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Jews, Christians and Muslims reading scripture together

They met at the annual Society for Scriptural Reasoning conference held at Huron University College in London, Ontario in Canada at the end of June. Over 60 participants from North America of Jewish, Christian and Muslim faiths gathered to study their scriptures together. The conference sought to teach how this practice of mutual scripture study works, and to foster friendships as participants are encouraged to keep meeting and studying together on a regular basis.

The Society for Scriptural Reasoning was founded over a decade ago when a group of Jewish and Christian academics sat down together to read one another's scriptures in a spirit of mutual respect and curiosity. Muslims joined them a few years afterward, bringing Qur'anic perspectives into the conversation.

The purpose is "not to come to an agreement about the 'true meaning' of the passages" but to "strive to learn more about the ways we understand our own traditions and the way others understand us," writes Peter Ochs, President of the Society for Scriptural Reasoning and a philosophy professor at the University of Virginia.

For example, a Jewish member of the group read the Christian epistle 1 Corinthians 3:1 in which the Apostle Paul tells the 1st Century CE Christian community of Corinth, "And so, brothers and sisters, I could not speak to you as spiritual people, but rather as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ." She then asked, "What does it mean to be 'in Christ'?" Each Christian in the group offered their perspective, and the Muslim discussants joined in the lively discussion on whether faith is characterised by personal individual practices, communal activity, lifestyle, beliefs or rituals?

Formerly a Jew but now an agnostic, another participant shared that she still practices Jewish prayer rituals, specifically a special prayer when putting on her shoes in the morning, and said that on the days she doesn't, she feels off-centre. A member of a Catholic monastic order identified with her, stating that when he did not practice his fixed-hour prayers, known as the Liturgy of the Hours - morning, noon and night - he also felt he lacked inner peace throughout the day.

The participants then read the Qur'anic verses 17:78-111 together and found the Qur'an also outlines a practice of fixed-hour prayer. And while some participants appreciated the physical aspect of prayer rituals, others squirmed at the notion of fixed-hour prayers with written prayer forms.

This kind of respectful disagreement, often accompanied by lively argumentation, is fostered by the practice of scriptural reasoning.

Some first-time participants fear that interfaith scriptural readings require people to eliminate or ignore their faith differences. But in the meetings they are often relieved to discover that listening to someone of another faith study their scriptures actually helps them listen more carefully to their scriptures as well. For example, Jewish and Muslim participants read the Apostle Paul's letter to the Corinthians, in which he criticises members of the early church community as being "people of the flesh...behaving according to human inclinations" (1 Corinthians 3:3), a passage that often leaves the modern day Christian chafing. The passage took on new importance as the other readers discussed Paul's attitude towards the body.

How did he understand the body, a Jewish reader queried?

A Muslim reader wondered how Paul could expect people not to have human inclinations.

In this way, a mutual wrestling with the text unfolded around the table and the participants discovered different traditions' notions of the relationship between body and spirit.

Scriptural reasoning provides hospitality between people of the Abrahamic faiths because it expects participants to have a respectful relationship with one another and pay careful attention to one another's texts, and it provides a place to meet for sustained conversation. Participants find their predispositions and cultural assumptions about each other are exposed and, even though it might be difficult at times, the shared study keeps them together.

In a world that often sees scripture as justifying violence and division, the practice of scriptural reasoning fosters an Abrahamic collegiality around that which matters most: scripture.

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