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On Being Together

The Role of Lived Experience in Scriptural Reasoning

Rebecca Skreslet Hernandez, Margaret Beaufort Institute of Theology,
Cambridge, UK

Abstract

In the multicultural city of London, there is a widely acknowledged need for context-based, grassroots approaches to interfaith engagement that take local communities and practice into consideration. As a tool for interreligious dialogue that calls for members of different faith traditions to read and reflect on each other's scripture together, Scriptural Reasoning (SR) is very much a work in progress. While scripture and textual reasoning are at the heart of SR, I argue that the practice is most effective when discussions go beyond recitations of doctrine and tap into the lived experience of the participants, engaging them in both mind and body. This research draws on empirical data gathered from more than a dozen SR events in northwest, central, and east London. Looking at the practice of SR through the lens of lived experience highlights areas of tension and ambiguity that may be problematic and disruptive to the goals of SR but can, at the same time, hold creative potential that might ultimately enhance the SR experience. Issues of presence and embodiment, authenticity, and authority emerge as essential to the processes of world-making and boundary-crossing that represent both the risk and the promise of SR as lived experience.

Keywords: dialogue, Scriptural Reasoning, experience, authority, embodiment

Introduction

In an ambitious report entitled *Beyond Dialogue? Interfaith Engagement in Delhi, Doha and London*, Woolf Institute researchers John Fahy and Jan-Jonathan Bock (2018) assess the past, present, and future of the global interfaith movement. They observe that, while formal

dialogue and theological discussion have a role to play in interfaith engagement, there is a widely acknowledged need for context-based, grassroots approaches that take local concerns into consideration. The authors make a number of key recommendations, one of which responds to the critique that interfaith work tends to favor an essentialized idea of “religion” as theology while devoting less attention to religion-as-practice (Fahy and Bock 2018, 75). They suggest that an approach to interfaith engagement rooted in the historical, political, and social realities of particular communities will be more effective in bringing in lay people who may not be as interested in theological debates but who are in tune with the needs and concerns of people within their communities.

But what is this “lived religion” or “lived faith” and how do these concepts translate into a methodology for interfaith engagement in diverse and divided communities? Lived religion as a scholarly focus within the broadly defined discipline of religious studies emerged in the last few decades to shift emphasis to embodied practice and lived experience as key to understanding how people find value and meaning in their own lives and in relation to others as part of complex societies. This focus on practice has attracted scholars from a variety of disciplines including history and the sociology and anthropology of religion and has revitalized the use of qualitative methods (such as ethnography, participant observation, and field interviews) to examine the religious, the secular, and everything in between.¹ Complementary subfields have sprung up in recent years, including material and spatial approaches² as well as a trend focusing on everyday life and the strategies and tactics (following De Certeau 1984) that people use daily to negotiate their own fluctuating identities and to respond creatively to those around them.³

David Cheetham (2013b) connects Michel de Certeau’s theory of the strategies and tactics that one uses to navigate through the perplexing pluralities of everyday life while striving to maintain a sense of self to the idea of a meeting of “ordinary” religious people. He reflects that in the very “ordinariness” of such engagement “there is perhaps more room for liminality, provisionality, or perhaps even ontological ambiguity” (Cheetham 2013b, 78) and that it is in such a space that fruitful interreligious relationships can be nurtured. In the final chapter of *Ways of Meeting and the Theology of Religions*, Cheetham turns his attention to the Scriptural

¹ Foundational works in the study of lived religion include Hall 1997, Orsi 2005, and McGuire 2008.

² Manuel Vásquez (2011) provides a critical overview of literature within the academic study of religion that takes “embodiment” and “emplacement” as a starting point of analysis. Spatial approaches, for example, look at how physical and non-physical boundaries are constructed and transcended, how networks are used to connect people and causes, and how spatial dynamics relate to issues of power (see Knott 2005; Williams and Ruparell 2014; Tweed 2006; and Massey 1993). Wuthnow (2020) surveys practice-based approaches to the study of religion drawing from a variety of disciplines. Wuthnow’s theoretical inquiry focuses on intersecting areas of situations, intentions, feelings, and bodies.

³ For studies of religion and secularity in everyday life see, for example, Ammerman 2007 and 2014 and the essays in Schielke and Debevec 2012. This focus on practice and everyday life and on ambiguity as opposed to coherence is seen as correcting an overemphasis on formal institutions, clerical authorities, abstract doctrine, and interiorized beliefs. These aspects of religious life are not ignored completely, however, and several scholars have made compelling arguments for the relevance of qualitative methods to theology and ethics. See, for example, Whitmore 2007; Pandian 2008; Mahmood 2005; Hirschkind 2006; Adams and Elliott 2000; and the essays in Lambek 2010; Scharen and Vigen 2011; and Ward 2012.

Reasoning movement as a form of meeting that seeks to create just this kind of productive liminal space – a fluid, in-between space unbound by theological prescription in which participants are free to engage creatively with the other on an (ideally) equal footing and in a spirit of friendship. While Cheetham’s work provides a rich description of the theory and method of the practice of SR, it provides few contextual empirical examples of how the practice connects with the actual lived experience of its practitioners.⁴

This paper takes up the challenge of approaching interfaith encounters from the perspective of faith as lived and experienced by people within distinct social contexts drawing on empirical examples from fieldwork. In the practice of SR, members of different faith traditions read and reflect on scriptural texts together with the aim of gaining a better understanding of their own traditions and those of others. Shifting the focus to the experiential aspects of a scripture-based activity has the effect of bringing out some of the potential paradoxes, tensions, and ambiguities existing beneath the surface of SR. I suggest that these tensions do not necessarily inhibit the goals of SR but can be used productively and creatively (as Cheetham hopes). The research looks at three aspects of experience that produce tension in SR: presence, authenticity, and authority. The first section concerns the spatial, sensory, and physical factors mediating the experience of SR and argues that these factors play an important role in creating a sense of familiarity and unfamiliarity and can be used as a bridge to open up discussions of identity, history, culture, and tradition. The second aspect touches on the representational, aesthetic, and political aspects of the SR experience, while the third aspect engages with questions of how power dynamics play out in exclusive and inclusive uses of language and in the ways in which experts (including academics) position themselves in relation to the texts. I introduce the three sections with a vignette titled “Into the Wilderness” illustrating the metaphorical and experiential process of world-making and boundary-crossing that characterizes the practice of SR and in which the paradoxes and potentials of SR find space to flourish and to grow.

Context and Methodology

The research draws on empirical data collected from September 2017 to August 2018 at interfaith events in east, west central, and northwest London. I participated in over a dozen SR events over a twelve-month period and conducted informal interviews with the organizers of the events. Ethnography as a research tool is not assumed to represent the dispassionate observation of a subject by a researcher, but rather a mutual negotiation of meaning by the

⁴ Cheetham does make reference to an initiative at his own university in Birmingham to open up an SR discussion to Hindus, Buddhists, and Sikhs under the theme “What is a Good City?” (2013b, 189–90). Sian Nicholas (2016) describes another project also in the “super diverse” city of Birmingham commissioned by the Bishop of Birmingham in 2014 to bring members of the community together for a series of conversations following the tensions stirred up by the “Trojan Horse” allegations against Birmingham schools. The Birmingham Conversations are interesting because lived faith was instrumental to both the methodology of the meetings themselves as well as to the subsequent evaluation and analysis. Nicholas (2016, 90–91) writes that the purpose of the conversations was not to achieve consensus or peace-building, but “to provide a space for discussion amongst people of faith that was missing in the Birmingham context, about issues that directly impacted their lives, from the perspective of their daily practice of religion and culture.”

researcher and participants as part of a joint enterprise.⁵ The cosmopolitan city of London provides a dynamic environment for interfaith initiatives with residents of inner and outer London being above the national average both in terms of faith commitment and religious diversity (Fahy and Bock 2018, 49). Government-sponsored and community-led efforts to promote boundary-crossing social cohesion in London neighborhoods are ongoing and remain often quite fraught (Fahy and Bock 2018, 51).

The events described here primarily follow a format in which representatives of the three Abrahamic faiths (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) introduce texts from their traditions relating to a particular theme (for example, “the afterlife” or “hope”) followed by discussion often in small groups. Although SR is a form of interfaith engagement pioneered in the 1990s by academics at the University of Virginia and the University of Cambridge and continues to flourish in academic circles, the events that form the basis of this research are not academic in nature but are rather aimed at members of the local communities. The people asked to lead discussion are local faith leaders who tend to be active members of their congregations. The events take place in places of worship and community centers with the location often influencing the nature of the event (as will become clear in the discussion). The majority of SR participants tend to be Christian, female, and over the age of forty. The evening meetings in particular tend to attract educated professionals who have a strong sense of both faith commitment and civic duty.

As the name implies, scripture is at the heart of SR. Equally central to the process, I suggest, are the people reading the scripture and doing the reasoning. SR is best described as a practice involving embodied individuals engaging with one another in real time. As Marianne Moyaert (2017, 86) reminds us, “Interreligious learning is first and foremost a meeting between *persons*, real people with hopes and fears, dreams and disappointments, life experiences and prejudices, which they bring to the table in the form of small and grand narratives.” It is therefore entirely appropriate and even desirable to look at the practice of SR through the lens of lived faith making use of qualitative methods of observation and analysis. Although each SR event takes place at a discrete place and time, the practice of SR should be viewed as an ongoing process that participants bring into their own lives even after a particular discussion has concluded. In their introduction to *What Matters? Ethnographies of Value in a Not So Secular Age*, Courtney Bender and Ann Taves (2012, 13) write that one of the strengths of studies of lived religion is an “emphasis on practice as processes” or, put differently, “a focus on *practicing* and the dynamic social processes wherein experience, authority, and creativity are reproduced in ritual, actions, strategies, and habits in both embodied and discursive senses.”

Vignette: Into the Wilderness

It was a Monday morning in September and I stood outside a nondescript office block in Fitzrovia after walking from the station at King’s Cross. I hesitated in front of the buzzer wondering if I had arrived too early or if this was even the right place. There was no indication

⁵ John Swinton (2012, 81) reminds us that ethnography is “first and foremost an interpretive enterprise” and that the “act of interpretation is necessarily value-laden.” I did not seek to bracket off my own identity and assumptions as part of my participation in these events. Indeed, my own positionality was instrumental in the interpretation as I hope will be made clear by the evidence presented.

from the outside that the building contained a synagogue or Jewish community center. A man walked up and I asked him if he had come for the Scriptural Reasoning group. He confirmed that this was the case and buzzed us both in. A receptionist arrived and led us up some stairs and into a small kitchen area where a few other people were chatting. There was a man wearing a clerical collar and a woman wearing an embroidered hat whose accent suggested that she was American. The man was Rev. L, the Anglican organizer of the group, and the woman was Rabbi J, the Jewish presenter. Next to arrive was Sister L, a Catholic nun, who would be presenting from a Christian perspective.⁶ Rev. L explained that the invited Muslim presenter had a last-minute emergency and would not be joining us. Altogether the group ended up being seven women and two men. We proceeded into a meeting space where a wide square table and chairs had been set up. It took me a minute to realize that this room was the worship space of the synagogue. The ark containing the Torah scrolls was closed and the building was quiet apart from the sounds of a cleaner mopping the floors with a strong-smelling disinfectant.⁷ Rev L provided some background on the group for the new participants and asserted that each person was under “strict rules” to introduce him or herself and to indicate where he or she is coming from. The purpose of the discussion, he said, is not to win an argument but to share with others. The normal practice of the group is to have each speaker talk for ten to fifteen minutes with the Jewish speaker first followed by the Christian and Muslim speakers. We then observed a minute of silence to remember victims of recent terror attacks in the UK and around the world.

When the silence ended, Rabbi J produced a ram’s horn (*shofar*) that she said is used to mark the beginning of the High Holy Days. She blew into the horn making a clear high-pitched tone and then passed the shofar around so that we could each feel it and try it out for ourselves. She had selected several passages from the Hebrew Bible and from rabbinical literature on the chosen theme of “wilderness.” She commented that her eyes have been bothering her a lot lately and had printed the texts in large print. In spite of these struggles, she persisted in reading aloud a portion of the Hebrew from the book of Numbers (*B’midbar* in Torah). The rabbi began her commentary by discussing the etymology of the Hebrew word *midbar* and spoke of the wilderness as an “ownerless place” and of the Jewish God as a “desert God” who separates and sustains order from chaos. The wilderness might inspire fear but also awe and a feeling of

⁶ The names of the individuals have been anonymized out of respect for their privacy. It should be noted that the interfaith events in which I participated are open to the public and that I announced my own presence to the organizers prior to the events.

⁷ I attended another event at the same venue about four months later in which SR participants were invited to attend the worship service prior to the meeting. Even though it was the same location, the atmosphere on this occasion was completely different. There were over 50 people in attendance and the space was packed. The congregation seemed pleased to have so many visitors and went out of their way to show hospitality and to encourage the guests to eat the ample food provided. They had a volunteer working “security” at the door, but towards the end of the evening the rabbi was informed of a security breach where it appeared that the lock on the outer door had been sawed through. The rabbi said that the police had been called and that we couldn’t leave until they arrived. The organizer took this to mean that no one could leave the building, so she extended the final discussion beyond the end time for the event. Finally, someone asked if everyone had to stay or just the leadership of the synagogue and it was determined that the rest of us could leave. As I left, I thanked the rabbi who was visibly flustered and upset by the security problem. She was worried about securing the door and was asking people to borrow their bike locks.

being part of creation. The wilderness represents a place of transformation; it was during their desert wanderings that the Jews who had been liberated in Egypt took on a new identity as the people of Israel. For this reason, the rabbi explained, the wilderness texts are usually read during Shavuot, a holiday commemorating the reception of the Torah on Mount Sinai. She mentioned that some Jews consider this to be a physical act involving stone tablets while others see it as less literal and more symbolic.

Sister L introduced her presentation on the Christian texts by situating it within the same “general terrain and framework” as the Jewish texts on wilderness. The contrast, she reflected, is that the Christian emphasis is more on the call of an individual person rather than of a people like Israel. She focused on the example of John the Baptist as a “liminal” figure and on the example of the temptations of Christ on the mountain. In these cases, the wilderness is a place of discernment where one grapples with one’s own demons and sinfulness so that one can be prepared to lead in active ministry. She suggested that the temptations of Christ struck her as being very masculine temptations. Would temptations of power appeal to women in the same way since women are already used to having limited access to power? For example, Catholics know there will not be a female pope any time soon. So, what are the temptations for women? Questions of ego affect everyone though they might be expressed in different ways. Rabbi J commented that she has never felt tempted by worldly power but does at times feel tempted by despair.

Towards the end of the discussion, Rev. L made the observation that crossing into unfamiliar territory that is not one’s home could be an apt metaphor for interfaith experiences.

Experience and Presence

In the case studies presented in Bender and Taves’ (2012, 20) edited volume, “experience” is not a passive encounter but “a fertile and contentious space in which processes of valuation and ways of apprehending what matters come into view.” The participants in the studies show a high degree of self-reflexivity as well as a willingness to shape their experiences while being able to tolerate ambiguity and doubt. These observations seem to resonate quite well with the SR experience in general and in the particular encounter narrated above. Rev. L made explicit the similarity between crossing into the wilderness as a biblical theme and the experience of interfaith engagement. The image of the tent (with its implied connection to the biblical figure of Abraham) is one that is invoked frequently to convey the transience and provisionality of SR (Ford and Pecknold 2006). Thomas Tweed’s (2006) image of crossing and dwelling is particularly relevant to the kind of place-making and movement that characterizes the ongoing practice of SR. There is risk and even fear involved in stepping outside of one’s comfortable assumptions, crossing boundaries and entering into unfamiliar territory.

Drawing on the philosophy of Paul Ricoeur, Moyaert (2017, 81) rejects the idea that the human subject is “a mere product of its historical, cultural, social, and religious context, deprived of the freedom to act as a self-reflexive being responsible for his actions.” Although self-reflexivity is part of being human, Moyaert (2017, 86) sees it as a competency that can be learned and cultivated through dialogue and “in conversation with the other.” The theme of understanding gained through experience and practice came up many times in the SR discussions. At a February meeting of Rev. L’s northwest London group, participants addressed the topic of “God language” by reflecting on how our understanding and

relationship with God is mediated through the language that we use to describe the divine. The Christian speaker (a clergyman in the Reformed tradition) put forward the rhetorical question of which came first, Exodus or Genesis, to suggest that the experience of the Exodus had to come first in order to enable the Israelites to think about the nature of the universe as reflected in Genesis.

As noted above, the practical wisdom and self-critical competency that can (ideally) be gained through the SR experience depends largely on the people in the room, their physical presence, as well as their willingness to engage with the theme, with the texts, and with each other in conversation. As Rumea Ahmed (2013, 178) puts it: “This fellowship cannot be captured in written form, it must be experienced; requiring time, energy, and openness from all participants.” This means that hospitality and access are very important to SR. In order for the exercise to be successful, participants must feel that they are in a “safe” space in which they can share their views openly. At the same time, synagogues in London that I visited all had security measures in place (as did a few of the churches) with the implication being that crime (and even hate crime) is a significant consideration. In the event narrated above, the absence of the Muslim participant made the full task of SR impossible.⁸ At other times, the disproportionate number of Christian participants and scarcity of Muslim and Jewish participants resulted in awkward shuffling and in people having to raise their hands according to which tradition (if any) they identify with. Negotiating one’s presence at such an event can hold powerful implications for the dynamic of the encounter that goes beyond the choice whether or not to attend. For example, in a meeting of the west central London group, the timing of the meeting was changed to accommodate the new Muslim speaker (after the original invitee had cancelled). The imam arrived ten minutes late, delivered his presentation, took a few questions, and then left abruptly to catch a train. In this case, though the Muslim voice was represented in the event, the imam did not hear the other speakers and thus did not engage with the Jewish and Christian traditions, which is normally the intention in an SR meeting.

The question of presence and embodiment, while key to the practice of SR and to interfaith engagement more generally, can also be a source of tension (as hinted above). Factors relating to body, mind, and sensory culture can facilitate the crossing of physical, intellectual, and spiritual boundaries but they can also place limitations and barriers of their own.⁹ In the event narrated above, Rabbi J struggled with a vision problem but did not let it prevent her from performing her duty as a rabbi and as an SR leader. In an event with the east London organization, an elderly man in my small group discussion was very hard of hearing

⁸ The group tried to compensate for this gap at the next meeting where the Muslim presenter addressed the theme of wilderness before moving on to the theme assigned for that session. In her study of an American interfaith book group, Louise Gramstrup (2017) observes that the dearth of Muslim participants became a frequent subject of discussion and concern within the group’s leadership. This “missing Muslims” discourse accentuates the tension that “exists between the creative individual approaches to religious otherness that sometimes succeed in transcending difference and the leadership discourse that rigidly positions Muslims as different to non-Muslims” (Gramstrup 2017, 349–50).

⁹ For example, in their study of a Philadelphia women’s group, Mara Brecht (2013) and Jeannine Hill Fletcher (2013) find that incorporating personal narrative and embodied exercises (such as sharing a Seder meal) into the practice of the group allowed them to make an epistemological shift from focusing on beliefs as products to beliefs as processes, which influenced the spiritual formation of the women in the group.

and was unable to catch the majority of the conversation. Does such an impairment make someone less “present” in an interfaith encounter? What if a participant is able to hear but is unwilling to listen to what is being said? Rabbi J’s shofar reminded us in a visual, auditory, and tactile way not only of current and future events but also of a long tradition and heritage as well as the practical mediation of a collective identity.

Similarly, the dress and appearance of participants entered into the discussion. In a meeting of Rev. L’s northwest London group that took place at an Islamic foundation, a senior member and a more junior affiliate of the Foundation led the discussion on the theme of foundational texts from a Muslim perspective. On this occasion, both women were wearing mostly black and each wore a hijab covering her hair.¹⁰ The embodied presence of the two Muslim women gave rise to a discussion about the difference between a hijab and a niqab, the relationship between religion and culture, and individual and communal expressions of identity. One participant observed that in contemporary society (especially in the west), expression of identity is often understood to be individualistic in nature and not necessarily bound by the expectations of a community. At the same time, though, one cannot escape the fact that individual identity must be relational on some level as well as being linked to larger social processes. The two women found themselves having to convey not only their personal views but, in a sense, to represent Muslim women in London and across the world.

It is understood that one’s own identity as well as one’s relation to a “community” and place within society at large is not static but in flux (on the contradictions of “community,” see Dwyer 1999; also Prideaux 2009 and Chivallon 2001). The space in which people come together to engage in SR is one in which social and power dynamics are constantly shifting. The effort to orient and situate oneself in relation to others transcends the context of SR and takes into account the concerns of local communities, the “global” city of London, and greater anxieties about the future of multicultural Britain. Though the term “event” as in an “interfaith event” implies a discrete action bound by space and time, spaces can be conceived of less as passive containers and more as active and dynamic processes connected to the wider world (Knott 2005; Massey 1993). Indeed, David Ford (Ford and Pecknold 2006, 20) suggests that the promise of SR lies in its potential to transform both the individual and society at large, thus enabling people to “be exemplary citizens of the twenty-first century, seeking the public good for the sake of God and God’s peaceful purposes.”

It is interesting to note that the discussion of religious dress and identity in the Islamic foundation event followed a presentation by Rev. L on Christian foundational texts in which he spoke about the incarnation and the idea of “the Word made flesh” as a concept central to Christian faith. Robert Orsi (2016, 37) has illustrated in vivid terms how the concept of

¹⁰ I witnessed the junior member (Sister M) speak on two other occasions. In the first meeting (also in the context of SR), she was wearing hijab and in the second meeting (an informal discussion as part of a speaker series) she did not but had a scarf draped loosely across her shoulders. She explained in this meeting that she does not normally cover her hair and considers the veil to be more of a cultural practice than an aspect of worship. In a meeting of the west central London group towards the end of a discussion on religious law, a man of Muslim background asserted that the Sharia is “what we have to do” and used the woman wearing hijab in our group as evidence of this claim. She then spoke up and said that for her as a convert to Islam the covering is really a personal choice more than anything else.

presence has been a driving force in the devotional practices and experience of American Catholics and even goes so far as to say that the “divide between presence and absence, the literal and the metaphorical, the real and the symbolic, the natural and the supernatural, defines the modern temperament.” Matthew Engelke (2007) has written about God’s presence and absence as one of the key problems occupying Christian theologians and philosophers and has studied how African Christians address this problem in their lived experience today. Also drawing on fieldwork in Africa, Birgit Meyer (2011) examines how objects and images act as “sensational forms,” mediating absence (as she puts it) by rendering the invisible visible. In the context of the SR events in which I participated, I wonder whether objects organic to or introduced into the space act as “sensational forms” in the way that Meyer has theorized.¹¹ The sound of the ram’s horn piercing the silence and the hijabs of the female Muslim speakers could be seen as authenticated embodiments of a religious history and experience that connects the individuals in the room to an unseen presence that is greater than themselves in that moment.

Experience and Authenticity

The high degree of self-reflexivity amongst SR participants reinforces the idea that SR does not represent a natural interchange of people of different faiths but acts rather as a kind of contrived performance in which participants dress in symbolic costumes and use props to dramatic effect. Though this perception of SR is perhaps an exaggeration, there is no doubt an aspect of aesthetic performativity to the practice of SR that extends to other types of interfaith meetings as well. David Cheetham raises an interesting point when he proposes the idea of an aesthetic politics of religion in which the type of representation that takes place during SR could apply to political representation in the public sphere in a broader sense as well. Cheetham (2013a, 307) suggests that the potential value of the SR dynamic lies in “modelling a relationship” and that it “is not about embodying doctrine or inhabiting a precise calibrated theological system, but concerns exhibiting a certain style and purpose.” At the same time, the self-selected group of people who regularly take part in SR and other interfaith events in London is a small fraction of those in the city who identify with one of the three Abrahamic faiths and is even less representative of citizens of the UK in general. Cheetham (2013a, 310) responds to this consideration by suggesting that rather than detracting from its potential relevance in the public sphere, the type of representation that takes place in SR allows its practitioners to act as vicarious “classics” where the “challenge for the expert improvisers or ‘reasoners’ of their traditions is to illuminate, exhibit or unveil the possibilities for healing and repair as representatives who vicariously venture into new territories on our behalf.”¹²

Luke Bretherton (2011) presents a different interpretation of the civic and representational aspects of SR and of interfaith relations in Britain in the post-war era. He makes the point that interfaith work, much like community organizing, is not cut off from the

¹¹ Meyer (2009, 13) defines sensational forms as “relatively fixed, authorized modes of invoking and organizing access to the transcendental, thereby creating and sustaining links between believers in the context of particular religious power structures.”

¹² Cheetham’s use of the term “classics” also seems to connect with Moyaert’s (2017, 91) advice to her students who have difficulty accepting “the sacredness of the others’ scriptures to those others” to “treat the scriptures as classics, like the Greek myths or humanist poetry, or even philosophical texts, which they also read.”

state and market forces but is rather shaped by those factors. He therefore sees interfaith initiatives in the contemporary context as primarily civic and political in practice rather than religious or humanitarian (Bretherton 2011, 346). The UK government has a vested interest in promoting faith-based groups as part of an active civil society (in which “social cohesion” is one of the stated goals) as well as to fill in the lapses of the welfare system and to counter extremism and terrorism. The danger for religious groups, according to Bretherton (2011, 355–56), is that religion is coopted by the state, reduced to multicultural communalism, or commodified as just another lifestyle choice on the market. The solution is for religious groups to engage in shared political action in pursuit of common interests in “the form of a civic or public friendship” (Bretherton 2011, 358). Again, similar to community organizing, religious groups can pursue a “politics of the common good” by cultivating joint civic practices of listening, of fostering a connection to a local place, and of building lasting institutions (Bretherton 2011, 365).

The representational, political, and civic dimensions of SR expressed themselves repeatedly and in interesting ways in the events in which I was a participant observer. Indeed, the state and its interests was never far from our discussions. Sister A, the senior speaker from the Islamic foundation, was awarded a British order of chivalry (MBE) for her services to “community cohesion.”¹³ In a meeting of the east London group for which the theme was rights and duties in society, a popular local imam decided to frame his presentation in a very personal way, speaking passionately about the pride and the pain of his lived experience as a British Muslim. Imam M recalled first arriving in the UK as a student in 1970. When he applied for naturalization, a policeman came to his house and commented that at least he was “not dirty like those Pakistanis.” His house was attacked every day by his neighbors to the point where he was living in fear. The discrimination hurts, he said, but in spite of all this he is grateful to God that he is a British Muslim in a country where there are rights and opportunities. Muslims have a responsibility to be law-abiding citizens and are not forced to drink alcohol or to do anything unlawful. They should work for the wellbeing of all communities. He remembered his oath of allegiance to Queen Elizabeth II and asked how many other people receive a Christmas card from the Queen every year. The imam lamented that he will always be labelled as “the bloody foreigner” due to his accent rather than being judged according to his longstanding service to the nation as a British citizen. It is likely that Muslim participants in interfaith dialogue feel the greatest pressure to affirm their status as upstanding citizens deserving of recognition and financial support by the state authority. At the same time, Muslims may feel reluctant to take part in public interfaith engagement due to concerns about state surveillance or stigmas relating to cooptation and control.¹⁴

¹³ The British monarch appoints citizens as members of the Order of the British Empire to recognize their exemplary national and civic achievements. Nominations for honors are made twice a year and honors recipients are announced in the official public record known as the Gazette.

¹⁴ In Teresa Whitney’s (2015) study of the London School of Economics’ Faith Center, she notes how a climate of Islamophobia can affect institutions and people engaged in interfaith efforts. The Muslim participants in the study expressed the greatest concern in regards to institutional surveillance and reported feeling uncomfortable in the shared space – a concern that extends beyond the LSE (Whitney 2015, 169).

Experience and Authority

The state is one of many competing sources of authority making up the complex power dynamic of interfaith encounters. There is much that may be said about authority in the context of SR and interfaith events, so the discussion will be limited to two points here. The first concerns the link between language and power (and social class to some extent as well). Language is an important marker of authority in relation to sacred texts and those who use the texts. Linguistic access and competence can be used to build bridges but it can just as easily have exclusive effects.

At a west central London event, SR participants were invited to take part in a short Hebrew lesson led by one of the teachers at the Hebrew school associated with the liberal synagogue that hosted the event. The Israeli teacher (who was very dynamic) introduced us to the Hebrew alphabet using a chart designed for children's lessons and had us decode a few words. He asked if we wanted to continue the lesson in the sanctuary with a "hands on" look at an actual Torah scroll, to which we responded in the affirmative. We each grabbed a prayer book as we entered the worship space. He opened the ark and showed us the scrolls, large ones from Iraq and small ones "rescued" from the Czech Republic. The teacher explained that the scroll was made out of cow skin and pointed to sections using a metal *yadd*. He showed us the page break that is meant to evoke the crossing of the Red Sea. We each had a chance to look closely at the scroll and to ask questions. In this case, the introductory Hebrew lesson was effective in providing a window into the lived experiences of Jews both in terms of communal identity and ritual practice. As participants, we were not just receiving information in a passive way but were engaging both our minds and our bodies in active learning about Jewish history and culture.

It is frequently an expectation in SR that the speakers introducing the texts will read aloud or recite a portion of the text in the original language. The rabbis did this without exception in the events that I attended, sometimes even in spite of nasal congestion and vision challenges. It is clear that the rabbis considered the act of recitation to be essential to their identity and practice as rabbis. Therefore, they found ways to engage in the act of recitation while remaining subject to bodily limitations that could not be ignored under the circumstances.¹⁵ Although only one Muslim speaker (who was identified as a sheikh) chose to do a fully formal recitation of the Qur'anic text,¹⁶ all of the Muslim speakers referred to the Arabic and often quoted phrases from the texts in Arabic. One Muslim speaker remarked that English is not the language of revelation and likened reading the Qur'an in English to shining a cheap electric torch in contrast to the light of the Sun.¹⁷ The Jewish organizer of the west central London

¹⁵ Jeannine Hill Fletcher (2013) writes of "creativity under constraint" as a useful way to understand the tension between the Enlightenment ideals of human freedom that inspired the global feminist movement and the realities of constraint (due to body, gender, materiality, race, and social and religious norms). Hill Fletcher (2013, 114) argues that our fundamental quality as humans lies not in transcending these constraints but in the creativity that we employ "within the particular contexts in which we find ourselves."

¹⁶ Interestingly, the sheikh did not read the English translation but had an assistant do it for him.

¹⁷ The same speaker also commented that his English was not as good as the other two speakers (whose first languages were French and Polish respectively) because his speech was full of "localisms." I interpreted this to be a statement about social class due to his working class London accent.

events commented that for Christians the original language of the Bible is not as important, but if the rabbi had not used the Hebrew text she “wouldn’t be a rabbi.” She even suggested that it was a bit awkward when Christian presenters choose texts from the Hebrew Bible instead of from the New Testament and criticized one participant for using “very Christian language.” It is true that language plays less of a role in how Christian laypersons approach the biblical texts and define their own identity as Christians. While Jews and Muslims may send their children to Hebrew or Arabic lessons at their synagogue or mosque, Christian children do not learn biblical Greek in Sunday school as part of their heritage and may only learn it in seminary as adults pursuing ordination.¹⁸

It is not uncommon for participants in SR events to take a proprietary stance towards the texts and even towards the language in which the texts appear. While some speakers try to avoid specialized terminology and make an effort to translate unfamiliar words, others do not – perhaps in an attempt to preserve the particularity of the tradition and to emphasize their own expertise as interpreters of the texts. Moyaert (2008) sees the translatability of religions in the context of interfaith engagement as more than just a linguistic concern but as an ethical one as well. Taking inspiration from Paul Ricoeur’s *On Translation*, she attempts to find a middle ground between pluralists and post-liberal particularists, arguing that “religious languages are *not* untranslatable and that inter-religious dialogue is possible, provided that the *ethical* posture of hermeneutical hospitality for the religious other is adopted” (2008, 337). The translator knows that a perfect translation is out of reach and yet still strives to strike a balance between the foreign and the familiar and between openness and closure (Moyaert 2008, 355). As Moyaert suggests, the paradigm of translation and the concept of “linguistic hospitality” provide promising means with which to develop interreligious hermeneutics.

The second and final point about authority in interfaith encounters to be discussed here goes back to the question of experience and its role in generating knowledge. Specifically, I wish to address the somewhat problematic role of the academic in the practice of SR. As Daniel Weiss (2017) observes, our “habitation” as academics trained to value specialized scholarly expertise and some degree of impartiality in reading texts may be the very factor holding us back when it comes to the practice of SR. Participants in SR are encouraged to comment about texts as non-experts and are not expected to put aside personal commitments or to attempt to read the text in “an academically neutral manner” (Weiss 2017, 5). Weiss points out (2017, 4) that it is not the case that no expertise is needed in SR, but rather a different kind of expertise may be needed. For example, in an east London event, an elderly lady was asked to comment on the rights and duties of marriage in Judaism based on her over fifty years of experience of married life. The imam who gave the impassioned and very personal talk on rights and duties in society did so not as a legal scholar but as a British Muslim. In the event narrated earlier in which the Muslim speaker did not attend, I faced the dilemma of whether to use my authority as a scholar of Islamic studies to comment on the theme of wilderness from an Islamic perspective or to refrain from speaking for a tradition that is not

¹⁸ The only Christian speaker who I heard try to read a passage in Koine Greek was an ordained minister who was also a PhD candidate in theology. He read the Greek with some difficulty and struggled to pronounce a few of the words.

my own. The practice of SR forces one to define oneself based on lived experience with the understanding that this definition is under constant revision.

The emphasis that SR practice places on lived experience over expert knowledge and disciplinary training is laudable in many respects. SR discussions seemed most successful in my estimation when participants related the theme to important events in their own lives. For example, in a meeting of the east London group in which the theme was “coming to terms with bereavement,” an elderly Muslim man spoke movingly about his late wife’s last moments with her family and of his own grieving process following her death. The discussion went beyond doctrine and allowed us in the group to ask him questions on a personal level: Did he believe that his wife is in heaven? Does he hope to see her again someday? However, the same event illustrates the confusion surrounding the role of the designated “experts” in that setting. When asked to comment on the Qur’anic text chosen by the imam, the elderly man in our group could not offer very many insights beyond repeating doctrine that he believed to be correct but that was not immediately relevant to the discussion. When I spoke to the imam at the end, he expressed irritation that he and the other people on the panel of experts had not been asked to introduce the texts that they had chosen. The analysis that he had prepared thus went undelivered and our group was at a loss to explain why the particular text had been chosen. He commented that he had strong reservations about non-experts trying to interpret the Qur’an in general and quoted the hadith, “He who interprets the Qur’an without having knowledge, let him prepare his place in *Jubannam* (Hellfire).” Clearly, the discomfort that can arise from asking non-experts to interpret sacred texts is not unique to the imam but speaks to larger questions about authority as it plays out in modern life.

Conclusion

Looking at the interfaith practice of Scriptural Reasoning through the lens of lived experience reveals several areas of creative tension. Such areas that emerged in the course of the research include questions of presence and absence, spatial, material, and sensory aspects of the SR encounter, and issues surrounding hospitality and access. Embodied aspects of the encounter could be used productively to inspire discussions of identity and tradition, but could also detract from the effectiveness of the interaction by creating a sense of imbalance. The issue of authenticity in the SR experience arises from the complex dynamic of “ordinary” people engaging in an interaction that is neither ordinary nor naturally occurring but orchestrated as part of a larger (and often rather murky) political, civic, and economic drama. Asking non-experts to explain the significance of scriptural texts to other non-experts raises troubling questions of authority and the role of experiential knowledge as opposed to scholarly expertise in scriptural interpretation. Language becomes an instrument of power in this scenario. Language can be used as a marker of exclusivity and territoriality in the SR encounter, but it can also become a bridge allowing outsiders to experience the distinctive ethos of an unfamiliar faith tradition on a human level.

Just as the goal of SR sessions is not to achieve consensus by wiping out the particularity of the traditions, the specific local context, or the individuality of the people representing those traditions, the analysis presented here also aims to keep the individuals front and center while still endeavoring to discover what these particular cases may tell us about how the broader themes of experience, authenticity, and authority play out in interfaith meetings. It can be a

greater challenge to engage in actual conversation with another human being than it is to intellectualize a situation from afar or to create a disembodied theory based on an ideal outcome. Also, much like SR, the researcher's conclusions can only be provisional as part of an ongoing conversation rather than a definitive last word on the subject. The work of engaging in and analyzing interfaith encounters, like that of translation, will always be imperfect and will require patience as well as the ability to reconcile oneself to ambiguity and to the knowledge that there will always be barriers that one cannot (and probably should not) cross. However, acknowledging the humanity and value of the other people in the room and making this central to one's efforts and analysis is, in my view, a good place to start.

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