodox leaders . . . , [growing] out of their humanitarian aid programs in the camps for the displaced. They used their influence to play a key

24. Appleby, *Ambivalence*, 27.

role in facilitating the peace process between the Ugandan government and the Lord's resistance Army . . . They also formed local and later district-level peace committees to educate their own people about peace building."²⁵

(2) *That each religion and religious group displays some unique features of religious experience, belief, and practice, irreducible to features displayed in other religions or religious groups. The study of religion and religious groups is a study of complexity.*

Religious actors recognize that tradition is pluriform and cumulative, developed in and for concrete and changing situations. Religious traditions are inherently dynamic, comprised of what John Henry Cardinal Newman called "leading ideas," which interact with "a multitude of opinions" and introduce themselves into the "framework and details of social life." This storehouse of religiously approved options is available to religious leaders whenever new circumstances call for change in religious practice. History shows that religious communities, in their self-understanding and in their orientations to the world, change constantly.²⁶

(3) *That the unique features of religions and religious groups tend to be displayed in ways that are specific to certain regions of the world at certain times in relation to certain conditions of social and natural environments. At the same time, the experiences, beliefs, and practices of any religious group also tend to display features that may be observed globally in any groups that espouse a particular religious tradition or sub-tradition.*

Appleby warns against trying to capture the meaning or character of a religion or religious group by identifying it with some intellectual construct or ideal type. Such constructs ignore the great variety of "personalities, behaviors and degrees of religious observance" that characterize most members of even the more militant religious movements.²⁷

(4) *That, contrary to some stereotypes, traditional religions tend to present their elemental beliefs in ambiguous terms and their behavior rules in terms that are "polyvalent" (in terms that carry many types and levels of meaning).*

This argument is of particular importance in SR, because scriptural study across deep religious difference depends, more than anything else,

25. Powers, "Religion and Peacebuilding."

Roht-Arriaza explains that, on a local level, "the Acholi carry out a ceremony called *matu oput*, or drinking the bitter herbs, which involves a recognition of a wrong and reconciliation with the victim's family. A separate ceremony, involving stepping on an egg, is used to cleanse those who have been away from home and allow them to return." Roht-Arriaza, "Human Rights." See Hovil and Quinn, *Working Paper*.

26. Appleby, *Ambivalence*, 32–33.

27. Appleby, *Ambivalence*, 32–33.

on the polyvalence of scriptural words and verses. No matter how much this claim may surprise or challenge contemporary readers, SR scholars are accustomed to seeing the most strictly observant religious teachers read words of Scripture as disclosing a surprisingly broad range of meanings, each appropriate to a different context of reading. Classical and medieval scriptural commentaries offer comparable evidence: the jurist or homilist tends to read a given verse of Scripture as speaking in its unique way to some particular moment of reading in service to some particular community of readers. In Appleby's words, "The ambiguity and internal pluralism of religious traditions invite situational reasoning and pragmatic leadership."²⁸

(5) *That religions are sources of both peace and violence.*

An emergent movement of interreligious peacebuilders recognizes both sides of this argument: that "While . . . there are great untapped resources for peacemaking and conflict resolution in the world's religions, there is also a vast reservoir of texts and traditions ready and waiting to be used to justify the most barbaric acts by modern standards of human rights."²⁹

In sum, a previous century's secularization theory no longer speaks to the realities on the ground. It contradicts contemporary field observations about the way politics actually interacts with religion and religious groups throughout the world. The clearer empirical evidence, today, is that the vast majority of human beings across the globe engages in what we in the West would call "religious" activities. The same lesson applies to programs of peacebuilding: religious beliefs and practices should be numbered among the useful resources for resolving religion-related conflict *as well as* among the likely sources of such conflict.

SR and peacebuilding: Reiterating claims by scholars associated with Appleby's work, SR scholars add that religious actors are more prevalent in human populations than conventional analysts suppose, and this includes populations in Western societies. By "religious actors," I mean individuals who in a time of crisis, tension, or uncertainty, may turn to religious practices and beliefs. By "religious practices and beliefs," I mean practices and beliefs that actors, if asked about the matter, would identify as having been drawn from what most readers of this book would identify as a "religion," including not only what we often call "world religions" and any of their denominations, but also what we might label as a "strange" religion, a "sect" or "cult."

28. Appleby, *Ambivalence*, 32–33.

29. Gopin, "Religion and International Relations," cited in Dubois, "Religion and Peacebuilding," 257.

The hearth of religion, or what is most valued in a religious group's beliefs and practices: SR recognizes unique features of religions that may correspond to what Appleby calls the sacred, but only as named and characterized within each religious community according to its own language tradition. I like to name these unique features *hearth*s, defined loosely as those dimensions of life that members of a religion turn to in times of crisis, tension, or uncertainty in the hope of drawing nearer to the source of their deepest values and identities. Scriptural Reasoning acquires its name from a conspicuous practice in Abrahamic traditions of turning to scriptural texts as a primary means of accessing the hearth of a given religious community. This turning may be enacted through reciting verses, chanting them, studying them, proclaiming what they say, imitating the words or the actions of characters displayed therein, believing what they say, or performing what they command.

When I refer to the "hearth" of a religion, I am not making any claim about what religion or a religion really is or what really are its elemental features. I am, instead, offering a pragmatic or operational claim. Observing some visible behavior I consider religious, for example, I construct a portrait of what might be going on in the world to generate such behavior. On the basis of that portrait, I try to predict what might happen next under certain conditions. If my prediction fails, then I try a new portrait, and so on. If the prediction seems close to what I see next, I treat the portrait as if it were useful in guiding my interactions with the activity/actors in question: useful, but subject to continual adjustment, correction, and refinement. I call the process pragmatic or operational, because, no matter how successful, the portrait has meaning only as an instrument for anticipating behavior, never as the source of an empirical claim about what is out there in the world. In these terms, I have found the portrait of a "hearth" useful for guiding my expectations about certain religious behaviors.

When first adopting this approach, I thought of "hearth" as a central, heated place where family members might gather, first thing, on a cold morning: keeping warm around it, preparing food, and feeling sufficiently comfortable and at ease to share intimate thoughts one with the other. At times I also associated hearth with a bear's den, where mother and cubs share each other's warmth and intimacy. I would imagine that, were an intruder to enter the den, the mother's gentle mood would turn in a heartbeat to a defensive and potentially offensive posture: fearing the intruder and acting to remove the object of fear. I imagined that a human family's morning hearth would operate, analogously, as a refuge where intruders were not expected and where, if they came in, the family's relaxed conversation would be replaced immediately by guarded, defensive postures or, if needed,

aggressive postures. I imagined that, in times of daily stress, members of a religious group might turn to certain dimensions of their religion as a hearth-like source of strength and guidance. I imagined that, in infrequent times of serious social distress, a religious group might turn collectively to hearth-like social/religious institutions and practices, where group teachers and leaders might invoke traditions of deep values and wisdom as sources of comfort and guidance in the face of shared threats.

Over the past eight years, I have found this portrait of hearth quite useful for anticipating what may happen in SR study sessions, for planning and facilitating SR groups, and for co-designing and testing tools for diagnosing noteworthy features of religion-related conflict. I applied the notion of hearth first to scripturally based religions, imagining that devout members might gather around texts of Scripture as they would gather around a hearth, opening their hearts to one another and to the questions and hopes they would bring to the scriptural verses. I assumed that, within each tradition, such study would be an intimate, insider's affair, shielded from outsiders, whose presence would interrupt a group's sense of shared understanding, warmth, and trust. I imagined that, as they engaged outsiders, group members would adopt cooler forms of speech that veiled their intimate beliefs and confessions. This way, I could also make sense of the counterfactual character of SR gatherings, where members of different groups of this kind agreed to sit one next to the other and to share at least some modest elements of their hearths. I could understand why, when first joining an SR-study, traditional devotees would express coolness, distance, and caution toward one another, as if this was no place to share Scripture's intimacies. And I could appreciate how remarkable it was that the vast majority of these groups stayed together long enough that group members began to experience the SR environment as neither home-like nor alien: not a place for either caution and coolness or tradition-specific openheartedness and deep warmth. Most often, the SR environment became an in-between place where individuals came to display some of the warmth they associated with at-home Scripture study integrated with a new kind of interreligious and inter-hearth engagement.

But what of non-scriptural religions or populations for which Scripture no longer displayed hearth-like qualities? I have found it helpful to look within such groups for analogues to the hearth I attributed to traditional gatherings around Scripture. I look for some dimension of material culture that the group values most of all and that serves as a focus of gatherings where group members share instruction about deep values, beliefs, and sources of guidance. I think, for example, of the privileged place of dugout sailing canoes in traditional Micronesian societies and of revered navigators

who chant oral navigational lore to gatherings of sailors. The lore transmits navigational instructions in poetic verse that also delivers political wisdoms and traditional accounts of the gods and the sea spirits. Readers may think of many other examples, from East African cattle-based societies, to devotees of personality cults, to modern Western devotees of the natural world or of theosophy. For each case, I imagine the hearth-centered behavior of those who gather around a group's highly privileged places, actors, and practices. This imagining is not a source of any testable knowledge of "what is really going on" in any group, but it is a resource for generating testable plans for how to anticipate and, where appropriate, respond to group behaviors and intergroup interaction.

SR practice as hearth-to-hearth engagement: I have already noted that religion is a potential source of both peace and violence. Turning toward a religious hearth can open religious practitioners to means of radically changing, refining, reforming, or even transforming or overturning their conventional habits and rules of action and belief. Such change may entail the elimination of tendencies toward hatred or violence, or it may mean upsetting tendencies toward acceptance and tranquility, thereby unleashing unexpected passions of anger or rebellion. The SR account of turning toward such hearths overlaps in many ways with Appleby's account of turning toward the sacred. "Turning" opens capacities to both peace and violence in ways that are somewhat comparable to what Appleby calls the ambiguity of the sacred, opening pathways of many kinds, including peace but also including much else.

The ambiguity or vagueness of religious discourse: The ambiguity of religious belief is among the most powerful reasons that religion is as much a resource for peace as for violence. In the context of SR, the terms I tend to use for ambiguity are *vagueness* and *polyvalence*. Polyvalence is another way of referring to the vagueness of words: that words will appear to have not just one but potentially many meanings. This does not mean that the words are necessarily confusing, only that readers must enter into a more intimate relationship with the words to discover which meaning is active at which time, and in which place and context of reading.

In these terms, the ambiguity of religious discourse is its vagueness, not its generality. The force of Appleby's account is to correct the broad misconception that religions imposed hard and fast doctrines and rules. People tend to confuse the authority of religious doctrines and rules with their generality. Charles Peirce offers more intuitive definitions. He suggests that to speak *generally*—as in "the wagon is red"—is to allow listeners to further determine the generality as they see fit (imagining this or that type of red), which implies that a generality retains its force whatever the listener thinks

and independently of any relationship to the listener. To speak vaguely, however—as in "*somebody* in this room is smoking"—is *not* to lend such freedom to the listener; it is to claim that both speaker and listener are constrained by the facts of the case, in this case by the character of whoever is smoking. Vague claims thereby engage both speaker and listener in a binding, two-way relationship: something, somewhere is what it is, and we must both work to find out where it is. The expected response to a general claim is therefore either "okay, I get it," or "no, I don't think that is true." But the expected response to a vague claim is to engage this speaker in a long series of questions, which may lead to a long series of conversations that would help both speaker and listener to get closer to the intended object, which is to see it less vaguely.

Readers may find it odd that Peirce associates vagueness with both empirical knowledge and polyvalence. If I say something in order to draw your attention to something out there in the world, why should I encourage your trying out a range of different ways of understanding what I have said? For Peirce, this is because I do not want you to be misled by my words, which may mean something different to you than they do to me. My goal is to utter words that will bring you into some relationship (of seeing, knowing, or engaging) with that thing out there rather than with my words alone. I therefore encourage you to try out different meanings of my words until you come to engage the thing that I hoped you would engage (and, yes, this engagement may include your telling me that the thing really isn't what I thought it was). What, however, if I seek to draw your attention to something that is not literally visible? I may, for example, hope that you will see that Jack loves Jill, or that some business transaction was corrupt, or that God is really in this place, or that this scriptural verse has this meaning. The primary subjects and arguments of this book concern such cases: claims about what is purportedly real or out there but not literally visible. I will argue in the book that such claims share two characteristic marks. On the one hand, such claims call for polyvalent reading just as in empirical claims. On the other hand, the words that deliver such claims are not strictly instrumental as they appear to be in most empirical claims. Drawing on Peirce's work, I will argue that these two marks are integrated only through the community and tradition of discourse that speaker and listener must share if they are to share relationship to the object of such claims. I attribute such a community and tradition to the *hearth* of any religious group. In these terms, a claim about invisible realities is truth functional only with respect to such a hearth and is not truth functional for participants who gather around different hearths. Under conventional conditions, different hearths offer incommensurable contexts for evaluating the meanings and

judging the truth or falsity of claims about invisible realities. While it cannot erase that type of incommensurability, SR introduces a third context for engaging claims across the borders of different communities and traditions of discourse. Different from the context for engaging empirical claims and the context for engaging claims about the reality of invisibles, this third context pertains strictly to claims about invisibles introduced across the borders of religious groups and their hearths.

Postponing most comments to the following chapters, I will offer only a few words about the place of vagueness and polyvalence in this third context, of which the prototype is the setting of SR. SR tends to engage participants from very different and often antagonistic text traditions in increasingly binding relations as co-readers. When first entering an SR circle, traditionally religious participants tend to bring with them a presumption of monovalence: that they know the meanings of individual terms and verses in their traditional readings of Scripture and that, therefore, those who offer different meanings have misread their texts. In the early years of SR, I did not realize that this presumption was most often inoperative back home. Around their traditional hearths, the same participants tended to exercise polyvalent readings, challenging one another to double-check their assumptions that a meaning appropriate to a particular setting was also appropriate to another one. I gradually adopted the hypothesis that traditional readers turned to monovalent readings in strange settings, away from the protection of traditional hearths and that they applied this strategy to readings both of their own and of other text traditions. This hypothesis contributed to my initial idea of "hearth" and to a theory about the role of polyvalence in SR: that, in settings like SR, monovalent reading accompanies both cool and hot, or stressful, relations among members of different religious groups and that non-monovalent reading accompanies a warming of cool relations and a cooling off of hot ones. I theorize that such polyvalence does not, however, imply any loosening of devotion to a traditional religion or to the authority of Scripture. To the contrary, it signals intimacy with Scripture and with those who share in reading Scripture: an intimacy that frees traditional readers to experiment, modestly, with Scripture's range of potential meaning so that, when the context of reading calls for decision or action, readers have greater trust that their context-specific decisions and commitments are guided by the most reliable reading.

I theorize that there is a distinct difference between the intimacy achieved around the traditional hearth and the much more modest intimacy achieved in long-term SR groups. The traditional hearth nurtures the greatest intimacy members of a religious group experience with Scripture and with their fellow readers. A successful SR group nurtures something different: a

new space unlike the traditional hearth as well as the traditional experience of engagement outside the hearth. The new space of SR nurtures something closer to this: a secure environment in which a few (five to ten) members of different traditions allow one another, within a discrete period of time in a discrete setting, to read scriptural excerpts independently of their implications for decision, commitment, or action. There is no explicit discussion of this independence and no strictly shared assumption about how one's individual reading in SR compares with one's reading at home. I imagine that SR works best when the topic I have just raised is not on the table as part of SR study. Such theorizing may in fact interrupt the modest intimacy of this third space, either by stimulating traditional fears or cooling the modest warmth that participants gradually feel toward one another within the group. I imagine that the group's "modest intimacy" is unique to the SR setting and that it may concern relations among the text traditions themselves as well as among the individuals sitting around the table. Individuals may come to experience various kinds of interpersonal warmth and cross-border adventure and discovery. But, to understand SR more deeply, I think we should also think beyond individual experience and discuss what it may mean for different traditions of language and meaning to interact one with the other: that is, for interaction to take place on the level of system and discourse beyond the nodes of our bodies' neurological and protoplasmic activity.

I think of SR's modest intimacy as taking place most significantly in the interaction among languages and systems of action and belief. I therefore think of polyvalence and vagueness as characteristics of relations between individuals and systems of language and meaning, and I think of such relations as the "third context" and "third space" for giving, receiving, and adjudicating claims about what is real and invisible. In such a third space, typical of SR, meanings are vague and polyvalent because they are entertained independently of the spheres of decision and action that necessarily reduce Scripture's polyvalence to monovalence in order to serve the needs of this-worldly behavior. Such needs arise in spacetime-specific contexts and require spacetime-specific judgments. Such judgments are monovalent, but only for a given spacetime context. Such monovalence cannot extend to a religious group's system of discourse and practice of scriptural reading in general, since the monovalence is not a characteristic of religious authority, but only of the specificity of decision and action in worldly time and space.